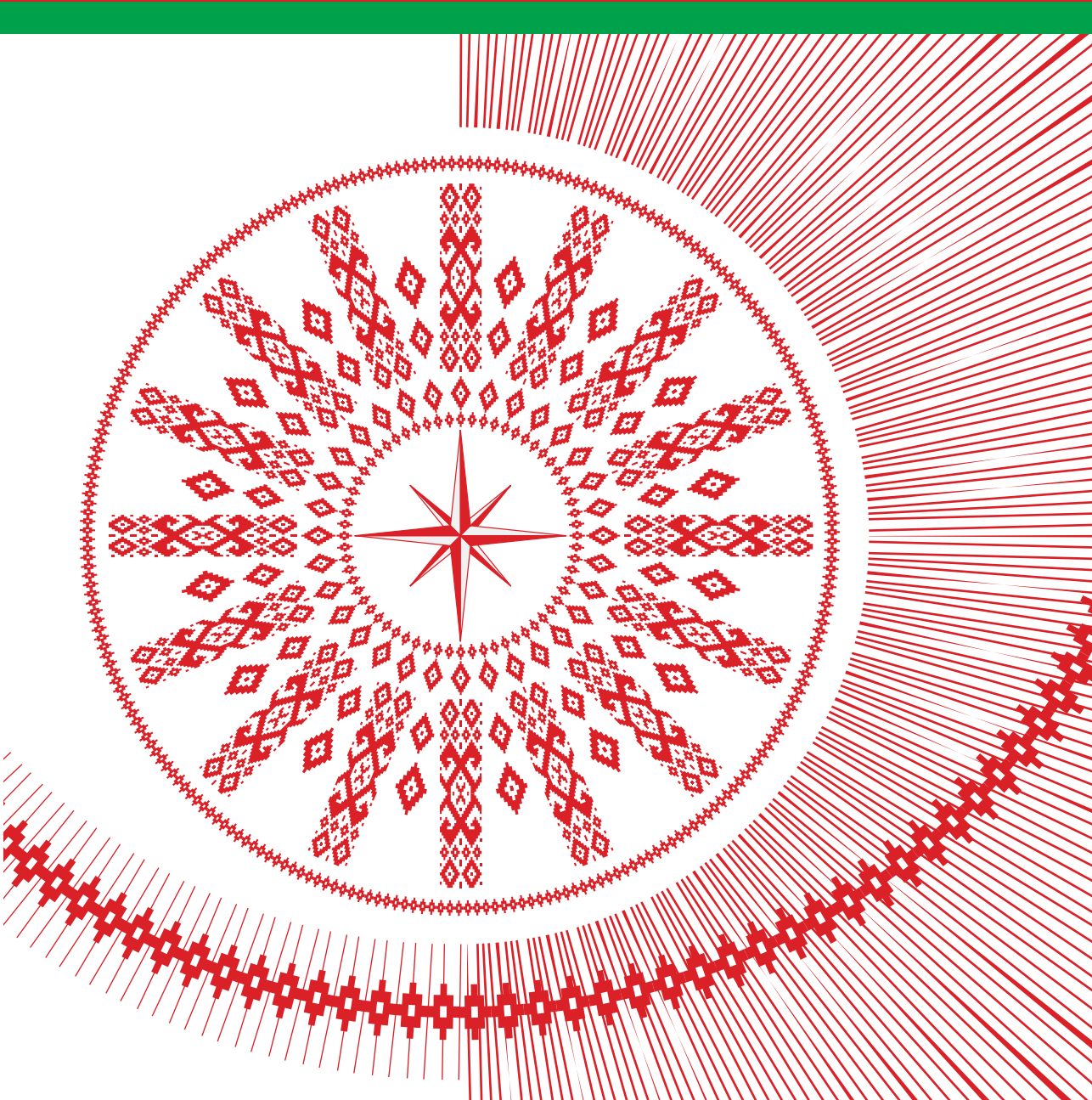


# Belarusian Foreign Policy:

Editor:  
Andis Kudors

# 360°





# Belarusian Foreign Policy: **360°**

Editor: Andis Kudors

The Centre for East European  
Policy Studies



University of Latvia Press  
Rīga, 2017

*This project was implemented by the Centre for East European Policy Studies with the support of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.*

*The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.*

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# Introduction

*“But if there are some smart pants here believing that the land of Belarus is, as they say, a part of the Russian world or nearly of Russia itself — forget it! We welcome everyone, but we will also teach everyone to respect our sovereignty and independence.”*

/Alyaksandr Lukashenka,  
press conference, 29 January 2015/

*“But I will say to all Westerners directly: both the European Union and US understand me when I am telling — look, guys, you must know it and we do not conceal it — if, for God’s sake something will go wrong — we’ll stand side by side with Russia. This is our ally!”*

/Alyaksandr Lukashenka,  
address to the National Assembly, 29 April 2015/

Straight after the illegitimate annexation of Crimea in 2014 the internal and external policy of Belarus experienced a renewed, focused attention by foreign experts and politicians. The breach of more than one international norm created anxiousness among Russia’s closest partners within the CIS integration projects — Belarus and Kazakhstan, as well as in the North Eastern flank of NATO — the Baltic countries. The idea of sister nations, destined to “stay together forever” — Ukrainians and Russians, did not protect the former from aggression by the latter. Curiously, Vladimir Putin used this cultural and ethnic link to authorize the annexation, i.e. the aggression against Ukraine. In his speech before members of the State Duma and the Federation Council of 18 March 2014, Putin pronounced: “[...] we are not just close neighbours, in fact, as I have told for many times, we are the same people. Kyiv is the mother of the Russian cities. The Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot get along without each other.”<sup>1</sup> These words expressed promptly after taking Crimea showed a level of unthinkable cynicism; this can be compared to a situation

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<sup>1</sup> “Обращение Президента Российской Федерации”, 18 March 2014, accessed May 3, 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

where a perpetrator explains his violence against the victim out of emotional and cultural closeness. Russian propagandists named Georgians ‘brothers’, pointing to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and the ‘evil political elite’ of Georgia as the source of the problem, because the two peoples themselves are mutual friends.

In 2015 the president of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, mentioned the notion of ‘the Russian world’ several times in his communication with Belarusian media and politicians, mainly expressing a negative attitude towards this culturally geopolitical concept, which presumes unification of Russia with some of its neighbours as a supranational entity with Moscow in its centre. The ideas of ‘the Russian world’ as soft power, with Russian culture as the main tool of public diplomacy, have evolved into legitimization for the aggression against Ukraine. In the afore-mentioned speech of 18 March 2014, Putin points out that transferring Crimea to Russia is not just the unification of historic Russian lands, but the uniting of ‘the Russian world.’<sup>2</sup> As Marelne Laruelle notes, the use of the geopolitical, historical and ethnic ideas of ‘the Russian world’ to legitimize the annexation of Crimea places the whole concept from the realm of soft power to the reality of hard power.<sup>3</sup> The negative attitude of the president of Belarus is understandable — when mentioning ‘the Russian world’ he emphasizes the need to respect the sovereignty and independence of Belarus. Although he has taken steps towards ‘soft Belarusization’ after the annexation of Crimea, and sharply criticised Russia’s price-forming policy on energy resources, the West should have no illusions about the real space of manoeuvre for the foreign policy of Belarus. Another quote by Lukashenka at the beginning of this book reminds us that official Minsk is clearly aware of the special role Belarus plays in regional foreign and security policy of Russia. The manoeuvres by the Belarusian president have strictly set strategic limits; trespassing them would evoke an aggressive reaction by Russia against Minsk. One could just imagine what would unfold if Minsk announced its intention one day to leave the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The unreformed Belarusian economy is very dependent on Russia’s benevolence, translated into special prices for energy supplies. The space of manoeuvre for Mr. Lukashenka is indeed quite limited.

The Centre for Eastern European Policy Studies has invited researchers from several countries to analyse relations between Belarus and its neighbouring

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<sup>2</sup> “Обращение Президента Российской Федерации”, 18 March 2014, accessed May 3, 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

<sup>3</sup> Laruelle M., *The “Russian World”, Russia’s Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination*, Center on Global Interests, 2015, 24, accessed April 11, 2017, <http://globalinterests.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FINAL-CGI-Russian-World-Marlene-Laruelle.pdf>.



countries. This collection of articles is comprised following the geographical principle as well as to outline the main topical directions of Belarusian foreign policy. The authors have studied the bilateral relations between Belarus and its neighbours: Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia — keeping the main focus on the period after the illegitimate annexation of Crimea in 2014. On a bilateral level, Belarus–Russia military cooperation, political climate and soft power are reviewed as distinct themes.

The opening section of the collection of articles is devoted to history, national identity and domestic policy issues. Ainārs Lerhis gives an insight of historical twists and turns that have formed the Belarusian identity. His article is a valuable compilation of facts and interpretations allowing the reader to look at those historical turning points which have directly or indirectly influenced foreign policy choices of the present day Belarus. The first chapter also includes the article by Alla Leukavets about the institutional framework and decision-making practices of Belarusian internal and external policies, giving the possibility of comprehending the fundamentals of Belarus' political system, which significantly affect the foreign policy priorities of the country. A. Leukavets continues the well accustomed discussion about foreign policy study with the question — does the authoritarian character (type) of domestic policy necessarily determine foreign policy priorities and their implementation?

The articles in the second chapter focus on the regional dimension of the foreign policy of Belarus, including its relations with the EU (Dzianis Me-lyantsou) and reactions by NATO's nearest Member States to Belarusian defence activities, especially in the context of the upcoming military exercise *Zapad 2017* (Nora Vanaga). The third chapter reviews bilateral Russia–Belarus relations in their political (Māris Cepuritis), military (Aleksandr Golts) and soft power dimensions (Alena Artsiomenka). The concluding fourth part follows the development of bilateral relations between Belarus and its neighbours — Ukraine (Petro Burkovsky), Latvia and Lithuania (Diāna Potjomkina and Dovile Šukyte respectively) and Poland (Andrei Yeliseyeu). Thus the book encompasses a full 360 degrees in the geography of Belarus' foreign policy, and highlights several particular topics either in its relations with Russia or its Western neighbours.

In what ways have relations changed between Belarus and Russia after the annexation of Crimea? How serious is Alyaksandr Lukashenka's criticism for Russia and his positive signals towards Brussels in this post-annexation period? Is Minsk interested and capable of manoeuvring enough in order to change the basic vectors of its foreign policy? How should the improvement of relations between Minsk and Kyiv after the annexation of Crimea be treated? What is the vision of neighbouring EU and NATO countries about their bilateral relationship with Belarus? What is likely to happen during the military exercise *Zapad 2017* and beyond? The answers to these questions have been searched for

by a team of international scholars from Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. The book targets a wide audience — politicians and experts, journalists and students — anyone who wishes to better understand Belarus and its foreign policy.

On behalf of the authors I would like to thank the financial supporter Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Baltic and its director, Dr. Tobias Mörschel, whose support has been vital for this work. We are grateful to the Regional Projects Manager of FES in the Baltic States, Regīna Plīkša, for her active contribution in the practical management of the project.

Andis Kudors,  
May 2017

# Part I: Identity and Domestic Politics





# The History of Belarus: Multiply Identities

*Ainārs Lerhis*

There is an approach that distinguishes the five criteria for national identity: history, culture and language community, territorial community, and people who display socio-psychological behavior. Identity, and self-identification (our assessment of what we are) as its component, can influence and affect a country's foreign policy. In turn, one of the most important components of identity is a history (both academic and in social memory); each nation's view of its own history. Each nation's historical heritage and experience, to some extent, have an impact on foreign policy decision-making.

The issues of emergence and the development of the Belarusian State are relevant and up to date, because Belarus has been, and continues to be, an area of special interest of various countries. Despite the fact that in 1991 the Republic of Belarus proclaimed itself as a new state on the map of Europe, its history is more than 1000 years old. Along with the acquisition of independence, as with other former Soviet republics, the opportunity arose for Belarus to do objective studies of their historical sources; a comprehensive analysis of all facts and events, and a re-evaluation of the past in order to look from the other side at their historical reality.

The collapse of the USSR and the emergence of new independent states led to significant changes in history science, for Russia and in other countries of the post-Soviet space. In each of these countries, these changes have "national" peculiarities. For countries located to the West and North-West from Russia, the studies of their own statehood (or road to statehood) and the earlier history of mutual relations with Russia have gained an important role.

During USSR times, histories of the republics were written from a point of view with Russia's interests in mind. Belarusian historiography went through the Russian Empire and Soviet periods, and is only now acquiring national character. Prior to that, during several centuries, issues regarding the formation and development of the Belarusian nation and statehood were studied by scientists who completely denied its existence.

Nations have their historiography traditions. They represent every nation because of the historical memory of past events in the territory inhabited by

people over the centuries. It forms part of its identity, but remains different from other nations, national interests and standpoints. Because of the differences in experiences and state interests, sometimes people are confronted with the politicization of history and “history battles” between countries, especially neighboring countries who were quite closely involved in each other’s fate over the centuries.

Also, the history of Belarus and the Belarusian people was presented in the context of other countries and peoples. Therefore fighters for a Belarusian statehood in other national historiographies were often evaluated in relevant assessments or concealed. For Belarusians to not mention the heroes who contributed to those countries whose successor is today’s Belarus, it would mean giving up their own history, even if it offended neighboring countries.

The aim of this article is to provide an insight into the opinions of both Belarusian historians and the public on Belarusian history, and the impact of these views on national identity choices nowadays. It will describe how this vision has been affected by political conjuncture in the development of the State of Belarus.

## **Insight into the History of Belarus until 1918: Problems and Opinions**

The majority of modern nations have developed during New and Modern Times, during feudal then capitalist relationships. This also applies to the Belarusian nation whose origins are from Eastern Slav tribes, individual Western Slavs and ethnic groups of Balts.<sup>1</sup> The formation process of Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians, started in the sixth to ninth centuries, when the modern Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian territories were occupied by Eastern Slavs and local ethnic groups were assimilated by them.

Belarusian national historiography considers the Belarusian people as descendants of ancient Krivichs, Dregovichs, Yotvingians and Radimichs, so they have a different ethnic origin than Russians.<sup>2</sup> Some nationally minded Belarusian historians even believe that Belarusian lands have a more ancient history and traditions of statehood than those Russian lands where Moscow was later formed. This is based on, for example, the fact that Polotsk signed an agreement with Kyiv in 882, but Moscow was founded by the Grand Prince of Kyiv, Yuri Dolgorukiy, in 1147.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1991, Belarusian historians increasingly stress that one of the oldest state formations in the territory of Belarus was the Duchy of Polotsk. It can

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<sup>1</sup> Александра Воробьева, “Серия белорусских монет “Укрепление и оборона государства””, accessed February 18, 2017, <https://www.nbrb.by/bv/articles/10227.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Анатолий Тарас, “Краткий курс истории Беларуси IX–XXI веков,” accessed February 26, 2017, <http://coollib.com/b/277966>.

<sup>3</sup> Анатолий Тарас, “Краткий курс истории Беларуси IX–XXI веков.”

be considered the cradle of the Belarusian millennial statehood. It took up a significant part of the territory of modern Belarus.<sup>4</sup> The Duchy of Polotsk periodically came under the power of Kyiv, but later became a de facto independent state with all the attributes of the state — the sovereign power of the Prince, the administration, the capital, troops and a fiscal system. It is believed the first centers of consolidation by East Slavic tribal unions were not only Kyiv and Novgorod, but also Polotsk.<sup>5</sup> The Duchy of Polotsk was one of the largest state formations, and not far behind in terms of similar feudal state formations found in Western Europe.

Belarusian historian Uladzimir Orlov has said that this tradition continued in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), where public life has taken place in mostly Belarusian national forms. The Slavic population was more than a population of Balts — the Old Belarusian language played a key role, and in this language Francysk Skaryna issued a printed Bible 500 years ago. The Duchy of Polotsk took up the larger part of modern Belarusian territory and it was a typical coastal country of that time. The Duchy of Polotsk played an important role in Eastern Europe, as European monarchs of that time did not consider Polotsk as the outskirts of Europe.<sup>6</sup>

The Lithuanian Grand Duke Mindaugas united the lands of the Lithuanians and East Slavs, forming GDL in 1253 (around the capital city Navahrudak, but in 1323 the capital was moved to Vilnius). This state reached its broader territorial development in the second half of the fourteenth century when its borders were from the Baltic Sea in the North to the Black Sea in the South, and from Brest in the West to Smolensk in the East.

There is a dispute here between Lithuanian and Belarusian historians. This led to two competing paradigms. Lithuanians emphasize their key role in the creation and history of the GDL. On the contrary, Belarusian historians believe that from the beginning Lithuania was Belarusian land; the Belarusian nation, as well as its spiritual and material culture was formed during the existence of the GDL. In their mind, the Lithuanian Grand Duke was a Balt or Goth, in terms of religion — a Christian, in terms of language — a Belarusian.<sup>7</sup> There is a presumption that common perennial history unites the Belarusian and Lithuanian nations. Despite the fact the GDL, territorially in both Lithuanian and Belarusian lands, was a joint state, the issue regarding the heritage of the GDL

<sup>4</sup> Александра Воробьева, “Серия белорусских монет “Укрепление и оборона государства””.

<sup>5</sup> Анатолий Тарас, “Краткий курс истории Беларуси IX–XXI веков.”

<sup>6</sup> “В учебниках истории Беларуси расставят новые акценты,” accessed March 14, 2017, [http://www.dw.com/ru/в-учебниках-истории-беларуси-расставят-новые-акценты/a-37854013?maca=rus-CB\\_rus\\_BelarusPartisan-4786-xml-mrss](http://www.dw.com/ru/в-учебниках-истории-беларуси-расставят-новые-акценты/a-37854013?maca=rus-CB_rus_BelarusPartisan-4786-xml-mrss).

<sup>7</sup> Анатолий Тарас, “Краткий курс истории Беларуси IX–XXI веков.”

is still unresolved. Disputes about “Who owns the Grand Duchy?” are arising both among historians and ordinary citizens of the two countries.

In 1569, the GDL and the Kingdom of Poland entered into a Union of Lublin,<sup>8</sup> and Rzeczpospolita was established. It existed during 1569–1795, and Polonisation and Catholicisation took place in Lithuania (the Western part) and Rus’ (the Eastern part). Further development was hampered by two wars: the Russo–Polish War (from 1654–1667) and the Great Northern War (from 1700–1721), during which the Russians blew up St. Sophia Cathedral in Polotsk in 1710 which was the ancient Belarusian spiritual center.<sup>9</sup> The effects of the Third division of Poland (1795) are still felt in relations between the modern Republic of Poland and with its eastern neighbors. Live discussions among Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian historians have been about the Act of Krewa (1385) and the Union of Lublin especially.

During 1795–1917 Belarusian lands were under the Russian Empire. In the eighteenth century, as a result of the three divisions of Poland, virtually all modern Belarusian territory was annexed to the Russian Empire. In the War of 1812 Belarusian territory suffered severely and many people were killed. In 1839 the Uniate Church was put under the Russian Orthodox Church’s jurisdiction.<sup>10</sup> Tsarist rule destroyed the Uniate Church (which, in fact, was the Belarusian national church), spreading Russification, imperial ideology, public administration and Orthodoxy according to Moscow’s examples. During the period 1794 to 1863, Belarusians took part in three uprising movements, which had anti-colonial character.<sup>11</sup> The uprising of 1863–1864, with the aim of Rzeczpospolita’s restoration, was essential to Poles, Lithuanians and Belarusians.<sup>12</sup> But the uprising was suppressed. Polish influence was gradually forced out of public political life and was replaced by Russian influence.

The formation of Belarusian historiography is inextricably linked with the Belarusian national idea and national movement from the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was due to the emergence of Belarusian Orthodox intelligentsia. This process had an impact, on the one hand, from the GDL history research tradition that formed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand — from exposure to Polish and Russian concepts which denied

<sup>8</sup> Анатолий Тарас, “Краткий курс истории Беларуси IX–XXI веков.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Андрей Тихомиров, “Между национальным нарративом и попытками создания “общей истории”” accessed March 3, 2017, <http://thebridge-moct.org/volume-2-issue-7-10-%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%82%D1%8F%D0%B1%D1%80%D1%8C-2013-6/>.



Belarusian ethnos, its language, culture, and considered the existence of Belarus as part of either Poland or Russia, but Belarusians as either Russians or Poles.<sup>13</sup>

In the nineteenth century the name “Belarusians” appeared. Since the second half of the nineteenth century the names “Belarus” and “Belarusians” were used more actively. The creation of fundamental scientific publications contributed to national consciousness in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and was devoted to the Belarusian people, its language, culture and historical past. The idea of the Belarusian people’s autonomy was firstly put forward by the group “Gomon”, which operated among Belarusian students in St. Petersburg affected by a similar group of Ukrainians.<sup>14</sup> Studies were carried out regarding church history.

### ***Belarusian or Byelorussian During 1918–1991: The People’s Republic and The Soviet Socialist Republic***

On 25 March 1918, the Belarusian People’s Republic (BPR) was proclaimed as an independent and free country in the territory where the majority of the Belarusian population lived. It existed for a short time. The BPR’s second government took the course of non-resistance to the German occupying power, sought union with Germany, but it also failed. On 5 January 1919, the BPR’s government went into exile. The activities of BPR’s Rada in the international arena was more successful — it opened a number of diplomatic missions, such as the Chamber of Commerce in Kyiv. The BPR began to issue passports. In April 1918 the white-red-white flag and coat of arms “Pogonya” were approved as state symbols, the decision was made to have the Belarusian language as the state language. Belarusian schools, grammar schools, and a textbook publishing house were opened. The Belarus Pedagogical Institute began to operate in Minsk.

However, progress in BPR’s national construction was limited because the occupying German authorities did not allow the Belarusians to set up their own armed forces and police, and a financial system and local authorities were lacking. In October 1918, a new government was drawn up which tried to solve the Belarusian issue by negotiations with the government of Soviet Russia. Negotiations began in November 1918 but remained incomplete. During the Riga peace talks between Soviet Russia and Poland, Stanislav Bulak-Balahovich with his army of 20,000 men began to fight against the Red Army. After several initial

<sup>13</sup> Radzimaby, “Историография истории Беларуси,” accessed February 21, 2017, <http://rodina.by/?p=3017>.

<sup>14</sup> Анатолий Тарас, “Краткий курс истории Беларуси IX–XXI веков.”

successes the Belarusian army suffered a heavy defeat against the Red Army and crossed the Polish border where it was interned.

In November–December 1920 Belarusian essers led the Slutsk uprising with slogans for the restoration of the BPR. No neighboring countries wanted a sovereign and independent state of Belarus in the territory populated by Belarusians.<sup>15</sup> The BPR was the first Belarusian attempt to create their independent State. The attempt failed because of divisions in the national movement, weak support of the local population, other countries did not recognize the new republic, and the Bolshevik army invaded the country.<sup>16</sup> It is believed the BPR has no connections with the modern Republic of Belarus.<sup>17</sup> And it has been established that the modern Republic of Belarus does not consider itself as the BPR's legal heir because the Ukrainian People's Republic existed longer. It is understood the Soviets saw that the idea of a statehood had become quite popular among Belarusian people. If the BPR had not existed before, it is likely the Bolsheviks would not have created a separate Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). The Bolsheviks did not have other options for keeping Belarusian land to declare their autonomy.<sup>18</sup>

On 1 January 1919 the Byelorussian (or Belorussian) SSR, with the capital of Minsk, was proclaimed in Smolensk. The Belarusian language was established as the BSSR's state language. The Lithuanian–Byelorussian SSR was established soon after. It existed until 31 July 1920, when the Byelorussian SSR was proclaimed for the second time in Minsk and on 30 December 1922 the BSSR was one of the parties to agree on the establishment of the USSR.

Poland tried to restore their territory in 1772 on the range. And in 1918 Poland began a military intervention in Belarusian lands. The BPR was not able to create their own army and show proper resistance. On 18 March 1921 the peace treaty in Riga was signed by Soviet Russia and Poland, establishing the division of Belarus between these powers. The Western part of Belarusian territory remained under Poland. The proximity of Polish borders led to some level of influence on Soviet policy in Belarus. A “buffer” was created and a “Belarusisation” policy implemented. In 1926 the idea of the BSSR's capital's transfer from Minsk to Mogilev (even further from the Polish border) was discussed.

<sup>15</sup> Евгений Подлесный, “Белорусская Народная Республика: триумф и трагедия,” accessed February 19, 2017, <http://vsr.mil.by/2014/06/26/beloruskaya-narodnaya-respublika-triumf-i-tragediya-3/>.

<sup>16</sup> Максим Тютюшев, “Белорусская Народная Республика: провозглашение и история,” accessed January 29, 2017, <http://fb.ru/article/186510/beloruskaya-narodnaya-respublika-provozglashenie-i-istoriya>.

<sup>17</sup> “Белорусская Народная Республика,” accessed March 18, 2017, <http://historica.ru/index.php?showtopic=12416>.

<sup>18</sup> “25 марта 1918 года была провозглашена Белорусская Народная Республика,” accessed January 25, 2017, <http://s13.ru/archives/56015>.

During the Soviet period, the situation in the BSSR's historiography was influenced by guidelines adopted by the Bolsheviks for the USSR's history science. Russia, who was the leader of the USSR, was presented as the most powerful and fairer country. All peoples of the USSR were declared as glowing supporters in the accession of Russia. People voluntarily joined Russia and later enjoyed a positive outcome of accession. In particular, it concerned Belarusians and Ukrainians who along with the Russians were unified together as the Old Russian nation descendants, and therefore dreamed about a reunification with Russia. The Soviet concept of Belarusian history was quite close to the concept during the Russian Empire times.<sup>19</sup> It was believed that Russia has always had a historical ally in Belarusian and Ukrainian people against foreign oppressors. Muscovite State, the Russian Empire and the USSR have never conquered anybody, it only "liberated" or "reunified", so for Belarusians Russia was always seen only as a liberator and never as a conqueror.<sup>20</sup>

A relatively favorable process was the "Belarusisation" in the 1920s, when the history of the area, archeology, agrarian history, and East Belarus' history was researched. The concept of Belarusian origin was developed and deepened.<sup>21</sup> Belarusian and Ukrainian historiography in the 1920s had national character because of a short-term "root" or "*korenizatsia*" policy which was promoted in the Soviet Union's non-Russian republics.<sup>22</sup> At the national intelligence debacle in 1928, Belarusian national historiography in Belarus's territory disappeared for many years. A "national" theme was continued only by those authors who were in open opposition to the Soviet regime and lived in areas not controlled by the USSR.<sup>23</sup> In the late 1920s the "Belarusisation" policy was terminated and at the beginning of the 1930s almost all Belarusian historians were repressed.<sup>24</sup>

With regards to the origins of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, there were two concepts — of "Trinitarian Russian people" and of the "Old Russian nationality" — in the USSR historiography. The first concept was created in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and its essence was that "Russian people" were a united community of Great Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians) and Belarusians. In the eighteenth century the Russian Empire raised this concept

<sup>19</sup> "Историография советского периода," accessed February 8, 2017, <http://www.fullhistoria.ru/istorias-1068-1.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Анатолий Тарас, "Краткий курс истории Беларуси IX–XXI веков."

<sup>21</sup> "Становление белорусской национальной историографии и ее развитие в 20–30-е годы XX века," accessed February 9, 2017, <http://studopedia.org/6-170079.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Андрей Портнов, "Советизация исторической науки в Украине и Беларуси," accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.secret-g.net/arkhiv-publikatsij/36-2016/zapreshchennaya-istoriya>.

<sup>23</sup> Вячеслав Носевич, "Проблемы образования Великого княжества Литовского: обзор белорусской историографии (2008)," accessed March 12, 2017, <http://vln.by/node/150>.

<sup>24</sup> "Становление белорусской национальной историографии и ее развитие в 20–30-е годы XX века."

to the rank of state ideology. In the 1920s the Soviets believed this theory as reactionary and chauvinist (it was one of the causes for allowing “Ukrainisation” in the Ukrainian SSR and “Belarusisation” in the BSSR). When in the 1930s Russification began, the USSR returned to the old imperial concept.

In the middle of the twentieth century Russian scientists developed the “Old Russian nationality” concept. In this concept the term “Russian people” was understood to be the common ancestors from three nations: Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians.<sup>25</sup> During the 1930s–1950s the following arguments were elaborated in order to explain the past of the USSR’s peoples: (1) non-Russian people were never conquered and subjected, but only “united” or “reunited” with the Muscovite State, the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union; (2) the annexation of non-Russian lands by Russia was a “progressive” phenomenon at all times which favorably benefited local people’s economy, culture, and internal and external policy areas; (3) non-Russian people of Russian Empire (or the USSR) areas were not able to create their own independent states; (4) “Great Russians” at all times were “elder brothers” and “teachers” for the rest of the people, etc. The main postulates of the BSSR’s official historiography (written by authors such as L. Abetsedarski and A. Zalesski, etc.) were as follows: (1) the self-determination of Belarusian people is related to the “area of East Slavs” rather than with Europe. The Belarusian role in the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was omitted; (2) both Czarist regime coercions (liquidation of the Uniate church in 1830s and the Belarusian language ban) and the repressions of Soviet power (the mass terror of 1930–1941) against the Belarusian language and culture were concealed; (3) until 1919 there was no Belarusian state but Soviet power laid the foundations for Belarusian statehood in the form of the BSSR; etc. In the Soviet Union from 1930–1950s, the tendency for a “merger” with Russia was declared as an expression of development of non-Russian peoples, but any ideals of independent statehood by these nations were considered as “reactionary” and “bourgeois.”<sup>26</sup> For many years the BSSR’s officials actually denied many of their past epochs and many of their ancestors.

The situation began to change in the late 1980s when the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was forced to recognize ideological pluralism. The biggest impact for the BSSR’s socio-political life in the “*perestroika*” period was left when clarification of the burial places of victims of the NKVD massacres in Kurapaty occurred. In 1989 the nationally-minded Belarusian Popular Front was founded. In February 1989 a meeting was held in Minsk to notify the intention to renew

<sup>25</sup> Николай Янкойть, “Если вы нашли себя в докладе — это повод для гордости. Как “русский мир” изучает белорусский национализм,” accessed February 25, 2017, <http://kyky.org/life/esli-vy-nashli-sebya-v-doklade-eto-povod-dlya-gordosti-kak-russkiy-mir-izuchaet-belorusskiy-natsionalizm>.

<sup>26</sup> Андрей Портнов, “Советизация исторической науки в Украине и Беларуси.”

the BPR's symbols — the white-red-white flag and the “Pogonya” coat of arms. On 27 July 1989 a declaration of sovereignty of the Byelorussian SSR was adopted.

Public events in the second half of the 1980s resulted in an increase of interest by Belarusian society about Belarusian history. As a result of the liberalization of social life, historians were freed from the rigid ideological restrictions. Historical problems, which in Soviet times were concealed, then won topicality.

### Changes in the Republic of Belarus: a “National Awakening” and “Two Languages Policy”

After the 19–21 August 1991 coup events, on 19 September the BSSR was re-named the “*Respublika Belarus*”. During Soviet times, even the names of Belarusian people and the republic were Russified — “*belorusskiy narod*”, “*Belorussiya*” (close to the Russian names “*russkiy*”, “*Rossiya*”). Now Belarusian names (“*belaruskiy narod*”, and “*Belarus*”) were officially set up. It also prevented misunderstandings, where the Belarusian name was often confused with “White Russia” — Russian White Guards and the Empire's adherent movement after 1917.

As mentioned above, there is an approach that distinguishes the five criteria for national identity: history, culture and language community, territorial community and people who display socio-psychological behavior. Sociologist Andrei Vardomatski expressed the view that at present Belarus belongs to a type of territorial identity. Some experts believe the main direction in the formation of a Belarusian national identity was the creation of a sovereign Belarusian State after the collapse of the USSR. Philosopher and writer Valentin Akudovich expressed the idea that previously Belarusians did not have their own state, so it was an unclear identity which is only now beginning to take a clearer shape; the nation-building process continues, so Belarusian language problems are extremely important and topical. This process is also influenced by events of the recent past. Philosopher and cultural expert Maxim Zdankov believes that until World War II Belarusian intelligentsia were completely destroyed.<sup>27</sup>

In Belarus there was no question of withdrawing the republic from the USSR. On 25 December 1991, people were confronted with a *fait accompli* — the Soviet Union no longer existed. After gaining national independence the Soviet historiography view was replaced by a national historical interpretation from a Belarusian point of view. The Soviet-time idea of a new historical community — the “Soviet people” — was left behind. Ideas of “nation” and “nationalism” became

<sup>27</sup> Елена Данейко, “Особенности белорусской национальной идентичности,” accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/ru/особенности-белорусской-национальной-идентичности/a-37674267>.

popular.<sup>28</sup> Now Belarusian history guidelines plan to research everything that ever happened in living areas of the Belarusian ethnos, while society reached a sovereign Belarusian State. It was only after 1991 that Belarusians learned in ancient times they too have had roots, fortresses and cities, knights and aristocrats, but Belarusian statehood sources had already been around a long time before the establishment of the BSSR in 1919. Several authors take the view that in the public's consciousness a significant inertia remained from the USSR period — the so-called “Soviet identity”.

From the 1990s, in varying degrees, attention was paid to national state issues — the establishment of statehood in the forms of the BPR and BSSR, some aspects of the inter-war period including the Stalinist repressions, and the Second World War. Historians had disputes. Some continued to defend the idea that the Republic of Belarus dated back to the BSSR, but everything before 1917 was out of sight. Others argued that statehood traditions could be sought in the GDL or the BPR.<sup>29</sup>

Gradually the idea strengthened that the Belarusian state could not truly be sovereign if it was based on the historical concepts of other peoples and countries. Many myths exist in mass consciousness and modern historiography. The Belarusian real history has nothing to do with foreign authors' interpretations of it.<sup>30</sup> Since 1991 the history of Belarus began its re-orientation to the view of national positions. For example, it began to recognize the fact the Belarusian nation suffered from armed conflicts of two eastern powers — the GDL (later Rzechpospolita) and Rus' (later the Russian tsardom). In the early 1990s the majority of Belarusian researchers believed that in Belarusian lands Russia exercised a great power policy which limited Belarusian people's opportunities and benefits which were guaranteed for the Russian nation. During the period from 1991–1994 a wide “Belarusisation” policy was implemented<sup>31</sup> when Stanislau Shushkevich became the first head of state of an independent Belarus.

Lack of their own statehood experience led to the fact that in 1991 Belarus became an independent post-Soviet republic with a weak national identity. In 1994, Alyaksandr Lukashenka became president. He was in opposition to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>32</sup> During his first presidency he spoke

<sup>28</sup> Accessed March 19, 2017, [https://eurobelarus.info/video/mysli/2013/10/01/Bratochkin\\_mysli.html?sid=v3rbid3q2ru94ruq636at401o3](https://eurobelarus.info/video/mysli/2013/10/01/Bratochkin_mysli.html?sid=v3rbid3q2ru94ruq636at401o3).

<sup>29</sup> Игорь Мельников, “История Беларуси и “вызовы современности””, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://www.istpravda.ru/bel/research/114/>.

<sup>30</sup> Анатолий Тарас, “Краткий курс истории Беларуси IX–XXI веков.”

<sup>31</sup> Татьяна Дворникова, “Языковой барьер. В Белоруссии стартует предвыборная кампания с национальным колоритом”, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2810828>.

<sup>32</sup> Павел Волков, “Лукашенко и белорусский национализм,” accessed March 22, 2017, <http://naspravdi.info/byvshiy-sssr/lukashenko-i-belorussskiy-nacionalizm>.

disparagingly about the Belarusian language, highlighting the advantages of the Russian language.<sup>33</sup> On 14 May 1995 following an initiative from Lukashenka, a referendum was held in which the Russian language was granted state language status alongside the Belarusian language. The “two languages policy”, in practice, led to a domination of the Russian language again. Perhaps it manifested doubts about the sovereignty of the state — one negative consequences is that during the past 20 years authorities have formed a national system based on rapprochement with Russia.<sup>34</sup>

For part of the population the 1991–1994 period looked like a repetition of the BPR in 1918 which now “disbanded again”. It was replaced by the return of a “Soviet identity” which also manifested itself in changes such as the history teaching programs in schools, a replacement of the white-red-white flag and the coat of arms “Pogonyá” with slightly updated symbols of the BSSR.

During the early years of Lukashenka’s rule one might have the impression that the authorities generally considered their country’s independence as a temporary phenomenon, but their rule — as preparation for the reintegration in the former Soviet space. This reintegration did not happen. According to the state ideology of modern Belarus it sees its beginning from the BSSR. Considered a major achievement of the Belarusian nation was victory in the Great Patriotic War when Belarus was a part of the USSR. The signing in December 1991 of the Belavezha Agreement, which eliminated the Soviet Union, was considered if not a crime then a serious error committed against the will of the people of the USSR, including the will of the Belarusian nation.<sup>35</sup>

In the history science it was largely a return to Soviet postulates, but national motives began to phase out. It had an impact — the process of development in national consciousness by Belarusian society slowed. In such circumstances the main task of Belarusian historians was, in spite of restrictions, to tell the Belarusian public the truth about their country’s historical past. In this respect the Internet plays a big role.<sup>36</sup>

In the framework of official discourse by Belarusian authorities after 1994 a collective identity model was set in which an important role was played by a number of past Soviet events. In the second half of the 1990s processes were largely suspended which had begun in the late 1980s and early 1990s — public

<sup>33</sup> Артем Шрайбман, “Почему Лукашенко полюбил белорусский язык и нацстроительство,” accessed February 26, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=66512>.

<sup>34</sup> Татьяна Дворникова, “Языковой барьер. В Белоруссии стартует предвыборная кампания с национальным колоритом.”

<sup>35</sup> Юрий Дракохрус, “Белорусская Народная Республика как улыбка Чеширского кота (к юбилею первой Белорусской республики),” accessed February 25, 2017, [http://www.intelros.ru/readroom/nz/nz\\_60/2922-belorusskaja-narodnaja-respublika-kak.html](http://www.intelros.ru/readroom/nz/nz_60/2922-belorusskaja-narodnaja-respublika-kak.html).

<sup>36</sup> Игорь Мельников, “История Беларуси и “вызовы современности””

debates about the traumatic periods of Soviet history (for example Stalinist repressions), and the availability of Soviet times' closed archives for historians. This contributed to the deconstruction of a number of Soviet identity forms and symbols, but a large-scale "de-Sovietisation" did not happen. Work focused on reassessing the Soviet past, Soviet historiography from 1991–1994, was not carried out. In the late 1990s Belarusian historiography marked a trend towards the rehabilitation of Russian Empire policy to some extent.

Historian Zakhar Shibeko believes the imperfection of a Belarusian national historical conception today is the latest challenge for Belarusian historiography. The Belarusian state and nation has met a threatening situation where there is a "formal" and "informal" version of the past and Belarusian citizens are in separated historical "barricades".<sup>37</sup> His colleague Ales Kravtsevich indicates that in Belarus no history text-book is written from a Belarusian viewpoint about the history of its neighboring countries. Belarusian authors have not written the history of Russia, but textbooks or texts written in Russia are used where Russia's official version of the history of Belarus is supported, and Belarus is paying for it.<sup>38</sup>

Currently, Belarus actually has two historiographies. The first one, in practice, consists of researchers and history enthusiasts acting largely without state support. The second one, the official version, is based on the heritage of the notorious BSSR historian Lavrentiy Abetsedarski. According to some historians' opinions, it may cause the impression that until 1917 there was no history in the territory of modern Belarus. In fact, Belarusians are an ancient nation, such as Minsk City celebrating their 950<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017. As well, in 2017 Belarus at a national level is marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Belarusian book publishing.

The Soviet period has left a mutilated historical memory for Belarusian people. Nationally-oriented historians have expressed the view that since the collapse of the USSR, fault for the slow overcoming of this collective amnesia must be placed on state authorities who had remained with the Soviet past.<sup>39</sup> For example, in Belarus the 1917 Revolution's history is described in the same way as during the Soviet era. In Belarus it is a national holiday.<sup>40</sup> However, even before 2014, a direction towards a greater understanding about the significance of the Belarusian heritage had

<sup>37</sup> "Незавершенность выработки национальной концепции истории Беларуси — это самая актуальная проблема отечественной историографии," accessed March 18, 2017, <http://www.open.by/country/39930>.

<sup>38</sup> "Кравцевич: Наша задача — написать историю с белорусской точки зрения," accessed March 7, 2017, <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2015/10/22/174879/>.

<sup>39</sup> Валерий Карбалевиц, "Трудно еще найти в мире народ с такой искалеченной исторической памятью, как белорусы," accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.nv-online.info/by/769/opinions/132436/>.

<sup>40</sup> "В учебниках истории Беларуси расставят новые акценты."



emerged. Researchers have tried to perceive a changing attitude in some statements by President Lukashenka. In September 2011 the president, as one of the main tasks of the education system, advanced the task of promoting the historical and cultural heritage in Belarus in accordance with national interests.<sup>41</sup>

In May 2012, it was decided there was no longer any reason to use the term “the Patriotic War of 1812” in Belarus. The official youth organization “Belarusian republican youth union” prohibited the use of the George Ribbon during 9 May celebrations. At the end of June 2012, a monument was inaugurated in Vitebsk dedicated to the Lithuanian prince Olgerd, who for a long time and quite successfully fought with the Muscovite State.<sup>42</sup> The monument’s unveiling caused indignation in Russian mass media, connected with Olgerd’s “repeated military expeditions to Moscow”. However, the municipal authorities of Vitebsk refused to erect a monument to Alexander Nevsky (who has no direct relationship with this city). Also due to this fact, Russian journalists had already seen an expression of “soft Belarusisation”<sup>43</sup>

During 1994–2014 not enough sufficient work was done to overcome the Russian Empire and Soviet historiography heritage as well as to research the historical legacy of Belarusians. This fact allowed a significant impact of Russia’s and the Soviet Union’s historiography to remain in Belarus. It was one of the factors that hindered the Belarusian national identity consolidation, which started from 1991–1994.

### **Belarus Is Not a “Russian World”. A Path to Strengthening All Belarusians?**

After the Crimea and Donbas events, the official Minsk began to seriously think about the fact that having an incomplete national identity was a national Belarusian vulnerability factor. It is possible that some impact has been left by the time factor because the State of Belarus has been in existence for more than 20 years.

On 1 July 2014 Lukashenka spoke publicly for the first time in the Belarusian language, underlining the significance of freedom and independence.<sup>44</sup> His advisor

<sup>41</sup> Елена Нарыжная, Зоя Неверова, Сергей Елизаров, Сергей Юрис, “История Беларуси в контексте европейской цивилизации,” accessed February 26, 2017, <https://www.litres.ru/elena-narizhnaya/istoriya-belarusi-v-kontekste-evropeyskoy-civilizacii/chitat-onlayn/>.

<sup>42</sup> Павел Волков, “Лукашенко и белорусский национализм.”

<sup>43</sup> “Белорусизация: миф или реальность?,” accessed February 2, 2017, <http://gazetanm.eu/content/belorusizaciya-mif-ili-realnost>.

<sup>44</sup> “Почему Лукашенко заговорил по-белорусски?,” accessed March 11, 2017, [https://ej.by/news/politics/2014/07/09/pochemu\\_lukashenko\\_zagovoril\\_po-belorusski.html](https://ej.by/news/politics/2014/07/09/pochemu_lukashenko_zagovoril_po-belorusski.html).

Kirill Rudniy noted that Belarusian citizens understood the perspective that to lose the Belarusian language would be one of the main threats to the existence of the Belarusian State.<sup>45</sup> In 2014 the President said: “If we forget to speak the Belarusian language — we will stop to be a nation.”<sup>46</sup> Later, the President announced an increase in Belarusian language lessons in schools. The authorities have started to treat alternative symbols more loyally, those symbols which in 1991–1995 were official and continued to be used by the opposition — the white-red-white flag and the “Pogonya” coat of arms.<sup>47</sup>

At the end of January 2015 Lukashenka warned: “There have been wise guy, who announced that Belarus is, as they say, the part of the Russian world and almost Russia. Forget. Belarus is a sovereign and independent state. [...] We will force everybody to respect our sovereignty and independence, who thinks that, look, there was not such a country. It was not, but now it is, and take it into account.”<sup>48</sup>

On 21 January 2015 at a press conference, the Education Minister of Belarus, Mikhail Zhuravkov said: “Learning of Belarusian geography and history, of course, need the Belarusian language”. The minister announced recommendations given to the Belarusian State University to teach history to all students in the Belarusian language from that point on.<sup>49</sup> The ministry decided to increase the number of lessons in schools where subjects are taught in the Belarusian language. Before the 2015 presidential elections Lukashenka promised to come to terms in regards to the commemoration of those Stalinist repression victims in Belarus.

On 7 April 2016 in his speech at the Minsk automobile factory, Lukashenka reacted emotionally to one of the replicas about Russia: “Come to your senses! We already have 25 years of an independent state. We are not part of Russia!”<sup>50</sup> In late February 2017 the task was given to portray the formation of Belarus’ statehood in textbooks. Lukashenka added “the need to write and put in minds of the people the truth. If there is some nationalism, then healthy.”<sup>51</sup> In March,

<sup>45</sup> Павел Волков, “Лукашенко и белорусский национализм.”

<sup>46</sup> Александръ Потаповъ, “Белоруссия может стать второй Украиной: Как братский народ уведят на Запад,” accessed March 18, 2017, <https://cont.ws/@potapov/130219>.

<sup>47</sup> Артем Шрайбман, “Почему Лукашенко полюбил белорусский язык и нацстроительство,” accessed February 26, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=66512>.

<sup>48</sup> “Лукашенко: Беларусь — не часть русского мира, но Майдана здесь не будет,” accessed February 15, 2017, <http://news.bigmir.net/world/873957-Lukashenko--Belarus----ne-chast--russkogo-mira--no-Majdana-zdes--ne-budet>.

<sup>49</sup> Юрий Баранчик, “Как в Белоруссии идет ползучая националистическая белорусизация,” accessed February 19, 2017, [http://m.rusnext.ru/recent\\_opinions/1483440094](http://m.rusnext.ru/recent_opinions/1483440094).

<sup>50</sup> Алла Бронь, “Мягкая белорусизация Лукашенко,” accessed February 15, 2017, <http://iamruss.ru/myagkaya-belorusizatsiya-lukashenko/>

<sup>51</sup> “Лукашенко заговорил о “здравом национализме” в новых учебниках истории,” accessed March 7, 2017, <https://eurobelarus.info/news/society/2017/02/28/lukashenko-zagovoril-o-zdravom-natsionalizme-v-novyh.html>.

Lukashenka ordered a book to be written about the results of the development of Belarus during those 25 years.<sup>52</sup>

Historians have expressed hope the President's statement means the new Belarusian official historiography will put accents on references to sources of Belarusian statehood from the ninth century onwards. The changes will not affect the Soviet period, however hope has emerged for historians for changes in evaluating Soviet-era political repressions. Some experts think Belarus as one of the last post-Soviet states will begin to renounce the Soviet version of history, but for the time being this is only as regards ancient history.

Although an influence of Soviet historiography heritage in the Belarusian history science remains high, officials in Russia are not satisfied even with this version of Belarusian history. The smallest steps towards strengthening Belarusian language and history have immediately been criticized in Russia. Any steps taken in former Soviet republics to strengthen their national identity is considered by the Federation as anti-Russian activities. Despite the fact that the Belarusian language is still used less than when compared with the Russian language in Belarus, Russian media diligently account every slight step towards a "nationalistic Belarusisation" or interpret different actions as such steps, including the politicization of certain issues regarding Belarus' history.

## Conclusion

Perhaps, gaining status as the independent State of Belarus at the end of 1991 was not highly evaluated the first time. Over the years it has become more and more clear that Belarusian independence is not a historical misunderstanding. The Belarusian nation has come to be their own State through a long and difficult road, and it has taken centuries, like other modern Eastern European countries that gained their independence in the twentieth century.

Belarusians have 1200 years of history fixed in written historical sources. Over the past 300 years there were regular threats to the existence of the Belarusian people and its identity, but the people survived, although suffering heavy losses in human, material and spiritual culture. Throughout history, as a result of political and social turmoil, intellectuals were either annihilated or reoriented to Russia or Poland.

The Belarusian nation is on its way to ascertaining the real history of its people and land. Belarusians are increasingly conscious of the fact they are not a nation without their own history, although a lot of information about Belarusian

<sup>52</sup> "Лукашенко поручил создать книгу об итогах развития Беларуси за 25 лет," accessed March 19, 2017, <https://pulseoftheday.ru/article/3523563>.

history from ancient times, and 1917–1919, was concealed or presented by other nations and states from the viewpoints of their interests. Much remains to be done in order to be able to “tell the story of history” to the people, to familiarize them with historical facts and a true assessment.

Today the Belarusian nation’s identity would be stronger if the preservation and development of their identity was not hindered or had been devoted too little attention to by Belarusian authorities from 1994–2014. In 2014 the authorities began to change this situation, but Belarus has lost at least 10 years to strengthen their identity. The fact that the Belarusian identity was not strengthened allowed significant forces outside the country to begin to treat Belarus as part of the “Russian world”. The ability to realize and defend their national interests, without fearing it will end up contradicting the national interests of other nations, is, to some extent, one of the signs of maturity of a national identity.

Despite the BPR’s short time of existence, it has proved to be a permanent place for the Belarusian people’s historic memory. The more important task is to strengthen Belarusian national consciousness and historical memory in order to strengthen an independent perspective regarding its history and become free from imposing versions by other peoples and countries about the history of the Belarusian land and nation. Emphasizing the need for the development of historical research about Belarusian statehood, it is possible that Belarusian authorities’ treatment of history slowly but gradually changes to “cautiously positive”, while weakening the Soviet heritage distinction and strengthening Belarusian national identity.

There are two historical paradigms now which continue to “compete” in Belarus. From one side, there is an increasing but still insufficient consciousness that Belarus can have, and has, a different view on some historical issues than Russia has, and, therefore, should go its own way in the future regarding international policy. From the other side, if Russian historiography, Russia’s memory or the “Russian world’s” historical events of personalities are further cultivated, it will affect society’s perception about the most desirable foreign policy direction towards Russia.

Also comprehension of historical legacy can affect today and may influence the geopolitical orientation and foreign policy direction of the country in the future. The question as regards the mutual connection of Belarus’ history, national identity and future foreign policy remains open.

# Belarusian Domestic Politics and its Influence on Foreign Policy

*Alla Leukavets*

The idea about foreign policy as the continuation of domestic politics has been often discussed by international relations scholars. The question of foreign policy-making in authoritarian states has not lost its relevance with time. Authoritarian leaders, just like the leaders of democratic states need a certain degree of support from domestic actors to pursue a concrete foreign policy course. The difference is how leaders of free and not free societies accomplish this task of winning the hearts and minds of a domestic audience. Democratic systems promote the accountability of politicians who can be voted out of the system if they pursue a foreign policy trajectory not favoured by the majority. The authoritarian leaders, on the other hand, just need the approval of a limited group of elites, while popular support acts only as a façade for legitimising the system.

After winning the presidential election in 1994, Alyaksandr Lukashenka started to consolidate power, transforming Belarus into an increasingly authoritarian regime.<sup>1</sup> The most valuable assets in the country were put under presidential control and mass media was censored.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Lukashenka started centralising power, building the presidential vertical and relegating political opposition to the background. By the end of his first presidential term the limited circle of political elites led by the president took full control of political decision making and the state's economic resources. Subsequent presidential elections which took place in 2001, 2006, 2010 and 2015 strengthened Lukashenka's grip on power and turned Belarus into a country with a consolidated authoritarian regime. Short periods of democratisation usually taking place before the presidential elections (for example, in 2008–2010) have been incremental and can be seen as the country's attempts to avoid democratic pressure and gain support from the West in securing positive election results.

It is important to note, that the current crisis in Ukraine has contributed to improving the international image of Belarus. The West appreciated Belarus'

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<sup>1</sup> Valerii Karbalevich, *Alyaksandr Lukashenko: Politicheskii Portret*. Minsk: Partizan, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Tolstrup, *Russia vs. the EU: The Competition for Influence in Post-Soviet States*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014, 77.

role in mediating the peace deal between Ukraine, Russia and Europe and as a result EU sanctions were lifted from the Belarusian regime in February 2016. However, a complete reset in Belarus relations with the West is rather unlikely because Russia still remains Belarus' most important trading partner and a source of economic support. The Belarusian economy is heavily dependent on its cooperation with Russia, a legacy of the Soviet Union when the two economies were mutually interconnected. The situation has not changed considerably since 1991, and the dependence of the Belarusian economy on Russian support has increased in some spheres, such as the energy sector.<sup>3</sup> As a result a specific model of Russian–Belarusian cooperation emerged, whereby the Russian market remained open to Belarusian products, and Belarus received energy subsidies which allowed the Belarusian government to maintain the centrally planned economy and postpone the implementation of economic reforms.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, economic dependence on Russia does not allow the official Minsk to completely exit the orbit of Russian influence in the near future. The possibility of a Belarusian Euromaidan and a change of regime “from the bottom” also remains unlikely judging by the harsh measures the government currently undertakes to suppress any attempt of popular uprising.<sup>5</sup>

The goal of this contribution is to take a closer look at the domestic level of policy-making in the country dubbed “the last dictatorship in Europe”, and traditionally perceived as a state with a consolidated authoritarian regime. This paper will identify the main actors and institutions on the political stage in Belarus and analyse their role in a foreign policy-making process. Firstly, the work will look at the different actors and institutions representing executive and legislative branches of power. Inter alia, it will analyse the role of the Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), as well as the political opposition in the political configuration of Belarus. After that, this contribution will take a closer look and scrutinise the role of two additional actors in the Belarusian policy-making process, exemplified by general public and regime-linked business elites. Finally, the paper will spell out the influence of domestic configurations in Belarus on the foreign policy trajectory of the country. This work will conclude by underlining the main findings of the undertaken analysis. The main added value of the paper is that it contributes to opening the “black

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<sup>3</sup> Wojciech Kononczuk, *Belarus difficult ally for Russia*, OSW studies, 15 September 2008, 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>5</sup> Recent popular protests are the result of the population's reaction to the newly adopted presidential decree No. 310 on taxing the unemployed (the so-called “social parasite law”). The protest movements have been amply highlighted in media sources, for example, Nabihah Parker, Belarus Freedom Day protests: arrests as hundreds take to streets, the Telegraph, 25 March 2017, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/25/belarus-freedom-day-protests-opposition-leader-arrested-thousands/>.

box” and uncovers the domestic layer of policy-making in closed countries like Belarus where the policy-making process is traditionally viewed as being in a political vacuum.

## **Main Political Actors and Institutions and Their Role in Foreign-Policy Making in Belarus**

According to the Constitution of Belarus, political institutions which participate in foreign policy-making are the National Assembly (i.e. Parliament of Belarus), the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, the Constitution grants the president the right to safeguard the country’s national interests and to conduct foreign and security policy. The president delivers annual reports on the situation in Belarus and on the main directions for domestic and foreign policy, and he carries out international negotiations and signs international treaties (art. 79 and art. 84 of Constitution of Belarus).

All political institutions can be divided into policy initiators and policy ratifiers. The body responsible for the ratification of international treaties into law is the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus (policy ratifier) while the executive branch, *de jure*, acts as a policy initiator of international agreements.

In democratic states with guaranteed political competition, policy initiators are endowed with agenda-setting powers and first-mover advantages, while policy ratifiers can veto policy proposals; therefore, policy ratifiers’ preferences must be taken into account by policy initiators. However, in practice, in Belarus the executive and legislative branches are highly centralised and subordinate to the president and his administration which deprives them of real policy-making power.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Parliament of Belarus***

The Belarusian parliament consists of two chambers: the lower chamber (the House of Representatives, which has 110 deputies elected by the citizens of Belarus) and the upper chamber (Council of the Republic, which has 64 members who are partly elected by local administrative bodies and are partly appointed by the president).<sup>7</sup> The role of the House of Representatives includes considering

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Frear, Belarus: player and pawn in the integration game, 2013, in Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk (eds.), *Eurasian Economic Integration: Law, Policy and Politics*, 119–139, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Pub.

<sup>7</sup> Constitution of Republic of Belarus, art. 91, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---ilo\\_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms\\_127420.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_127420.pdf).

drafted legislation, running presidential elections, approving the president's nomination for prime minister, and approving or opposing the government's activities.<sup>8</sup> The main role of the Council of the Republic is to consider drafted legislation that has been approved by the House of Representatives.<sup>9</sup>

According to several analysts neither parliamentary chamber holds debates and MPs very often vote unanimously for a law prepared by the presidential administration.<sup>10</sup> The chamber speakers or chairmen of these parliamentary committees play an insignificant role in Belarusian politics, and are subordinate to the president and his administration.<sup>11</sup> For example, during the 2008–2012 term the members of parliament drafted only three pieces of legislation, while all proposed legislation that passed without scrutiny came from the Council of Ministers or the presidential administration.<sup>12</sup>

Members of parliament are elected for four-year terms (art. 93 of Constitution).<sup>13</sup> The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA OSCE) considered the parliament elected in 1995 to be the last democratically elected and only legitimate parliament in Belarus; the 2000 elections were boycotted by most opposition groups although some representatives of the opposition secured a few seats; in all subsequent terms no members of the opposition have been represented in parliament.<sup>14</sup> As the result, in the most recent election for the House of Representatives held on 11 September 2016 only two representatives of the opposition were elected: independent candidate Aliena Anisim, and United Civic Party (UCP) candidate Hanna Kanapackaja.<sup>15</sup> According to Preiherman, a typical MP in the Belarusian Parliament is a male deputy between 50 and 60 years of age who has previously worked in government institutions and has a solid record

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<sup>8</sup> Constitution of Republic of Belarus, art. 91, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---ilo\\_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms\\_127420.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_127420.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, How The Belarusian Political System Works, 13 August 2014, *Belarus Digest*, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/how-belarusian-political-system-works-16219>; Yauheni Preiherman, Who Is In The New Belarusian Parliament?, 04 October 2012, *Belarus Digest*, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/who-new-belarusian-parliament-11503>; Igar Gubarevich, Why Does Europe Engage With Belarus's Rubber Stamp Parliament?, 17 August 2016, *Belarus Digest*, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/why-does-europe-engage-belarus-rubber-stamp-parliament-26896>.

<sup>11</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, *op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Yauheni Preiherman, *op.cit.*; Igar Gubarevich, *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> The parliamentary elections were held in 1995, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Igar Gubarevich, *op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Conduct And Outcomes: Digest Of The 2016 Parliament Elections, *Belarus Digest*, 21 September 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/conduct-and-outcomes-digest-2016-parliament-elections-27276>.



of political loyalty to the incumbent regime.<sup>16</sup> Thus, most deputies are “political has-beens at the end of their careers”.<sup>17</sup>

Political parties, whether pro-government or oppositional, have not had a significant presence, if any, in parliament.<sup>18</sup> There are fifteen parties registered in Belarus, seven of which support the government.<sup>19</sup> Belarus does not have the equivalent hegemonic political parties that, for example, exist in Russia (United Russia party). Most pro-Lukashenka parties are a facade that help the regime comply with electoral laws and influence election outcomes by participating in electoral commissions and local councils, as the Belarusian electoral code requires one-third of the membership of electoral commissions be representatives from parties and movements.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in Belarus, even pro-regime parties do not have a major representation in the government. As seen in the chart below, during the last two convocations the Communist Party secured 3 seats, the Agrarian Party and the Republican Party of Labour and Justice only have one seat each, while oppositional parties have not been represented in Belarusian parliament in the previous two convocations. According to Tatsiana Kulakevich, “the existence of a multiparty system in Belarus provides an opportunity for the government to display a bit of window dressing as evidence that it is not authoritarian. In reality, many of the parties supporting the government have only maintained a nominal existence while the freedom to operate for opposition parties has been severely blocked”.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, President Lukashenko secures most of his political support from non-partisan members of parliament.

<sup>16</sup> Yauheni Preiherman, op.cit.

<sup>17</sup> Igar Gubarevich, op.cit.

<sup>18</sup> Tatsiana Kulakevich, Political Parties In Belarus — Do They Really Matter?, 16 June 2015, *Belarus Digest*, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/political-parties-belarus-do-they-really-matter-22849>.

<sup>19</sup> Volha Charnysh, Pro-Government Parties In Belarus: Are They Real?, 29 April 2015, *Belarus Digest*, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/pro-government-parties-belarus-are-they-real-22524>.

<sup>20</sup> Volha Charnysh, Pro-Government Parties In Belarus: Are They Real?, 29 April 2015, *Belarus Digest*, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/pro-government-parties-belarus-are-they-real-22524>; Tomasz Bakunowicz, A game played according to Lukashenko’s rules: the political opposition in Belarus, OSW Commentary, 2015-07-09, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2015-07-09/a-game-played-according-to-lukashenkos-rules-political>.

<sup>21</sup> Tatsiana Kulakevich, Political Parties In Belarus — Do They Really Matter?, 16 June 2015, *Belarus Digest*, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/political-parties-belarus-do-they-really-matter-22849>.

**Table No. 1: Representation of political parties in Belarusian parliament.<sup>22</sup>**

<i>Registered Party</i>	<i>House of representatives</i>	<i>Membership in 2015</i>
<b>Parties supporting government</b>		
Liberal Democratic Party	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	51,000
Republican Party	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	10,000
Republican Party of Labour and Justice	0/110 (2008–2012) 1/110 (2012–2016)	9,830
Communist Party of Belarus	3/110 (2008–2012) 3/110 (2012–2016)	6,500
Belarusian Social-Sport Party	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	2,500
Belarusian Patriotic Party	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	1,500
Social-democratic party of People's agreement	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	No official data
Belarusian Agrarian Party	1/110 (2008–2012) 1/110 (2012–2016)	No official data
<b>Parties opposing government</b>		
Party Belarusian National Front	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	5,000
United Civic Party	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	3,668
Conservative-Christian Party	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	3,000
Belarusian Party of the Left "Just World"	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	1,300
Belarusian Party "Green"	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	1,250
Party Belarusian Social-Democratic "Hramada"	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	1,200
Belarusian Social-Democratic Party	0/110 (2008–2012) 0/110 (2012–2016)	1,150

<sup>22</sup> Tatsiana Kulakevich, Political Parties In Belarus — Do They Really Matter?, 16 June 2015, *Belarus Digest*, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/political-parties-belarus-do-they-really-matter-22849>.

Thus, it can be concluded that Belarus has a “sterile” parliament, with no political opposition representatives, business elites, civil society or national minorities, which is the ideal legislature for an undemocratic government in Belarus. According to the president, the greatest advantage of the House of Representatives is that “they work professionally and quietly, without quarrelling and shouting”.<sup>23</sup> In addition, he admits that Belarusian MPs are not politicised: “Look around at other countries — some MPs fight in parliament, they are politicised, and there are oligarchs’ groups, and some people pay to become MPs. Rich people will not be able to force their people into the Belarusian parliament”.<sup>24</sup>

The parliament in Belarus is a body completely reliant on the volition and decisions of the executive branch.<sup>25</sup> Legislative activity seeks to pass bills handed down from the presidential administration; members of parliament seldom exercise their right to initiate bills.<sup>26</sup> The parliament has no independent or opposition voices, and there is no genuine debate as part of the policymaking process; election into this legislative body is usually considered “the last step on the way to honorary retirement for state officials”.<sup>27</sup>

### *Council of Ministers and MFA*

According to art. 107 of the Constitution of Belarus, the Council of Ministers is responsible, inter alia, for elaborating the basic guidelines of domestic and foreign policy and for taking measures to implement such policy.<sup>28</sup> The main organisation subordinate to the Council of Ministers and responsible for the formulation of foreign policy is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to the Provisions, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs carries out state policy in the sphere of foreign relations and coordinates the foreign policy and foreign economic activity of the Republic of Belarus.<sup>29</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs includes three departments responsible for cooperation with Russia: the Directorate for Russia, the Division for Eurasian Integration, and the Division for Bilateral Relations

<sup>23</sup> Lukashenko happy with ‘unpoliticized parliament’ in Belarus, *Euroradio*, 09 August 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://udf.by/english/politics/143671-lukashenko-happy-with-unpoliticized-parliament-in-belarus.html>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Andrei Yahorau, Parliamentary elections of 2012: a show in keeping with the worst traditions, in Anatoly Pankovsky and Valeria Kostyugova (eds.), *Belarusian Yearbook*, 2012, 60.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Constitution of Republic of Belarus, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---ilo\\_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms\\_127420.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_127420.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Provisions on Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, approved by the ruling of the Council of Ministers, 31.07.2006 number 978, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.pravo.by/webnpa/text.asp?RN=c20600978>

with the Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Division for Europe and the Division for European Cooperation are tasked with cooperation with the EU.<sup>30</sup> Just like the legislative branch, the executive branch is highly centralised and subordinate to the president.

The president directly appoints the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the prime minister (with consent of the lower chamber of the parliament, which is often a formality).<sup>31</sup> In addition, provisions on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stipulate that, in special situations prescribed by legislation, the MFA must answer exclusively to the president.<sup>32</sup> De facto, officials in government ministries find themselves subordinate to — or competing with — the ruling elites within the presidential administration, where the real political decisions are taken. Therefore, ministries essentially execute decisions made by others, and they must be ready to take public blame for unpopular policies.<sup>33</sup>

### *Political Opposition in Belarus*

Although Belarusian opposition is rather diverse and includes political parties and movements with different ideologies, the fundamental feature uniting them is their declared opposition to Lukashenka's regime.<sup>34</sup> A recent trend in the development of Belarusian opposition is the prevailing influence of civic movements over political parties. First, it is easier to acquire international funding for civic movements than for political parties. Second, political parties have negative connotations among the post-Soviet electorate, which hinders the recruitment process.<sup>35</sup> Thus, opposition leaders increasingly separate from their parties and found civic movements, combining political goals with social initiatives.<sup>36</sup> As such political opposition in Belarus is fragmented. Opposition parties and movements cannot agree on a joint candidate for elections or develop a long-term political and social strategy. Internal cohesion is undermined by a lack of trust, personal conflict and accusations.<sup>37</sup>

Currently, opposition forces are divided into two main camps. The first coalition is represented by an alliance of parties coordinating the “people's referendum”: the BPF Party, the “Movement for Freedom”, the “Tell the Truth” campaign and

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<sup>30</sup> <http://mfa.gov.by/en/contacts/>.

<sup>31</sup> Art. 106 of Constitution and para. 9 of the Provisions on Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>32</sup> Provisions on Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, approved by the ruling of the Council of Ministers, 31.07.2006 number 978, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.pravo.by/webnpa/text.asp?RN=c20600978>.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Frear, op.cit.

<sup>34</sup> Tomasz Bakunowicz, op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> Volha Charnysh, op.cit.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Tomasz Bakunowicz, op.cit.

the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Assembly). The “people’s referendum” campaign was launched in 2013 to reach out to Belarusian society. The campaign collected signatures in support of proposed socio-political reforms, including free access to education and healthcare, a new presidential term limit (two years), and integration with the EU.<sup>38</sup> Despite gathering 120,000 signatures by May 2015, the campaign did not have a major impact on society.<sup>39</sup>

Established in September 2013, the second coalition is the Talaka Civil Alliance for Fair and Honest Elections for a Better Life, which includes two parties: the liberal United Civic Party of Belarus and the post-Communist Belarusian Left Party for “A Just World”.<sup>40</sup> This alliance has also proved to be rather ineffective.<sup>41</sup>

Over the last two decades the regime has succeeded in completely marginalising the political opposition in Belarus. This weak opposition, which follows the rules of the game imposed by the ruling regime, poses no threat to Lukashenka’s power, and its participation in the election is used to legitimise the political system in Belarus. In the foreseeable future lack of internal cohesion, mistrust among leaders, political apathy among the population and the strength of the Belarusian authoritarian regime, undermine the opposition’s potential to become a powerful and efficient actor in the political arena of Belarus.

### **Additional Actors: Regime-Linked Business Elites and General Public**

Having identified the political actors and their role in the policy-making process in Belarus this section will focus on analyses of two additional actors — “oligarchs” and the general public.

#### ***“Belarusian Oligarchs”***

Belarus does not have an equivalent of an oligarchic system in which several groups have sufficient wealth to influence different spheres of political life and shape foreign policy.<sup>42</sup> As Sergei Bohdan notes, there are several rich

<sup>38</sup> Tomasz Bakunowicz, op.cit.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Kamil Klynski, Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, Changes in the political elite, economy and society of Belarus. Appearances and reality. OSW Studies, 2009, 69; Matthew Frear, op.cit.; Grigory Ioffe, Arrest of an ‘Oligarch’ in Belarus, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 13, Issue 59, 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45243&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=64cd7e90a9405567cf82d5fa7c942bef#.V9DNL5grLIU](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45243&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=64cd7e90a9405567cf82d5fa7c942bef#.V9DNL5grLIU).

businessmen in Belarus, but their financial success is based on having close ties with Lukashenko's inner circle, which provides them with access to national wealth.<sup>43</sup>

Different scholars agree it is more appropriate to call Belarusian oligarchs large-scale businessmen or regime-linked business elites because business and industrial leaders do not have an influence on political life in Belarus. By contrast, in Russia or Ukraine, business moguls have considerable clout in national politics.<sup>44</sup> According to Bohdan, Belarusian oligarchs are just "replaceable managers rather than stakeholders of the regime. The Belarusian ruler brings them to the top, then puts them in prisons, forgives them and uses them again as he deems proper. Their function is to run profitable firms and take care of whatever the regime permits them to do".<sup>45</sup>

Some of the richest and most successful businessmen in Belarus based on the 2011 *EJ* rating include, inter alia, Uladzimir Peftiev, Yury Czyzh and Alexander Shakutin.<sup>46</sup> Access to representatives of regime-linked elites for rent-seeking opportunities in Belarus is completely dependent on presidential favours. In return for these favours, businessmen make a contribution to the regime, for example, in the form of donations to special high-cost prestigious government projects or a cash flow to the presidential administration.<sup>47</sup> For instance, Yuri Chizh received oil quotas in exchange for the development of the Dinamo football club in Minsk.<sup>48</sup>

Stepan Sukhavenko argues that Belarus has a system of "oligarchic capitalism" according to which the president can grant a small group of people access to the most lucrative resources and pieces of the national economy in exchange for contributions and political loyalty.<sup>49</sup> In this system the major internal rule is sharing the profit of any deal, no matter how small, with the head of state.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, Are There Any Oligarchs in Belarus?, *Belarus Digest*, 1 May 2012, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/are-there-any-oligarchs-belarus-9069>.

<sup>44</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, Who rules Belarus, 2013, *Belarus Digest*, accessed March 21, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/papers/whorulesbelarus.pdf>; Margarita Balmaceda, Living the high life in Minsk. Russian Energy rents, domestic populism and Belarus' impending crisis, 2014, CEU Press. 105.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ej.by*, 200 successful and influential businessmen in Belarus, 2011, accessed March 21, 2017, <http://ej.by/rating/business2011/peftiev.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Margarita Balmaceda, op.cit.

<sup>48</sup> Oligarch Chizh will conduct the reconstruction of "Dynamo", *Charter 97*, 6 November 2012, accessed March 21, 2017, <https://charter97.org/en/news/2012/11/6/61033/>; Margarita Balmaceda, Living the high life in Minsk. Russian Energy rents, domestic populism and Belarus' impending crisis, 2014, CEU Press. 105.

<sup>49</sup> Stepan Sukhovenko, Oligarchi Lukashenko, 2004, *Compromat.ru*, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.compromat.ru/page\\_16167.htm](http://www.compromat.ru/page_16167.htm).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, the struggle for resources becomes a struggle to be close to the president and his apparatus. Unlike oligarchs in Russia or Ukraine, Belarusian oligarchs never appear in public and stay in the shadows. They cannot be found in the list of Forbes billionaires, and they do not try to influence public opinion by waging so-called “information wars” against one another. The scandals of the Belarusian oligarchs are solved only in the president’s cabinet.<sup>51</sup>

None of the businessmen can guarantee the security of their assets or their personal immunity. If they do not follow the internal rules of the game and do not share their profits with the ruling elites, they can very quickly find themselves imprisoned. For example, in August 2015, Vladimir Yaprincev, a close business partner of Yuri Chyzh, was arrested for channelling his money abroad. Yuri Chyzh went to prison for tax fraud in March 2016.<sup>52</sup> Chyzh’s real problems started emerging after one of his companies failed to complete the construction of the Kempinski Hotel in time for the 2014 Ice Hockey World Championship.<sup>53</sup> Other possible explanations were that the oligarch fell victim of the internal regime struggle because he was one of the few pro-market representatives among the Belarusian business elite.<sup>54</sup> The Belarusian regime could also be attempting to crack down on Russian businesses in the Federation, or to simply raise money because of looming economic difficulties.<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, no independent business elites in Belarus would attempt to lobby the government for or against a certain policy. Decision making in Belarus is based on what will best serve the interests of the president and his apparatus, and although business elites can voice their opinions, they can be easily replaced if they fall out of favour, as the recent example of Yuri Chyzh’s imprisonment demonstrated.

### *Geopolitical Preferences of Belarusians*

In authoritarian regimes, the ordinary public has limited means of influencing the authorities and policymaking processes. Support of the general public is not

<sup>51</sup> Stepan Sukhovenko, Oligarchi Lukashenko, 2004, *Compromat.ru*, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.compromat.ru/page\\_16167.htm](http://www.compromat.ru/page_16167.htm).

<sup>52</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, Ryhor Astapenia, Why Belarus KGB Detained The Country’s Former Top Businessman, 18 March 2016, *Belarus Digest*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/why-belarus-kgb-detained-countrys-former-top-businessman-25014>; Grigory Ioffe, Arrest of an “Oligarch” in Belarus, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 13, Issue 59, 2016, accessed March 23, 2017, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45243&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=64cd7e90a9405567cf82d5fa7c942bef#.V9DNL5grLIU](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45243&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=64cd7e90a9405567cf82d5fa7c942bef#.V9DNL5grLIU); Oligarch Yaprincev and his son arrested? 20 August 2015, *Charter 97*, accessed March 23, 2017, <https://charter97.org/en/news/2015/8/20/165389/>.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, Ryhor Astapenia, op.cit.

essential for official Minsk to pursue integration. The authorities did not ask for people's opinions (for example, via a referendum) when making the decision to join the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union; thus, Belarusians' role in policymaking processes is limited to passive observation of the process pursued by official Minsk. Nevertheless, an analysis of opinion polls helps identify the extent to which the strategy of official authorities reflects the opinion of the general public. This paper will do so by using the example of the geopolitical preferences of society towards integration vis-à-vis the EU and Russia.

An analysis of opinion polls over the last decade shows Belarusian society has been divided on the issue of Belarus' integration choice.<sup>56</sup> The numbers of pro-European and pro-Russian respondents have been fluctuating at approximately 40 percent; in some years respondents have gravitated more towards European integration (for example, in March and June 2011, December 2012 and 2013), while they gravitated towards closer ties with Russia in other years (2003–2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014–2016).<sup>57</sup> In addition, a sizable percentage (approximately 20 percent) of respondents remain undecided on the issue of integration.

**Table No. 2: Attitudes toward the European Union and Russia**

**“If you had to choose between integration with Russia and membership in the European Union, what would you choose?” Data for 2007–2016 (%).<sup>58</sup>**

<i>Variant of Answer</i>	12'07	12'08	12'09	12'10	03'11	12'12	12'13	12'14	12'15	03'16
<i>Integration with Russia</i>	47.5	46.0	42.3	38.1	31.5	37.7	36.6	44.9	53.5	48.0
<i>EU membership</i>	33.3	30.1	42.1	38.0	50.5	43.4	44.6	34.2	25.1	31.2

<sup>56</sup> Regular opinion polls are conducted by IESEPS (IIESEPS conducts quarterly nationwide public opinion polls. The standard volume of the selection amounts to approximately 1,500 respondents. Sampling includes, on average, about 50 settlements (Minsk, large and small towns, as well as villages). The statistical error does not exceed 3 percent.), available at: <http://www.iieps.org/?p=2874&lang=en>; in addition, two major studies have been conducted: D. Melyantsou, A. Artsiomenka, Geopolitical preferences of the Belarusians: a too pragmatic nation?, Research paper, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2 April, 2013, <http://www.belinstitute.eu/en/node/916>; Office for Democratic Belarus (2013), Public opinion poll. Belarus and Eastern Partnership: National and European values, accessed March 23, 2017, [http://odb-office.eu/files/ODB%20National%20and%20European%20Values%20Survey%20Detailed%20Findings\\_1.pdf](http://odb-office.eu/files/ODB%20National%20and%20European%20Values%20Survey%20Detailed%20Findings_1.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Dzianis Melyantsou, *European View*, 2014, 13: 49 (1), 50.

<sup>58</sup> Based on opinion polls conducted by IESEPS, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.iieps.org/?p=2874&lang=en> and <http://www.iieps.org/?p=4268&lang=en>.



In general, Belarusians continue to consider themselves closer to Russia than the EU, as observed in opinion polls conducted by IISEPS on the degree of friendliness towards different countries from 2007–2016. Based on that data Russia always had a rather high level of friendliness, while most of the mentioned EU countries (e.g. the UK and Germany) prompted a higher level of adversarial moods.<sup>59</sup>

The crisis in Ukraine clearly contributed to an increase in pro-Russian sentiment.<sup>60</sup> In 2013 the share of European supporters decreased by 10 percent, while the number of opponents of European integration increased by 15 percent. The number of supporters of Russian integration remained the same in 2013–2014 but increased by almost 6 percent in 2015. In 2014, an absolute majority of Belarusians (73.6 percent) considered themselves closer to Russians than Europeans (25.4 percent) in terms of cultural and psychological values.<sup>61</sup> When asked about the legitimacy of Russia's annexation of Crimea, 27.2 percent of respondents called it “an imperialistic usurpation and occupation”, while almost 60 percent of respondents thought that it was “a restitution of Russian lands and reestablishment of historical justice”.<sup>62</sup> In 2015, the share of Euro-Belarusians (those supporting European integration) decreased dramatically (by almost 8 percent), and pro-Russia sentiment increased (by 6 percent).<sup>63</sup> In 2015, most Belarusians continued supporting Russia in the Ukrainian conflict. For example, 42 percent of respondents supported the independence of Novorossiia and believed that “its people have a right for self-determination” (25.5 percent of respondents supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, while 15.9 percent believed that “there is no Novorossiia, there is just a Russian aggression against Ukraine”). The attitude towards the EU after the Ukrainian conflict was damaged for 35.6 percent of respondents, enhanced for 7.9 percent, and stable/unchanged for 49.7 percent; attitude towards Russia after the Ukrainian conflict was damaged for 21.5 percent of respondents, enhanced for 22 percent, and stable/unchanged for 52.2 percent.<sup>64</sup> In 2016, pro-Russian tendencies gradually decreased, while the share of those supporting European integration started to increase.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Friends and foes of Belarus, IISEPS opinion poll, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4793&lang=en>.

<sup>60</sup> Anatoly Pankovsky and Valeria Kostuygova (eds.), *A survey and analysis of developments in Belarus in 2014*, Belarusian Yearbook, Lohvinau: Vilnius, 2015, 198.

<sup>61</sup> The most important results of the public opinion poll in 2014, Foreign policy orientations of Belarusians, IISEPS, 2014, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=2687&lang=en>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> The most important results of the public opinion poll in 2015, Foreign policy orientations of Belarusians, IISEPS, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=2680&lang=en>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> The most important results of the public opinion poll in 2016, Foreign policy orientations of Belarusians, IISEPS, 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4699&lang=en>.

Thus, in terms of its geopolitical orientation, Belarusian society remains more closely aligned with Russia and its integration project rather than with the EU, although overall the share of Euro-Belarusians has gradually increased in recent years. Geopolitical preferences of the general public in Belarus seem to be determined less by political or social values and more by pragmatic calculations, such as economic benefits. Ukraine's crisis contributed to a temporary rise in pro-Russian sentiment in 2014–2015. An increase in pro-European sentiment will depend on the improvement of relations between Minsk and Brussels, the final liberalisation of the visa regime and increased knowledge about the EU.

### **The Influence of Domestic Configuration in Belarus on the Foreign Policy Trajectory of the Country**

Hence, in Belarus the most important political actor is the president and a group of elites centred around him. Most of the financial resources which support Belarus' bureaucratic apparatus and the country's paternalist social contract is provided by Russia. As Yaraslau Kryvoi puts it "Lukashenka devised a strategy to retain his hold on power and secure financing by remaining in the Russian camp and appearing anti-Western so as to play to Russia's imperial urge, while still engaging in regular disruptive behaviour towards Russia".<sup>66</sup>

Overall, Belarus has strong economic links with Russia, but these ties are highly asymmetrical. This asymmetry is apparent in the intensive trade flows between Belarus and Russia and Russia's role as Belarus' main trade partner, the generous energy subsidies (cheap oil and gas), and Russia's constant economic support in the form of loans on preferential conditions. In response to these economic subsidies, Russia has demanded closer political and intergovernmental cooperation with Belarus, especially in the domain of integration policy. Russian support allowed the Belarusian president to avoid painful economic reforms and get a firm grip on the political and economic situation in Belarus.<sup>67</sup> According to some estimates, the level of Russia's subsidisation of Belarus has amounted to between 500 million to 1.5 billion USD per annum (4–11 percent of GDP) during the 1990s.<sup>68</sup> This generous financial aid allowed Lukashenka to buy popular support through social and industrial subsidies and to freely introduce

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<sup>66</sup> Yaraslau Kryvoi, Andrew Wilson, "From sanctions to summits: Belarus after the Ukraine crisis," European Council on Foreign Relations official website. 5.05 (2015).

<sup>67</sup> Jacob Tolstrup, *Russia vs. the EU: The Competition for Influence in Post-Soviet States*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 116.

<sup>68</sup> Verena Fritz, *State-building: a comparative study of Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania and Russia*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007, 217.

state control over the economy.<sup>69</sup> However, this assistance came at a certain price, as Russia demanded the right to a military presence in Belarus and asked for a loyal ally in foreign policy.<sup>70</sup>

Belarus's policy vis-à-vis Russia can be characterised as “sovereignty entrepreneurship” — the extraction of rents in the form of energy subsidies and credits in return for loyalty or the threat of a reorientation away from Russia.<sup>71</sup> This pattern of relations started forming and became particularly visible after 2000 when Putin came to power in Russia and attempted to put relations with Belarus on a more commercial footing.<sup>72</sup>

Although official Minsk has sometimes engaged in diplomatic rapprochement with the EU, these attempts should rather be interpreted as a bargaining game vis-à-vis Russia, in order to reap higher economic benefits from its “Big Brother”. In spite of some recent trade wars and political squabbles with Russia, the Belarusian regime cannot afford the option of reorienting to the West, as this step would entail democratic and market reforms which make up part of the conditionality attached to cooperation with the EU. As Lukashenka has pointed out, the support of Russia could not be matched by the support of any other potential partner so therefore neither America, nor the EU can replace Russia for Belarus.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

Although *de jure* the competences of international policymaking are shared between the executive and legislative branches in Belarus, *de facto* the real power is concentrated in the hands of the president and his administration. The Council of Ministers and especially the National Assembly exist simply to legitimise the political system and simulate the institutions of democratic representation. Hence, their role in affecting the policy-making process in Belarus is minimal. The parliament mostly consists of non-partisan deputies who are loyal to the incumbent regime, and it serves rather ceremonial purposes.

<sup>69</sup> Jacob Tolstrup, *Russia vs. the EU: The Competition for Influence in Post-Soviet States*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 117.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Alex Nice, *Playing Both Sides: Belarus between Russia and the EU*, DGAP analyse, 2 March 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Alexander Batur and Slava Mikhaylov, “I Love You, You Pay My Rent”: Belarusian-Russian Integration, in David Dusseault and Richard Sakwa (eds.), *The CIS: Form or Substance*, Aleksanteri Institute: Helsinki University, 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Alina Grishkevich, “President: No one will replace Russia for us” (“Президент: Россию нам никто не заменит”), *Tut.by*, 15 January 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/politics/431512.html>.

Belarusian MPs have initiated only a handful of legislative acts over the last two decades, and they have passed drafted legislation from the executive branch with little scrutiny. Thus, such an impotent legislative body can hardly have a real influence in the policy-making process of the country. In addition, Belarus does not have the prototypes of oligarchs which, for example, exist in Ukraine and can constrain the power of the president by having direct control of the political level playing field.

Alternative points of view coming from either political opposition or the general public do not provide to constrain the ruling regime either. Belarusian opposition is marginalised and cannot have a real influence and representation in policy-making institutions in the country. Being cut off from media and having to operate abroad it can reach only a limited number of Belarusians.

The general public also does not have an active say in foreign policy-making. The population has never had a referendum on the foreign policy choices of their country, such as closer alignment with the EU versus membership in Russian-led integration projects. Therefore, support of the population is not essential for Belarusian authorities to pursue certain foreign policy trajectory, which leaves President Lukashenka and his entourage the main actors on the political stage in Belarus.

As a result, Belarusian foreign policy trajectory since the beginning of the 1990s has largely had a pro-Russian orientation. Belarus' huge asymmetrical economic dependence on Russia, primarily in the energy domain, helped to generate a kind of "sponsored authoritarianism" economic model, which was facilitated by Russia's financial and political support. Reorientation towards the EU can only be realised with certain democratisation steps, which may be detrimental to Lukashenka's regime. Belarus-EU relations have moved through several stages of conflict and engagement, but have largely remained antagonistic. Phases of diplomatic thaw usually came during pre-election periods, but sanctions and complete isolation followed such thaws. At the same time, the crisis in Ukraine has contributed to Belarusian attempts to distance the country from Russia, which have led to a certain rapprochement in its relations with the EU in 2014–2016. Although, as has been stated earlier, the Belarusian regime is unlikely to shift its generally pro-Russian orientation, the West can use this created "window of opportunity" and build a pro-active long-term strategy, forming ties with Belarus at all levels and strengthening Belarusian statehood and national identity.

## Part II: Region and Beyond





# Belarus–EU Relations: Normalization 2.0

*Dzianis Melyantsou*

A new geopolitical situation in Europe formed after Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the war in Donbas is pressing Belarus and the European Union to revise their policies in the region as well as their relations with each other. In this new context, Belarus is seeking a more balanced foreign policy with elements of neutrality.

Relations between independent Belarus and the European Union have always been difficult. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the newly proclaimed Republic of Belarus started to build democracy and established diplomatic relations with Western countries. It concluded a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU in 1995. But after Alyaksandr Lukashenka started to consolidate his authoritarian rule and returned to the idea of integration with Russia, relations with the Western democracies deteriorated dramatically. In response to an unconstitutional referendum in 1996, repressions against political opposition, and manipulated elections in 2001 and 2004, the EU imposed personal sanctions against a number of Belarusian officials, including the president, and restricted political and economic cooperation with Belarus. EU Member States also declined to ratify the PCA.

The first serious attempt to normalize relations between Belarus and the European Union took place in 2008–2010, when after the Russian–Georgian war Minsk did not recognize the separatist Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent; released all political prisoners; decreased the level of repression against domestic opposition forces; and softened its rhetoric towards the West. In response, the European Union suspended personal sanctions against almost all Belarusian officials. That paved the way for visits by Lukashenka to Lithuania and Italy after years of isolation.

This wave of normalization ended with a crackdown at the opposition's demonstration on the day of the presidential elections (December 19, 2010). The EU reintroduced sanctions and stopped contact with Belarusian top officials. Nevertheless, Belarus retained its membership in the Eastern Partnership, which became almost the only platform for intergovernmental communication between Minsk and Brussels.

In 2012–2013 Minsk again started taking steps to normalize relations with the West. This process has been going slowly and has been painful, given the huge

distrust that had accumulated following the first unsuccessful normalization attempt. Simultaneously Belarus tried to convey the message to European capitals that the EU's policy of sanctioning is counterproductive and harmful for constructive dialogue. That is why Minsk had not released any political prisoners until 2015 showing that EU pressure and demands produced no result.

The crisis in Ukraine, and Minsk's neutral position towards Kyiv, gave significant impetus to the process. Today we can say that relations between Belarus and the West have entered a new phase of sustainable normalization that is gaining momentum.

### **What are Belarus' Motives to Improve Relations with the EU?**

Belarusian authorities and Belarusian society have different interests when it comes to relations with the European Union. The Belarusian government is primarily interested in more financial and technical aid, loans, investments, and transfer of technologies. It is also very much interested in access of Belarusian goods to the European market.

After the Big Bang enlargement in 2004, the European Union became the second trade partner for Belarus after Russia, and it was critically important to ensure good and stable political relations with the EU in order to sustain economic stability. After Russia started to feel economic difficulties, connected with Western sanctions and decreased support for the Belarusian economy, this motivation became even stronger.

Besides this, Minsk seeks a geopolitical balance between an increasingly aggressive Russia and the West to ensure its own security and stability as a "situationally neutral" country. To this end, official Minsk is ready to make some concessions towards the West (e.g. less repression against political opponents and human rights dialogues with the United States and the EU), but only to the extent that they do not undermine the established political system.

According to a recent research conducted by the Office for Democratic Belarus, Belarusian society is primarily interested in the EU first as a partner to help with economic reforms and development (32.6 percent of respondents) and as a trade partner (23.1 percent of respondents). Only 8.9 percent of Belarusians think Belarus could benefit from cooperation with the EU in the sphere of democracy and good governance.<sup>1</sup> The EU is also an attractive destination for shopping and tourism for ordinary Belarusians. Per capita, Belarus is the leading country in the world when it comes to Schengen visas.

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<sup>1</sup> "Belarus between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union", ODB-Brussels, 6 April 2016, accessed March 28, 2017, [http://by.odb-office.eu/ekspertyza\\_/dasledavanni/belarus-mezhdu-evropeyskim-soyuzom-i-evraziyskim-ekonomicheskim-soyuzom-issledovanie-vospriyatiya](http://by.odb-office.eu/ekspertyza_/dasledavanni/belarus-mezhdu-evropeyskim-soyuzom-i-evraziyskim-ekonomicheskim-soyuzom-issledovanie-vospriyatiya).



## **The New Round of Normalization**

In some ways, today's normalization resembles the 2008–2010 initiative to improve relations with the EU. The then official Minsk liberalized the political climate inside the country, pursued greater independence from Moscow in foreign policy, and significantly softened its rhetoric towards the European Union. Each time powerful triggers of détente were conflicts in the post-Soviet space inspired by Russia and the West's negative reaction to Russia's activities. And each time Minsk sought to use these crises to enhance its independence and its role in the region.

Despite these similarities, the new normalization is characterized by significant differences that render it more promising, and ultimately more sustainable. First, the war in Ukraine influenced the security environment in the region more seriously than the Russia–Georgia war, and demanded a clearer position from Belarus. Belarusian authorities were seriously frightened, and moved to strengthen their defense capacities and to stake out more independent positions from Russia in all spheres. Since 2014 Belarus has conducted military exercises and training of its Border Guards and territorial defense troops (National Guard) almost every month. President Lukashenka ordered Belarus to start its own missile program to achieve more independence from Russian armament. Belarus has also adapted its Military Doctrine to the new security environment.

Second, Minsk and Brussels have learned their lesson from the previous round of normalization and thus lowered the bar with regard to their expectations. Today the parties prefer slow but sure steps towards each other. They are focused on confidence building measures and on concrete questions of constructive cooperation, temporarily taking sensitive political issues out of agenda.

Third, since 2013 the EU and Belarus have been advancing a more comprehensive agenda for their relations. Minsk and Brussels have started sectorial dialogues on topics ranging from border security, to the environment and food safety. They are continuing negotiations regarding visa facilitation, as well as on readmission agreements to manage the return of irregular migrants. In addition to the Eastern Partnership, a Belarus–EU coordination group was established as a new platform for communication following their earlier dialogue on modernization. Taken together these initiatives affirm the serious interest of both parties in deepening their dialogue.

Fourth, Brussels and the Member States have also changed their attitude towards Belarus and its leader, against the backdrop of Russia's aggressive actions as well as instability inside Ukraine and other regions bordering the EU. For the EU today, Belarusian stability, controllability as well as the position towards the conflict in Ukraine have become more important than the promotion of democracy. And this is taken in Minsk as an additional positive factor for dialogue, since Belarus previously reacted negatively to the EU's democracy promotion rhetoric, considering it as interference into domestic affairs.

## War in Ukraine as a Factor of Belarus–EU Normalization

Whereas the conflict in Georgia influenced Belarus's security only indirectly, the Ukrainian conflict has given Belarus an unmarked border of more than 1000 kilometres with a belligerent country. Before 2014 trade turnover with Ukraine reached more than 6 billion USD, making Kyiv a very important trade partner for Minsk. Russia's annexation of Crimea and hostilities in Donbas caused a twofold reaction from official Minsk. First, Minsk authorities were irritated because their closest military ally did not inform them about a military operation in an important neighboring country. This irritation translated into harsh public criticism by Lukashenka of the Kremlin's behavior, as well as an attempt to stay clear of the conflict. Second, Belarusian authorities were genuinely frightened by the Russian actions. This fear prompted efforts to strengthen their defense capabilities and to tout Belarusian national identity.

After the Ukrainian crisis Belarusian authorities have made efforts to improve the readiness of their military forces and to enhance their military independence to adapt to the new security environment. To this end Belarus's military doctrine was updated, a new martial law was passed in 2014–2015, and an updated defense plan was signed by the president. According to defense minister Andrej Raouk, the new military doctrine is focused on “tendencies connected with planning of colored revolutions and mechanisms to change constitutional order, undermining of territorial integrity of a state by inspiration of internal armed conflicts.”<sup>2</sup> The document also includes a wider list of internal and external threats, and for the first time states the need for an “active position of the state in prevention of a military conflict by taking preemptive measures of strategic containment.”<sup>3</sup> Obviously, these changes were inspired by the conflict in Ukraine.

Belarus's neutral position on Ukraine has been conditioned by the necessity to retain the Ukrainian market's share for Belarusian goods, reluctance to spoil relationships with the West and to take part in Russia's unilateral actions about which Russia had never sent an advance notice to Belarus. Apparently gaining from the crisis in Ukraine was not among the initial goals (this was a question of survival), nevertheless Minsk was able to extract political and economic benefits.

First, by pursuing a neutral policy regarding Ukraine — retaining close ties with Russia and simultaneously backing Ukraine's territorial integrity — made it possible for Belarus to organize peace talks in Minsk and thus improve Belarus's international image. On February 11, 2015, the leaders of Germany and France

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<sup>2</sup> “The new Military Doctrine was designed in response to the colored revolutions (in Russian)”, *Tut.by*, 4 April 2016, accessed March 29, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/society/491061.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus, accessed March 29, 2017, [http://www.mil.by/ru/military\\_policy/doktrina/](http://www.mil.by/ru/military_policy/doktrina/).

despite sanctions came to Minsk for negotiations with Poroshenko and Putin, and the leader of Belarus greeted them.

Second, the crisis in Ukraine increased the value of Belarus's stability for the European Union and especially for neighbouring Member States. Belarus has suddenly been transformed from the outsider of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative into its "success story" — at least now Belarus is the only EaP country which fully control its territory and has no disputes with its neighbours.

Third, European governments, concerned about the potential loss of Belarus's statehood because of Russia's pressure, put aside their human rights and democracy concerns and intensified contact with Minsk.

Fourth, Belarus made a serious effort to curb further decline in its trade exchange with Ukraine. Thus, in January 2015, the two countries agreed that from now on Ukraine could pay for Belarusian non-petroleum exports in Ukrainian hryvnas. This was a risky decision on Minsk's part as the hryvna was extremely unstable. However, in that way, Belarus is able to retain much of the market share for its products in Ukraine — Belarus's second-largest trading partner, with which it enjoys a trade surplus. In addition Belarus was able to boost its agricultural export to Russia because of Russia's retaliatory embargo on foods from most Western countries.

### More Sustainable Relations

The experience of the previous normalization showed that the mutual expectations the European Union and official Minsk had of each other were too high. The EU demanded democratization with the help of the Belarusian opposition, which was absolutely unacceptable to Lukashenka. And Brussels was severely disappointed when security forces brutally cracked down on an opposition demonstration on election day, September 19, 2010, fearing it could signify the beginning of a Belarusian version of Ukraine's "Orange Revolution".

Minsk also was unrealistic to expect the EU would be open to granting multi-billion loans and greater financial assistance in exchange for a release of political prisoners and non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Such expectations were formed in part by European politicians themselves: during their visit to Minsk just before the 2010 presidential elections, the foreign ministers of Poland and Germany, Radoslaw Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle, promised 3 billion EUR for Belarus in the event elections would be more free and fair. While the election day crackdown ensured no Western assistance would be forthcoming, until that point the Belarusian leadership did try to ensure a much freer campaign than in the previous 2006 elections.<sup>4</sup> In the end, Lukashenka's need to maintain control

<sup>4</sup> Official Minsk differentiated between the electoral campaign which they believed to be more open, and events of the electoral day's evening, which they believed to be a threat.

outweighed his interest in Western assistance, and following the elections official Minsk reverted to the same repressive policies and anti-Western rhetoric.

These episodes have all added a realism to Belarus–EU relations. Today the parties understand each other's motives and limitations much better, and are not setting impossible goals. Realizing the Belarusian authoritarian regime is stable enough and does not intend to democratize in order to be closer to the EU, Brussels prefers to work in areas that do not cause rejection from Minsk and do not affect fundamentals of the Belarusian political system. The EU now tends to promote liberalization in Belarus indirectly, for instance through humanitarian projects, tourism, and assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises. Today the main goal is not democratization but rather stability on its eastern borders. Rapprochement should be reached by simplifying Schengen visa procedures, implementing the Mobility partnership and reaching a level of trust conducive to starting negotiations on a new agreement establishing contractual relations.

For their part, Belarusian authorities understand the EU's limitations and do not expect quick progress or large financial benefits from normalization. According to Belarus Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej, Belarus and the EU have agreed to address only solvable problems and to take sensitive issues out of the agenda. The past three years have shown that this approach has been more successful, and enabled the parties to move further in the process of normalization, than between 2008 and 2010.

## The New Agenda of Belarus–EU Relations

Relative sustainability of the process of normalization has been achieved *inter alia* due to formulating a comprehensive agenda of both bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation. Over the past two years, relations with the EU have been developing mainly within the framework of the Eastern Partnership initiative (ministerial formal and informal meetings, expert roundtables) and dialogues on modernization and their subsequent format, and the Belarus–EU Coordination Group which held its first meeting in April 2016. Belarus and the EU have also reopened human rights dialogue and started new dialogue on trade.<sup>5</sup> Minsk and Brussels have also continued negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements (the process is at the final stage), concluded a Mobility Partnership, and have signed a Cooperation Arrangement on an Early Warning Mechanism in the energy sector.

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<sup>5</sup> EU–Belarus Human Rights Dialogue, *EEAS*, 9 June 2016, accessed March 15, 2017, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5040/eu-belarus-human-rights-dialogue\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5040/eu-belarus-human-rights-dialogue_en).

In January 2015 the EU elaborated on an internal document entitled “The list of possible additional concrete measures to deepen the EU’s policy of critical engagement with Belarus” (or informally the “29 measures”), which could be considered as a normalization roadmap. Belarusian authorities have made a number of steps in liberalizing the domestic political environment — they have freed all political prisoners and conducted more free and open electoral campaigns in 2015 and 2016. Belarus also took a neutral position towards the crisis in Ukraine. In return the EU has implemented a number of measures from the list, including lifting sanctions, resuming contacts at a high political level, and increasing financial assistance. In fact, at the time of writing this, 15 of the 29 measures have been implemented by the European Union.

In 2016 Minsk also stated it was ready to start negotiations for a new agreement on partnership and cooperation with the EU. But so far the European Union refrains from positively answering this intention preferring to complete negotiations that have already been started (e.g. visa facilitation and readmission).

In the framework of the Belarus–EU Coordination Group, eleven priorities were detailed in which the EU could assist Belarus in its modernization process:

1. Support the development of enterprises, creation of a specialized agency.
2. SME internationalization (development of an SME strategy, access to finances for exports, availability of advisory services for export).
3. International and EU standards, rules of origin, and technical regulations.
4. Investments and business climate (increasing awareness in Belarus about EU/international standards, developing harmonization and compatibility of Eurasian Economic Union and EU standards, addressing problems and hidden barriers in attracting foreign investments, development of e-government).
5. Optimization of the radiation control network and modernization of automated system of radiation control in Belarus.
6. Development of the green economy.
7. Provision of public access to environmental information.
8. Connecting Belarus’ electricity system with neighboring countries.
9. Modernization of transport infrastructure in Belarus and at Belarus–EU border crossing points.
10. Provision of social services at permanent establishments for social treatment.
11. Establishment of a National Human Rights Institution in Belarus.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> “Eleven priorities of the dialogue. What Minsk and Brussels discussed during the first meeting of the Coordination group” (in Russian), *Tut.by*, 8 April 2016, accessed March 29, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/politics/491767.html>.

Thus, today Minsk is involved in an intensified dialogue with Brussels in a number of spheres, including political, economic and security issues, with the participation of many governmental officials as well as experts and diplomats. In the framework of this interaction, mutual benefits are being achieved and mutual trust is being built. This type of trust- and confidence-building process could help to avoid misunderstandings and crises in the future.

### **Changing the EU's Perception of Belarus**

The EU has also reconsidered its attitude towards Belarus and Belarusian authorities. First, developments in Ukraine have shown that forced European integration on geopolitically contested territories, together with support for anti-government protests, can lead to instability and war, and that perhaps a stable and rather soft (compared with e.g. Azerbaijan or Russia) Belarusian authoritarian regime is not an absolute evil. Moreover, in 2014–2016 Minsk made some steps in liberalizing the domestic political climate: all political prisoners were freed, the opposition was able to campaign openly during at least two electoral campaigns and organize demonstrations in the center of Minsk without any repressions; civil society activists and opposition leaders had more access to state media without censorship.

Second, compared to Russia's Putin, Alyaksandr Lukashenka is no longer perceived by the EU as a "Europe's last bloody dictator" who should be removed as soon as possible.

Third, the new image of Minsk as a "place of peace" (according to the Pope) is not compatible with a demonization of Belarusian authorities and the demanding tone traditionally used by Western leaders. Thus EU rhetoric towards the Belarusian government has softened.

Fourth, Brussels finally understood that since Minsk did not plan on joining the EU in the foreseeable future, the usual conditionality policy did not work in Belarus in the same way it worked in Moldova or Ukraine, and the EU should offer something different to influence the country.

Fifth, the EU apparently became disillusioned with the Belarusian opposition as a strong and realistic alternative to the incumbent government. It now additionally engages with Belarusian state institutions in spheres of mutual interest. And since Belarusian authorities refrain from repression against their political opponents and demonstrate more openness during electoral campaigns, the degree of EU criticism has dropped so this contributes to the continuation of the policy of gradual normalization.

Finally, the September 2016 parliamentary elections brought sensational results. For the first time in more than a decade, two opposition candidates became members of the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of the Belarusian

parliament.<sup>7</sup> And though the ODIHR election monitoring mission did not recognize the elections as completely compliant with OSCE standards, it noted better organization of the elections, a bigger number of registered candidates (including opposition), and more possibilities for candidates to campaign (e.g. debates on state television).<sup>8</sup>

The main outcome of the election campaigns for the relationship between Minsk and Brussels is that it did not put any new obstacles in the way of building dialogue. It would even be safe to assume that after the presidential election of October 2015, and the recent parliamentary elections, the “vicious circle” of electoral cycles — when a deterioration of relations was observed after each election campaign requiring a long rehabilitation period that often took a few years — was finally broken in the relationship between Belarus and the EU (and, on a broader scale, with the West). This time the elections did not become a new obstacle to dialogue. Two opposition MPs, as well as refraining from violence against opposition candidates and activists during elections and afterwards, were strong messages from the Belarusian government to the European Union, which can pave the way for more intensive cooperation, at least in some areas.

Though Belarusian authorities returned to selective repression against participants of the unauthorized demonstrations which took place in Minsk and other regions in March 2017, the scale of these repressive measures (i.e. administrative arrests and fines) can hardly be compared to those of 2010–2011 and will probably not disrupt ongoing Belarus–EU dialogue.

### **Bilateral Relations with the EU’s Member States and Regional Formats**

In the process of normalization with the European Union, Minsk focused not only on deepening dialogue with the EU’s institutions but also with EU Member States, especially with those who had essential decision making influence within the Union. One vivid example of such an approach was improved relations with Poland.

In March 2016 Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski visited Belarus. Given the overall tense relationship between Minsk and Warsaw after 2010, the first visit in eight years within the bilateral framework became especially symbolic and significant.

Waszczykowski held a round of talks with Minister Makiej, and met with President Lukashenka. The head of state called for taking the bilateral

<sup>7</sup> Hanna Kanapatskaya of the United Civil Party and Alena Anisim of the Belarusian Language Society.

<sup>8</sup> Artsiom Shraibman, “OSCE on the Results of the Elections: Belarusian Authorities Partly Fulfilled Their Promises,” *Tut.by*, 12 September 2016, accessed March 30, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/politics/511771.html>.

relationship to a new level in order to effectively address current challenges. Lukashenka emphasized that Belarus intended to pursue the “closest cooperation with Poland.”<sup>9</sup> For his part, Waszczykowski said that the new Polish government believed relations between the two countries in recent years were not normal, and therefore decided to embark on dialogue to resolve all issues that might be addressed in the foreseeable future without any preliminary conditionality.

In October 2016 Belarusian Foreign Minister Makiej visited Warsaw. He conducted talks with Poland’s President Andrzej Duda, Secretary of State at the Chancellery of the President Krzysztof Szczerski, and Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski. Makiej’s stay in Poland, which followed the visit of the Polish foreign minister to Minsk in March, became another link in the chain of normalization of relations with Warsaw. The officials addressed a broad range of issues, including challenges. Makiej brought to Warsaw some archive documents that, according to Waszczykowski, concerned the “fate of many Poles”. Makiej also gave an extensive interview to the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*.<sup>10</sup> In addition to numerous positive remarks about Poland and the European Union, the appeal of the Belarusian foreign minister to improve the visibility of the EU in Belarus via the implementation of mutually beneficial projects is noteworthy.

On 20 May 2016 President Lukashenka visited Italy and the Vatican. That was the first visit from a Belarusian head of state to an EU Member State since the entry ban was removed in February 2016. Incidentally, back in 2009, during a previous warm spell in the relationship between Minsk and Brussels, Rome and the Vatican became a “gateway to Europe” for the Belarusian president. From the point of view of the evolution of the relationship between Belarus and the EU, Lukashenka’s visit to Rome was naturally a giant leap. As with lower level diplomatic contacts in the past few years, it helps create a critical mass of events required to achieve further normalization and diversification of bilateral relations.

On 6–7 July 2016 Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej paid a working visit to Riga. The large number of meetings that Makiej had with Latvian leadership and heads of some ministries was quite remarkable: he met with President Raimonds Vējonis, Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis, Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Economics Arvils Ašeradens, and Minister of Transport Uldis Augulis. As can be seen from the list of meetings, Makiej held a series of negotiations regarding a broad range of issues on both the bilateral agenda and within the framework of the Belarus–EU relationship.

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<sup>9</sup> Meeting with Poland Prime Minister Witold Waszczykowski, accessed March 30, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/en/news\\_en/view/meeting-with-poland-prime-minister-witold-waszczykowski-13315/](http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/meeting-with-poland-prime-minister-witold-waszczykowski-13315/).

<sup>10</sup> Verbatim of the interview of Minister of Foreign Affairs U. Makiej to the Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, 9 October 2016, Warsaw, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://mfa.gov.by/press/smi/b0e4aa770383c1d1.html> (in Russian).



Possible development scenarios for Ukraine were discussed as well, along with possibilities for involving Belarus in inter-regional engagement projects, including in the 16+1 format, which includes Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkan region, and China.

When commenting on the current status of the relationship between Belarus and the EU, Makiej said: “There are some steps that both sides can and must take in order for the relations between Belarus and the European Union to normalize. We are actively working for these steps to become a reality. And we are satisfied with the positive progress in the promotion of our relations with the European Union.”<sup>11</sup> The minister also voiced the need for commencing talks over the conclusion of a framework agreement between Belarus and the EU. According to Makiej, agreements between the EU and Kazakhstan, and the EU and Armenia, could be used as models; however, there should be differences to capture the specific nature of the engagement between Minsk and Brussels.

On November 5, 2016 Belarus’ Prime Minister Andrej Kabiakou also visited Riga where he took part in the summit for heads of governments of Central and Eastern Europe countries and China (16+1 format). Belarus was invited to the summit as a special guest. During the official visit of Belarusian Defence Minister Andrej Raukou to Latvia in December 2016 a Latvia–Belarus agreement on cooperation in the field of defence was signed.

One of the most important events in 2016 was the visit of Slovak Prime Minister Fico to Minsk in November 2016. This was the most high-ranking (in the context of bilateral relations) visit from a European politician in the last six years. It’s worth noting that in the second half of 2016 the Slovak Republic held the the European Union presidency, thus Fico visited Belarus in dual roles.

Belarus has gradually improved its diplomatic relations with Sweden. In December 2016 Minsk opened an embassy in Sweden. At the beginning of 2017 Belarus made another significant step in opening up towards the West by introducing a 5-day visa-free regime with 80 countries of the world, including all EU countries and the US.

## **Conclusion**

Minsk and the European Union have learned the lessons from previous “normalization” and now are cautiously trying to build more stable and comprehensive relations on the basis of mutual interests. For now these mutual

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<sup>11</sup> Verbatim report of the press availability of Foreign Minister of the Republic of Belarus Ula-dzimir Makiej following his talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs, 7 July 2016, Riga, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://mfa.gov.by/press/smi/fab87d7ace888ff9.html> (in Russian).

interests are common border control, combatting illegal trafficking, environment protection and food safety, transit infrastructure, and security in the region. In these spheres Belarus could be a cooperative partner.

Depoliticized dialogue and cooperation in numerous spheres could be effective mechanisms. Belarus now desperately needs financial resources to overcome its economic crisis. The EU could use conditionality to help modernize the country and make it more stable and predictable, rather than exclusively push a democratization agenda, which most probably would only provoke Minsk's irritation and resistance, as it was before.

Nevertheless, one should remember there are clear red lines which Belarus cannot cross on its way to improving relations with the European Union, and the West in general. First, Belarus remains a close ally of Russia, and it is deeply dependent on energy subsidies from Moscow and a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. In this regard, the goal to establish a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with Belarus (as one of the stated goals of the Eastern Partnership) seems unrealistic. On the other hand, some trade agreements and a renewed Partnership and Cooperation Agreement are achievable, and also desired by Belarusian authorities. Second, being a consolidated authoritarian regime, Belarus will definitely not consider genuine democratization as one of the possible concessions during the normalization process. Domestic political stability is of preeminent importance to Belarusian authorities, while relations with the EU is a secondary goal. Therefore, to achieve practical progress in the relationship it would be more useful and effective to focus on a non-political agenda of mutual interest, namely issues such as trade, the environment, border security, energy, transport, and education.

If the normalization process continues without interference by external players (Russia) or disruption by domestic shocks, Belarus and the European Union could finalize the Visa facilitation and Readmission agreements in 2017 and start negotiating an updated Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, as well as an interim trade agreement that could function until the PCA enters into force. This would lend new impetus to trade and create a basis for institutionalized cooperation at a political level. In domestic politics, official Minsk could introduce a moratorium on the death penalty and further reform the electoral system to encourage greater participation of political parties and a revitalization of Parliament. But it is unrealistic to expect that at this stage the Belarusian government will ensure truly democratic and fully transparent electoral processes and consider the opposition as a legitimate part of the political system and not just as clients of the West.

# The Defence Policy of Belarus: A Regional Perspective

*Nora Vanaga*

It is not possible to analyze the development of Belarus' defence policy apart from its foreign policy and relationship with Russia. The geostrategic position of Belarus that functions as a buffer zone for the defence of Moscow, and as a potential staging area for Russia's attack against the West, has always been the main bargaining card of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in talks with Russian leadership. If Russia wants this buffer zone to be credible in deterring potential opponents from the West, it needs to assist with financial support and military arms for Belarusian armed forces. Indeed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus inherited a military force that was in a very good condition at that time. It kept modern weapons and equipment due to its previous frontline states status, and preserved many high technology factories that produced components for military equipment and arms. For years Lukashenka was successful in arguing along this line of logic by asking to modernize the outdated equipment and arms. In return, Belarus' defence sector was closely integrated into Russia's but the policy of neutrality formulated in the early 90s stayed on paper and was never destined to be implemented.

Not being able to provide sufficient funding for defence resulted in an irreversible ageing of military arms and equipment, and from 2000 it was a challenge to sell this argument to Moscow who refused more often than not to provide assistance. Stricter conditionality could be observed from Moscow's side, pushing for the creation of a single air defence system, demanding a greater contribution from Belarus within the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and in a more covered way making persistent attempts to take over or rule out Belarusian defence enterprises from the markets. In recent years numerous attempts have been made to force Lukashenka to agree to a Russian air base in Belarus which is still an open issue.

The Ukraine crisis hit the confidence of the Belarusian political leadership in Russia hard as its close partner in regional security and defence matters. As Lukashenka expressed during a session of the Security Council: "We do not want to be dictated and maltreated. We will take care of our land, our national identity

and independence...” and additionally emphasizing that one needs to “assess the situation realistically and to offer solutions taking into account the existing capacities.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, within the scope of foreign policy, Belarus demonstrated itself to Moscow as a reliable security partner while simultaneously keeping a political affinity with Kyiv. But in the defence sector, considering the long-term dependence on Russia’s assistance for military modernization, any changes that could increase Belarus’ autonomy can be hardly be made. Seeking other partners in Asia (China, Vietnam, India, and Pakistan) is one strategic move to reduce their dependence on Russia. Other developments in Belarus’ defence policy is the strengthening of air defence with air missiles by Chinese manufacturers, boosting the security of the border with Russia, and increasing the operational capacity of land forces. Hence once again Belarus wants to show Russia that its military is strong enough to fulfil the functions of a buffer zone for the protection of Moscow, and purposefully argue there is no need for an increased Russian military presence in its territory. The strategic goal of the Belarus defence strategy is to not be dragged into the confrontation between the West and Russia. It means keeping a distance while simultaneously maintaining strong ties with Russia as a close partner concerning national security, but at the same time demonstrating that Belarus, to the West, is a constructive and open partner for dialogue.

Regarding relationships between Belarus and the West in the realm of defence, close ties with Russia have negatively affected the image of Belarus as an independent, trustworthy partner. Also, its domestic politics (Lukashenka’s authoritarian regime) have also hampered building the necessary trust. Despite the fact that Belarus is a NATO Partnership of Peace country, there have been only a few positive developments in the relationship between both sides over the years. The military exercise *Zapad 2013*, where hostile scenarios against the Baltic States and Poland were played out, worsened the situation. Subsequently, there is an anxiety within NATO, in particular among the Member States of the Baltic Sea region, about the upcoming military exercise *Zapad 2017*, questioning the lack of transparency about the scope and scenarios that are likely to be played out.

Accordingly, the aim of this chapter is to analyse the main challenges that the Belarus defence policy is facing after the Ukraine crisis. Additionally, the upcoming military exercise *Zapad 2017* will be analyzed with an aim to collect the perceptions of the Baltic Sea regional players involved and identify the implications for regional security.

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<sup>1</sup> Official Website of the Republic of Belarus. “Lukashenko: Belarus needs military security, social and political stability,” accessed March 5, 2017, [http://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/speeches-and-interviews/lukashenko-belarus-needs-military-security-social-and-political-stability\\_i\\_17778.html](http://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/speeches-and-interviews/lukashenko-belarus-needs-military-security-social-and-political-stability_i_17778.html).

## Challenges of Belarus' Defence Policy

For years there have been many problems that Belarus' defence policy has faced that have significantly limited Lukashenka's ability to find a balance between Russia and the West in the post-Ukraine geopolitical situation. The most important among them is the high dependence on Russia, lack of sufficient defence spending, the quantity and quality of armed forces personnel, slow military modernization processes, and the struggle to keep the military industry profitable.

Although in the 1992 Military Doctrine of Belarus it stated that its defence strategy is a neutrality policy and the status of a non-nuclear weapon state,<sup>2</sup> after the election of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 1994, whose appeal was to integrate with Russia in practically all sectors, including defence, Belarus stepped into a dependence-on-Russia path. The doctrine witnessed instant amendments that foresaw close military cooperation with Russia.<sup>3</sup> Also, the following doctrine of 2002 that was elaborated as a response to NATO's expansion towards Eastern Europe and terror acts in the US clearly stated that in order to provide military security for Belarus, it was necessary to form a single defence space with the Russian Federation to develop a combined military infrastructure, and to adopt other steps to support the defence capability of the Union State.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, the recent doctrine of 2016, despite the Ukraine events, foresees the continuation of a close cooperation with Russia. Interestingly enough, it also provides a definition and describes the threats posed by hybrid warfare such as private military companies and irregular formations that could be entering Belarus from neighboring countries with an objective of conducting an anti-constitutional change of power.<sup>5</sup> Thus Belarus' defence policy, being developed for more than two decades in close cooperation, and in some spheres even fully integrated, with Russia (for instance air defence) cannot be considered as sovereign per se even if Russia's assertive policy in Ukraine is considered as a threat for Belarus. So ideologically it is very challenging to break away from Russia. When it comes to the sustainment of defence systems however, Belarus, due its inability to allocate sufficient financial resources, also needs Russia's financial and military arms support.

<sup>2</sup> Steven J. Main, "The Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus," *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, 2002, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Steven J. Main, "The Belarusian Armed Forces: a Military-Political Analysis, 1991–2003," *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, 2003, 35–40.

<sup>4</sup> Voennaya doktrina Respubliki Belarus, January 3, 2002; The term "the Union State" originates from 1999 Russia–Belarus agreement "The Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus" that foresees a close integration of both countries that would result in one Union State.

<sup>5</sup> Voennaya doktrina Respubliki Belarus, July 20, 2016.

The lack of sufficient funding for keeping armed forces and capabilities that Belarus inherited from the Soviet Union up to date, is at times a very core problem of the defence policy. The total strength of the Belarus armed forces is 45,000 active personnel, including 29,000 army and 16,000 air force, and at least 270,000 reservists.<sup>6</sup> The army consists of one special purposes brigade, four mechanized brigades, one mobile brigade, four artillery brigades, one missile brigade and two artillery groups. There are two operational commands — the Western in Grodno and the Northwestern in Borisov.<sup>7</sup> In its return, the air force consists of some 100 fixed-wing aircrafts (combat aircraft Mikoyan MiG-29 “Fulcrum”, Sukhoi Su-27 “Flanker” for air defence and the SU-25 “Frogfoot” for attack/close air support), 140 helicopters — Mi-24 “Hind” attack helicopters and Mi-8 “Hip” assault/transport helicopters, a modest amount of Aero L-39 trainers and about dozen transport aircraft. Additionally, in recent years the air force has put emphasis on developing unmanned aerial vehicles.<sup>8</sup> But allocated resources for the defence sector in the last five years has been insufficient, hardly enough to sustain the defence system — in 2012 — 595.5 million USD, in 2013 — 686.4 million USD, in 2014 — 779.4 million USD, in 2015 — 746.2 million USD, and in 2016 — 554 million USD.<sup>9</sup> Logically the greater part of finance accounts for the salaries of military personnel and very little resources are left for modernization processes.

Staffing the military with motivated and bright cadres has been a problem in recent years. Belarus has a mixed conscript-contract model, having recruits who serve for 12–18 months. There is an intent by military leadership to increase the proportion of contract servicemen on three-year terms with an emphasis to professionalize non-commissioned officer cadres, but it is not proceeding well as armed forces have witnessed tremendous cuts since 1996 when Lukashenka decided to reduce the size of the armed forces from 85,000 to 60,000 by 2010 and this process turned out to be sporadic. As a consequence, the size of armed forces was significantly reduced, below 60,000.<sup>10</sup> For instance, in 2012 the shortage in a number of military units was 20 percent and there was an overall tendency that the brightest young officers left the service once their first five-year contract expired.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Lukashenka’s ambition, inspired by the recent Baltic and Cold War-time West German and Scandinavian experience to create territorial

<sup>6</sup> IHS Markit, “Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment — Russia and the CIS,” January 10, 2017, 1.

<sup>7</sup> IHS Markit, “Jane’s world Armies. Belarus — Army,” January 2, 2017, 2, 5.

<sup>8</sup> IHS Markit, “Belarus — Air Force,” Jane’s Defence, January, 2017, 4.

<sup>9</sup> IHS Markit, “Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment — Russia and the CIS,” January 10, 2017, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Andrei Porotnikov, “Armed Forces: Degradation of the Defense Potential,” *Belarusian Yearbook*, 2012, 37, accessed March 5, 2017, [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/ej\\_2012\\_eng.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/ej_2012_eng.pdf)

defence troops of up to 120,000 personnel who would cooperate with armed forces,<sup>12</sup> only overstretches any military funding and the defence system as such.

Although the armed forces are perceived not only as the backbone of the national defence system but also as a way to promote patriotism<sup>13</sup> and therefore serves for ideological purposes of the regime, there has been a struggle to recruit qualitative cadres for the defence and security forces. For instance, in 2013, the Military Academy had to enroll applicants who failed entrance examinations, and the following year requirements had substantially decreased.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the Academy trains armed forces and internal security positions. As internal security institutions (the State Security Committee and law enforcement structures) are more important for keeping the regime's internal stability,<sup>15</sup> their positions are more appealing to young people due to better salaries and easier ways to climb up the ranks in the system. As an expert on Belarus defence, Siarhei Bohdan, notes: "Those who have served as a bodyguard to Lukashenka are almost guaranteed a rank of colonel or higher".<sup>16</sup> Besides internal competition for cadres between the armed forces and interior institutions, higher salaries for Russian armed forces (for instance, in 2013 a Belarusian lieutenant colonel received six times less (around 950 USD) than his Russian colleague) also cause a cadre flow to armed forces of this neighboring country.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, underpaid security and defence institutions are more vulnerable to corruption risks, which was put in the spotlight after the Ukraine crisis. Lukashenka was critical in his annual address to the National Assembly, emphasizing the problem of corruption among law-enforcement officials — the Interior Ministry, Investigative Committee, customs and border agencies.<sup>18</sup> Hence there are problems to provide quantitative and qualitative personnel for both defence and security institutions. There is also a risk that individuals unable to compete in the private sector are recruited to

<sup>12</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, "Belarusian Army: Its Capacities and Role in the Region," *Analytical Paper* 4, 2014, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Bohdan, "Belarusian Army," 8.

<sup>14</sup> Andrei Porotnikov, "Regional Security: Stagnation Against the Background of the War and Regional Security Crisis," *Belarusian Yearbook*, 2014, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2014/en/page3.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Jovita Neliupšiene and Valentinas Beržiūnas, "The Impact of Force Structures and the Army on Maintaining the Regime in Belarus," *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review*, 12, 2013–2014, 199–202, doi: 10.2478/lasr-2014-0009.

<sup>16</sup> Bohdan, "Belarusian Army," 11.

<sup>17</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, "Russia Takes Over a Part of Belarusian Army," *Belarus Digest*, 23 February 2012, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/russia-takes-over-part-belarusian-army-7898>.

<sup>18</sup> Andrei Porotnikov, "The Ukraine Scenario Is Being Tested In Belarus," *Belarus Digest*, 26 May 2014, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/ukrainian-scenario-being-tested-belarus-belarus-security-digest-17869>.

the armed forces and exposed to the risk of corruption which degrades the prestige and professionalism of the Belarusian armed forces.

Underfunding of the defence sector not only has a negative impact on personnel in the armed forces but it has undermined Belarus' attempts to keep its arms and equipment state-of-the-art, and hence provide a trump card in bargaining with Russia. The key problems of the Belarusian armed forces remains the same over the years — the obsolescence of military equipment and weapons, and deterioration of military infrastructure. To draw an example — the T-72B, a basic Belarusian tank, was produced in 1985, their armoured vehicles are also from the beginning of the 1980s; the air force is in pretty much the same condition — helicopters and fighter jets are productions of the 70s and 80s.<sup>19</sup> Rough estimations from 2014 show that only 60 percent of fighter jets are in battle readiness.<sup>20</sup> A recently adopted military-technical policy of Belarus, for the present period until 2025 addresses issues of armaments, the defence industry and cooperation between Belarus and its foreign partners. The equipment and weapons list have not changed significantly — telecommunication, reconnaissance assets, automated control systems, land- and air-based electronic warfare means, air defence and tactical ballistic missile systems, as well as information and navigational support means.<sup>21</sup> Hence the development lines for Belarus' military are air defence, the air force, missile arms, electronic warfare, reconnaissance, and communications. The problem lies in the fact that defence funding barely covers personnel costs and the sustainment of only some armaments.

In order to deal with the lack of financial resources for modernization processes, Lukashenka has over the years heavily relied on Moscow's support for supplying military hardware at relatively low prices. When Russia started to significantly increase its defence expenditures, there were expectations from Belarus' leadership that there would also be an increase of Russian support. But this was not the case. There have been many agreements concluded but implementation has often been either with a significant delay or has not taken place at all. The year 2012 was particularly humiliating for Belarus when it decided to purchase 18 outdated SU-30 heavy fighters from India.<sup>22</sup> Before that, there was the expectation that Belarus would receive secondhand repaired SU-30 fighters from Russia which did not happen. Instead, Moscow demanded the money and after a while sold these fighters to Angola.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless there have been some gradual developments taking place, for instance, in 2015 the trainer airplanes

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<sup>19</sup> Alexander Alesin, "Armed Forces: Slow-Paced Rearmament," *Belarusian Yearbook* (2009), accessed March 5, 2017, [http://belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/BY\\_2009\\_engl.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/BY_2009_engl.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Bohdan, "Belarusian Army," 12.

<sup>21</sup> Porotnikov, "Regional Security".

<sup>22</sup> Porotnikov, "Armed Forces," 37.

<sup>23</sup> Bohdan, "Belarusian Army," 13.



L-39 were replaced with Russian Yak-130's, ten MiG-29 fighters were repaired, an agreement was made with a Russian company about supplying 12 logistic support helicopter Mi-8MTV-5's, and lastly, a supply of four Russian S-300 air defence battalions finally happened.<sup>24</sup> Hence the most recent years showed that when Belarus spent less on military modernization it started losing its leverage with Moscow. The latter has become more demanding regarding payment for supplies of military hardware and pushes for deploying its forces instead. Since the Ukraine crisis the Russian initiative to establish a military air base in Belarus has been put on the political agenda numerous times despite obvious resistance from Lukashenka.

Finding other partners and trying to keep its military industrial sector running is the main way that Belarus has tried to get additional support for its defence sector and to some extent at least moderately counter its dependence on Russia. The year 2012 was extraordinary for Belarus because it was counted among the world's 20 leading arms exporters, selling arms — aircraft, air defence systems and armoured combat vehicles — in the worth of 625 million USD. The main export regions are traditional Soviet-time markets, such as Southeast Asia (China, Vietnam, and Myanmar), Western-allied Arab regimes in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates) and even Sudan.<sup>25</sup> But this cannot be viewed entirely as a success as all of these arms are a legacy from Soviet times. Hence, Belarus has been selling its old arms. For instance, in the realm of its air force it meant losing one-third of its warplanes (Su-24 bombers and Su-27 heavy fighters)<sup>26</sup> whose replacements, as described before, are a very expensive and slow process.

The military arms produced by Belarus' defence industry are much more beneficial. Traditionally Belarus' defence industry produced air defence equipment, optics, electronics, command and control systems, and electronic warfare items mostly designed for installation in Russian or Ukrainian machines such as tanks and aircraft etc.<sup>27</sup> Therefore the main export markets, again, have been post-Soviet countries. But as these markets are characterised with intense internal competition, Lukashenka has tried to diversify its export markets for military products approaching China and other countries in Southeast Asia.

<sup>24</sup> Andrei Porotnikov, "National Defense in the Context of Regional Threats," *Belarusian Yearbook*, 2016, 28–29, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2016/en/page3.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, "Can Belarus keep a strong position on the global arms markets?," *Belarus Digest*, 13 March 2017, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/can-belarus-keep-strong-position-global-arms-markets-29382>.

<sup>26</sup> Porotnikov, "Armed Forces," 37.

<sup>27</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, "Belarus Strengthens Defense Sector Cooperation with Ukraine," *Belarus Digest*, 23 December 2014, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-strengthens-defense-sector-cooperation-ukraine-20771>.

Since 2010 an intensified bilateral cooperation with China has developed. That has resulted in receiving 22 light armoured vehicles (Dongfeng Meng Shi) in 2012, and Belarus in return is considering buying new weapons that are simply cheaper than others available on the market.<sup>28</sup> A concluded agreement about technical military cooperation between Belarus and Vietnam that focuses on providing telecommunications (radar systems) for the Vietnam People's Army<sup>29</sup> is a visible example of diversification attempts. Belarus has been trying to come up with new products as well, for instance, unmanned aerial vehicles "Burvestnik" for real-time reconnaissance and aerial observation and weapons system such as "Palanez", multiple-launch rocket systems designed to eliminate targets within a range of around 200 km.<sup>30</sup>

But along with overcoming challenges to get into new markets, the Belarus defence industry faces additional obstacles posed by Russian defence enterprises. Russian government agencies have come up with state programmes aimed at replacing Belarusian, Ukrainian and Western-supplied manufactured components in order to boost its military industrial complex and provide maximum self-sustainability. Defence analyst Andrei Frolov pointed out that this intention was already clear before the Ukraine crisis but due to technological, political and financial reasons it was next to impossible to implement.<sup>31</sup> Western sanctions after events in Ukraine cut off the military spare parts flow to Russia and accelerated the implementation of previously adopted policies. In this context, Belarus is intermingling these processes and there is a great potential to experience a decrease in its imports to Russia in the relatively near future. This will happen despite the fact that Russian military experts admit that Belarusian military products are cheaper and better quality than products of their Russian counterparts. Acknowledging this, there are precedents for when Russian enterprises try to take over Belarusian companies.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Belarusian leadership tries to seek ways to come up with new products and export markets in East and Southeast Asia, and also Africa.

Summing up the main challenges of the Belarusian defence policy it can be concluded that most of them originate from a continuous lack of funding for the defence sector which is a result of an overall negative performance by Belarus' economy. At the same time, the set course in the early 1990s and Lukashenka's

<sup>28</sup> Porotnikov, "Armed Forces," 41–42.

<sup>29</sup> Jon Grevatt, "Vietnam and Belarus sign military technology agreement," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, July 8, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Bohdan, "Can Belarus keep a strong position."

<sup>31</sup> Andrey Frolov, "Import Substitution in Russia's Military-Industrial Complex: The Experience of 2014–2016," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 February 2017, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Russian-in-Place-of-Foreign-18590>.

<sup>32</sup> Bohdan, "Belarus Strengthens Defense Sector Cooperation with Ukraine".

view of both countries as blood brothers put the defence sector on a dependence-path on Russia which has then undermined Belarus' sovereignty over the years. The shimmer of hope is Belarus' military industrial complex which is relatively competitive in the arms market. However, in recent years it has been challenged by Russian companies who attempt to rule out Belarus' imports. Lukashenka tries to compensate these developments by building new partnerships with conservative regimes in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

At the same time, the geopolitical situation forces Lukashenka to find a balance between NATO's increasing presence in the Baltic Sea region and development in Russia's Western Military district. One possible source of raising tension is the *Zapad 2017* military exercises that are anxiously awaited in the West, especially the Baltic States and Poland, in fall 2017.

### Belarus and the West in the Context of *Zapad 2017*

Although the *Zapad* military exercises were organised by Russians since Soviet times (1973, 1977, 1981, 1984 and 1985) and mostly took place in Belarus' territory, the first-time Belarus participated in these exercises was in 2009. Traditionally the intent of the exercises was to demonstrate the Soviet's military might to NATO. As *Zapad 2009* was appraised positively by Russia and Belarus, it was decided to organise them every two years.<sup>33</sup> *Zapad 2013* was critically assessed by the Baltic Sea region countries due to the lack of transparency, the scenario and the scope of what was done. The exercise took place in the Kaliningrad Province of Russia and in Belarus, involving more than 60 combat aircraft, 350 armoured vehicles and approximately 13,000 personnel, including 10,000 Belarusian and 3,000 Russian troops.<sup>34</sup> The official scenario was to test the ability to deal with terrorists, saboteurs and other forms of aggression. But details of the exercise reveal that it was highly likely a scenario was for the deployment of NATO troops in Poland and the Baltic States, and of a large-scale offensive operation towards the east. The names of the four fictitious countries were Mordija, Lastija, Villija and Bugija, who were located in the neighborhood of Belarus and western and northwestern regions of Russia. Hence, Russia and Belarus were counter-attacking NATO.<sup>35</sup>

Regarding the upcoming *Zapad 2107* there are few details known. The military exercise will have an impressive scope from the Kola Peninsula near

<sup>33</sup> Jörgen Elfving and Peter A. Mattsson, "Zapad 2013: A Multifaceted Exercise With Unique Ingredients," in *Russia's Zapad 2013. Military Exercise. Lessons for Baltic Security Region*, eds. Liudas Zdanavičius and Matthew Czekaj (The Jamestown Foundation, 2015), 18.

<sup>34</sup> IHS Markit, "Jane's world Armies. Belarus — Army," 11.

<sup>35</sup> Jörgen Elfving and Peter A. Mattsson, "Zapad 2013," 20.

the Russian border with Norway and Finland, to Belarus. The main participants on Belarus' soil will be the Belarusian armed forces and the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Army of the Western Military District of Russia. It means that tank units and forces will travel to Belarus. Just like in previous exercises the maximum number of troops will be 13,000, including 3,000 Russians and about 280 vehicles and 25 aircraft and helicopters. So far nothing is known about the scenario of the exercise, but officially it has been announced it will be in line with defending the territory of the Union State in the western direction.<sup>36</sup> Considering the geopolitical situation and the increase of NATO's presence in the Baltic States and Poland, it is obvious that the scenario in general lines will be about defending and counter-attacking NATO forces.

So far no distress within Belarus leadership about *Zapad 2107* can be observed. It gives Lukashenka an opportunity once again to be in the spotlight of events and play the mediator between principal Russia and concerned Western countries of the Baltic Sea region. The strategy in regards to Russia is to show commitment — that Belarus is a reliable partner in regional security matters and its military meets the requirements to fulfil the task as a buffer zone for Moscow. But towards the West, Lukashenka is assuring those regional countries that *Zapad 2107* will be an open exercise and “those who want to make sure we are not going to assault anyone, will be invited to attend the army exercise.”<sup>37</sup> In this way, Lukashenka tries to silence those critics who referred to the previous *Zapad 2013* saying that was lacking transparency. Also, he tries to calm any domestic critics that argue about Russia's intent to keep its forces in Belarus after the military exercise and thus occupying the country<sup>38</sup> arguing that: “The Russian army units, which are going to come to Belarus, will leave just the way they will arrive.”<sup>39</sup>

The countries most concerned about *Zapad 2017*, naturally, are the Baltic States, especially Lithuania as it borders with both the Kaliningrad Province of Russia and Belarus. The notorious “Suwalki gap” that connects Belarus with Kaliningrad along the Polish border is being perceived as a weak point for NATO when it comes to defence of the Baltic States. According to Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė's views, the upcoming *Zapad 2017*

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<sup>36</sup> NSNBC, “Russian-Belarusian 2017 Zapad Military Exercise to Span from Kola Peninsula to Belarus,” 20 March 2017, accessed March 25, 2017, <https://nsnbc.me/2017/03/20/russian-belarusian-2017-zapad-military-exercise-to-span-from-kola-peninsula-to-belarus/>.

<sup>37</sup> BelTA, “Lukashenko confirms readiness for Belarus-Russia army exercise Zapad 2017,” 3 February 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-confirms-readiness-for-belarus-russia-army-exercise-zapad-2017-98466-2017/>.

<sup>38</sup> Arseni Sivitski, “Will Russia Occupy Belarus in 2017,” *Belarus Digest*, 29 November 2016, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/will-russia-occupy-belarus-2017-28101>.

<sup>39</sup> BelTA, “Lukashenko confirms readiness for Belarus-Russia army exercise Zapad 2017.”

exercise foresees a deployment of “a very large and aggressive force (on our borders) that will very demonstrably be preparing for a war with the West”.<sup>40</sup> The Estonian threat assessment of 2017 even ironizes about the *Zapad 2017* scenario, which will probably be about a ‘peaceful’ Moscow training against ‘provocations’ from a NATO adversary<sup>41</sup> and predicts possible provocations in the information space during military exercises.<sup>42</sup> Public discourse of Latvian officials is less outspoken, but the Ministry of Defence admits that armed forces will be in a higher status of alert throughout the military exercise.<sup>43</sup> Considering the concerns of the Baltic States, it is expected they will ask for additional security measures in the region.<sup>44</sup>

In return, Poland, possessing at the moment the largest tank corps in the EU (600 tanks), has decided simply to deter Russia by deploying some to Poland’s eastern border.<sup>45</sup> On its behalf, NATO has urged Russia and Belarus to provide detailed information in advance about the exercise (the scope and scenario of the training) and has welcomed announcements from Belarusian leadership about the possibility to be invited as observers for the exercises, although no invitations have been received.<sup>46</sup> So far it is not quite clear how NATO could increase its presence even more in the Baltic Sea region, considering the deployment of multinational battalions in the Baltic States and Poland, and the American troops that will rotate from Germany to each country. Up to this point NATO’s deterrence posture is perceived as unprovocative towards Russia, so any additional assurance measures could turn out to be counterproductive.

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<sup>40</sup> Andrius Sytas, “Baltic states seek more NATO help ahead of Russian exercise,” *Reuters*, 9 March 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-baltic-nato-russia-idUSKBN15O2HZ>.

<sup>41</sup> Estonian Information Board, “International Security and Estonia”, 5 February 2017, accessed April 4, 2015, [https://www.teabeamet.ee/pdf/EIB\\_public\\_report\\_Feb\\_2017.pdf](https://www.teabeamet.ee/pdf/EIB_public_report_Feb_2017.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Estonian Information Board, “International Security and Estonia,” 21.

<sup>43</sup> LETA, “Latvija sekos līdzī gaidāmajām Krievijas mācībām “Zapad”; netiek atklāts, kā uz tām reaģēs NBS”, 25 February 2017, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://skaties.lv/zinas/latvija/sabiedriba/latvija-sekos-lidzi-gaidamajam-krievijas-macibam-zapad-netiek-atklats-ka-uz-tam-reages-nbs/>.

<sup>44</sup> Andrius Sytas, “Baltic states seek more NATO help ahead of Russian exercise,” *Reuters*, 9 March 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-baltic-nato-russia-idUSKBN15O2HZ>.

<sup>45</sup> Gerhard Gnauck, “Poland’s new weapons and delayed tenders,” *Deutsche Welle*, 15 March 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/polands-new-weapons-and-delayed-tenders/a-37940017>.

<sup>46</sup> Saulius Jakucionis, “NATO wants detailed info in advance about Zapad 2017 exercise near Lithuania,” *LETA*, 14 February 2017, accessed March 3, 2017, [http://www.leta.lv/eng/defence\\_matters\\_eng/defence\\_matters\\_eng/news/B3AF0916-0C2E-41FB-BDDA-AB6C34CF2B21/](http://www.leta.lv/eng/defence_matters_eng/defence_matters_eng/news/B3AF0916-0C2E-41FB-BDDA-AB6C34CF2B21/).

## Conclusion

Traditionally Belarus has functioned as an important buffer zone between the West and Russia. During Soviet times the country played a very important role in providing an area for potential offensive operations against NATO. This is the main reason why Belarus, after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, inherited well-developed armed forces with a significant amount of offensive capabilities. The harsh reality followed when an independent Belarus due economic reasons could not allow to sustain these capabilities. The analysis of the challenges that Belarus' defence policy faces reveal a clear trend of underfunding for the defence sector that negatively affects the capabilities of its armed forces, and damages the image of their professional service.

The election of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 1994 set Belarus on a dependence-path on Russia in practically all sectors, including defence. For years the geostrategic location of Belarus and its armed forces were a bargaining card of Lukashenka in negotiations with Russian leadership in order to get more financial support and assistance for the modernization of his armed forces. But it came at a price, as over-reliance on Russia's support ended up relegating many of Belarus' own defence tasks to the Federation, for instance air defence. Because of slow modernization processes and problems related with the quality and quantity of military personnel, Belarus started losing its importance to Russia as a strategic partner in the security of the Baltic Sea region. In return for its financial and military hardware support, Russia dares to ask for an even greater abeyance of Belarusian leadership, pushing its issues on political agendas. The ability of Belarus' leadership to resist Russia's influence in the country has become increasingly limited.

So far Lukashenka has showed a modest resistance because every step taken towards Russian demands is one step back from sovereignty. The main course of action for him has been to seek other strategic partners in more distant regions — Asia, Africa and the Middle East — with conservative and anti-Western regimes. So far this strategy has been productive in the realm of defence as Belarus has received some support for its modernization process and has managed to find export markets for products of its defence industry. But there are challenges to come as Russia's military-industrial complex has experienced a significant boost since the Ukraine crisis, and their enterprises are pushing Belarusian products out of the market and allowing them to try to buy Belarusian companies.

Regarding the West, domestic politics have always been in the way of building any substantive relationships. The West for Lukashenka has been a trump card when he goes to Moscow and tries to prove the geostrategic importance of Belarus in regional security matters. The same counts in the case of military

exercises during *Zapad 2017*, the more countries in the Baltic Sea region, such as the Baltic States, demanding NATO's increased involvement, the easier it will be for Lukashenka to emphasize the role of Belarus. Hence, so far Belarus is only benefiting from the rising intentions in the Baltic Sea region.

The concerns of the Baltic States based on *Zapad 2013* are that it was not transparent, involved an unprecedented amount of participating forces, and that a hostile scenario that foresaw a counterattack on NATO via the Baltics was played out. Additionally, the "Suwalki gap" is perceived as an Achilles heel of NATO in defending the Baltic States. Although none of the countries foresees having a military confrontation during the exercises, there are expected to be provocations in the information space and generally increased tensions in the region. Hence the Baltic States urge an even greater NATO allies' presence. In return, Poland, instead of using the Baltic "the power of the weak" strategy within NATO and urging for more assistance, is considering deterring Russia by deploying tanks along its Eastern border.

As for NATO, it has urged Russia and Belarus to provide detailed information about the upcoming exercise, and more transparency while it is conducted. In order to decrease tensions in the region it is more likely that NATO will not respond in a substantive manner at the request of the Baltics about having a greater presence as multinational battalions will already be deployed in the Baltic States and Poland by June 2017, and additionally American troops will be rotated across the region.





## Part III: Belarus and Russia: Bilateral Relations





# Belarusian Political Relations with Russia after the Annexation of Crimea

*Māris Cepurītis*

Relations between Belarus and Russia are of a special character. Both countries are closely linked in several integration mechanisms of the post-Soviet space. The development of integration between Belarus and Russia started during the collapse of the USSR, when on December 8, 1991 the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus signed the so called Belavezha Accords — documents that dissolved the Soviet Union and created the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). These decisions were reconfirmed two weeks later when a similar document was signed by other former republics of the USSR, except Georgia and the Baltic States. The CIS was formed to salvage some parts of integration that still existed in the Soviet Union. These former republics established integrated markets, thus benefiting from access to energy and other resources from other former republics and access to markets for goods distribution, therefore disintegration of the USSR risked dissolving any existing trade routes.

During more than 20 years of independence, Belarus and Russia have developed mechanisms for closer cooperation that have led to a unique level of integration in the post-Soviet arena. Under the auspices of the CIS, Russia, Belarus and other countries have developed the Collective Security Treaty Organisation creating a framework for security cooperation. Since 1996 Belarus and Russia developed their own special integration mechanism — the Union State, which began to fully function on January 26, 2000 after a ratification of both countries. Since 2015 these two countries, together with other partners, have united in a framework known as the Eurasian Economic Union.

Relations between Belarus and Russia since the collapse of the USSR have seen their share of disagreements and tension. The primary reasons for conflict between Belarus and Russia are economical — mostly gas and oil prices. Quarrels around prices of gas and oil are almost regular events for both countries. These began around 2006 when Russia decided to change its price policy. This meant Belarus wouldn't receive oil and gas deliveries at domestic prices, but would have to pay an “international price”. For the Belarusian economy this meant loss of profits from refined oil products. Since then disputes about oil and gas prices take place almost every time Belarus and Russia have to negotiate a new agreement on deliveries.

Almost all disputes between Belarus and Russia have public character. This is due to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's policy, while trying to rally public support behind the Belarusian position. Here he tries to attract public attention in Belarus and in Russia, showing Russia's political leadership in a negative light. In some instances this has backfired, as in 2010 when during another period of crisis the Kremlin launched a campaign against Lukashenka. The campaign included several "documentaries" airing on Russian TV that showed the Belarusian president as a tyrant who has confined Belarus to a Soviet-era economic stagnation.

So far periods of crisis in bilateral relations have benefited Belarus, as it obtains concessions from Russia on oil and gas prices, or financial loans. But in some instances, Belarus has had to compromise, like in 2011 when the country had to sell its remaining 50 percent of shares in Beltransgaz, the Belarusian gas pipelines operator, to the Russian energy giant Gazprom.

The history of the relationship between Belarus and Russia is a story of integration and cooperation but also conflict. This history has continued up to the present moment. Since the annexation of Crimea by Russia, relations between both countries have seen strained periods. Part of the tensions could be attributed to the annexation of Crimea and the following standoff between Russia and the West. Nevertheless current tensions (beginning in 2017) can be only partly seen as one episode in the long and turbulent history of Belarus–Russia relations. This article examines the bilateral relations of Belarus and Russia since the annexation of Crimea. The first part focuses on the implications of the annexation but the second part examines the role of sanctions on the bilateral relations between Belarus and Russia.

### **Implications from the Annexation of Crimea to Belarus–Russia Relations**

During the first months of 2014, politicians, diplomats and foreign policy experts focused on events taking place in Ukraine. Turbulence that started as wide-scale protests against the decision by Victor Yanukovych to abstain from signing an association agreement with the EU later escalated to nationwide unrest and unfortunately civilian casualties. The crisis was taken advantage of by Russia who occupied and annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and later initiated a military operation in the Eastern border regions of Ukraine. In addition, Russia began a massive informational confrontation with Ukraine and the West.

What started as a bilateral confrontation between Russia and Ukraine soon became a priority for the whole region. Belarus — a country neighbouring Russia and Ukraine — was influenced by a decrease in regional security, and an erosion

of international law and subsequent developments in relations between Russia, Ukraine and some Western countries.

During his annual address to the nation and the National Congress, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka described the first months of 2014 as the following: “Ukraine is boiling, Russia tries to regain its historical posture. Old borders are crumbling before our eyes. For the first time in many years Europe is covered in smoke from explosions”.<sup>1</sup> The crumbling of borders and overall uncertainty reflected on Belarus and its relations with Russia.

Events in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities, as well as the annexation of Crimea, created implications for Belarusian foreign policy planners. This was especially due to the fact the Ukrainian events were taking place at the same time as final discussions for establishing the Eurasian Economic Union — a common integration project of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. (See the chapter “Belarus in the Eurasian Economic Union: Risks and Benefits” about Belarus and the EEU for a detailed analysis). Until 29 May 2014 when the official Treaty of the Eurasian Economic Union was signed, Belarusian representatives still had to go through several rounds of negotiations to secure more favourable export and import tariffs, especially for oil products. These two important events — the Ukrainian crisis and negotiations about the EEU — put Belarus in a disadvantaged position and demanded special attention from Belarusian officials to find the best approach to relations with Russia and other neighbours.

Since the annexation of Crimea, Belarusian choices can be understood in categories provided by experts from the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. They describe two main strategies in Belarusian foreign policy towards Russia. The first strategy puts emphasis on independence and sovereignty of the Belarusian state and its people. They argue that Belarus has tried to develop an image of an independent policy that isn't influenced by Russia.<sup>2</sup> The second tactic used by Belarus vis-à-vis Russia is emphasizing the partnership — that the importance of preserving a partnership between Belarus and Russia forces Belarus to make sacrifices.<sup>3</sup> In this strategy Belarus is shown as a good and obedient partner ready to do whatever is necessary for the sake of a partnership with Russia, even if it creates losses for the country. This strategy portrays Russia in a negative light and creates a necessary background for Belarus in order to ask for or demand Russian support (mostly economical). These two approaches can

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<sup>1</sup> “Послание Президента белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию 2014”, accessed March 24, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/aleksandr-lukashenko-obraschatsja-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-8549/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/aleksandr-lukashenko-obraschatsja-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-8549/).

<sup>2</sup> Melyantsou Dzianis (ed.), *Belarus' Foreign Policy Index*, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (No. 20, May–June 2014), accessed March 24, 2017, [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS\\_FPI20\\_2014en.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_FPI20_2014en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

be seen from 2014 until 2017 when the officials of Belarus used them accordingly depending on international and domestic developments.

The first few months after the annexation of Crimea witnessed the continuation of Belarus' policy alignment with Russia. When asked to comment on the annexation of Crimea, President Lukashenka stated that: "Crimea, just like Ossetia, Abkhazia and other regions, is not an independent state. Today Crimea is part of the Russian Federation. No matter whether you recognise it or not, the fact remains".<sup>4</sup> The President's statement led to diplomatic tensions between Belarus and Ukraine, including recalling the Ukrainian ambassador in Belarus.<sup>5</sup> Later the official position of Belarus became more ambiguous. Officials in their speeches recognized that Crimea was seized by force or that Crimea de facto belongs to Russia, but the decision was not made de iure.<sup>6</sup> Different statements indicated the avoidance of a specific position was the chosen position. In this discussion additional emphasis was put on Belarus as an independent international actor that does not follow someone's dictate in policy making decisions. This position is well illustrated in the 2014 statement of President Lukashenka to the National Assembly of Belarus: "We are not pro-Russian, not pro-Ukrainian and not pro-Polish, we are not Russian, we are Belarusian! Our country is White Russia (*Белая Русь*)."<sup>7</sup> This manoeuvre helped Belarus to secure the role as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia, and later as a host for peace talks.

However, the Belarusian stance on Crimea was also linked to relations with Russia. Crimean issues created a twofold challenge for Belarus — the possibility that a similar scenario could repeat itself in Belarus, and if so, how to remain in the "good graces" of Russia — still the main partner of Belarus. Statements made by the political elite of Belarus have been deliberately confusing in order not to object to Russia's positions and thus provoke the Federation. On the other hand, statements about events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea have been adjusted to show an independent position by Belarus, at least in the eyes of Ukraine and Western states.

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<sup>4</sup> "Lukashenko: Crimea is now part of Russia, non-recognition will change nothing", *Belta*, 23 March 2014, accessed March 15, 2017, [http://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/speeches-and-interviews/lukashenko-crimea-is-now-part-of-russia-non-recognition-will-change-nothing\\_i\\_10411.html](http://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/speeches-and-interviews/lukashenko-crimea-is-now-part-of-russia-non-recognition-will-change-nothing_i_10411.html).

<sup>5</sup> "Ukraine recalls its ambassador from Belarus for consultations", *TASS*, 24 March 2014, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://tass.com/world/725113>.

<sup>6</sup> Shraibman Artyom, "The Lukashenko Formula: Belarus's Crimea Flip-Flops", *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 1 June 2016, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=63698>.

<sup>7</sup> "Послание Президента белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию 2014", accessed March 24, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/aleksandr-lukashenko-obraschaetsja-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-8549/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/aleksandr-lukashenko-obraschaetsja-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-8549/).

The chosen tactic was similar to one used in 2008 after the Russian–Georgian war. Shortly after ceasing military confrontation, Belarusian officials supported the recognition of the Georgian break-away regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, after receiving an official request from South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Belarusian officials began the so-called “policy of delay”, augmenting that recognition would be made in due time.<sup>8</sup> While this article was written, Belarus had still not given its recognition.

In both cases, the chosen approach was carefully tailored in correspondence with the national interests of Belarus. The priority was the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. The Georgian and Ukrainian cases had showed Russia’s willingness to create conflict and capture territories to deter its neighbours from policies that harm Russia’s interests. Although Belarus is more integrated and dependent on Russia than Georgia or Ukraine, it still doesn’t want to be completely absorbed by Russia.

The annexation of Crimea has brought another issue to relations between Belarus and Russia — the focus on the sovereignty of Belarus. Levels of sovereignty can differ in the modern international state system. Many countries, for example members of the European Union, have decided to delegate part of their sovereignty to supranational institutions. However, at a basic level, sovereignty remains one of the basic elements of every state. Sovereignty is an important issue in Belarusian political circles as well as in relations with Russia. In a document that describes the main directions of Belarusian foreign policy (in force since 2005), the protection of sovereignty and the territory of independent Belarus is mentioned as the first priority.<sup>9</sup>

Building on the foreign policy priorities defined in 2005, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided a more specific description of its priorities. While describing relations with Russia the Ministry states that “while developing mutually beneficial cooperation with Russia, Belarus strictly follows the principle of unconditional preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states, and responsible implementation of their international obligations”.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, preservation of the sovereignty of Belarus is mentioned only in the description of Belarusian foreign policy towards Russia, but not in relations with members of the EU or NATO.

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<sup>8</sup> “Белоруссия скоро признает независимость Абхазии и Южной Осетии”, *РИА Новости*, 8 September 2008, accessed March 23, 2017, <https://ria.ru/politics/20080908/151063444.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “Об утверждении Основных направлений внутренней и внешней политики Республики Беларусь”, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=H10500060>.

<sup>10</sup> “Priorities of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, accessed March 15, 2017, [http://mfa.gov.by/en/foreign\\_policy/priorities/](http://mfa.gov.by/en/foreign_policy/priorities/).

Emphasis on sovereignty is part of the first Belarusian strategy in relations with Russia. A focus on sovereignty gained importance after the annexation of Crimea and helped Belarus to balance relations with Russia, and with Ukraine and Western countries. Secondly we can't exclude that the question "Will Belarus be next?" was in the minds of Belarusian officials. Because of the close integration with Russia, as well as Russia's instruments of influence and strategic importance, Belarus is uncertain about Russia's future plans.

This uncertainty can be noticed in Belarusian decisions about Russia's military presence. In 2013, before the annexation of Crimea, Russia proposed a new air base in Belarus. Those Russian intentions faced strong opposition from Belarus. The establishment of a third Russian base would mean increased Belarusian dependency, loss of leverage, and increase the possibility of a Crimean scenario. Acceptance for the Russian air base proposal would send a signal to Western states that Belarus was losing its sovereignty. After the annexation of Crimea a new Russian base would challenge the Belarusian image as a neutral player in the conflict.

Russia's intentions in discussing a potential air base in Belarus can be described as political, because it would be less problematic for Russia to develop a new air base in Kaliningrad. Furthermore, if Russia really wanted to secure its Western flank, why did they refuse to sell new aircraft to Belarus?<sup>11</sup> Since the annexation of Crimea, Belarus has found a solution to the air base issue by buying planes from Russia in order to secure Belarusian air space, and obligations under the Single Air Defence System with Russia.<sup>12</sup> This means that Russia partly loses its argument to establish an air base in Belarusian territory, and is not limiting Belarus' sovereignty as much as the development of a new Russian base.

The creation of a greater distance between the militaries of both countries is another tendency for relations between Belarus and Russia. The interaction of these countries militaries goes beyond regular exercises or the due presence of Russian military personnel in Belarus. Most of the current top-level military officials of Belarus have studied at the highest military schools in Russia. Furthermore, some Belarusian cadets are currently studying and training in Russia. However, in the last two years, Belarus has developed its domestic capacity to provide specialized military education for young cadets. It has led to a decrease in the number of cadets studying in Russia from 447 in 2015, to 374 in 2016.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, "Thwarting Plans For A Russian Airbase, Minsk Strengthens Its Air Force", *Belarus Digest*, 12 October 2016, accessed March 27, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/thwarting-plans-russian-airbase-minsk-strengthens-its-air-force-27550>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, Dzmytry Balkunets, "Belarus-Russia Relations after the Ukraine Conflict", *Ostrogorski Centre*, p. 8, 1 August 2016, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/papers/belarus-russia-relations.pdf>.



Belarus is applying caution when it comes to military affairs with Russia. It objects to decisions that would additionally limit its own sovereignty and increase the likeliness of a Crimean scenario. Thus Belarus is trying to develop its own military capacity, but at the same time showing it is still a good partner of the Russian Federation and is ready to protect Russia's Western flank. The tendency from the Federation, during the last few years, shows greater independence from Belarusian military, but due to personal and technical links as well as integration defence systems, ties still remain quite close. The common military exercise *Zapad 2017* will provide an important insight on further developments in the military circles surrounding Belarus and Russia.

Although the possibility of a direct military invasion remains low, Russia has other instruments of influence to use and influence Belarusian decision-making and public opinion. The most influential set of tools Russia's uses to influence Belarus are economic instruments. Access for Belarusian goods into Russian markets, and supplies of Russian oil and gas, are most important. Issues of oil and gas supplies or import tariffs in relations between Belarus and Russia are not only economic issues. They have a unique political character that was noticed in the context of Western sanctions towards Russia, and Russia's countersanctions.

### **Sanctions in the Context of Belarus–Russia Relations**

Since the collapse of the USSR and the establishment of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation these countries have a sustained high degree of economic integration. From a Belarusian point of view, we can even speak about dependence from Russia in specific sectors of the economy.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and military involvement in regions on the Eastern border of Ukraine roused a highly negative reaction from those Western countries that oppose the breaking of the international law and the territorial integrity of a sovereign country by military and hybrid means. The first set of US, Canadian and EU sanctions against Russia followed soon after the annexation of Crimea. The sanctions were mainly targeted at officials responsible for the decision to annex Crimea. They included travel bans and freezing the personal assets of targeted individuals.<sup>14</sup> The list of persons and restrictions was further widened in April 2014. Additional countries like Japan and Australia also joined the sanctions against Russia.

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<sup>14</sup> "COUNCIL DECISION 2014/145/CFSP of concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine", 17 March 2014, accessed March 19, 2017, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2014:078:0016:0021:EN:PDF>.

In March and April 2014, Belarus had not yet seen any serious consequences from the sanctions, so its position regarding economic cooperation with Russia remained unchanged. In his address to the Belarusian National Assembly, President Lukashenka spoke strongly on cooperation between Belarus and Russia: The “Russian Federation has always been and always will be our strategic ally, our brother...”<sup>15</sup> He also said: “Safeguarding and improving the strategic partnership with our historical partner Russia — main task of our foreign policy.”<sup>16</sup>

The escalation of hostilities in the regions along the Eastern border of Ukraine, and shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight No.17 over Ukraine by a rocket from territories controlled by Russian militants and “separatists”, forced Western countries to impose further sanctions. This time restrictions were imposed on Russian banks, energy companies and a prohibition of selling military, dual use and technologies used by the oil industry. The list of sanctioned individuals has also been widened. From July 2014 until 2017 the US, EU and other countries have continued imposing sanctions. These sanctions currently remain the strongest and most visible instrument used by Western countries to force Russia to fulfil its obligations in normalising the situation in the East of Ukraine under the provisions of the “Minsk Protocols”.

The sanctions imposed by Western states against Russia created a slight challenge for Belarus. The more noticeable implications came after the decision made in the Kremlin. On 6 August 2014 Vladimir Putin signed a decree on the “use of special economic measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation”.<sup>17</sup> With the decree Russia banned imports of almost all agricultural products whose country of origin adopted or joined sanctions against the Federation. This measure was introduced by Russia to improve its bargaining position and increase pressure on countries, especially members of the EU, to stop supporting the sanctions.

Not long after President Putin’s decree, President Lukashenka pledged Belarusian support for the decision of his Russian counterpart: “We should fulfil our obligations to protect the Union State market (we have the common customs in the customs space) regarding the transit of goods from the West to Russia via Belarus. As Russia closed its market for certain goods, we should not allow

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<sup>15</sup> “Послание Президента белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию 2014”, accessed March 24, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/aleksandr-lukashenko-obraschaetsja-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-8549/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/aleksandr-lukashenko-obraschaetsja-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-8549/).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “Указ о применении отдельных специальных экономических мер в целях обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации”, 6 August 2014, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46404>.

the transit of these products to Russia via Belarus.”<sup>18</sup> Despite public statements, further developments suggest that Belarus used this opportunity to further push its economic interests by re-exporting goods that were banned in Russia. This was mentioned by Vladimir Putin on 26 August 2014<sup>19</sup> as well as by several news outlets reporting on the influx of Belarusian shrimp in Russian supermarkets.<sup>20</sup> In September 2014 Russian officials complained about Belarusian fish-processing companies, who increased fish purchases from Norway<sup>21</sup>, thus clearly and intentionally trying to use the opportunity created by the sanctions. Since the introduction of sanctions, imports of food from Belarus to Russia has slightly increased,<sup>22</sup> although according to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Uladzimir Makiej, the increase of imports to Russia has not improved the overall situation for Belarusian trade. Taking into consideration that Minister Makeij’s comments were spoken in 2016, it is evident that Belarus continued re-exporting food to Russia despite Russia’s protests. The continuation of such a practice was grounded in the clause that if goods have been processed in Belarus to a certain degree they could be considered of Belarusian production and this corresponds to agreements signed within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>23</sup>

The way Belarus used the Russian sanctions can be described as “enterprise diplomacy”. The term enterprise diplomacy was introduced by Professor Alan Henrikson to describe a diplomatic strategy used by small states. Enterprise diplomacy is described as an “international practice by which a country aggressively exploits a natural locational or some other, artificially generated advantage (e.g., convenient ship registry, tax haven, flexible incorporation legislation) in order to promote its economic and perhaps also political position,

<sup>18</sup> “Lukashenko: Belarus committed to agreements with Putin on transit of goods from West to Russia”, *Belarus.by*, 11 August 2014, accessed March 28, 2017, [http://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/speeches-and-interviews/lukashenko-belarus-committed-to-agreements-with-putin-on-transit-of-goods-from-west-to-russia\\_i\\_13929.html](http://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/speeches-and-interviews/lukashenko-belarus-committed-to-agreements-with-putin-on-transit-of-goods-from-west-to-russia_i_13929.html).

<sup>19</sup> Melyantsou Dzianis (ed.), “Belarus’ Foreign Policy Index”, *Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies* (No. 21, July–August 2014), accessed March 29, 2017, [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS\\_BFPI21\\_2014en.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_BFPI21_2014en.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> “After food ban, Russia markets shrimp “from Belarus””, *EUACTIV*, 20 August 2014, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/after-food-ban-russia-markets-shrimp-from-belarus/>.

<sup>21</sup> Melyantsou Dzianis (ed.), “Belarus’ Foreign Policy Index”, *Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies* (No. 22, September–October 2014), accessed March 29, 2017, [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS\\_FPI22\\_2014en.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_FPI22_2014en.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> “No profits for Belarus from Russia-EU sanctions”, *BelTA*, 8 April 2016, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://eng.belta.by/politics/view/no-profits-for-belarus-from-russia-eu-sanctions-90-385-2016/>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

sometimes though not necessarily at the expense of others (competitors).”<sup>24</sup> Belarus used its unique position as a neighbouring county of Russia, as a part of the Union State, a member of the Customs Union and, from 2015 the Eurasian Economic Union, to gain additional economic benefits. Considering Minister Makeij’s statement, Belarusian re-exports to Russia didn’t save the Belarusian economy, but it can be argued that without this, the decrease in overall trade would be much larger.

Overall economic activity between Belarus and Russia has decreased since the adoption of sanctions. In 2013, before the annexation of Crimea, Russia was the largest market for Belarusian goods (16,837 million USD). Since then there has been a sharp decrease in trade between Belarus and Russia, so in 2014 Belarus’ exports to Russia were valued 15,181 million USD, but exports in 2015 and 2016 amounted to 10,398.4 and 10,818.8 million USD accordingly.<sup>25</sup> The same pattern has been noticeable in Russian imports to Belarus. In 2013 Russian imports to Belarus amounted to 22,190.2 million USD. In 2015 imports decreased to 17,143 million USD, but in 2016 to 15,295.4 million USD.<sup>26</sup>

Sanctions haven’t been the only source of economic decline for Russia and its close partner Belarus. Other international developments also played their role — most importantly the worldwide decrease in the price of hydrocarbons. The Belarusian “economic dream” is partly based on Russian supplies of oil and natural gas. This has helped the Belarusian industry to keep production costs down, thus theoretically improving the competitiveness of goods. Secondly, Belarus is an oil-producing and exporting country — it extracts 1.6 million tonnes of oil per year from its territory,<sup>27</sup> but exports much larger quantities of this natural resource. The deficiency between extraction and export is made up by cheap Russian oil. Russia’s oil supplies and the price difference between Russia and the export markets in Europe is the reason why oil products are the largest export

<sup>24</sup> Alan K. Henrikson, “Ten Types of Small State Diplomacy”, accessed March 24, 2017, [https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2008/MVZ157/um/TEN\\_TYPES\\_OF\\_SMALL\\_STATE\\_DIPLOMACY.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2008/MVZ157/um/TEN_TYPES_OF_SMALL_STATE_DIPLOMACY.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> “Экспорт товаров из Республики Беларусь по странам СНГ”, *BELSTAT*, accessed March 30, 2017, [http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya\\_2/osnovnye-pokazateli-za-period-s-\\_-po-\\_\\_\\_gody\\_10/eksport-tovarov-respubliki-belarus-po-stranam-sng/](http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya_2/osnovnye-pokazateli-za-period-s-_-po-___gody_10/eksport-tovarov-respubliki-belarus-po-stranam-sng/).

<sup>26</sup> “Импорт товаров в Республику Беларусь по странам СНГ”, *BELSTAT*, accessed March 30, 2017, [http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya\\_2/osnovnye-pokazateli-za-period-s-\\_-po-\\_\\_\\_gody\\_10/import-tovarov-v-respubliku-belarus-po-stranam-sng/](http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya_2/osnovnye-pokazateli-za-period-s-_-po-___gody_10/import-tovarov-v-respubliku-belarus-po-stranam-sng/).

<sup>27</sup> Vadzim Smok, “Does Belarus Stand a chance in new oil war with Russia?”, *Belarus Digest*, 13 January 2017, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/does-belarus-stand-chance-new-oil-war-russia-28644>.

commodity of Belarus.<sup>28</sup> In 2013 and 2014 Belarusian oil production exports supplemented the state budget by approximately 12 billion USD.<sup>29</sup> In 2015 and 2016 the value of oil production exports decreased to 7.8 billion USD and 6.1 billion USD accordingly.<sup>30</sup> Losses due to falling oil prices and the purchasing capacity of Russian markets lowered the overall income of Belarus.

A decrease of national income increased the strain on Belarus' economy and public services and led to several "hydrocarbon wars" between Belarus and Russia. The first tension between Belarus and Russia on energy issues came after annexation of Crimea took place, at the end of 2014. It was the period just before the full establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union. Tensions rose as Russia changed its tax policy on oil exports and extraction. By Belarusian arguments, Russia's decision meant losses for Belarus, so it asked for compensations. After an initial hard-line position, it eventually agreed to pay 700 million USD for compensation in 2015.<sup>31</sup> One probable reason for the Belarusian success was Russia's interest in launching the Eurasian Economic Union without unnecessary delays, although further tensions caused by changes in oil and gas prices happened in 2016 and spilled to 2017.

In January 2016 Belarus demanded Russia reduce gas prices arguing that global gas prices had decreased and their current price gave a disadvantage in competitiveness for Belarusian goods in the markets of the EEU. Russia didn't agree to the demands, but Belarus made a unilateral decision to pay less for gas supplies. This meant that by end of 2016 Belarus had accumulated a debt of 425 million USD.<sup>32</sup> Debt on gas supplies became the cause of the "hydrocarbon conflict" in January 2017. Russia demanded Belarus pay its gas debt in order to secure an agreement for the continuation of oil deliveries. Belarus declined, so Russia decided to reduce oil supplies to Belarus from 4.5 to 4 million tonnes in the first quarter of 2017.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "Экспорт важнейших видов продукции" *BELSTAT*, accessed March 30, 2017, [http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya\\_2/osnovnye-pokazateli-za-period-s-\\_\\_\\_po-\\_\\_\\_gody\\_10/eksport-vazhneishih-vidov-produktsii/](http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya_2/osnovnye-pokazateli-za-period-s-___po-___gody_10/eksport-vazhneishih-vidov-produktsii/).

<sup>29</sup> Vadzim Smok, "Does Belarus Stand a chance in new oil war with Russia?", *Belarus Digest*, 13 January 2017, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/does-belarus-stand-chance-new-oil-war-russia-28644>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Melyantsou Dzianis (ed.), "Belarus' Foreign Policy Index", *Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies* (No. 22, September–October 2014), accessed April 1, 2017, [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS\\_FPI22\\_2014en.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_FPI22_2014en.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Vadzim Smok, "Does Belarus Stand a chance in new oil war with Russia?", *Belarus Digest*, 13 January 2017, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/does-belarus-stand-chance-new-oil-war-russia-28644>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

The “hydrocarbon conflict” in January 2017 was only the prelude for a more intensive conflict between Belarus and Russia that advanced into February and March 2017. Some signals towards normalization occurred on 3 April 2017 after a meeting between President Lukashenka and President Putin in Saint Petersburg.<sup>34</sup>

Russia’s sanctions and low prices on gas and oil have had a visible impact on relations between Belarus and Russia. Since the annexation of Crimea, the economic situation of Russia and Belarus has worsened. This has forced Belarus to seek additional compensation from Russia showing that Belarus, as part of the Union State, is prepared to support Russia’s position so long as Russia is ready to cover Belarusian loses. This worked in 2014 and partly in 2015, but with the decrease in oil prices and thus a decrease in Belarus’ income in 2016, the country faced more intensive pressure to find solutions. The Belarusian approach was to use an image of a good, supportive partner in order to gain additional concessions from Russia. We can argue that Belarusian officials believe the crisis in Ukraine was caused by Russia, so Russia should be ready to pay for Belarusian loses. At the same time, Belarus used an opportunity to capitalize on Russian sanctions on Western agricultural products by exporting foodstuffs to the Federation that were previously brought from countries under Russia’s sanctions.

### **Conclusion: Belarus and Russia — More than just Neighbours**

During the writing of this article — in the first months of 2017, relations between Belarus and Russia were strained. The conflict that had roots in the gas disputes of 2016 escalated to new heights in January — March of 2017. Further escalation of tensions was promoted by the Belarusian decision to introduce a visa-free travel regime for short-term visits to citizens of around 80 countries. This led to Russia’s decision to establish a security zone on the border between the two countries, thus showing a lack of trust in the Belarusian border security and to send a signal that such unilateral decisions will not be tolerated. Russia’s decision was not warmly welcomed by Belarusian President Lukashenka who stated in his press conference: “... the whining by some neighbouring countries is just an attempt to state dissatisfaction by some forces. We have not breached anything here in terms of our domestic legislation. It’s our sovereign right. And we have not breached anything in terms of our agreements with other countries.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Анна Красноперова, “Россия рефинансирует долг Белоруссии за российский газ”, *The Insider*, 3 April 2017, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://theins.ru/news/51073>.

<sup>35</sup> “Lukashenko: introduction of visa-free regime with EU countries is sovereign right of Belarus”, *Interfax-Ukraine*, 20 January 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/economic/397728.html>.

The first few days of April 2017 showed some normalization of relations with an agreement on energy deliveries, but overall development of relations give an indication that tensions may return.

Experts identify two strategies Belarus uses in relations with Russia — emphasizing independency and good partnership. The strategy of independency is aimed to increase the autonomy of Belarus and show Russia that if Belarus doesn't gain from its cooperation with Russia, it is ready to cooperate with other partners. The second strategy focuses on the maximization of gains from cooperation with Russia. In this strategy Belarus is portrayed as the closest partner of Russia; a partner that does everything for the sake of close cooperation in exchange for benefits from Russia. This strategy is used to solve economic matters, for example oil and gas disputes.

Both strategies have been used since the annexation of Crimea. The independency strategy was present in the initial months after the annexation when Belarus hadn't officially defined its position on the invasion. Statements by different Belarusian officials indicated that Belarus accepted that *de facto* Crimea is controlled by Russia. But an unwillingness to lose their image on independence in the eyes of the Western states and Ukraine forced Belarus to not define a specific position. This policy of avoidance was previously present in the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia — the break-away regions of Georgia. An additional basis for this policy is Belarusian concerns about similar scenarios in their country.

More challenging times for Belarus and an increased strain in relations with Russia came after Russia adopted sanctions against agriculture products from many Western countries. Belarus used this opportunity to export foods that were previously acquired in countries under Russian sanctions. And Belarus did this despite Russia's protests. However, additional exports of food didn't help the overall decline of intrastate trade and the markets of Russia and Belarus. In addition, the decrease in global oil processes resulted in a lower state income.

For Belarus, as an authoritarian state, a part of regime legitimacy comes from public spending and the overall economic welfare of society. The decrease in Belarusian income puts pressure on President Lukashenka's regime. The disputes on natural gas prices which started in 2015 and continued in 2016, along with the unilateral Belarusian decision to pay less, indicated Belarus decided that Russia had to compensate for their losses.

The policy of Belarus towards Russia can be described as a dilemma between state sovereignty, autonomy and economic benefits. The President of Belarus is aware that Russia currently remains guarantor of the Belarusian economy and his political regime. Belarus could seek larger autonomy by increasing its radius, manoeuvring between Russia and EU members, but this would come at a cost.

The scenario that Russia adopted in Georgia and Ukraine could become a reality for Belarus in a case where Belarus adopted a pro-Western orientation. At this point there is no viable alternative for Belarus, so it will most likely continue limited manoeuvring in order to gain benefits from other partners, but every step will be based on strong calculations in the national interests of the Russian Federation.



# Belarus and Russia: Military Cooperation but with Different Goals

*Aleksandr Golts*

According to numerous official Russian and Belarusian documents, as well as regular statements from the two countries' leaders, cooperation in the military sphere is the cornerstone of these states' relationship. It is, as seen in these statements, "diverse and varied", and has "stemmed from the national interests of both states". In other words, this relationship is an almost perfect example of relations in a military sphere between former Soviet republics. However, one important fact does not allow us to believe in such a rosy picture. Cooperation between Russia and Belarus in the military sphere evolved relatively successfully until there was no risk of a direct military conflict on the European continent. But such a confrontation arose and resulted in the annexation of Crimea and the secret war carried out by Russia in the Donbas region, and this has not led to military cohesion between Moscow and Minsk. On the contrary, Russia and Belarus began to argue rather abruptly about obligations to each other in the military sphere.

This happened for obvious reasons. In reality, when developing and adopting documents for military cooperation, all parties pursued different goals. Moscow needed to provide strategic assumptions and possess a foothold to the West of its boarder. Minsk was interested in an exchange of verbal readiness for military engagement in order to get economic benefits. However, when the threat of confrontation with the West, together with the economic crisis became reality, the Russian–Belarusian Union had problems.

## **A Prosperous Facade**

Currently there are 35 treaties and agreements which cover the entire range of bilateral relations in military and military-technical fields between Russia and Belarus. Military cooperation between the two countries began almost immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. On 20 July 1992 a treaty

regarding coordination of activities in the military field<sup>1</sup> and an agreement about the strategic forces temporarily stationed in the Republic of Belarus<sup>2</sup> were signed. Later, on 24 September 1993, an agreement about the status of the strategic forces military formations of the Russian Federation<sup>3</sup> temporarily stationed on the territory of the Republic of Belarus, and the agreement<sup>4</sup> that determined the order of their withdrawal from the territory of Belarus, were signed. According to the schedule agreed upon in 1993, units from the military space forces, ground forces, engineering troops, the Main Intelligence Directorate and airborne troops were withdrawn from Belarus that year. In 1994 electronic warfare units left the country. Air force units as well as units of central subordination were withdrawn in 1995, Russian strategic rocket forces in 1996, air defense troops and the Navy by the end of 1998.

However, even during those early stages cooperation was not limited to the withdrawal of Russian troops only. In January 1995 an agreement was signed, according to which three Russian military units could be permanently stationed in Belarus. These were the military space forces (about 600 troops) which ensured the functioning of the separate communication center “Gantsevichi” (a station called “Volga”), including the early warning system of a missile attack. It was also the forty-third communications center of the Navy (about 350 officers and warrant officers) which provided communication to the main Navy staff on ships and submarines (at the station called “Vileika”).<sup>5</sup> Military mission 1281 carried out the acceptance of equipment manufactured by Belarus enterprises involved in implementations by the Russian defense order. All these units are still functioning now.

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<sup>1</sup> “Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о координации деятельности в военной области”, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/1900284>.

<sup>2</sup> “Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о Стратегических силах, временно размещенных на территории Республики Беларусь”, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/1900721>.

<sup>3</sup> “Договор между Правительством Российской Федерации и Правительством Республики Беларусь о статусе воинских формирований Российской Федерации из состава Стратегических сил, временно размещенных на территории Республики Беларусь”, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/1900980>.

<sup>4</sup> “Соглашение между Правительством Республики Беларусь и Правительством Российской Федерации о порядке вывода воинских формирований Российской Федерации из состава Стратегических сил, временно размещенных на территории Республики Беларусь, на территорию Российской Федерации”, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://systemaby.com/docs/bitrm/dk-hv5ioa.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “Соглашение между правительством РФ и правительством Республики Беларусь о порядке использования и содержания радиостанции Вилейка, расположенной на территории Республики Беларусь”, accessed April 20, 2017, [http://www.lawrussia.ru/texts/legal\\_524/doc524a591x715.htm](http://www.lawrussia.ru/texts/legal_524/doc524a591x715.htm).

In 1997 the general principles of a military build-up of armed forces and the use of elements in military infrastructure in both states<sup>6</sup> were adopted. In 1998 the concept of a joint defense policy for Belarus and Russia was approved.<sup>7</sup> It constituted the basics of planning, applying, managing, and ensuring regional groupings of the troops (forces) of Belarus and Russia. It was a joint agreement ensuring regional security in the military sphere.

Military cooperation began to develop rapidly after the unification of Russia and Belarus as the Union State and establishing the Organization of Collective Security Treaty. The composition of the regional grouping in its full force includes the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus (about 70,000 troops), the 20<sup>th</sup> Army of the Western Military District of Russian Armed Forces stationed together with enforcement military units deployed there.

As stated in official press releases, there were a number of joint events conducted to ensure combat readiness during 20 year periods of the troops grouping existence. These exercises and trainings addressed the interoperability of Russian and Belarusian grouping components. The goal was to determine the optimal combat strength and structure of the joint forces. Subsequently, the effectiveness of the measures were verified during large-scale exercises such as *Schit Otetchestva 2006*, *Zapad 2009* and *Zapad 2013*. Over the years, the number of involved troops constantly grew. Experts suggest that an unprecedented number of troops will take part in the exercise *Zapad 2017*. In particular, they indicate that the Russian Defense Ministry has ordered 4200 cars and platforms for railroad transportation to Belarus. This is 20 times more than were used in *Zapad 2013*.<sup>8</sup> According to official statements a joined air defense system entered into force in 2016. In addition, more than 400 military personnel are currently being trained in 23 Russian military schools and academies.<sup>9</sup> The number of officers sent to Russia from the Belarusian armed forces is growing annually.

In the framework of bilateral military cooperation Russia supplies Belarus with armament and military equipment according to Russian domestic prices.

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<sup>6</sup> “Решение Высшего Совета Сообщества Беларуси и России от 02.04.1997 N 5. “Об Общих принципах военного строительства и использования элементов военной инфраструктуры Беларуси и России””, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://lawtu.info/dok/1997/04/02/n104196.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> “Решение № 4 Высшего Совета Союза Беларуси и России О Концепции совместной оборонной политики Беларуси и России”, accessed April 20, 2017, [http://www.conventions.ru/view\\_base.php?id=14630](http://www.conventions.ru/view_base.php?id=14630).

<sup>8</sup> Галина Петровская, “Учения “Запад-2017”: Москва давит, Минск молчит,” *ИноСМИ.ру*, 8 December 2016, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://inosmi.ru/military/20161208/238358986.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “Офицеры из Белоруссии будут учиться в Московской военной консерватории,” *РИА “Новости”*, 4 September 2003, accessed April 20, 2017, <https://ria.ru/society/20030904/429054.html>.

In particular, according to the Russian Center for the Analysis of International Arms Trade, in 2005 and 2006 Belarusian Armed Forces received four battalions (a total of 48 launchers) of S-300 air defense complexes from stockpiles of the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>10</sup> In this case, with 180 million USD being the standard export price for one battalion Belarus got four battalions for only 13 million USD, “saving” about 700 million USD.<sup>11</sup> Eight years later, in July 2014, a contract was signed for the transfer (free of charge) for another four S-300 battalions.<sup>12</sup>

It should be noted that military-technical cooperation with Russia remains the main destination for the Belarusian military-industrial complex, who maintain connections with two hundred enterprises of the Russian defense industry. Almost 90 percent of fabrications from Minsk’s wheel tractor plant production is used in Russian military equipment. The chassis produced by this plant are used in the Russian strategic rocket complex “Topol-M”, the tactical rocket complex “Iskander”, the multiple rocket system “Smerch”, and anti-aircraft missile systems S-300 and S-400. Belarusian spare parts are used in T-90S, T-72S and T-80U tanks, armed vehicles, artillery systems, anti-missile and air defense systems, and small arms.

Many Belarusian enterprises supply their Russian sub-contractors with element bases, electronic devices, and other accessories. The plant “Integral”, the largest Belarusian enterprise producing microelectronics, sells 20 percent of its electronic components of dual and special purpose to the Russian Federation.<sup>13</sup> Representatives of the military-industrial complexes from both countries say a lot about prospects for cooperation in the field of satellite navigation and joint use of the GLONASS system.

## The Main Contradiction

However, military cooperation does not make sense in the absence of a military threat, real or at least hypothetical. Military withstanding to the West is one of the most important elements of the Kremlin’s external and internal policy.

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<sup>10</sup> Александр Алексин, “Белорусская система ПВО: если долго мучиться...”, *Белрынок*, 14 June 2016, <https://www.belrynok.by/ru/page/society/3315/>.

<sup>11</sup> Олег Горупай, “Наши приоритеты”, *Красная звезда*, 28 March 2011, accessed April 20, 2017, [http://old.redstar.ru/2011/03/26\\_03/3\\_01.html](http://old.redstar.ru/2011/03/26_03/3_01.html) 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Александр Алексин, “Белорусская система ПВО: если долго мучиться...”, *Белрынок*, 14 June 2016, <https://www.belrynok.by/ru/page/society/3315/>.

<sup>13</sup> Александр Заяц, “Не процветаем, но и не дохнем”, “Интеграл” интегрируют в “Российскую электронику”, *Новости ВПК*, 21 March 2013, accessed April 20, 2017, [https://vprk.name/news/86499\\_ne\\_procvetaem\\_no\\_i\\_ne\\_dohnem\\_integral\\_integriruyut\\_v\\_rossiiskuyu\\_elektroniku.html](https://vprk.name/news/86499_ne_procvetaem_no_i_ne_dohnem_integral_integriruyut_v_rossiiskuyu_elektroniku.html).

Since the late 1990s Russian leaders prefer to approach any conflict with the West in the form of military confrontation. In addition, the Kremlin prefers to support Russian people feeling they live in a “besieged fortress”. Until 2014 expansion of NATO at the expense of states who were once part of the Warsaw Pact and Baltic countries once part of the USSR, served as evidence of hostility by the West. In addition, the deployment of elements of missile defense was presented as the most important proof of aggressive intentions by the North Atlantic Alliance. From this perspective Belarus’ participation in the hostile confrontation hostile aimed at the West was necessary and important evidence that showed the threat really exists.

In addition, the Kremlin is annoyed due to the fact that it was unable to form a military alliance to withstand the North Atlantic Alliance in Europe. Due to the geographical locations of all states in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia and Belarus can’t, even theoretically, confront NATO. Therefore, the role of Belarus in this artificial military confrontation was extremely important. In addition, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has long been considered by Western countries as “Europe’s last dictator”. He was very eager to explain and criticize situations regarding election fraud and violations of political rights involving Belarusians as part of the preparations of military aggression against the West.

Thus it is necessary to pay tribute to the Belarusian ruler. For the last 17 years he has used all possible advantages to prove the fact Belarus was necessary for the Kremlin to confirm the existence of Western threats. Moscow paid for a military alliance with Minsk with loans that nobody was going to return, providing preferential prices for oil and gas. She closed her eyes to Belarus’ re-exporting gasoline produced from oil to the west, which was allegedly supplied for the needs of the country. These benefits kept the Belarusian economy alive for many years.

At the same time, if any hint of conflict in the economic sphere arose, Alyaksandr Lukashenka immediately pointed out the invaluable, strategic role Belarus plays in the defense of Russia. “We together with the Russian people, the Russians, will defend our common Fatherland not less important for Russia the Western direction [...] In the Western direction, we will die in defense of Belarus and Russia”.<sup>14</sup> Lukashenka stressed this in October 2016 at a meeting with the Belarusian Parliament deputies. Naturally, such an approach made open talk about minor subjects such as the debts of Belarus simply impossible. No sooner does the Kremlin begin talking about the need for Minsk to pay for its Russian oil and gas then Lukashenka becomes hysterical, asking how there can be any talk of payment when Belarus is helping protect Russia from Western aggression.

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<sup>14</sup> “Лукашенко обещает России поддержку армии на западном направлении”, *РИА “Новосту”*, 7 October 2016, accessed April 20, 2017, <https://ria.ru/world/20161007/1478723524.html>.

On 1 June 2009 Lukashenka in an interview with the chief editors of several publications explicitly stated that the support of Russian security interests by Belarus “has no price”.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, before the Ukrainian crisis and subsequent isolation of Russia in the international arena, in the conduct of common military policy Moscow and Minsk still managed to not fall into direct confrontation with the West. Although military strategists of the two countries had to resort to all sorts of tricks to avoid declaring NATO a direct military adversary. Such convincing evidence, for example, can be seen in the scenario of the joint maneuver *Zapad 2013*, which was striking in its artificiality.

According to a war games scenario, Belarus’ border guards detect a battalion of 600 commandos attempting to cross the border, and although the guards put up stiff resistance the commandos ultimately break through into Belarus territory. After that, the “terrorist” battalion takes a serious hit from a detachment of old but battle-ready military aircraft that drop 250 kilogram bombs on their convoy from an altitude of 200 meters. Despite the battering, the tenacious column of invaders moves forward. They are subsequently attacked in turn by a battery of mechanized guns and motorized infantry reinforced by Special Forces. As silly as it sounds, the commandos bounce back after each onslaught, finally making their way to a town where they take hostages. Only at that point are they finally wiped out by anti-terrorist units.

All this is reminiscent of the movie “*The Terminator*” in which the “bad guy” keeps coming back to life every time he is killed. At first glance, the whole idea of a battalion that will not die no matter how often it is attacked seems rather ludicrous. But if someone put themselves in the shoes of the two General staffs officers who planned these war games, they would realize it would be impossible to use the classic scenario in which the “blue” forces attack “red” troops who repel the offensive and, predictably, end up winning. In that case, the Baltic States and Poland could say Moscow and Minsk were preparing an invasion. In 2013 they tried to avoid such an impression. At the same time, the games gave Russian and Belarus’ leaders a chance to show off their tanks, armored vehicles, bombers and helicopters, letting them rain missiles down on the enemy. For that, it was necessary to come up with a ridiculous scenario in which Russia and Belarus use everything short of nuclear weapons to stop just 600 terrorists. In addition to the *Zapad 2013* maneuvers, planners created the *Cooperation 2013* games involving the Special Forces from all Member States of the Collective Security Treaty

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<sup>15</sup> Александр Алексин, “Москва разрешила Минску покомандовать единой системой ПВО”, *Белорусские новости*, 16 September 2013, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://naviny.by/node/70604/href>.

Organization. In those maneuvers, Kazakh troops fight extremists in Belarus which looked completely unrealistic.

Apparently, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu realized how artificial such maneuvers look given their lack of connection to any actual threats. It was therefore no coincidence that he told journalists that “with each passing year, the various scenarios and episodes developed will be less spectacular due to the use of modern weapons, the increasingly distant targets on sea and land and accordingly, the manifold increase in the territory over which exercises are carried out.”<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, in all the years of Belarus–Russian military relations, another insoluble problem has always existed. On one hand, the Russian Armed Forces’ military capabilities are much larger than the Belarusian military potential. This fact naturally determines the subordinate role of the Belarusian army in all joint projects. However, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has vigorously and successfully managed to avoid a situation when the Belarusian military would need to be subordinate to Russian generals. With his loud statements about a readiness to “die for Russia”, the official Minsk quite severely restricts the possibility of the joint use of Russian and Belarusian troops. In contrast to Russian doctrinal documents which indicate the North Atlantic Alliance as a military threat, military doctrine of Belarus does not consider the NAA, NATO as a whole, or individual countries of the West as a threat. Moreover, Belarusian military doctrine does not permit the use of its forces outside the country except participation in peacekeeping operations. This eliminates the subordination of Belarusian troops to Russian commanders during operations of the Collective Rapid Response Forces for the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Even preparation for joint action on Belarus’ territory is limited. Joint regional grouping only exists formally. Russian troops can only deploy in Belarus during military maneuvers. Regional force grouping does not actually have a permanent command. All this makes the possibility of effective military interaction between Russian and Belarusian forces more than doubtful.

The implementation of previously announced plans for the integration of Belarusian enterprises into the military-industrial complex in Russian corporations by 2020 now looks now more than unlikely. Alyaksandr Lukashenka has now had some time to declare that the Minsk wheel tractor plant will not be sold. It is unlikely the company *Integral*, will be included in the structure of the Russian state corporation “*Rostekhnologii*”. The company “*Peleng*”, expected to be purchased by the federal space agency “*Roskosmos*”, also remains under Belarusian ownership.

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<sup>16</sup> “Министр обороны России и начальник Генерального штаба Вооруженных Сил встретились с военными обозревателями”, 27 September 2013, accessed April 20, 2017, [http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/person/more.htm?id=11849235%40egNews](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/person/more.htm?id=11849235%40egNews).

## A Joint Air Defense System is Still Divided

Attempts to create a joint air defense system has stretched more than two decades, serving as an example of such unresolved contradictions. In accordance with the implementation plan of the Treaty, when establishing the community of Belarus and Russia on 2 April 1996,<sup>17</sup> the parties came to a mutual agreement on establishing a unified regional air defense system of the two countries. It had seemed this idea could be fairly quickly implemented. It had all the necessary material and recourse possibilities. After the disintegration of the USSR a separate air defense army formation was deployed in the territory of Belarus. The army consisted of three anti-aircraft missile brigades, two anti-aircraft missile regiments (650 launchers), two radio-technical brigades and two anti-aircraft jet-fighters regiments (76 aircraft). The fighter regiment of the Moscow air defense district (40 fighters) and the fighter regiment of the 26<sup>th</sup> army of the Soviet Air Force (51 fighters) had also been deployed in the territory of the Republic.<sup>18</sup> On 1 August 1992 the command of the Air Defense Forces of the Republic of Belarus was established on the basis of the air defense command of the Belarusian military district and a second separate air defense army. Such a concentration of forces and air defense can be easily explained. The Belarusian military district was a main strategic reserve of the Western group of Soviet troops, aiming to strike NATO. Therefore, despite a number of problems related to aging weapons and military equipment, the former commander of the Russian air force, Army General Anatoly Kornukov, insisted the Belarusian air defense system was the most efficient, powerful and effective throughout the territory of the CIS.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, adopting a huge number of documents for the creation of a joint air defense system, Minsk strongly inhibited the transition to a real unification. As a result, the agreement on the establishment of such a system was only signed in 2009.<sup>20</sup> In accordance with the composition, the joint air defense system had to include five air force units, 10 anti-aircraft missile units, five radar units and one electronic warfare unit. They were stationed in the Kaliningrad

<sup>17</sup> “Договор об образовании Сообщества России и Белоруссии”, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/1901190>.

<sup>18</sup> Юрий Зверев, “Зачем Беларуси и России единая система ПВО”, *Мир перемен*, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://mirperemen.net/2016/09/zachem-belarusi-i-rossii-edinaya-sistema-pvo/>.

<sup>19</sup> “ОДКБ в Ереване: необходима система кризисного реагирования”, *РИА “Новости”*, 19 August 2003, accessed April 20, 2017, <https://ria.ru/analytics/20100819/266826070.html>.

<sup>20</sup> “Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о совместной охране внешней границы Союзного государства в воздушном пространстве и создании Единой региональной системы противовоздушной обороны Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь”, accessed April 20, 2017, [http://www.conventions.ru/view\\_base.php?id=1426](http://www.conventions.ru/view_base.php?id=1426).



region, Western Russia and Belarus.<sup>21</sup> Coordination of the system was to be implemented with the central command post of the commander of the Russian Air Forces (now the Airspace Forces). However, joint command of the entire system was assumed to be formed only during a so-called “period of threat”, that is, on the eve of a possible war. Moreover, the main stumbling block was the question of who would command the system. Minsk did not want to leave the command system to the Russian side. In the end it was decided that a commander should be appointed on “a rotational basis”. This means Russian and Belarus commanders in the Air Force and Air Defense will take the position in turn. In August 2013, this position was appointed to the Belarus commander of the air force and air defense forces, Major-General Oleg Dvigalev.

However, even after these solutions were created, the system failed. In mid-2015 the main chief of staff, first Deputy Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces, Lieutenant General Pavel Kurachenko, promised that the Armed Forces of Russia and Belarus would begin their combat duty as part of the joint Russian–Belarusian air defense system at the end of 2016. According to him, “The Defense Ministries of Russia and Belarus have approved a list of military command and control organizations, command points, large units and military units that will form part of the joint regional air defense system as well as a Provision on the commander and the command post of the joint regional air defense system.”<sup>22</sup> It was stated that instructions on the organization and performance of combat duty for the air defense system had still not been approved by the Defense Ministers of Russia and Belarus at that time.

However, even in March 2017 official Minsk continued to look for opportunities to obstruct the implementation of the agreement. Alyaksandr Lukashenka has continued to make changes and additions to the agreement signed seven years ago. As follows from the media reports, the substantive content of these changes is that the concept of a “period of threat” is replaced by the concept of a “period of direct threat of aggression”, implying the military-political situation in which Russia or Belarus may be attacked “by any state or group of States”. It can be assumed that “the period of direct threat of aggression” in interpreting Lukashenka is shorter than just a “period of threat”. Therefore, in order to start forming a unified command, Moscow and Minsk had to agree on whether “a period of direct threat of aggression” came or not. All this made the period

<sup>21</sup> Юрий Зверев, “Зачем Беларуси и России единая система ПВО”, *Евразия. Эксперт*, 20 September 2016, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://eurasia.expert/zachem-belarusi-i-rossii-edinaya-sistema-pvo/>.

<sup>22</sup> Александр Алексин, “ЕРС ПВО: старт, растянувшийся на годы”, *Беларуская праўда*, 11 September 2015, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://belprauda.org/ers-pvo-start-rastyanuv-shijsya-na-gody/>.

of the Russian troops' presence on Belarusian territory during exercises much shorter. And this is now very important for the Belarusian leader.

The fact that a joint regional system of air defense really exists in a situation of military confrontation with the West seriously matters for NATO's threat perceptions. It means that Russian strategists managed to establish an A2/AD zone to the forefront. The anti-aircraft missile systems S-300, the air force and air defenses of Belarus can, if necessary, strike targets on the territories of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. At the same time, the anti-aircraft missile systems S-400 in the Kaliningrad region and Belarusian S-300's overlap the affected area of each other, significantly limiting the possibility of access by air to NATO's air force in the Baltic and the transfer of reserves. In a situation when the Alliance is prepared to deter Russian aggression, the emergence of access denial in the region turns into a serious military factor.

Documents of the NATO summit in Warsaw in 2016, indicated that the Alliance will not tolerate the existence of such an anti-access/area denial zone. It is easy to assume the response of NATO would be to prepare the appropriate force for the destruction of air defense systems. As a result, Belarusian territory will be under the guns of US cruise missiles. Pandering to the militarist aspirations of Putin has turned into a direct military threat to Belarus. Lukashenka is trying to reduce the risk by signaling to the West that elements of the joint air defense system deployed in Belarus will be under his, and not Putin's control. But this can lead to future Moscow-Minsk conflicts.

### **A Base That Will Never Exist**

The realization that military cooperation with Moscow can cause direct military confrontation with NATO has led to the abandonment of the ambitious project enabling Minsk to pull money out of Russia. There was a proposal to create a third Russian military facility of Russia — an air force base. Plans for its creation arose before the Ukrainian crisis. Initially deployment of the base was seen as a response to the appearance of NATO fighters patrolling the airspace above the Baltic countries. "We are starting to consider a plan for the creation in Belarus of a Russian air base with aircraft-fighters," stated Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu during the meeting with Alyksandr Lukashenka in April 2013, "And I hope that in 2015, there will be a regiment. In 2013 we will also create an aviation commandant's office there and send the first patrol flight of combat fighters."<sup>23</sup> Soon these plans were fleshed out. In June 2013 the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian

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<sup>23</sup> Иван Софронов, "Шойгу прилетел в Минск со своими самолетами", *Коммерсант*, 23 April 2013, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2177242?themeid=6>.

air force Viktor Bondarev announced that a Russian airbase in Belarus would be located in the town of Lida. According to him, a group of Russian specialists had previously reviewed more than two dozen Belarusian military airfields. As the result the airfield, located 35 kilometers from the border with Lithuania and 120 kilometers from Poland, was selected. In Soviet times it was used as a fighter-bomber aviation regiment together with a bomber's regiment. Nearly all the necessary infrastructure was present at the airport in Lida — not just facilities for aircrafts, but complex equipment to ensure air navigation allowing modern combat aircraft to use the base. Originally multi-function fighters (Su-27SM3) were supposed to be deployed and at the same time other planes. Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Air Force stressed that “the establishment of a Russian airbase in Belarus is a result of the intergovernmental agreement on strengthening the military component of the Union State. As a member of the Union State Russia is obliged to deploy and have its air base, which will be an important element of the first strategic defense echelon of the Union State, providing cover the air space of Belarus.”<sup>24</sup>

These official statements gave the impression that the issue of deploying bases had been resolved and Russian experts immediately began to make plans concerning the future of the base. For example, Vice-President of the Russian Academy of geopolitical issues, Vladimir Anokhin, told reporters that to ensure the safety of Russian borders in the West, a combined air division including a regiment of bombers, the regiment of fighter-bombers and a regiment of fighters was to be placed at the new base. From a military point of view, there should be aircraft bombers with powerful delivery vehicles, together with fighter jet support, said Anokhin. As a vanguard at the Baranavichy airfield, four of the Su-27 were sent.

In September 2015 the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, ordered the signing of an agreement on the establishment of a Russian airbase in Belarus, instructing the Russian Defense Ministry and Foreign Ministry to hold talks with Minsk. However, on 6 October 2015, a few days before the next presidential election in Belarus, Lukashenka refused to place anything on the territory of Belarus airbase. Even more, he said that he didn't even discuss establishing a military base on the territory of the republic with Russia. “As Head of State, I see no reason to be drawn into a “muscle-flexing” with our Western and Eastern neighbors. I don't want it...”<sup>25</sup> said Lukashenka in October 2015. Russian

<sup>24</sup> “Россия построит авиабазу на территории Белоруссии”, *Росбалт*, 26 June 2016, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2013/06/26/1145500.html>.

<sup>25</sup> “Лукашенко: Российская авиабаза в Белоруссии не нужна ни Минску”, ни Москве, *Взгляд*, 30 October 2015, accessed April 20, 2017, <https://vz.ru/news/2015/10/30/775409.html>.

fighters have now left Belarus. Minsk's position changed suddenly and radically. Now the Belarusian leader wants proof that if Moscow is so concerned about their safety, it can provide Belarus with modern planes and air defense systems. Lukashenka even hinted to the West that he is not going to blindly carry out the orders of Moscow.

## Conclusion

Now the strategic interests of two countries formally united as a Union State, strongly disagree. Minsk is frightened by Moscow's desire to restore the Soviet Empire, at least partially. Belarus has not recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It has not approved the annexation of Crimea. Lukashenka understands that participation in the plans of the Russian military build-up, which was recently the only means of extracting money for Belarus, today brings the danger of involvement in a direct military conflict with the West. Moreover, Moscow's expansionism and revanchism calls into question the sovereignty of Belarus, as well as the right of Lukashenka to make all the decisions regarding his state by himself. It can be assumed that in the future it will be increasingly harder for Moscow to link the economic benefits for Belarus with the participation of Minsk in military preparations. While Belarus, in turn, will seek to avoid such participation.

Ultimately, future military cooperation between Russia and Belarus will be determined by several interlinked factors. First of all, a future military alliance will be determined by the level of military confrontation between Russia and NATO. Currently, the Alliance is deployed Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland's multinational battalions. Their main task is to deter possible Russian aggression. As a result there are "gray zones" between NATO and Russia; areas where there were no significant military contingents disappeared. In fact, the existence of such zones limited opportunities for sudden aggression. Now Belarus is the last "gray zone" in the line of separation between the forces of Russia and NATO. Naturally, the pressure on Minsk will increase. Strategists of the North Atlantic Alliance consider linking the territory of Belarus and the Kaliningrad district as the main threat in a situation of military conflict, creating a so-called "Suwalki corridor", and cutting off the Baltic States from its NATO allies. In this situation the Alliance will prepare its forces to strike Russian troops who use Belarus as a foothold. On the other hand, to reduce the time for preparing an advance in the direction of the Polish–Lithuanian border, Moscow will insist on the possibility of placing its troops in Belarus on a permanent basis.

Furthermore, the possibility that Vladimir Putin needs a "small victorious war", trying to dramatically raise the level of public support before the presidential

elections in Russia, cannot be ruled out. In this case, the annexation of Belarus, not dissimilar to the “Crimean” scenario, looks a likely option. The first step to this would be the emergence of Russian military bases and stationing of Russian troops on a permanent basis. It can be assumed the Kremlin will try to achieve this goal in the near future.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka will have to counter maneuver. On the one hand, he can't allow a significant contingent of Russian troops to be deployed. If it happens it will put his right to rule the whole country unilaterally under question. On the other hand, Lukashenka is scared of rapprochement with the West, which will inevitably require a rejection of suppression from internal oppositions. Thus, military cooperation with Russia becomes Belarus' most serious problem.



# Media, Culture and Soft Power in Relations between Belarus and Russia

*Alena Artsiomenka*

The concept of soft power has been elaborated on in international relations since the early 1990s, but it is not as popular for the smaller countries from the Eastern European region. This is why it is important to describe relations between Belarus and Russia in terms of interaction, and compare the soft power of both countries.

The author of the “soft power” concept, Joseph Nye, defined it as the possibility of a state to influence others’ behavior and to achieve results with the help of cooptation methods, agenda setting, persuasion and positive attraction. To operationalize the concept in terms of the actual cooperation between Belarus and Russia we will divide it into separate directions of media and propaganda influence, cultural influence, and the perception of neighboring countries’ public opinion as the result.

When we speak about the media sphere and propaganda in Belarus–Russia relations, it plays into Russia’s hands. The two countries have no barriers between their information spaces because of the common language. A higher professionalism by Russian media, a better financial position and more aggressive rhetoric make them very powerful in the informational space of Belarus. Russian media set the agenda for their Belarusian audience which trusts them more than other sources. Belarus has limited potential to influence Russia. Belarus is suffering from information insecurity, recognized even by Belarusian authorities. As in the media sphere, the use of the Russian language and peripheral perception of the Belarusian culture makes Russian content very influential in Belarus. The Belarus state supports the interconnection of the two countries through such ideological concepts as the pan-Slavic origin of the Belarusian statehood and nationhood, a common Soviet past and participation in the Great Patriotic War. The idea of a Belarusian involvement in the war is widely used by authorities to prove the role of the smaller country to its neighbor. Belarusian authorities and President Alyaksandr Lukashenka always tries to emphasize the role of Belarusian people in the war when speaking to Russian politicians and journalists. However, the threat of informational insecurity makes them turn to a so called “soft

Belarusization” — the support (or absence of resistance) to national discourse. This trend becomes more evident after the conflict between Russia and Ukraine began. Nevertheless, in the reflection of public opinion we have not seen yet any significant changes. Both countries are perceived by neighbors as friendly and supportive. Analysis shows Russian potential is very high due to numerous reasons, but Belarus is perceived very positively despite their lack of resources. Union State tools play an important role in widening the presence of Belarus into the Russian media and culture landscape.

### **The Media Sphere and Propaganda in Belarus–Russia Relations**

To describe the media sphere and propaganda in Belarus–Russia relations we will analyze the role of the common media space as the goal of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Then we will compare the influence of Russian media in neighboring countries, as well as putting forward the question of influence by Russian media on a Belarusian audience in terms of the volume of Russian content. We will also look at the image of Belarus created by Russian media for its audience.

When considering interconnection in a media sphere it is impossible to avoid the topic of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, and common programs and projects in its framework. As Irina Tolstik describes in her research on the conceptual basis of the common informational space, the main goal of the common space is to be competitive in the global media space and to create its own niche there. In other words, cooperation between the media spheres of two countries is being built to be more influential in promoting the Union State agenda inside and outside State borders. According to an official point of view, the central media of Belarus and Russia are the most active supporters for the unity of the states. More than 100 representatives of mass-media (from Russia, Belarus and other countries) have accreditation from bodies of the Union State. There is a corpus of media (TV, radio and press) financed from the State budget. These are, among others, the media group “Soyuz”, coordinated by the Broadcast organization of the Union State, the newspapers “*Soyuznoye veche*” and “*Soyuz. Belarus–Russia*”, an information agency “Soyuz-Info”, a radio station “*Soyuz*”, and others. There is a program of development in the common informational space, coordinated from the sides of the ministries of information of both countries and bodies of the Union State. The last action plan in the field of the creation of a common space (the program for 2016–2020) was agreed on in the session of the Council of Ministers of the Union State on 12 May.

Surprisingly, but at the same time, the issue of information security from Russia’s perspective, discussed by independent journalists and experts during



the last three years, arose for Belarusian authorities as well. The Deputy Head of the Belarus President Administration Igor Buzovsky in his interview on 15 May mentioned the volume of Russian content in Belarusian media “must put us on our guard from the perspective of safety of national culture and informational security”.<sup>1</sup>

Independent experts have been concerned about the influence of Russian media content for several years. For every country connected with the Russian language space the issue became more obvious after the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict in 2014. Many countries face a situation where a large share of the population supports the Russian side and shares the ideas and attitudes transmitted by Russian news agencies. Belarus was the country with the largest share supporting the Russian side. To use the annexation of Crimea as a marker, 62.2 percent of Belarusians in 2014<sup>2</sup> suggested it was a historical justice. In 2014,<sup>3</sup> in the first quarter this share dropped to 58.5 percent. The reason why most people were so sensitive to Russian propaganda was that the Belarusian state and independent media were not as influential and couldn't compete with Russia in this context.

One of the most significant factors of Russian dominance on the Belarusian informational field is the lack of their own media content and a huge share of Russian content on TV. The problem was revealed in a report prepared for weekly monitoring on the website *belarusinfocus.info*. The content of three main TV channels in Belarus (*Belarus 1*, *ONT* and *CTV*) was analyzed and the result was the following: With *ONT* (the channel was created 15 years ago with just one competing Russian TV channel) we can see that the volume of Belarusian content during a broadcasting day (we used the working day 9 August 2016 as an example) was five hours but Russian content was 14 hours. On the weekend the duration of Belarusian programs were two hours, whereas Russian programs were more than 10 hours. *CTV* had almost the same picture. Six hours were assigned to Belarusian content, nine hours for Russian (using the same working day 9 August 2016 as an example). The situation looks better on the TV channel *Belarus 1*. Its own programs took up eight hours, Russian programs 11 hours (in one working day). On the weekend the picture gets worse however: only four hours of their own content compared with 11 hours of Russian programs.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Minsk is worried about the informational influence of Moscow (in Russian)”, *naviny.by*, 31 May 2016, accessed March 22, 2017, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2016/05/31/ic\\_articles\\_112\\_191783](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2016/05/31/ic_articles_112_191783).

<sup>2</sup> “Brotherly freeze (in Russian)”, *IISEPS*, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://old.iiseps.org/03-15-07.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> “How to enhance the share of national content in Belarusian media (in Russian)”, Press Club Belarus, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://press-club.by/medyyatok/kak-uvlechit-dolyu-nacionalnogo-kontenta-v-belorusskih-smi>.

TV is still the most important source of information for Belarusians. Changes in the structure of use of information channels can be considered inconspicuous in comparison with 2013, confirmed by the results of the Media Sphere Study, carried out by the experts at the Information-Analytical Center (IAC) at a Presidential Administration level. According to the study, when answering the question: “Where do you usually get the necessary information about life in Belarus and abroad?” 85.6 percent of respondents named TV. This indication has remained stable: in 2011 — 85.0 percent, in 2012 — 86.0 percent, and in 2013 — 86.1 percent. The popularity of television remains high despite the growing number of people who consider the worldwide web a primary source of information: for four years their share has increased from 32 percent to 53 percent. On the one hand, this suggests that in real terms consumers combine the use of different communication channels. On the other hand, on the background of a rising demand for Internet information coverage of online news resources does not increase. Along with a continued leading role by television, the popularity of other traditional means of communication does not reduce or even reduce slightly over time. In 2014, 43.8 percent of respondents named printed press their primary source of information but in 2011 this was 40.6 percent. For radio 28.2 percent gave their vote but in 2011 this was at 31.3 percent.<sup>5</sup>

If we look at the use of Russian internet sources by the Belarusian audience, we can see the growth of its importance in the Belarusian media space. As research on the internet audience shows the most popular Russian sources in Belarus are *RBK*, *lenta.ru*, *RIA Novosti*, *Moskovsky Komsomolec* and the *Belarus 1* channel internet-site. In March 2016 their common audience reached 700,000 people (the main Belarusian internet portal *tut.by* reached 1.2 million people (though the total number of internet users remains at a level of 2.5 million readers).

All Russian media in the Belarusian media space causes a high level of trust in Russian media from Belarusians. As Professor Andrei Vardomatsky claimed, according to research by the Belarusian Analytical Laboratory, the index of trust for Russian media (the index contains such components as perceived professionalism, independence and objectiveness) is the highest when in comparison with other media (32.5 percent).<sup>6</sup>

The role of Belarusian media in Russia’s informational space is incommensurably lower. There is one Belarusian satellite channel for foreign countries,

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<sup>5</sup> “Media sphere of Belarus. Sociological aspect (in Russian)”, Informational-analytical center under the Belarus President Administration, 2014, accessed March 10, 2015, [http://iac.gov.by/sbornik/Mediasfera\\_Belarusi.pdf](http://iac.gov.by/sbornik/Mediasfera_Belarusi.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> “Andrey Vardomatsky: Belarusian media are able to change geopolitical orientation of Belarusians (in Russian)”, 21 March 2017, accessed April 2, 2017, <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2017/03/21/andrey-var-domatskiy-belorusskie-smi-sposobny-izmenit-geopoliticheskie-orientatsii-belorusov.html>.

Belarus 24, but it is less popular than “pure” Russian channels, including packages of cable or satellite TV-providers in Belarus. Regarding the media of the Union State, the Belarusian agenda has not risen in Russian media as often. Research on Belarusian soft power potential includes content analysis from main Russian resources such as internet portals and online versions of main federal newspapers.

First of all it is important to analyze the number of articles devoted to Belarus. During the period from May 2015 to April 2016, the volume of publications in Russian media was less than in the Polish media (197 vs. 290). This is surprising when taking into account the level of relations with both countries. And it could be treated as a lack of success with Belarus’ soft power. The context of mentioning Belarus in Russian media doesn’t differ from the context of any other neighboring countries, close or not. The first main topic is international trade, then international relations in general, economic issues, and fuel and energy. Less important topics are Belarusian internal policy (government), elections, sport, the social sphere, and technologies.<sup>7</sup>

It is an important issue for the (un)success[fullness] of Belarusian soft power and its informational safety (or lack of), that at times Russian media works against the image of Belarus. Often it is an answer about some unsolved disagreement in gas and oil supplies or so called trade wars between countries. But sometimes it looks like a purposeful policy to worsen relations and trust between union countries. Thus, in 2010, the Russian TV channel *NTV* showed the TV-serial “*God Father*” against the policy and even the word of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. At the end of 2016 to the beginning of 2017 several talk-shows on Russian TV were dedicated to the unfriendliness of Belarusians towards Russia (i.e. “*Neighbors. Time will show.*” on 1<sup>st</sup> channel, screened on 24 November). There are several Russian media (i.e. the Information Agency Regnum) which constantly prove the idea of Belarusian unreliableness as a partner. As a result some authors at *IA Regnum*, *lenta.ru* and *edaily.com*, Belarusian residents Yuri Pavlovec, Dmitry Aimkin and Sergey Shiptenko, were arrested on suspicion of fomenting international dissention in December 2016. Another type of reaction to the informational threat from the East is a more loyal attitude by authorities to their own national discourse. Many initiatives like language courses, suits with national ornaments etc. are not suppressed and even supported by officials. The trend was named “soft Belarusization” and after the Ukrainian conflict we have seen the enforcement of these tendencies. Sometimes such initiatives become evidence for anti-Belarusian propaganda in Russian media. But it is

<sup>7</sup> Dz. Melyantsou, A. Artsiomenka, “Soft power of Belarus in the region: potential assessment (in Russian)”, 2016, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://www.belinstitute.eu/ru/node/3373>.

important to understand that such an unfriendly rethoric is used mostly to get extra points in economical disagreements between the two countries.

Thus on the current stage we see that trade and political disagreements cause tension in the media sphere which endangers soft power success in both countries. However, the effect on the success of Belarusian soft power must be much more important because of the huge disproportion in influence by the media, and propaganda between the two neighboring countries.

So, the media sphere and propaganda in Belarus–Russia relations plays into Russian hands. The common language space makes interference by media content unhampered. A higher professionalism by Russian media, a better financial position and more aggressive rhetoric make them very powerful in the informational space of the region, and in Belarus most of all. Russian media sets the agenda for their Belarusian audience, which trusts them more than other sources. Belarus has little potential to influence their Russian audience. One possible channel is using resources of the Union State who is working on creating a common informational space. Media working for the Union State could help to promote the Belarusian agenda. But for now Belarus is suffering from information insecurity which is recognized even by Belarusian authorities.

### **Culture: Popular Historical Myths, Cultural Cooperation and the Common Mass Culture Space**

When describing the cultural tools of Belarus and Russia's mutual soft power there are two main points. First, it is the common history, myths and ideology that it is based on — and its influence in the current cultural space of the two countries. Second, it is a cultural perspective of interaction within the framework of the Union State. As in the previous chapter, we will come to the conclusion of a great disproportion between the impact on the two countries — both current and potential.

It is impossible to understand the depth of interosculation in Russian and Belarusian cultures without giving a historical perspective of its relations. Common history with Russia is so important that it even underlines the official ideology of the Belarusian state. Ideological institutions play an important role in Belarus. There are dedicated ideological departments/positions in executive power bodies and in the Belarus President's administration. There is an obligatory course on ideology at higher education institutions. And there is a large corpus of articles and textbooks on the fundamentals of Belarusian ideology which mostly explain the official version of the roots of Belarusian identity, nationhood and statehood.

Thus, there are different perspectives of understanding the origins of the Belarusian nation and state, and authors of the handbook “Basics of the Ideology of Belarusian State”,<sup>8</sup> studied at higher education institutions, reject the versions of statehood based on the heritage of the Great Duchy of Lithuania or place Belarus on the landscape of western civilization. The only approach they find possible is the concept of pan-Slavic roots in Belarusian culture to develop the statehood in a way to reconstruct connections with Russia within the Union State.

Official Belarusian ideology considers that Belarusian statehood started in Kyivan Rus — commonly stated as connecting future Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians. They shared common values based on Orthodox Christianity. And they saved these connections in the future. So this is the basis of conceptualization for the necessity of building the Union State.

Another pillar of Belarusian identity from an ideological point of view which can prove the necessity of integration, is participation in the Great Patriotic War. The image of the country which fought with others, took the brunt of the conflict and put up resistance during partisan warfare, is supported by Belarusian authorities — and it works. The argument about a common heroic past is widely used in any disagreements between the two countries. Authorities in both countries come to each other to take part in Freedom Day celebrations on 9 May.

Being part of the Russian Empire from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, and then being part of the Soviet Union with its center in Moscow, Belarus experiences huge effects on its national identity, and the potential of Russian soft power as a result. Nowadays we face two main sequences with such history from a cultural influence point of view. First of all, the role of the Russian language as the language of the title nation, and as the official one. As a result of three centuries of common history the Russian language has extruded almost all other languages from Belarus’ cities. In Belarus more than three million people, or 34 percent, consider Russian as the native language, in Minsk this increases to 42 percent according to the 2009 Census.<sup>9</sup> It makes all cultural and media products created in Russia usable and applicable in Belarus. At the same time it puts Belarusian cultural products in a position of competition from the side of Russian content. And this competition isn’t met from contemporary Belarusian culture.

<sup>8</sup> S. Kniazev, S. Reshetnikov, “Basics of the Ideology of Belarusian State (in Russian)”, 2004, accessed April 2, 2017, [http://stk.ucoz.org/\\_ld/0/29\\_Knjazev\\_Ideolog.pdf](http://stk.ucoz.org/_ld/0/29_Knjazev_Ideolog.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> “Census 2009. National composition of Belarus, vol.3 (in Russian)”, 2009 Belstat, accessed April 2, 2017, [http://www.belstat.gov.by/informatsiya-dlya-responenta/perepis-naseleniya/perepis-naseleniya-2009-goda/statisticheskie-publikatsii/statisticheskie-sborniki\\_2/index\\_535/](http://www.belstat.gov.by/informatsiya-dlya-responenta/perepis-naseleniya/perepis-naseleniya-2009-goda/statisticheskie-publikatsii/statisticheskie-sborniki_2/index_535/).

The second point is that after a long experience of being included in a larger state, Belarusian culture and identity has absorbed all the features of a peripheral one. Belarusians see the heroes of Russian TV shows and serials (because of the large share of Russian content on national TV channels) all the time. They perceive the agenda by Russian news as more important than the Belarusian news agenda. Music played by radio stations must include 75 percent Belarusian songs (not to protect the language but to increase revenue from local show business), but the rule is informal and constantly circumvented. Most FM-channels choose to translate Russian or Western mainstream items as an editorial policy. There is no exact data about the number of concert tours by Belarusian and Russian showmen, but it is possible to compare the demand in Belarusian and Russian performers in Belarus on the basis of fees. According to one expert evaluation, Belarusian artists get paid 10 times less for a 40 minute concert than Russian guests do.

The field for social, humanitarian and cultural collaboration is provided by the integration block of two countries. There is a concept of social development by the Union State (it is assigned every five years), including such directions as an educational policy, the policy in the sphere of culture and art, a tourism policy etc. In the framework of an educational policy a common educational space functions. But like many others directives there is a disproportion in the role of participating countries. There are 43 higher schools in Belarus while there are 530 in Russia. Despite the population size difference, Russia hosts much more Belarusian students than the number of Russians who study in Belarus: 8278 vs. 1332 in the academic year 2015–2016.<sup>10</sup> And it shows how attractive the Russian education system is for Belarusians.

The part of the concept devoted to culture collaborations states as the main goal: to create and develop a common cultural-informational space. Several common intercultural events are organized and paid for by the bodies of the Union State. As a result of the concept implementation for the 10 years through to 2010, the Union budget financed 80 common cultural events. There are Slaviansky Bazar festival, days for Slavik written language and culture, mutual tours by theater and musical companies, etc.

Some other directions of collaboration in the framework of the concept are the following. A specific direction for enforcing collaboration is by commemorating important dates and events of common history with monumental arts. Another direction is the widening of contacts in the sphere of folk arts by taking part in festivals in both countries. There are direct connections between artistic higher schools in both countries. Other important spheres of collaboration are

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<sup>10</sup> “Belarus and Russia. Statistical handbook (in Russian)”, 2016, Belstat, accessed April 2, 2017, [http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/publications/izdania/public\\_compilation/index\\_6839/](http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/publications/izdania/public_compilation/index_6839/).

the protection of historical heritage, movies and TV-productions. Several prizes in the field of literature and arts are instituted by the Union State for participants from both sides.<sup>11</sup>

To conclude, in describing the role of culture in the mutual soft power of Belarus and Russia, we need to say that a disproportionate influence, as described above, takes place in the cultural field as well. The use of Russian language and the peripheral perception of Belarusian culture makes Russian content very influential in Belarus. The Belarus state supports the interconnection of two countries through ideological concepts such as a pan-Slavic origin of Belarusian statehood and nationhood. The common past as Kyivan Rus, existence as part of the Soviet Union, and most of all participation in the Great Patriotic War, is the basis for the promotion of unity between both nations. The idea of the Belarusian role in the war is widely used by authorities to prove the role of a smaller country supporting its neighbor. But it is important to extend the role of their own cultural products and heighten their competitive ability to be more influential as a tool of soft power.

### **Cooperation in the Reflection of Public Opinion, and Geopolitical Orientations of the People**

All cooperation between Belarus and Russia, the experience of communication between people as well as media strategies, historical myths and other techniques of propaganda influence public opinion about neighboring countries. We can say that the components of soft power mentioned in previous chapters are the basis of geopolitical orientations as well. Furthermore, the effect on public opinion and geopolitical orientation could be treated as a way how soft power works, and the goal for all techniques of soft power. That is why we have to describe the perception of a neighboring country on the basis of numerous sociological researches conducted during recent years.

One of the main resources of comparative data on the attitudes of both nations towards each other is the Integration Barometer by the Center of Integration Studies, Eurasian Development Bank. The monitoring includes yearly research conducted in all countries of Commonwealth of Independent States. Researchers evaluate such topics as: friendly countries, countries who can propose (expect) military-political support, brands perception, working force/migrants attitudes and cultural interest.

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<sup>11</sup> "Concept of social development of the Union State for 2011–2015 (in Russian)", 25 November 2011, Permanent Committee of the Union State, accessed April 2, 2017, [http://www.postkomsg.com/news/socialnaja\\_politika/188217/](http://www.postkomsg.com/news/socialnaja_politika/188217/).

According to the 2015<sup>12</sup> report, Belarus is in first place for Russians as a friendly country; a country they can expect support from. Sixty six percent of Russians consider Belarusians as friends in 2015, and the parameter is growing (2014 — 65 percent, 2013 — 50 percent). Russia finds the following countries friendly: Kazakhstan (54 percent) and China (45 percent).<sup>13</sup> On the other side, this attitude is mutual. Eighty four percent of Belarusians consider Russia as a friendly country, and Russia is in first place at 81 percent, 83 percent and 80 percent in 2015, 2014 and 2013 accordingly. In Belarusians' perception Russia is followed by Kazakhstan (54 percent) and the Ukraine (24 percent).<sup>14</sup> Though in the case of Belarusian's attitudes the leadership of Russia is more evident than the leadership of Belarus for Russians. It reflects that Russian soft power is much stronger in Belarus, and it is difficult to underestimate a perceptible support from Russia's side.

Regarding the question of military-political support (weapons, a military presence, political support at an international level) we can say the situation is different. Both countries are at the top for each other. But perception of support for Belarus among Russians grew from 39 percent in 2013 to 47 percent in 2015. Following Russia, other supported countries are Kazakhstan (36 percent) and Armenia (28 percent). For Belarusians we see the opposite. In 2013–2014 Russia was perceived as a potentially supportive country by 61 percent and 62 percent of people, but in 2015 numbers dropped significantly to 47 percent.<sup>15</sup> The reason is clear: it was caused by Russia's aggressive behavior towards the Ukraine. (Serious disagreements on gas, oil and procurement of Belarusian foodstuff only arose in 2016.) Also the country's top people expect military-political support. Belarusians' expectation for Russia (74 percent) and Russians for Belarus (35 percent). Despite of the size of the country this high level of perception of possible aid from Belarus' side justifies a high evaluation of Belarusian defense potential.

An important component of soft power is how attractive brands and goods of any country are for others. That is why it is useful to evaluate customer preferences. To estimate preferences researchers ask what goods people prefer to buy from which countries and what goods they give credence to. Belarusians at 29 percent prefer goods produced in the Russian Federation (in second place after Germany). At the same time 19 percent of Russians prefer Belarusian goods (Belarus shares second place with Japan). From the point of view of the economy we can also evaluate the perception of a country through its attitudes towards

<sup>12</sup> "Integration Barometer (in Russian)", 2015, Center for Integration Research, accessed April 2, 2017, [http://www.eabr.org/general/upload/EDB\\_Centre\\_Analytical\\_Report\\_33\\_Full\\_Rus.pdf](http://www.eabr.org/general/upload/EDB_Centre_Analytical_Report_33_Full_Rus.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



the working force. It is Russians who are mostly appreciated as part-time workers, students and immigrants in Belarus (although the number went down from 36 percent in 2014 to 27 percent in 2015). Belarusians are in second place (16 percent) in Russia after Germany. And Belarusians use the possibility of a common labor market widely. Experts evaluated the number of labor migrants to Russia from Belarus at 300,000<sup>16</sup> in 2013 before the economic crisis, making the Russian labor market less attractive.

The question of interest to another country shows dependence from Belarus on the Russian cultural landscape. Russia is the leading country for Belarusians in terms of interest in its culture, history and geography (36 percent made this choice).<sup>17</sup> But it doesn't work in the opposite. Dependence on Russia is proved in the case of a preferred source of science and technologies (49 percent, first place) and business and investments (48 percent, first place). The role of Belarus for Russia is much smaller; the country doesn't even make the top three. The only case where Belarus is interesting for Russians is as a source of artists, writers and other people of art (Belarus shares second place with Germany while France leads in first place). At the same time 60 percent of Belarusians would like to receive creative people from Russia.<sup>18</sup> All this shows a significant disproportion in the soft power of the two countries, as well as dependence from Belarusian economic, scientific, technological and cultural spaces on Russia.

Another angle we can use to evaluate the effect of a soft power in the case of Belarus is to describe the geopolitical orientation of Belarusians. Being in between Russia as the main partner, a part of the Union State to the east, and EU-countries on the west, Belarusians are divided into several parts. Some of them support the east direction of integration and some of them would prefer to integrate with the EU. The dynamics of the shares can be a measure of success in Russian politics towards a neighboring country and its soft power as a part of that.

By asking people to choose only between a union with Russia and integration with the European Union, Belarusians traditionally prefer Russia. It was only in 2012–2013 that the EU choice was more popular because people recognized the necessity of economic reforms (as IISEPS data shows, <sup>19</sup> the maximum pro-EU share was in October 2012: 44.1 percent were for the EU and only 36.2 percent were for Russia). The result of the Ukrainian Maidan made Belarusians afraid

<sup>16</sup> "Migration. How many Belarusians left for jobs" (in Russian), 5 April 2013, *naviny.by*, accessed April 2, 2017, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2013/04/05/ic\\_articles\\_116\\_181355](http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2013/04/05/ic_articles_116_181355).

<sup>17</sup> "Integration Barometer (in Russian)", 2015, Center for Integration Research, accessed April 2, 2017, [http://www.eabr.org/general/upload/EDB\\_Centre\\_Analytical\\_Report\\_33\\_Full\\_Rus.pdf](http://www.eabr.org/general/upload/EDB_Centre_Analytical_Report_33_Full_Rus.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Dz. Melyantsou, A. Artsiomenka, "Geopolitical preferences of the Belarusians: a too pragmatic nation?", 2 April 2013, accessed April 2, 2017, [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS\\_PM07\\_2013en\\_0.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_PM07_2013en_0.pdf).

of such a scenario. In December 2015 the share of pro-Russian choice achieved 53.5 percent (the EU was chosen by only 25.1 percent). But later the popularity of Russia started dropping. In March 2016 it was only 48 percent, and in June 2016 it dropped to 42 percent.

But a choice between only two options simplifies the picture. By tracking research for the geopolitical orientation of Belarusians, conducted by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies,<sup>20</sup> the following conclusions were discovered. During the years 2010–2013 BISS recorded a substantial increase in the number of advocates for Belarus's development outside of integration processes (from 20.4 percent in 2010 to 30.9 percent in 2013) amid a reduction in the appeal of Russia as an integration center from 30.2 percent to 23.3 percent, respectively. The number of those supporting the European choice remained stable at 17 percent. Nevertheless, 70 percent of respondents believe that a single state with Russia would be an acceptable option for Belarus on condition that the move contributes to the improvement of the country's economic situation.<sup>21</sup> Therefore there is no popular consensus over the independence of the Belarusian state. However, three years ago, 82 percent of respondents said that a union with Russia was acceptable on certain terms. Belarusians perceive integration with Russia in a peculiar way — from those who opt for the eastern vector, 49.3 percent believe that the best possible integration form is just the creation of a free trade zone with Russia, 30.4 percent would support a common economic space with Russia with no political union, and only 6.3 percent (or 2.7 percent of the total number of respondents) would like to see Belarus as part of Russia as an autonomy.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The goal of the current analysis was to uncover soft power in relations between Belarus and Russia. The description of soft power by both countries, in terms of media and propaganda, cultural influence and perception of a neighboring country in public opinion, brings us to the following conclusions.

The media sphere and propaganda in Belarus–Russia relations plays into Russians hands. A common language space makes interference by media content unhampered. A higher professionalism of Russian media, a better financial position and more aggressive rhetoric make them very powerful in the informational space of the region, and in Belarus most of all. Russian media

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<sup>20</sup> A. Artsiomenka, "PollingMemo Presidential midterm: better than yesterday, worse than the day before", 2013, accessed April 2, 2017, [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS\\_SA07\\_2013en.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_SA07_2013en.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

sets the agenda for their Belarusian audience, who trusts them more than other sources. Belarus has limited potential to influence their Russian audience. One possible channel is the use of resources by the Union State which is working on the creating a common informational space. The media working for the Union State could help to promote the Belarusian agenda but for now Belarus is suffering from information insecurity which is recognized even by Belarusian authorities.

The role of culture in the mutual soft power of Belarus and Russia is disproportion due to the influences mentioned above, not only in the context of media but this takes place in cultural fields as well. The use of Russian language and peripheral perception of Belarusian culture makes Russian content very influential in Belarus. The Belarus state supports the interconnection of two countries through such ideological concepts as the pan-Slavic origins of the Belarusian statehood and nationhood, the common past as Kyivan Rus, existence as part of the Soviet Union, and most of all participation in the Great Patriotic War is the basis for promoting the unity of both nations. The idea of the Belarusian role in the war is widely used by the authorities to prove the role of the smaller country to its neighbor. However, it is important to extend the role of a country's own cultural product and to heighten its competitive ability to be more influential using tools of soft power.

The conflict in the Ukraine started in 2014 and changed the informational landscape of the region. For every country connected with the Russian language space issues of information security became obvious. Many countries face a situation where a large share of the population supports the Russian side and circulates the ideas and attitudes transmitted by Russian news. Belarus was the country with the largest share supporting the Russian side. Belarusian authorities recognized their insecurity as well. As a result the so called "soft Belarusization" (a trend towards a gradual support of national cultural initiatives) strengthened. It is an important issue for the (un)success[fullness] of Belarusian soft power and its informational safety (or lack of), that at times Russian media works against the image of Belarus. There are several Russian media (i.e. the Information Agency Regnum) which constantly prove the idea of Belarusian unreliableness as a partner. And national discourse supported by Belarusian authorities is shown there as evidence of Belarusian unfriendliness to Russia. But it is important to understand that such an unfriendly rethoric is used mostly to get extra points in economical disagreements between the two countries. When we discuss public opinion, Russia is much more attractive for Belarusians as a scientific, technological, educational, cultural and economic center. Belarusians support an eastern direction of integration, and perceive Russia as the most friendly and helpful country. But at the same time, despite of the lack of soft power potential, Belarus is perceived as a most friendly and helpful country as well.

But this is providing soft power falls under the same rules. Due to the size of the country and its economic position, influence from potential Russian soft power is much higher. Russia is a center of attraction for Belarus. Belarusian authorities support this in terms of official ideology, the exploitation of historical myths and use of the Russian language. Belarus' soft power has much less potential to influence. But it could be useful for Belarus to set in a wider motion tools of the Union State, because we can see a positive attitude towards the country among Russian people — which could be the result of and ground for a growing impact.

## Part IV: Belarus and Neighbors





# Ukrainian–Belarusian Relations from 2014 and Beyond: Using Good Chances and Looking for Better Times

*Petro Burkovsky*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between Ukraine and Belarus were described as opportunistic and instrumental as “neither side had a coherent policy towards the other”.<sup>1</sup> Although the outcome of presidential elections in Ukraine in 2004 made Belarusian authorities anxious of the possible transfer of “color revolutions” to Minsk, in 2006 external observers admitted that both countries continued “to develop a modus vivendi in the sphere of bilateral relations regardless of disputes about internal policy”.<sup>2</sup> They were seen as natural partners in countering Russian assertiveness in economic and security spheres.

We argue that differences between Ukraine’s and Belarus’ approaches toward Russia constitute a key factor towards shaping bilateral relations before 2014 and continue to play an important role afterwards. The most evident problem that complicated cooperation has been “an authoritarian nature of the Lukashenka regime”.<sup>3</sup> Kyiv tried to play the role of mediator between Minsk and Brussels, but these efforts were frustrated by a Belarusian inability to make long-term political commitments necessary to re-set relations with the West.

On the other hand, the Belarusian leader saw that a pro-western Ukraine was barely able to get any substantial benefits from the EU for itself, let alone negotiate for a third party. In 2014 this impression was strengthened after Ukraine faced Russian aggression without any kind of significant assistance or mediation from major western powers. At the same time Ukraine struggled to find a relevant approach to Belarus, balancing short-term pragmatic cooperation with strategic

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<sup>1</sup> Olexiy Haran, Serhiy Tolstov, “The Slavic triangle. Ukraine’s relations with Russia and Belarus: a Ukrainian view”, in *A Slavic Triangle? Present and Future relations between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, edited by Arkady Moshes, Bertil Nygren, 90. Stockholm: Swedish National Defence College, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Andrzej Szeptycki, “Relations between Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus: the present conditions, status quo and perspectives”, *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, March 2006, 46, accessed April 5, 2017, [https://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=3339](https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=3339).

<sup>3</sup> Olexiy Haran, Serhiy Tolstov, “The Slavic triangle”, 87.

countermeasures to hedge itself from risks emanating from the Belarusian–Russian union.

### **Overview of Ukrainian–Belarusian Relations Before the Ukrainian–Russian War**

Two decades before 2014 Ukraine and Belarus took different approaches to the Russian challenge. Beginning at the second presidential term of Leonid Kuchma (1999–2004), the Ukrainian government sought for a chance to involve Russian state-owned and private business groups in joint industrial and transportation projects, such as manufacturing the new military transportation jet An-70, establishing a trilateral (together with Germany) gas transportation consortium, and the privatizing of industrial assets which would become either suppliers for Russian enterprises or end users of Russian raw materials and energy, including oil and gas. Consequently, Russian companies became owners of the biggest oil refineries, banks, energy companies, shipyards, mills and processing plants. Even after confrontations over territorial claims regarding Tuzla Island in the strait of Kerch, and the status of the Azov Sea waters in October–November 2003, the Ukrainian side suggested a deal for a common, mutually beneficial use of the Kerch sea channel by trade fleets from both countries.

In essence, Kyiv tried to build a model of mutual economic and trade interdependence with Russia, assuming that the diversity of interconnected private and corporate interests between Ukraine and Russia would significantly reduce a risk of future bilateral tensions. Moreover, during 2005–2013 Ukrainian leadership and the biggest influential business groups looked for opportunities to tap into international financial markets and cover their cash deficit with relatively cheap western loans. That required more openness and adherence to western political and economic demands. Russia also followed the same pattern attracting western structures (IFIs, EU institutions, foreign investors) to support a reconstruction of its post-Soviet economy.

Since both countries pursued goals of modernization and rapprochement with the West, especially developing economic ties with the EU, Ukraine pondered that introducing European standards in practical relations with Russia would gradually transform its imagined superiority in the post-Soviet space into a kind of responsible partnership with the former colonies, similar to British Commonwealth.

The only outstanding exception from this policy was the security and defence sector. Remembering Russia's disruptive behavior during the division of the Black Sea Fleet and turmoil in Crimea in 1992–1995, Ukraine chose to advance its security cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic community. The main goal was to get



a real substitute or endorsement of Budapest security assurances from the West, since the Russian proposal of joining the Collective Security Treaty Organization was seen as unacceptable. After the Russian–Georgian War in 2008 this belief became even stronger.

In contrast to Ukraine, the attitude of Belarusian authorities toward Russia was defined as a “mercantilist trading mentality”.<sup>4</sup> The pyramid of Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s personal power was to be supported by the consolidation of economic power and control over the main sources of national wealth and its redistribution. In this context, development of relations with major external powers and other neighbors was a result of calculations of expected benefits, risk aversion and cost reductions. Indeed, it was partly a kind of accommodation to the sanctions regime imposed by the West in 1999 and strengthened in 2010. At the same time stalled privatization and a concentration of microeconomic decision making within governmental bureaucratic structures suspended diversification of Belarusian foreign trade and interrupted economy restructuring. Thus, Lukashenka had few alternatives to asymmetric economic dependency on Russian energy, the market and loans.

However, the Belarusian leader used the invention of a “Union State”, a re-integration interstate project between Russia and Belarus, to persuade Moscow to pay for Minsk political loyalty. Since 1995 Russia has become the main donor of the Belarusian budget, providing subsidized oil and natural gas, which played a great role in keeping Lukashenka’s social contract with loyal voters.<sup>5</sup> However, further economic integration that required weakening his grip on the economy in the interests of Russian-backed business groups or supranational bodies of the union state was seen by Lukashenka as a direct threat to his power.

Therefore, in 2002 when the Russian government presented plans for an economic and political integration of Belarus into Russia, Lukashenka rejected it accusing “rich people in Russia who wanted to grab Belarus and criminalize the economy”.<sup>6</sup> The Kremlin responded by replacing economic rewards for a “market approach”. Thus, during the next five years, Belarus was forced to make serious concessions in economic fields, especially the energy sector, ceding control of the national gas transportation system to Gazprom in return for gas

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<sup>4</sup> Yaraslau Kryvoi, with Andrew Wilson, “From sanctions to summits: Belarus after the Ukraine crisis”, *European council on foreign relations*, May 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR\\_132\\_Belarus\\_\(May\\_5\\_-\\_version\\_2\).pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_132_Belarus_(May_5_-_version_2).pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Leonid Zlotnikov, “The Belarusian ‘economic miracle’ — illusions and reality” in *Back from the cold? The EU and Belarus in 2009*, edited by Sabine Fischer, 69. Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> RFE/RL NEWSLINE, Vol. 6, No. 169, Part II, 9 September 2002.

debts, restructuring and lower gas prices.<sup>7</sup> At the same time the Ukrainian “orange government” managed to get a discounted gas price without giving up its economic sovereignty.

The vehicle of extracting cheap resources from Russia in exchange for political loyalty seemed to be exhausted by 2008, and Belarus would have faced serious troubles during the global financial crisis and fall of oil prices should the war between Russia and Georgia have not happened. It was observed that “every time relations between Russia and the West worsened, the relative value of Belarus as an ally increased”.<sup>8</sup> Thus Lukashenka boosted the role of Belarus as a staunch ally of Russia in its confrontation with the West over the invasion of Georgia, which resembled his behavior during the Russian–US standoff over Kosovo in 1999.<sup>9</sup> He even promised to recognize the sovereignty of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia in exchange for economic support.<sup>10</sup>

Between 2008–2013, the Belarusian leader repeatedly used his trick of positioning Belarus as a Russian geopolitical bulwark in Europe, then retreated from self-imposed security obligations to Russia when they brought less than expected economic benefits. Essentially, Lukashenka’s maneuvers spoiled his relations with the Kremlin but it did not change strategic Russian interest in controlling Belarusian security and economic policies.

In addition to vassal relations in economic and security spheres, Russian and Belarusian leadership faced similar domestic challenges to their survival and responded in the same fashion. Popular dissatisfaction with the anti-crisis policies of 2008–2010 coincided with election campaigns in both countries. In Minsk and Moscow embattled personalized governments felt especially vulnerable due to a deterioration of social contracts with their citizens after the impact of the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 and economic recession. Thus the authoritarian crackdown of Belarusian leadership on political dissent during presidential elections of 2010 appeared as a prelude to the authoritarian’s turn in Russia after the Bolotnaya protests in 2011–2012. From this point of view, both Putin and Lukashenka are natural allies who, in spite of bitter feuds

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Götz, “Ukraine and Belarus: Their Energy Dependence on Russia and their Roles as Transit Countries”, in *The New Eastern Europe: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova*, edited by Daniel Hamilton and Gerhard Mangott, 163. Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Margarita Balmaceda, *Living the High Life in Minsk: Russian Energy Rents, Domestic Populism and Belarus’ Impending Crisis* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014), 120.

<sup>9</sup> “War game of Lukashenko and Medvedev,” *BBC Russian service*, 29 September 2009, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2009/09/090929\\_belarus\\_war\\_game.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2009/09/090929_belarus_war_game.shtml) (in Russian).

<sup>10</sup> “Medvedev: Lukashenko promised to recognize independence of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia,” *Forbes.ru*, 3 August 2010, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.forbes.ru/news/53891-medvedev-lukashenko-obeshchal-priznat-nezavisimost-abhazii-i-yuzhnoi-osetii>. (in Russian).

over economic issues, see their cooperation against democratic civil movements and respective western influence as a crucial element of their regimes' stability.

Furthermore, permanent unpredictable shifts in Lukashenka's personal diplomacy disrupted development of some major common goals for Ukraine and Belarus. As was admitted by Belarusian insiders, "... stable, conflict-free and even development of relations between the two countries was broken after Lukashenka was elected President. Since that time conflict and scandals have been recurrent".<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, before 2014 on several occasions Kyiv suggested that Minsk establish grand regional joint projects to increase the economic value of both countries before the EU and reduce dependency on Russian energy, such as a plan to supply cheap Ukrainian electricity to the Baltics (2008–2009) and a commercial venture of transporting Caspian or Venezuelan oil to Belarusian refineries (2010). Despite prospects of diluting Russian control over the domestic energy market in the middle term, the Belarusian president withdrew from these projects as soon as he received short-term energy subsidies from Kremlin.

The most remarkable example of the Ukrainian–Belarusian pre-war relationship was a process of hard bargaining over approval of a bilateral agreement about the regime of the state border between two countries. Despite signing an agreement in 1997, the Belarusian government suspended ratification, demanding repayment of the questionable debts of Ukrainian enterprises before their Belarusian clients. The row lasted until 2009 when Ukrainian top diplomat Petro Poroshenko proposed several acceptable schemes of compensations, which included supplies of electricity at a discounted price, which Belarus would be able to re-export to Lithuania at a higher price; reduced transit tariffs for Venezuelan oil; and European financial support for covering the lion's share of border demarcation costs.<sup>12</sup> However, the Belarusian president delayed exchange of the ratification diplomas until 2013 when Kyiv agreed to add a preferential import regime for Belarusian tractors, and enhanced cooperation in the defence industry sector to the compensation package. In addition the Ukrainian government refused to impose additional excises on imported Belarusian oil products that made up almost 75 percent of Belarusian imports to Ukraine in 2012, and 67 percent in 2013 (See Table No. 1).

To conclude, the case study of settling disputes over state borders proved that Belarus under Lukashenka's rule was not interested in long-term confidence-building measures with Ukraine (which was oriented towards the European

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<sup>11</sup> Valeriy Karbalevich, "The prospect of Slavic unity. Belarus' relations with Russia and Ukraine: a Belarusian view", in *A Slavic Triangle? Present and Future relations between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, edited by Arkady Moshes, Bertil Nygren, 102. Stockholm: Swedish National Defence College, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Kravchenko, "Negotiated border," *Weekly Mirror*, June 14, 2013, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/dogovornaya-granica-\\_.html](http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/dogovornaya-granica-_.html) (in Russian).

Union) and, therefore, he was not interested in playing the delicate game of curbing Russian influence within the Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO. On the other hand, Kyiv, even under the pro-Russian Yanukovich government, was willing to bear the costs for developing relations with Minsk beyond Moscow's control, looking to enhance its independence from the former colonial power.

## **Bilateral Relations After the EuroMaidan: an Asymmetric Political Dimension**

Despite dramatic changes in Ukraine during the popular uprising against pro-Russian president Yanukovich who attempted to turn the country into autocratic political system, the Belarusian leader quickly used the opportunity to position himself as a neutral player who had no interest in backing Russia or Ukraine in their confrontation, and was willing to continue with “business as usual” in the new post-revolutionary Ukrainian government. Although being an autocrat himself, Lukashenka grasped the idea that the people who took power in Kyiv were more anti-Russian than anti-establishment. In fact, almost all of them, including nationalists from “Svoboda”, were former representatives of the “orange” governments or parties which tried to invite Belarus into regional projects containing Russian influences, such as the Eastern Partnership.

Thus Lukashenka used every occasion to send Kyiv messages that could be interpreted only as his readiness to conduct matters independent of Russian policy, and meeting Ukrainian concerns and urgent needs. Before the presidential elections the Belarusian leader assured acting president Turchinov that Belarus would not allow its territory to be used to attack Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> In April, after the Geneva Statement<sup>14</sup> called for political reform in Ukraine to delegate more power to the different regions, Lukashenka categorically opposed the federalization of its neighbor under external pressure.<sup>15</sup> In May he dismissed referendums undertaken by pro-Russian separatists in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Turchinov: It is important that there will be no aggression against Ukraine from the Belarusian territory, *Censor.net*, 29 March 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://censor.net.ua/video-news/278368/turchinov\\_vajno\\_chno\\_s\\_territorii\\_belarusi\\_nikogda\\_ne\\_budet\\_agressii\\_na\\_territoriyu\\_ukrainy\\_video](http://censor.net.ua/video-news/278368/turchinov_vajno_chno_s_territorii_belarusi_nikogda_ne_budet_agressii_na_territoriyu_ukrainy_video) (in Russian).

<sup>14</sup> “Geneva Statement of April 17, 2014,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://mfa.gov.ua/en/page/open/id/3787>.

<sup>15</sup> Lukashenko Plays Both Sides in Ukraine Crisis, *The Moscow Times*, 22 April 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/lukashenko-plays-both-sides-in-ukraine-crisis-34492>.

<sup>16</sup> Lukashenko: referenda in Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine have no legal force, *Naviny.by*, 25 May 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/05/21/ic\\_news\\_112\\_436478](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/05/21/ic_news_112_436478) (in Russian).

Then he recognized the legitimacy of Ukraine's presidential election and attended Mr. Poroshenko's inauguration in Kyiv. And since 2014, Lukashenka has consistently endorsed Ukraine's territorial integrity, although he condemned Kyiv for the weakness that resulted in the annexation of Crimea.

The political capital that the Belarusian leader invested in at the beginning of 2014 in building bridges with Kyiv bore early fruit when the Ukrainian government chose Minsk as a platform for negotiations with Russia and separatists. In 2014 the Belarusian capital became an Eastern European diplomatic hub for OSCE mediation missions, and the following year it hosted negotiations between Russian, Ukrainian, German, and French leaders which resulted in the Minsk-2 agreements. Careful distancing from Russian aggression against Ukraine is said to have been helpful for Lukashenka to facilitate the suspension of EU sanctions in 2016.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time the Belarusian president sought to compartmentalize rapprochement with the West, due to his role in negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, from policy choices toward a pro-western and more democratic Ukraine. For instance, on March 25, 2014 during an officially sanctioned annual march in Minsk celebrating the anniversary of the formation of the short-lived Belarusian Popular Republic, when demonstrators waved Ukrainian flags and held anti-Russian banners the police were ordered to detain opposition activists.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, President Lukashenka in his speeches to various domestic audiences used to refer to a vaguely defined "threat" to the security of Belarus, originating from Ukraine. For example, he insisted on a "lock" of the state border<sup>19</sup> against the infiltration of "armed thugs", who trained and participated in actions in eastern Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, due to reports, Belarusian law enforcement agencies formally warned citizens who fought alongside separatists, while persecuting and detaining volunteers who served in the Ukrainian army

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<sup>17</sup> Andrey Skriba, "On strategic cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine: benefits and challenges," *Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies*, SA #02/2016RU, (June 6, 2016): 17, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS\\_SA02\\_2016ru.pdf](http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_SA02_2016ru.pdf) (in Russian).

<sup>18</sup> "Amid Crisis, Belarus Re-examines its Political and Security Situation," *Stratfor*, Marshall Center Research Library, 1 August 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.stratfor-com.ezproxy.members.marshallcenter.org/analysis/amid-crisis-belarus-re-examines-its-political-and-security-situation>.

<sup>19</sup> "Lukashenko is going to build the wall on the border with Ukraine," *Weekly Mirror*, 25 September 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://zn.ua/WORLD/lukashenko-sobiraetsya-stroit-stenu-na-granice-s-ukrainoy-mysh-ne-proskochit-189897\\_.html](http://zn.ua/WORLD/lukashenko-sobiraetsya-stroit-stenu-na-granice-s-ukrainoy-mysh-ne-proskochit-189897_.html).

<sup>20</sup> "Lukashenko asked Ukraine not to supply armed men in Belarus," *Interfax*, 11 October 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.interfax.ru/world/472604> (in Russian).

or National Guard battalions. It is hard to imagine that such a selective approach was not sanctioned by a higher authority.<sup>21</sup>

Lukashenka also never questioned or defected from formal, legally binding obligations to Russia. Twice in 2014 and 2016 Belarus voted against UN resolutions that condemned the Russian annexation of Crimea, citing its commitment to coordinate diplomacy in international organizations with Russia within the framework of the union state.<sup>22</sup> Such a bureaucratic excuse paid a bad service to Belarus in March 2016 when it automatically, upon Russian request, named persona non grata Iryna Herashchenko as a VIP participant of talks in the Trilateral contact group and as a personal representative of President Poroshenko in Donbas.<sup>23</sup>

The latest diplomatic trouble happened in March 2017 when the Belarusian president directly pointed to Ukraine as a safe haven for extremists who tried to provoke civil unrest using protests of “non-idlers”.<sup>24</sup> A war of rhetoric was supported by questionable detention and expulsions of Ukrainian journalists and civil rights advocates on the eve of the protests, broadcasting a controversial pseudo-documentary about Ukrainian interest in destabilizing Belarus by staging violent protests and preparing a coup d'état.<sup>25</sup> Although it seemed to be defused after conversation between presidents, it looks like the regime is preparing alternative tracks for freezing relations, as well as a plausible interpretation of a new policy toward Ukraine for ordinary citizens, playing with their fears and prejudices, which we will look at further.

In our opinion, the Belarusian establishment understands that Ukraine, struggling with the Russian aggression in Donbas, will not risk any kind of adventure against that neighbor/member state of CSTO and give the Kremlin legal pretext for military invasion in “self-defence” or “coercion to peace”. However, accusations that Ukraine tolerates the transfer of elements of “hybrid war” to Belarus are reminiscent of Minsk concerns about the advent of the “color revolution”

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<sup>21</sup> Andrzej Poczobut, “Mińsk: Będą kary za Donbas,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 20 November 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75399,19216899,msk-beda-kary-za-donbas.html> (in Polish).

<sup>22</sup> Valeriy Kravchenko, “On the way to Moscow,” *Weekly Mirror*, 26 December 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://gazeta.zn.ua/international/po-doroge-v-moskvu\\_.html](http://gazeta.zn.ua/international/po-doroge-v-moskvu_.html) (in Russian).

<sup>23</sup> Ukraine parliament vice-speaker taken off Belarus entry ‘black list,’ *Euroradio*, 1 June 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://euroradio.fm/en/vice-speaker-ukraine-parliament-taken-belarus-entry-black-list>.

<sup>24</sup> “Armed outlaws, preparing provocations, were detained in Belarus,” *BelTA*, 21 March 2017, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.belta.by/president/view/v-belarusi-zaderzhali-gotovivshih-provokatsiju-s-oruzhiem-boevikov-238543-2017/> (in Russian).

<sup>25</sup> Anton Khodasevich, “Lukashenko prepares barrier for Maidan,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 3 March 2017, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://www.ng.ru/cis/2017-03-09/7\\_6945\\_belarus.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2017-03-09/7_6945_belarus.html) (in Russian).

twelve years ago. It could serve the same political ends: closing the ranks of the elites, tired in leadership and exhausted from the recession, preparing purges of security and intelligence officers with questionable or dual loyalty, splitting and channeling public dissatisfaction to “real” threats or causes of hardships, and even warning Russia that too much pressure or intrigues against “*batska*” may fuel nationalistic sentiments and result in an undesirable surprise of a pro-western government in Minsk. What can be said for sure is that for Ukraine, *ceteris paribus*, open, transparent and consistent political dialogue with Belarus remains remote for the future.

It seems that in building relationship with Belarus the new Ukrainian authorities share a view that “Belarus remains a society largely without politics, even at the elite level”.<sup>26</sup> Thus the task to achieve concrete, short-term goals in relations with such a counterpart appears to be more attractive and productive. Moreover, being an owner of a huge financial and industrial corporation, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko transfers his business administration skills into the sphere of foreign policy. This resembles Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s style of ruling Belarus like one big household. In other words, the leaders of both countries speak the same language: of profit-seeking and business-style reciprocity. This helped them find solutions for several different, difficult situations that overshadowed bilateral relations, like trade disputes, the particular incident when the “Belavia” plane was apprehended,<sup>27</sup> or the expulsion of prominent Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan from Minsk.<sup>28</sup>

Despite evident shortcomings and a lack of strategic perspective regarding Ukrainian policy, it was relevant to the turbulence and uncertainty of a major crisis situation. Poroshenko’s flexibility and interconnectedness with numerous stakeholders made it easier to exchange ideas with the Belarusian and approve quick decisions or agree to tradeoffs. It proved especially efficient in 2014–2015 when subtle personal diplomacy between Kyiv and Minsk helped slow down Russian aggression.

The real disadvantage of such an approach was that in certain situations boundaries between Ukraine’s national interests and the private priorities of Poroshenko were blurred. For instance, Ukrainian authorities made virtually no

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<sup>26</sup> Yaraslau Kryvoi, with Andrew Wilson, “From sanctions to summits: Belarus after the Ukraine crisis”, *European council on foreign relations*, May 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR\\_132\\_Belarus\\_\(May\\_5\\_-\\_version\\_2\).pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_132_Belarus_(May_5_-_version_2).pdf).

<sup>27</sup> “Ukrainian president apologizes to Lukashenko for Belavia aircraft incident,” *Kyiv Post*, 11 November 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/ukrainian-president-apologizes-lukashenko-belavia-aircraft-incident.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Vitaliy Portnikov, “Why was a renowned Ukrainian writer detained in Belarus?,” *RFE/RL*, 12 February 2017, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/02/12/why-was-a-renowned-ukrainian-writer-detained-in-belarus/#arvlbdata>.

effort to diversify gasoline imports from Belarus or propose tolling schemes of oil refinement to hedge both sides from Russian sabotage. Furthermore, both national leaders face a number of challenges to their personalized diplomacy. Poroshenko's policy choices toward Belarus have been seriously constrained by public opinion, active organizations of civil society, and political opposition.

In the first half of 2014 it was true that 85 percent of Ukrainians had a good attitude toward Belarus<sup>29</sup> with 62 percent having a good opinion about president Lukashenka, which was better result than that of US president Barack Obama or German chancellor Angela Merkel.<sup>30</sup> After two years of war the number of Ukrainians having a "warm attitude" toward Belarus reduced to 50 percent.<sup>31</sup> We expect that in the near future popular attitudes toward Belarus would depend on Lukashenka's decisions to support or stand against Russian foreign policy, especially, in the defence and security sector. Moreover, a downward trend might prevail if the Belarus government continues to suppress popular dissent, and accuse Ukraine in supporting Belarusian radical nationalists and be submissive to Russian demands on security matters, such as allowing Russian troops to threaten Ukraine from the north.

Although Lukashenka has no rivals to question his policy, he cannot ignore the general impression his people have about the situation in Ukraine. The same comparative survey in 2014 showed the majority of Belarusians (57 percent) viewed Ukraine favorably<sup>32</sup>, while 75 percent of Belarusians oppose any involvement on either side of their country with the war in Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> As the Ukrainian–Russian conflict unfolded, public opinion in Belarus experienced little change. If in June 2014 62.2 percent of Belarusians thought that the annexation of Crimea was "the return of Russia of Russian lands, the restoration of historical justice", then in March 2016 the same opinion dropped to 57.8 percent (the number of respondents who agreed it was an annexation remained stable at 27 percent).<sup>34</sup> Moreover, while in June

<sup>29</sup> Opinion poll, Ukraine, Russia and Belarus: mutual evaluation of the people, *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology*, 17 June 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, [www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=news&id=346](http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=news&id=346).

<sup>30</sup> Opinion poll, Ukrainians' attitudes toward world leaders, *Sociologic Group Rating*, 23 September 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/otnoshenie\\_ukraincev\\_k\\_mirovym\\_lideram.html](http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/otnoshenie_ukraincev_k_mirovym_lideram.html) (in Ukrainian).

<sup>31</sup> Opinion poll funded by the International Republican Institute, *Sociologic Group Rating*, 8 July 2016, [http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/opros\\_iri\\_demonstriruet\\_skepticizm\\_ukraincev\\_s\\_problekami\\_nadezhdy.html](http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/opros_iri_demonstriruet_skepticizm_ukraincev_s_problekami_nadezhdy.html) (in Ukrainian).

<sup>32</sup> Opinion poll, KIIS.

<sup>33</sup> Opinion poll, Ukrainian Compass for Geopolitical orientations of Belarus, *Independent Institute for social, economic and political studies*, 4 September 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.old.iiseps.org/09-14-04.html> (in Russian).

<sup>34</sup> Opinion poll, March 2016: Conflict in Ukraine: a Russian view from Belarusian eyes, *Independent Institute for social, economic and political studies*, 12 March 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4267&lang=en>.



2014 65.5 percent considered the situation in Donetsk and Luhansk as a “popular protest against illegitimate power” (only 23 percent agreed it was a Russian-backed rebellion),<sup>35</sup> in March 2016 75 percent thought Ukraine was in state of civil war. Still, it is important to acknowledge that Belarusians are roughly divided about the Russian role in the conflict: 44 percent of respondents agree there has been a war between Russia and Ukraine while 46 percent object to such a statement.<sup>36</sup>

There is evidence that this ambiguity in Belarusian public opinion can be explained by the influence of Russian media and propaganda.<sup>37</sup> However, we argue it is also a product of mainstream political discourse formulated, promoted and controlled by Lukashenka himself. For instance, in 2011 a prominent Russian journalist of Belarusian origin, Pavel Sheremet, eloquently described this problem: “Belarusian authorities quite intentionally cultivated very specific attitude toward Ukraine. For many years Belarusian propaganda exploited image of poor neighboring country as a bad example of reforms. It was acceptable to portray Ukrainians as impoverished people, compared to Belarusians, who also suffer from absence of law and order. The orange revolution only added darker shades to this negative image”.<sup>38</sup> After 2014 Belarusian leadership continued this brainwashing of the population, adding the new narrative of a Slavic neighbor on the brink of economic and security collapse. The challenge of gradual alienation between societies and a growing misperception is amplified by the latest trends in movements of people between two countries.

According to the Ukrainian national statistics (see Table No. 1), in 2006–2016 the migration of people from Belarus to Ukraine was less intensive than from other former Soviet republics of Caucasian and Central Asian regions or such remote countries like Israel. Noteworthy migration data for the period 2000–2008 shows a positive net migration result for Belarus. However, in 2009–2016, which coincide with meagre economic growth and recession in both countries, net migration became negative for Belarus. On the one hand, few Ukrainians left for Belarus; on the other, more Belarusians left for Ukraine than returned back.

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<sup>35</sup> Opinion poll, Is propaganda so powerful?, *Independent Institute for social, economic and political studies*, June, 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://old.iiseps.org/06-14-08.html> (in Russian).

<sup>36</sup> Opinion poll, March 2016: Conflict in Ukraine: a Russian view from Belarusian eyes, *Independent Institute for social, economic and political studies*, 12 March 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4267&lang=en>.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Wilson, “Belarus: from a Social Contract to a Security Contract?”, (paper presented at the Conference ‘Belarusian Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’ and the 2016 London Lecture on Belarusian Studies, London, March 24, 2016), accessed April 5, 2017, <http://belarusjournal.com/article/belarus-social-contract-security-contract-274>.

<sup>38</sup> Institute of world policy, “Ukraine’s soft power in Belarus,” *Glavcom*, 26 October 2011, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://glavcom.ua/publications/115706-%C2%ABm%E2%80%99jaka-sila%C2%BB-ukrajini-v-bilorusi.html> (in Ukrainian).

These assumptions are also supported by data provided by the Border Guards Service of Ukraine, about temporary visits of Belarusians to Ukraine and Ukrainians to Belarus (see Table No. 2). As a destination country for temporary visits of Ukrainians, Belarus was surpassed by Russia, Poland, Moldova, and Hungary. Respectfully, before the conflict Ukraine as a destination country for Belarusians was also yielding only to Russia and Poland. In 2014–2016 travel by Belarusians to Ukraine fell sharply by 52 percent, the lowest point in ten years, while Ukrainian visits declined to the level of 2009. The most striking setbacks were experienced by business and cultural exchanges between two countries.

To sum up, personal contacts between citizens of Ukraine and Belarus should be considered an important variable that influences and shapes attitudes and expectations of the two neighboring nations toward each other. We can also assume a decline of communications between people about economic and cultural issues undermines the long-term interest and mutual understanding of two close Slavic nations. If it diminishes, the people of both countries would seek building special bilateral relations with Russians and using Russian cultural references about each other. For instance, one of the Ukrainian key negotiators Yevhen Marchuk already warned that Russian servicemen in Belarus discreetly disseminate negative information about Ukraine and Ukrainians among Belarusians in the areas of their stationing.<sup>39</sup>

Naturally, a civil dimension of bilateral political ties suffered from a decrease of movement in people between the two countries since 2014. In means traditional stereotypes inherited from Soviet times when such contacts were more intensive and various would be substituted mostly by images and impressions crafted by mainstream mass media and popular culture. In the case of Belarus there would be a domination of Russian “infotainment”, while in Ukraine the Belarusian issue would be diluted and marginalized within narratives about the Russian threat.

### **Relations after the Annexation of Crimea: Security Dimension**

Having experienced the hybrid aggression of Russia that occupied Crimea and certain districts of Donbas, Ukraine began to closely examine closely what the Kremlin’s next move might be. In this analysis Belarus with its long border and long history of special relations with its aggressor possesses a prominent place.

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<sup>39</sup> Yevhen Marchuk: Russian troops are trying to change Belarusian public opinion about Ukraine to a negative one,” *Glavcom*, 21 August 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://glavcom.ua/news/jevgen-marchuk-rosiyski-viyskovi-v-bilorusi-namagayutsya-zminiti-na-negativnುದumku-miscevih-zhiteliv-pro-ukrajinu-368264.html> (in Ukrainian).

The renewed National Security Strategy of Ukraine<sup>40</sup> and Military Doctrine of Ukraine<sup>41</sup> include a remarkable definition of a major threat — the Russian expansionist aggressive policy. These documents do not mention any other members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Organization itself. This is not a casual omission, since Kyiv doesn't see any other country than Russia's interest to seize Ukrainian territory or impose restrictions on his sovereignty or provoke another regime change. However, military doctrine includes several points that are relevant for the evaluation of security threats originating from Belarus. There is growing unrest in neighboring countries, provoked by external powers; intensive militarization in the region, including an increased foreign military presence in neighboring countries; and an incomplete demarcation of the state border with Belarus and Moldova.

Therefore we can assume that in 2015 Ukraine was concerned about three major scenarios of possible crisis involving Belarus. First of all, a violent regime change or palace coup backed by Russia that removes Lukashenka and installs Kremlin puppets with strong anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western sentiments. Secondly, rapid reinforcement of Russian troops in Belarus that leaves Ukraine vulnerable to military pressure and coercion into a humiliating peace in Donbas. Thirdly, Russian special operations on the border with Belarus that may range from provoking unrest among a dissatisfied population in the northern regions of Ukraine, to sabotaging critical infrastructure objects, to damaging relations between Kyiv and Minsk by means of terrorist acts against people.

The fact that Belarus had no suspicious plans for Ukraine was supported by a SIPRI analysis.<sup>42</sup> It observed that in 2015 Minsk reduced its defence budget by 34 percent, compared with 2014. Austerity measures were forced by the recession and the government's plan to cover the deficit of social security payments. However, the Ukrainian perception of threats connected with Belarus may soon undergo a substantial review. Although Belarusian leadership underlines his sheer interest in a peaceful co-existence with Ukraine, there were serious messages Kyiv couldn't neglect.

The first warning happened in March 2014, when Russian and Belarusian air forces and air defence systems conducted large-scale exercises close to the border of Belarus and Ukraine, rehearsing attacks against Ukrainian military

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<sup>40</sup> National Security Strategy of Ukraine, *Official web-site of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine*, adopted on 26 May 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/287/2015> (in Ukrainian).

<sup>41</sup> Military Doctrine of Ukraine, *Official web-site of President of Ukraine*, adopted on 26 September 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.president.gov.ua/documents/5552015-19443> (in Ukrainian).

<sup>42</sup> Andrzej Poczobut, "Łukaszenka nie boi się Rosji," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 20 April 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75399,19950296,lukaszenka-nie-boi-sie-rosji.html>.

installations.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Belarus allowed the stationing of six Russian SU-27 fighter planes and three Russian transport aircraft, in addition to a squadron of Russian fighter planes, at a base near Baranovichi.

After the first Minsk agreements were achieved in September 2014, in an interview with *Euronews*, the Belarusian leader suddenly suggested he was ready to send his armed forces as “peacekeepers” to separate conflicting parties if necessary.<sup>44</sup> He repeated this idea in February 2015, when Russian troops continued an offensive against a Ukrainian stronghold in Debaltseve.<sup>45</sup> This idea did not meet with sympathy in Ukraine for two reasons: Belarusian armed forces could have been used as a disguise for the legal presence of Russian forces in Donbas, and separatists would be recognized as equal, legitimate participants of the peace making process.

In December 2014, when Russian troops started to infiltrate Donbas in order to support the separatists’ offensive, Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu launched talks with Belarusian colleague, Andrei Ravkov, to build up Russian air force capabilities in the country.<sup>46</sup> Nine months later during a meeting with Lukashenko in Sochi, Russian President Putin announced that he had agreed to a government proposal to sign a deal for the first full-scale base in Belarus since Soviet times and ordered defense and foreign ministry officials to start talks.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Minister Shoigu confirmed that the issue of the new base was just an element of a major plan to establish a common military structure for the union state of Russia and Belarus in 2018 as a response to NATO activity in the region.<sup>48</sup> The preparation for this strategic merger would be tested during the military training exercise *Zapad 2017*.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Yes and no,” *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 1 April 2014, Marshall Center Research Library, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://country.eiu.com.ezproxy.members.marshallcenter.org/article.aspx?articleid=951684279>.

<sup>44</sup> “Lukashenko claims “was ready to send” Ukrainian peacekeeping force but was rebuffed in exclusive interview,” *Euronews*, October 3, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Meeting with EBRD President Suma Chakrabarti, *The official internet-portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus*, 18 February 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/en/news\\_en/view/meeting-with-ebrd-president-suma-chakrabarti-10848/](http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/meeting-with-ebrd-president-suma-chakrabarti-10848/).

<sup>46</sup> “Russia Plans to Deliver New Aircraft to Belarus Air Base: Defense Minister,” *Sputnik*, 23 December 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201412231016140340/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Putin gives go-ahead to Belarus airbase plan,” *Reuters*, 19 September 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-belarus-airbase-idUSKCN0RJ0K720150919>.

<sup>48</sup> “Belarus, Russia to create ‘military organization’ for armed defense of Union State — Shoigu,” *Belsat*, 21 October 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://belsat.eu/en/news/belarus-russia-to-create-joint-military-organization-for-armed-defense-of-union-state-shoigu/>.

<sup>49</sup> “Russia, Belarus to Conduct Combined Military Drills in 2017,” *Sputnik*, 21 October 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201510211028865255-russia-belarus-drills-2017/>.

Although establishing the air base was delayed by president Lukashenka due to a fresh trade row over oil and gas prices, developments in security and defence cooperation between Belarus and Russia were reflected in the new edition of the Belarusian military doctrine, adopted by law in July 2016.<sup>50</sup> Among the direct military threats it defines danger to Belarusians living abroad; establishment and operation of special military units for conducting disruptive information warfare; and recruitment and training of illegal armed forces aimed at a destabilization of the country. In reacting to these and others threats Belarus reserves the right to appeal to the CSTO for military aid. Moreover, the new doctrine envisages the establishment of a common defence space within the union state with Russia, common armed forces and common measures of threat prevention. Additionally, in December 2016, the Belarusian president signed an approval for Russian Special Forces to enter the country and participate in joint counterterrorism operations from 2017.<sup>51</sup>

Provisions of the new military doctrine and strengthening the Russian military presence in Belarus were met by Ukrainian independent and governmental security experts with serious concern. It was argued that an integration of military structures between Belarus and Russia may force Ukraine to look for another neutral country to continue negotiations about a peace resolution in Donbas.<sup>52</sup> This impression only became stronger when President Lukashenka mentioned Ukraine as a source of paramilitary extremist groups that wanted to destabilize the country.<sup>53</sup> He repeated the same messages that Russian propagandists disseminated in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine in March–April 2014 before the Kremlin sent Special Forces and mercenaries to seize Ukrainian cities.

In this context it should be remembered that after the Minsk-2 agreements President Lukashenka called The United States responsible for the war in Ukraine, echoing the Kremlin about a western-funded unconstitutional coup

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<sup>50</sup> Belarusian military doctrine, *Military information portal of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus*, 20 June 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://www.mil.by/ru/military\\_policy/doktrina/](http://www.mil.by/ru/military_policy/doktrina/) (in Russian).

<sup>51</sup> “Belarus KGB may open doors to Russian green men? (document),” *Belsat*, 12 December 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://belsat.eu/en/news/tsi-legalizuyuts-u-belarusi-zyalyonyh-chalavechkau-merkavanne-ekspertau/>.

<sup>52</sup> Olena Snihyr, “Relatively independent neighbor,” *Weekly Mirror*, 16 December 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://gazeta.dt.ua/international/umovno-nezalezhniy-susid-viyskove-spivro-bitnictvo-bilorusi-ta-rosiyi-zagrozhuye-bezpeci-ukrayini-\\_.html](http://gazeta.dt.ua/international/umovno-nezalezhniy-susid-viyskove-spivro-bitnictvo-bilorusi-ta-rosiyi-zagrozhuye-bezpeci-ukrayini-_.html) (in Ukrainian).

<sup>53</sup> “Militants about to stage armed provocation apprehended in Belarus,” *BelTA*, 21 March 2017, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://eng.belta.by/president/view/militants-about-to-stage-armed-provocation-apprehended-in-belarus-99643-2017/>.

and consequent civil war in Donbas.<sup>54</sup> Thus Ukraine is going to follow the *Zapad 2017* and *Slavic brotherhood 2017* drills very closely to understand whether they are aimed against its security.

The previous *Zapad 2013*, conducted for six days at smaller scale, alerted the Baltics and Poland. Latvian Minister of Defence Artis Pabriks argued the exercises looked more like a demonstration of force than of defensive capability, while Estonian Minister of Defence Urmas Reinsalu suggested the exercises scenario seemed to be based on operations against NATO members and warned that holding such large-scale military exercises without inviting observers from neighbouring countries could undermine regional stability.<sup>55</sup> In fact, President Lukashenka ordered an invite to observers from NATO, or other interested states, to the country to mitigate their concerns.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, it will be very indicative whether Belarus manages to keep her promise and demonstrate transparency, whereas Russia is clearly intended to continue confrontation with the West. It might be another Lukashenka maneuver of spoiling the Kremlin's plans in response to continued bickering over energy subsidies. If this is true, then Russia has few options: either cancel drills and add more economic sanctions against a restive ally, or make a short-term exceptional agreement to bail out with the strong legal binding provided to the Yanukovich government in 2013. In the former case Kyiv must be ready to provide all possible means of political and economic support to Minsk to destroy the Russian blockade and undermine Russian influence in the region. In other scenario, Ukraine will look for strong evidence that Minsk is collaborating with Moscow, preparing aggressive actions against them. Consequently, it would not hesitate to impose high political and economic costs on Belarus and arrange a relevant security and defence response.

## **Bilateral Economic Relations: Tackling the Impact of War and Recession**

Trade and joint economic projects have always been the most promising and problematic facet for Ukrainian–Belarus relations. Despite profound differences in the internal structure of the economies, and strategic choices of integration

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<sup>54</sup> “Lukashenko vozlozhil otvetstvennost’ na SSHA za situatsiiu v Donbasse”, *Zn.ua*, 29 April 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://zn.ua/WORLD/lukashenko-vozlozhil-otvetstvennost-na-ssha-za-situaciyu-v-donbasse-174701\\_.html](http://zn.ua/WORLD/lukashenko-vozlozhil-otvetstvennost-na-ssha-za-situaciyu-v-donbasse-174701_.html).

<sup>55</sup> “Belarus–Russia manoeuvres perturb neighbours,” *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 8 October 2013, Marshall Center Research Library, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://country.eiu.com.ezproxy.members.marshallcenter.org/article.aspx?articleid=881038872>.

<sup>56</sup> “Lukashenko urges maximum transparency during West 2017 army exercise”, *BelTA*, 20 March 2017, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-urges-maximum-transparency-during-west-2017-army-exercise-99600-2017/>.

to geopolitically competitive regional trade blocs (EU and EEU), Ukraine and Belarus followed similar policy patterns.

In essence, both countries see themselves as a natural bridge between Europe and Eurasia. Located between the Baltic and northern European countries and the Black Sea neighborhood of the Middle East, Kyiv and Minsk consider their chances of becoming hubs for delivering Caspian and Persian Gulf oil to domestic and European markets. Additionally, since 2013 Ukraine<sup>57</sup> and Belarus<sup>58</sup> have been positioning themselves as important elements of the Great Silk Road between China and the EU.

At the same time Ukraine and Belarus share several identical weaknesses and certain specific obstacles that emerged in the last three years impeded economic cooperation. First of all, during 2014–2016 both countries responded to the dramatic worsening of market conditions with monetary administrative measures and trade protectionism. First of all, there were great concerns on the Ukrainian side about administrative measures that the Belarusian government implemented in order to reduce imports from Ukraine and increase the net income of bilateral trade. According to Ukrainian diplomats, Belarus limited access to hard currency for importers that deliver finished products from Ukraine; also, an administrative devaluation of the Belarusian ruble made home producers artificially more competitive than interested Ukrainian importers. This practice was used for the first time in 2011, then repeated in 2015.<sup>59</sup> To avoid paying hard currency for Ukrainian imports the Belarusian government also suggested using hryvnia in bilateral trade interactions.<sup>60</sup> However, this idea did not find support in Kyiv because it would result in the widening of trade deficit with Minsk. On the other hand, a currency swap agreement between national banks that might take place in such cases was never considered since the Belarusian leader demanded that even Russia must pay dollars or euros for Belarusian products.<sup>61</sup>

While Belarus used EEU regulations to justify its actions against Ukrainian exporters, Ukraine, a WTO member, disregarded free trade rules when it was

<sup>57</sup> “Foreign Policy Audit: Ukraine-China,” Institute of World Policy, 12 October 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://iwp.org.ua/eng/public/2144.html> (in Ukrainian).

<sup>58</sup> “Belarus throws its weight behind Belt and Road,” *China Daily*, 25 January 2017, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/cn\\_eu/2017-01/25/content\\_28051522.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/cn_eu/2017-01/25/content_28051522.htm).

<sup>59</sup> “Ukraine–Belarus: the Customs Union will not minor factor..” *UNIAN*, 14 December 2012, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://economics.unian.ua/industry/608722-ukrajina-i-bilorus-mit-niy-soyuz-ne-zalishitsya-nepomichenim.html> (in Ukrainian).

<sup>60</sup> “Belarus, Ukraine to expand use of hryvnia in bilateral trade,” *BelTA*, 27 July 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://eng.belta.by/economics/view/belarus-ukraine-to-expand-use-of-hryvnia-in-bilateral-trade-83770-2015>.

<sup>61</sup> “Belarus’s Lukashenko demands that trade with Russia be in dollars, euros,” *Reuters*, 18 December 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/russia-crisis-belarus-idUSL6N0U21C520141218>.

necessary to bargain with non-member Belarus. Such an egoistic policy brought limited economic effects for both countries, but undermined mutual trust. For instance, in 2014 Belarus introduced special custom licenses on Ukrainian beer, confectionery, potatoes, and flour-milling products that virtually blocked their import to the country. Ukraine swiftly enacted restrictive duties on all major Belarusian goods except petroleum products. The row was quickly resolved as both governments agreed to suspend protectionist measures. In 2015 Minsk adopted a special sanitary expertise for all imported agricultural goods due to pressure from the Russian Federation. However, according to a Ukrainian ministry of agricultural policy, it mostly affected those Ukrainian producers that competed with Belarusian manufacturers. Again, in 2016 Kyiv reacted with a resuming of special restrictive duties on Belarusian imports, which after a new round of negotiations and a temporary agreement were suspended.<sup>62</sup> At the same time trade statistics prove that Russian suppliers of grain and ferrous pipes, due to the impact of regulations from the EEU, have expelled Ukrainian competitors from the Belarusian market. Also, since 2015 Russian electricity substituted Ukrainian supplies (See Table No. 1). Thus it can be concluded that Belarus is looking forward to substituting Ukrainian industrial imports with its own production while reserving for Ukraine a role as a raw materials supplier. In the mid-term perspective it may backfire on Belarus when it decides to join the WTO and start accession trade talks with Ukraine.

There were a number of frustrating situations that showed how Kyiv and Minsk failed to implement mutual obligations. In 2014 Ukraine stopped fulfilling its contracts for electricity exports<sup>63</sup> due to an emergency situation with the domestic electricity market after separatists seized coal mines and stopped deliveries to Ukrainian power stations. In 2015 when Ukraine and Lithuania approached Belarus with a proposal to allow the use of free volumes along the Belarusian gas transportation network to transit natural gas from the Klaipeda terminal to Ukraine,<sup>64</sup> Minsk turned a blind eye to this request, referring to its dependency on Gazprom. In the summer of 2016 Belarus suspended the shipment of oil products to Ukrainian companies after Russia drastically cut off crude oil flow by 40 percent.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> “Ukraine responded to Belarus’ restrictions on imports from Ukraine with special duties for Belarus”, *Belarus in focus*, 22 April 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://belarusinfocus.info/economy-2/ukraine-responded-belarus-restrictions-imports-ukraine-special-duties-belarus>.

<sup>63</sup> “Ukraine from October 1 stops electricity exports to Belarus”, *Interfax-Ukraine*, 9 October 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/economic/227868.html>.

<sup>64</sup> “Kyiv asks Minsk to study possibility of gas transit from Lithuania”, *Interfax-Ukraine*, 24 July 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/economic/279981.html>.

<sup>65</sup> “Russia reminds wayward ally Belarus of its economic muscle”, *Reuters*, 7 July 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-belarus-idUSKCN0ZN0E3>.



**Table No. 1: Bilateral trade 2003–2016, million USD**

	<i>Export to Ukraine</i>	<i>Import from Ukraine</i>	<i>Balance for Belarus</i>
2003	343,5 (343,6)	362,1 (340,4)	-18,6
2004	545	550,8	-5,8
2005	907,8 (939,8)	893,9 (891,1)	13,9
2006	1234 (1255)	1223 (1222,7)	11
2007	1469,8 (1445,4)	1534,3 (1561,5)	-64,5
2008	2777,9 (2809,6)	2115,1 (2105,6)	662,8
2009	1691,5 (1692,8)	1290 (1258,9)	401,5
2010	2562,3 (2567,6)	1877,6 (1899,2)	684,7
2011	4159,8	2035,0	2124,8
2012	5557,2	2309,5	3247,7
2013	4195,8	2053,5	2142,3
2014	4063,7	1688,9	2374,8
2015	2514,9	951,5	1563,4
2016	2777,2	903,3	1873,9

Source: Statistics Committee of CIS

Moreover, Ukrainian authorities before and after Euromaidan showed more interest in making deals with Russian business than looking for more secure alternatives. For instance, at the beginning of 2014 imports of Belarusian gasoline were suspended by Ukrainian customs services that, allegedly, acted in favor of a business group close to President Yanukovich which imported Russian fuel.<sup>66</sup> Despite the war with Russia, the same was the case in 2015–2016. According to a Ukrainian expert in the energy market, Serhiy Kuyun, the Russian oil company “Rosneft”, controlled by one of Putin’s closest associates, Ihor Sechin, benefitted from cuts in delivery of Russian oil to Belarus and took over a substantial part of Ukraine’s domestic fuel market from Belarusian importers.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Reuter’s sources confirmed that in 2014–2016 Russian energy companies Sibur (controlled by Putin’s son-in-law Kirill Shamalov), Rosneft and Gazpromneft, superseded Belarusian and Kazakh producers of liquefied petroleum gas.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile the Belarusian leader withdrew his initial plans to develop alternative economic

<sup>66</sup> “Customs Service blocked petroleum delivery from Romania, Belarus,” *Ekonomichna Pravda*, 13 February 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.epravda.com.ua/news/2014/02/13/419842/> (in Ukrainian).

<sup>67</sup> Serhiy Kuyun, “Back to Russia, Face to Ukraine,” *Weekly Mirror*, 3 March 2017, accessed April 5, 2017, [http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/k-moskve-zadom-k-kievu-peredom-\\_.html](http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/k-moskve-zadom-k-kievu-peredom-_.html) (in Russian).

<sup>68</sup> “Russia ramps up motor fuel sales to Ukraine, regardless of conflict,” *Reuters*, 8 June 2015, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-russia-lpg-idUSL5N0-YR1CP20150608>.

relations and proposed to even quit the EEU after he received expected subsidies and stabilization loans throughout 2014–2016.

At the same time there were examples of constructive and mutually beneficial cooperation between countries that might develop into a long-term partnership. The key area for such cooperation is energy, since it possesses a 60–75 percent share of bilateral trade. It is worth mentioning that the Belarusian leader expressed his readiness to increase supplies of diesel fuel in August 2014 and fulfilled this in spite of the fact the deliveries could be used for logistics support of Ukrainian military action in Donbas. In 2016 Ukraine suggested tolling deliveries of oil to Belarusian refineries to substitute the deficit of Russian supplies. Moreover, Kyiv is ready to discuss trilateral cooperation aimed at transporting Azeri oil to Belarus. It is also possible to use Ukrainian underground gas storages for keeping strategic reserves of gas for Belarusian consumption in winter. Moreover, due to a liberalization of the domestic gas market and increasing gas extraction, Ukraine may offer alternative gas supplies for a reasonable price. However, all these projects depend not only on the state of Belarusian–Russian relations, but also on Minsk’s ability to begin gradual but real market reforms.

## Conclusion

Conflict with Russia forced Ukraine to begin a profound re-evaluation of ties with almost all those countries it once defined as “strategic partners”. According to the parliamentary resolution “On Major Directions of Ukrainian Foreign Policy” (active from 1993–2010), Belarus was “by default” regarded as a “neighboring state — strategic partner”.<sup>69</sup> However, for the first two decades of independent co-existence, Minsk and Ukraine looked at each other through the prism of each other’s relations with Russia.

After Euromaidan and the Russian intervention in Crimea and Donbas, Ukrainian elites and society felt disoriented about the nature of true partnership, and antagonism in foreign relations. Hybrid war was accompanied by hybrid diplomacy, and ambiguous economic relations promised short-term benefits connected to mid-term threats and long-term vulnerability. In this context, relations with Belarus, a state-member of a union state with Russia, an autocratic regime and friendly Slavic nation, were considered to include risks and opportunities.

Struggling against military aggression, Ukrainian governments had to limit their scope of action with short-term decisions and catch any chance to strengthen

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<sup>69</sup> On Major Directions of Ukrainian Foreign Policy, *Official Internet portal of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine*, 2 July 1993, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3360-12>.

defence and enhance economic sustainability. In this respect Belarus was valued for its pragmatism, neutrality and relative independence from the Kremlin. On the other hand, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's long history of switching between being an ultra-loyalist to becoming a political rebel against Russia demonstrated that beneficial cooperation might be unexpectedly substituted by carefully prepared estrangement and even animosity.

Therefore, Belarusian overtures about a possible joint tacit containment of Russian expansionism, and hybrid subversive policies toward neighbors, cannot be taken by Ukraine as a plausible and trustworthy foundation for the development of relations. On the other hand, Ukrainian determined orientation toward NATO and the EU makes it impossible for Minsk to enhance bilateral cooperation in its economy and security fields without provoking Russian anger.

One of the key obstacles for the development of bilateral ties is a willingness from both Kyiv and Minsk to avoid mutual commitments and unilaterally seek Russian or Western favors, be it cheap oil, privileged loans, preferential access to markets, lucrative deals or a security umbrella. If nothing radically changes in the environment, which in our case depends on the evolution of the Russian regime and its intentions toward its former colonies, Ukraine and Belarus will drift further apart. Then the most important task for these countries is to avoid becoming instruments of any external powers' interests.



# Belarus and the Baltics: Did Crisis Really Become an Opportunity?

*Diāna Potjomkina, Dovilė Šukytė*

Belarus and its two Baltic neighbours — Latvia and Lithuania — have had a long and complicated history of relationships that took yet another interesting turn around the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis. As could be expected from neighbouring countries, bilateral relations span a wide array of issues, and there are multiple stakeholders on all sides. Additionally, current Belarusian–Baltic relations are also influenced by European Union policies, which Lithuania and Latvia have to apply in their bilateral relations as EU Member States, and Russia’s influence over Belarus. Indeed, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has used both Baltic countries a lot in his manoeuvres between Moscow and Brussels, trying to obtain economic and political gains.

There are similarities as well as differences in how Latvia and Lithuania manage their relations with Belarus. In both instances, economic interdependence is the main factor ensuring a continuation and some kind of stability in these relations. There are also intensive people-to-people relations and historical commonalities (more so between Belarus and Lithuania that once shared the same state), and there are the abovementioned geopolitical factors to be taken into account. At the same time, in both Latvia and Lithuania a broad diversity of views on Belarus exist, and over the last few years both have adopted somewhat different policies. While current Lithuania–Belarus relations are dominated by political tensions over the safety of Astraviec NPP being built by Belarusian and Russian companies near Lithuania’s territory, Latvia has become one of Belarus’s most interesting political partners.

This article assesses Latvian and Lithuanian relations with Belarus in two parts, giving specific attention to the last three years since the war in Ukraine started, but also providing a broader historical context. Each part of the chapter deals with two prominent approaches in Baltic relations with Belarus — the “normative” one, focusing on human rights violations and to some extent security threats posed by the “Eastern” dictatorship, and the “pragmatic” one, aiming first and foremost for good economic relations and ignoring the nature of Lukashenka’s regime. Within each approach, we distinguish the specific issues that are most important in Latvian–Belarusian and Lithuanian–Belarusian relations.

While this article is mainly written from a Lithuanian and Latvian perspective, we also address Belarusian interests, concerns and priorities.

## Belarus–Lithuania Relations: Overview

On December 20, 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania recognized the Republic of Belarus as an independent state. A week later, Belarus followed by recognizing the independence of Lithuania. Since 1993 diplomatic representations — with a few months pause in 2012<sup>1</sup> — operate in both countries.

Lithuania's accession to the EU in 2004 resulted in new regulations, but opposite to existing fears, it did not distort economic cooperation between Lithuania and Belarus. It also did not discourage Belarusian citizens from traveling to Lithuania. On the contrary, Belarusians receive the biggest share of Lithuanian-issued Schengen visas — 49 percent of all Schengen visas in 2015<sup>2</sup> or more than 200,000 annually.

After the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative was launched in 2009, Lithuania has become one of the strongest advocates and supporters of EaP countries in Brussels. Though the majority of attention goes to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which are implementing the Association Agreements and DCFTAs with the EU, Vilnius can often be found taking on a mediator's role between Minsk and Brussels. Lithuania has always been critical of Lukashenka's regime, Vilnius has even become a hub for pro-democratic Belarusian forces and international organizations supporting Belarusian civil society. However, Lithuania has never viewed the EU imposed sanctions on Belarus as a wise approach. It argues that sanctions only isolate Belarus and push it closer towards Russia, while critics also remind them that intense economic relations that is not in interest of Lithuania to lose.

Lukashenka was in power almost since the beginning of Belarus–Lithuania bilateral relations, therefore, changes of relations, at least at a political level, can be best observed by analysing the positions of Lithuanian leadership. By comparing the approaches of two Lithuanian presidents in charge of foreign policy — Valdas Adamkus (in office from 1998 to 2003 and again from 2004 to 2009) and Dalia Grybauskaitė (since 2009) — the latter has brought in more pragmatism. Adamkus

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<sup>1</sup> In February 2012 EU High Representative Catherine Ashton announced the withdrawal of EU Ambassadors from Belarus. This came in line with EU sanctions and pressure for Belarus to release political prisoners. In April, after Lukashenka released political prisoner Andrei Sannikov, the EU and its Member States started re-opening their representations.

<sup>2</sup> European Migration Network, "Migracijos tendencijos Lietuvoje 2015" (Migration trends in Lithuania 2015), 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://emn.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Santrauka-LT.pdf>.

aimed for dialogue based on common principles and values, while Grybauskaitė lowered the bar to engagement in economic and cultural areas.<sup>3</sup>

Grybauskaitė's inauguration coincided with the launch of the EU EaP initiative. Also, in 2008, the EU lifted a travel ban on Lukashenka, who as a result intensified Belarus' relations with the West. It was a movement to re-engage Belarus, even to bring it back to the European fold. Thus, Grybauskaitė hosted Lukashenka in Vilnius in 2009 (his last visit to Lithuania was in 1997). The next year she paid a return visit to Minsk. Both sides expressed good will. After Lukashenka's visit Belarus released information from the investigation of General Uladzimir Uskhopchyk, charged for taking part in the January 13, 1991 atrocities. From Lithuania's side, Grybauskaitė offered to advocate Belarus' interests in Brussels, and also the agreement of simplified movement for citizens situated by the Belarus–Lithuania border was signed. Unfortunately its implementation is being stalled by Minsk. Two months after Grybauskaitė's visit, a rigged presidential election took place in Belarus and was followed by a massive crack down on public protests, including opposition forces. As a result, another set of EU sanctions was imposed. In 2013 Lukashenka was not even invited to the EaP Summit in Vilnius.

EU-Belarus relations improved again in 2016. The same could have been expected for Belarus–Lithuania relations, but due to the lack of openness regarding the construction of Astraviec NPP, Lithuania has turned from being an advocate of Belarus to its confronter, both in Brussels and other European capitals. In order to either stop the construction or ensure that it continues in accordance to international safety standards, Lithuania seeks to employ European instruments and gather support of EU Member States. A crack down on peaceful protesters in Minsk on March 25, 2017, might serve as yet another argument for proving the lack of transparency and responsibility by the Belarusian government.

### **Belarusia–Latvia Relations: Overview**

Belarus has played an important role in Latvian foreign policy, which has, however, been somewhat overlooked and underappreciated; similarly, the role of Latvia for Belarus has not received all the attention it deserves. While the two countries are not nearly the main economic, political or security partners for each other, and indeed they belong to different alliances and have had their share of political controversies, they are united by more than just a common border. For

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<sup>3</sup> Andžej Pukšto and Mantas Visockas, "Europos Sąjungos ir Baltarusijos santykiai 2004–2014 metais: Lietuvos vaidmuo" (EU — Belarus relations in 2004–2014: role of Lithuania), *Politikos mokslų almanachas*, No. 15, 2014, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://eltalpykla.vdu.lt/handle/1/31598>.

Latvia, Belarus is an important transit gate to the East and proof of its expertise and experience with the Eastern Partnership. For Belarus, Latvia, at least during some of the last ten years, is one of its main advocates in the West. This helps both countries to overcome or ignore differences and focus on mutually beneficial aspects instead; to the degree that, as Lukashenka recently expressed, “May God let us cooperate with other states as we do [with Latvia].”<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, as in the Lithuanian case, Lukashenka’s priorities in relations with Latvia have remained largely constant over the years. The calculating Belarusian president is primarily interested in maximising gains (finding markets for Belarusian products, cheap transit routes, international loans, investors, independence from existing or potential external pressure, having flatterers and political lobbies abroad) and minimizing losses to his regime (support to opposition, international sanctions and economic competition). As the well-known realist quip goes, Lukashenka “has no permanent friends or enemies: only permanent interests”. Meanwhile, Latvian policy towards Belarus has over years oscillated between “normative” and “pragmatic” positions largely depending on the leaders of the day. As described elsewhere, the first position mirrors the Western liberal, pro-democratic discourse traditionally employed with regard to Eastern European and other developing states, either because the advocate really does support these values, or for the more practical purposes of keeping Russia at bay and showing solidarity with Western European allies. Meanwhile, the second, “pragmatic” position prioritizes economic gain and is not concerned with human rights, nor with geopolitics.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1990s, Latvia pursued a pragmatic policy towards Belarus that did not change significantly even after Lukashenka came to power. Unlike the EU, Latvia did not introduce any sanctions against Belarus and maintained political contacts at the highest level until approximately 2000–2001, coinciding with the start of EU accession negotiations. EU rules on relations with Belarus did play an important role later on until sanctions were lifted, because they created a certain playing field for Latvian officials. High-level political contacts and business deals with certain partners of Lukashenka were severely restricted if not impossible, and support for democracy and liberal reforms was expected from all EU members. Some Latvian politicians from the “normative” stream took

<sup>4</sup> Президент Республики Беларусь, “Встреча с министром иностранных дел Латвии Эдгарсом Ринкевичсом,” 20 February 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/vstrecha-s-ministrom-inostrannykh-del-latvii-edgarsom-rinkevichsem-10870/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-ministrom-inostrannykh-del-latvii-edgarsom-rinkevichsem-10870/).

<sup>5</sup> Gatis Pelnēns and Diāna Potjomkina, “The Political Implications of Latvia’s Economic Relations with Russia and Belarus”, in Andris Sprūds (ed.), *The Economic Presence of Russia and Belarus in the Baltic States: Risks and Opportunities* (Riga: Centre for East European Policy Studies, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Centre for Geopolitical Studies, Academic Center for Baltic and Russian Studies (ABVKeskus), 2012).



this policy on with enthusiasm, condemning the “last European dictatorship” and calling for greater support for the Belarusian opposition. However, even in this period Latvia pursued a generally very moderate policy in the international arena, and continued pragmatic engagement with Belarus bilaterally.

EU sanctions were partially lifted in 2008, coinciding with the beginning of a long period of pragmatism in Latvian foreign policy, and regular political contacts were immediately restored; pragmatic cooperation could “leave the shadows”. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Belarus once again became complicated in the wake of the 2010 post-election repressions, but pragmatic Latvian political forces together with niche business interests and Belarusian requests for political support<sup>6</sup> dictated a very careful Latvian approach to EU sanctions. While lip service to democracy in Belarus was paid, in practice high-level political contacts continued, economics prevailed in bilateral talks, and in 2012 Latvia along with Slovenia vocally opposed and watered down a new round of EU sanctions against Belarus.<sup>7</sup>

The Ukrainian crisis helped to tweak Latvian–Belarusian relations yet again. For Belarus, it was a wonderful opportunity to improve relations with the West by posing as a neutral arbiter. For the West, it finally brought mainstream attention to the risks of rejecting less pro-democratic neighbours due to their disrespect for democracy and human rights, lest they find themselves deprived of any options and fall prey to Russia. In this rapidly changing international context, the Latvian EU presidency in the first half of 2015 (of course, together with other like-minded players) strived and succeeded in redefining the basic principles of the Eastern Partnership. The Riga Summit declaration and subsequent EU documents charted a way for a more pragmatic, differentiated and security-aware Eastern Partnership.<sup>8</sup> This, in turn, helped in improving Latvian–Belarusian relations; as Lukashenka said in early 2015, “If Latvia, during its [EU] chairmanship and not only, helps us to get closer to the EU, we will be very grateful to you.”<sup>9</sup> Finally,

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Ольга Львовская, “Белорусско-латвийские отношения становятся все крепче,” *Бизнес & Балтия*, 6 December 2012, <http://www.news.lv>.

<sup>7</sup> Joanna Hyndle-Hussein and Kamil Klysiński, “Limited EU Economic Sanctions on Belarus,” 28 March 2012, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2012-03-28/limited-eu-economic-sanctions-belarus>; see also Diāna Potjomkina, “Latvian–Belarusian Relations in 2013: Multiple Realities” in *Latvian Foreign Policy Yearbook 2013* (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2014), [http://liia.lv/site/docs/Gadagramata2013\\_makets\\_Diana\\_PDF.pdf](http://liia.lv/site/docs/Gadagramata2013_makets_Diana_PDF.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Diāna Potjomkina, *A More Geopolitical Eastern Partnership: U-Turn or “The Lady’s Not for Turning”?* (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2015), accessed March 20, 2017, <http://liia.lv/en/publications/a-more-geopolitical-eastern-partnership-u-turn-or-the-ladys-not-for-turning-477>.

<sup>9</sup> Президент Республики Беларусь, “Встреча с министром иностранных дел Латвии Эдгарсом Ринкевичсом,” 20 February 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/vstrecha-s-ministrom-inostrannyx-del-latvii-edgarsom-rinkevichsem-10870/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-ministrom-inostrannyx-del-latvii-edgarsom-rinkevichsem-10870/).

“Latvia actively supported further deepening of EU-Belarus relations in line with the EU’s list of measures to enhance the EU’s policy of critical engagement with Belarus (29 measures), inter alia supporting lifting of the majority of EU’s sanctions against Belarus in February 2016.”<sup>10</sup> We will see below how this thaw reflected on particular aspects of Latvian–Belarusian relations.

### **Belarus and Lithuania: Pragmatic Economic Partners**

According to President Grybauskaitė, economic cooperation between Belarus and Lithuania is constructive, especially in the sectors of transport and trade. Political dialogue, on the other hand, is slowed due to human rights and freedom of speech violations, and persecutions of political opponents in Belarus.<sup>11</sup>

Economic cooperation between Belarus and Lithuania can be interpreted as a way to maintain bilateral relations when engagement in other areas is under stress or as a mutual interdependency, which can outweigh animosities and force cooperation, if not on a political, then on an institutional level. Both versions are correct, only, the question related to the second one — to what extent can economic interests dictate a political agenda? — remains open.

Economic interdependency between Belarus and Lithuania is influenced by the following realities: Belarusian companies account for about a third of all cargo in Lithuania’s Klaipėda port, furthermore, transportation of cargo via land provides opportunities for Lithuanian Railways and logistic companies; Lithuania uses Belarusian pipelines to receive Russian gas, but after opening the LNG terminal in Klaipėda in 2014 Lithuania was able to diversify its energy sources. Lithuanian businesses continue to heavily invest in Belarus, thus, pressure for the Lithuanian government to sustain constructive working relations with Belarus does still exist.

Import/export volumes between the two countries are as follows: in 2016 Lithuania was 7<sup>th</sup> in importance as an export partner to Belarus. Belarusian export to Lithuania accounted to 3.3 percent of total exports and reached 780 million USD. At the same time, Belarus was 9<sup>th</sup> in importance as an export partner for Lithuania, accounting for 3.8 percent or 964 million USD. Import was slightly lower, Lithuania was 10<sup>th</sup> in importance as an import partner for Belarus, resulting

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<sup>10</sup> “Ārlietu ministra ikgadējais ziņojums par paveikto un iecerēto darbību valsts ārpolitikā un Eiropas Savienības jautājumos,” 3 January 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.mfa.gov.lv/images/ministrija/Arpolitikas\\_zinojums\\_2016.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.lv/images/ministrija/Arpolitikas_zinojums_2016.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> BNS, “D. Grybauskaitė: dialogą su Baltarusija stabdo žmogaus teisių pažeidimai” (Grybauskaitė: dialogue with Belarus is slowed due to human rights violations), *Izinius.lt*, 28 January 2014, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://lzinios.lt/lzinios/lietuva/d-grybauskaite-dialoga-su-baltarusija-stabdo-zmogaus-teisiu-pazeidimai/172399>.

in 0.96 percent of all imports and accounting for 264 million USD. Lithuanian imports from Belarus was higher and accounted for 2.8 percent or 774 million USD, leaving Belarus 12<sup>th</sup> in importance.<sup>12</sup>

The abovementioned data presupposes that Lithuania is a more beneficial partner to Belarus than visa versus. This argument can also be supported by foreign direct investment (FDI) that comes from Lithuania. In 2015 Lithuanian businesses invested over 80 million EUR (a similar amount was recorded in the Q2 in 2016<sup>13</sup>) and became the largest Western investor in Belarus, excluding Cyprus where many Russian and Belarusian businessmen have their companies registered.<sup>14</sup> This ranks Belarus 6<sup>th</sup> among those countries receiving Lithuanian direct investments, while Belarusian investments in Lithuania accounted for 50 million EUR in the Q3 in 2016<sup>15</sup> and cannot compete with EU investors, for example, the 6<sup>th</sup> major investor recorded in the Q2 in 2016 was Cyprus with more than 690 million EUR.<sup>16</sup>

Around 500 companies with Lithuanian capital operate in Belarus. Reasons that encourage Lithuanians to invest in Belarus include the following: cheaper labour costs, a three times bigger local market, no need to comply with EU standards and, most importantly, access to the Russian market. The geographical proximity, only 170 km between Minsk and Vilnius, is yet another motivator. A three hour long commute by train also profits the Lithuanian service sector, which due to a cheaper, better quality and broader variety of products appeals to Belarusian customers. Vilnius-based shopping centres even have separate advertisement campaigns in Belarusian. The same applies to the entertainment sector. Belarusian artists who cannot freely perform in Belarus choose Vilnius instead.

Lithuanian businesses are believed to be successful in Belarus because of a similar mentality which enables them to overcome Belarusian state bureaucracy and corruption. But since Belarus–Lithuania relations at a political level are deteriorating, the Belarusian economy has been in decline for three years in

<sup>12</sup> Trading Economics, 2016 export and import data by country on Belarus and Lithuania, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/belarus/exports-by-country>, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/belarus/imports-by-country>, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/lithuania/imports-by-country>, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/lithuania/exports-by-country>.

<sup>13</sup> The Bank of Lithuania, “Direct investment in Q2 2016”, 30 September 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.lb.lt/direct\\_investment\\_in\\_q2\\_2016](http://www.lb.lt/direct_investment_in_q2_2016).

<sup>14</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, “Investing in Belarus: a story of Lithuanian businessmen”, *Belarus Digest*, 9 January 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/investing-belarus-story-lithuanian-businessmen-28242>

<sup>15</sup> The Baltic Course, “The foreign direct investment flow into Lithuania was on the increase in Q3”, 6 January 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/analytics/?doc=126725>.

<sup>16</sup> The Bank of Lithuania.

a row. What might spark a wave of privatization, is more and more Lithuanian businesses seeking reassurance by working in cooperation with international financial institutions, for example, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.<sup>17</sup>

On an institutional level Belarusian–Lithuanian relations include regular meetings of the Intergovernmental Economic and Trade Commission or the annual Belarusian–Lithuanian Economic Forum, among others. Both engagements are to be continued in 2017 and often the level of representatives reflects the temperature of bilateral relations. For example, Lukashenka attended the Economic Forum in 2009 during his visit to Lithuania, but in 2013 and 2014 it was attended by prime ministers and in 2015 and 2016 only ministers and deputy ministers were present.<sup>18</sup>

### Belarus–Latvia: Pragmatic Interests

To the benefit of Belarus, it enjoys having influential economic lobbies in Latvia. Overall, “the historical patterns of external trade with Russia and Belarus over the past 20 years represent mostly the realities of economic development and seem to receive little influence from political events in the countries,”<sup>19</sup> and Belarus’s share in Latvia’s external trade has never risen above 5 percent — indeed since 2009 it has been on a decrease, falling below 2 percent in 2014 and 2015.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, while Belarus lists Latvia among its main economic partners, Latvia’s share in Belarus’s external trade has not exceeded 3 percent during 2011–2016,<sup>21</sup> not even accounting for the fact that “Belarusian statisticians do not distinguish

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<sup>17</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, “Investing in Belarus: a story of Lithuanian businessmen”.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Andrejs Jakobsons, “The Economic Dimension of Bilateral Relationships between Latvia, Russia and Belarus — Past and Present”, in Andris Sprūds (ed.), *The Economic Presence of Russia and Belarus in the Baltic States: Risks and Opportunities* (Riga: Centre for East European Policy Studies, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Centre for Geopolitical Studies, Academic Center for Baltic and Russian Studies (ABVKeskus), 2012), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Andrejs Jakobsons, “The Economic Dimension of Bilateral Relationships between Latvia, Russia and Belarus — Past and Present,” 17; author’s calculations using data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, <http://www.csb.gov.lv/en>.

<sup>21</sup> Author’s calculations, National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, <http://www.belstat.gov.by/en/>. See also Министерство иностранных дел Республики Беларусь, “Внешняя торговля Беларуси,” accessed March 20, 2017, <http://mfa.gov.by/export/>.

between items that are traded bilaterally and those that are destined for transit.”<sup>22</sup> Still, there are big Latvian businesses investing and operating in Belarus, and Latvia is one of Belarus’s main transit partners; for Latvia itself, Belarusian transit accounts for about 20 percent of total transit volumes.<sup>23</sup> Over the years, two main business organizations in Latvia — the Latvian Confederation of Employers and the Latvian Chamber of Commerce — as well as Latvian Railway, ports and other stakeholders including the Belarusian diaspora — have lobbied for good political relations and sharply condemned any political or economic sanctions against the neighbouring state. Lukashenka has not-so-subtly hinted at economic repercussions of political criticism: “If Latvia does not want us to work in its port and does not want Latvians with big businesses to work in our country, they will harm themselves.”<sup>24</sup> While Belarus needs Baltic transit routes and lobbying in the EU, it is not limited to a single partner and can play Latvia and Lithuania against each other — something it has successfully done for many years now.

It must be noted that practical cooperation between Latvia and Belarus is not without issues. Apart from the political background, Belarus is heavily protectionist; it welcomes foreign investment, especially technologies, but first, Latvia is not a major source of technologies, and second, investors have to bear with the politically tense and economically volatile Belarusian environment.<sup>25</sup> Even well-known Latvian businessmen have failed;<sup>26</sup> one of the latest examples is major drug company Olainfarm complaining about the Belarusian “hints” it should license some of its medicines for local production as a part of an overall Belarusian protectionist policy.<sup>27</sup> Latvian–Belarusian economic relations are not

<sup>22</sup> Edijs Bošs, “Lukashenkonomy: Belarus’s Perilous ‘Third Way’ Between Russia and the West”, in *The Economic Presence of Russia and Belarus in the Baltic States: Risks and Opportunities*, 78–9; Kārlis Bukovskis, “State Institutions, Interdependence and Perceptions in Latvia’s Economic Relations with the Russian Federation and Belarus”, in *The Economic Presence of Russia and Belarus in the Baltic States: Risks and Opportunities*, 105.

<sup>23</sup> Latvijas Republikas Ārlietu ministrija, “Latvijas Republikas un Baltkrievijas Republikas divpusējās attiecības,” 30 November 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/divpusejas-attiecibas/latvijas-un-baltkrievijas-attiecibas#sadarbiba>.

<sup>24</sup> Президент Республики Беларусь, “Президент ответил на вопросы представителей белорусских и зарубежных СМИ,” 14 April 2006, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/prezident-otvetil-na-voprosy-predstavitelej-belorusskix-i-zarubezhnyx-smi-2421/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/prezident-otvetil-na-voprosy-predstavitelej-belorusskix-i-zarubezhnyx-smi-2421/).

<sup>25</sup> Edijs Bošs, “Lukashenkonomy: Belarus’s Perilous ‘Third Way’ Between Russia and the West,” 78–9.

<sup>26</sup> Didzis Kļaviņš, “Business interests between Latvia and Belarus: looking beyond the obvious”, in *The Economic Presence of Russia and Belarus in the Baltic States: Risks and Opportunities*, 154.

<sup>27</sup> *Tut.by*, “Продажи латвийской фармкомпании в Беларуси из-за протекционизма сократились на 20%,” 1 May 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/economics/494772.html>.

apolitical and “objective”<sup>28</sup> as Lukashenka sometimes says; rather, they demand continued political involvement and supervision. Almost every month now there is an economics-related event between the two countries, be it an official visit at state or municipal level, an annual bilateral business forum, tourism forum or something else.

As mentioned above, Latvian–Belarusian relations have mainly dealt with practical, down-to-earth matters even during freezes in EU–Belarusian relations, so the impact of lifting sanctions from Belarus did not bring any significant changes — except a more favourable environment for high-level contacts. By far the most important issue for Latvia in the last few years has been transit, followed by overall trade and investments, and border management.

### *Transit*

In the face of Lithuanian competition, slumping volumes of transit from Russia and Russian pressure on Belarus to use its ports, Latvia is trying to secure Belarusian transit through its territory. (This concerns both the transit of goods produced in Belarus itself and transit from more remote regions like China that go through Belarusian territory.) Arguably, transit has been the main topic in bilateral talks in previous years — at least for Latvia. The most interesting development, for Latvia and Lithuania alike, has been the Great Stone — a major Chinese industrial park and logistical hub in Belarus. Both Baltic countries have been fighting for the right to provide transit services to the hub, which is part of China’s One Belt, One Road initiative — a major commercial lifeline, as well as to attract other cargo from China and other Asian states crossing Belarusian territory. Bilaterally, transit cooperation has been addressed at a long string of meetings; the state company Latvian Railway opened an office in Minsk in early 2017. In 2016, Latvia even invited the Belarusian prime minister as a special guest to Riga’s 16+1 meeting of Central and Eastern European countries and China.

Unfortunately, on this most important issue tangible progress to date is less visible. While Belarus is positive about Latvian and Lithuanian transit offers,<sup>29</sup> it has pitted the two Baltic countries against each other, trying to bargain for better conditions. Due to aggressive Lithuanian tactics and, according to some stakeholders, shortcomings in the Latvian strategy, until now results have mostly

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<sup>28</sup> Президент Республики Беларусь, “Президент ответил на вопросы представителей белорусских и зарубежных СМИ,” 14 April 2006, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/prezident-otvetil-na-voprosy-predstavitelej-belorusskix-i-zarubezhnyx-smi-2421/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/prezident-otvetil-na-voprosy-predstavitelej-belorusskix-i-zarubezhnyx-smi-2421/).

<sup>29</sup> *Naviny.by*, “Турьянов: доля в порту Клайпеды позволила увеличить объем перевалки грузов,” 16.03.2015, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/eu/2015/03/16/ic\\_news\\_627\\_455555](http://naviny.by/rubrics/eu/2015/03/16/ic_news_627_455555).

been in favour of Lithuania. While Belarus does have a share in the Woodison Terminal in Riga Port, it has invested much more heavily in the Lithuanian Klaipėda port and uses it for, inter alia, the bulk of its potassium fertilizers.<sup>30</sup>

### *Trade and Investment*

The crisis in Ukraine and ensuing mutual Russian–Western sanctions also had interesting implications for Latvian–Belarusian relations. Since many Latvian producers found the Russian market suddenly closed, Belarus, who did not join the sanctions, obliged by allowing transit into Russia through its unsecured borders or more elaborate schemes such as buying Latvian milk, converting it into dairy products and selling it to Russia.<sup>31</sup> This step was highly appreciated by the Latvian side.<sup>32</sup> (Admittedly, Belarusian dependence on Russia created some limitations as well, for instance, in 2015 Russia managed to prohibit the re-export of Latvian fish products from Belarus.<sup>33</sup>) The Latvian priority is to find alternative markets; Belarusians, however, want to protect their market. While re-export schemes to Russia have proven lucrative, and Belarus even resumed negotiations regarding WTO membership (something that Latvia has actively supported), purely bilateral cooperation in trade will likely remain limited.

The Baltic States are among the key recipients of Belarusian investments,<sup>34</sup> but even so, Belarus ranks 22<sup>nd</sup> among foreign investors in Latvia. Latvian investments into Belarus are twice greater than Belarusia's into Latvia.<sup>35</sup>

It is worth noting that, unlike Lithuania, Latvia is concerned about safety at the Belarusian nuclear power station, but is not planning any drastic measures such as a ban on buying its electricity.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Naviny.by*, “Беларусь накормит Россию сыром из европейского молока,” 16 September 2014, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2014/09/16/ic\\_articles\\_113\\_186775](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2014/09/16/ic_articles_113_186775).

<sup>32</sup> Latvian minister of economics Dana Reizniece-Ozola quoted in Sandris Točs, “Esam atbaidījuši investorus,” 20 October 2015, [http://news.lv/Dienas\\_Bizness/2015/10/20/esam-atbaidijusi-investorus](http://news.lv/Dienas_Bizness/2015/10/20/esam-atbaidijusi-investorus).

<sup>33</sup> “Беларусь запретила реэкспорт в Россию рыбо- и морепродукции из Латвии и Эстонии,” 5 June 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2015/06/05/ic\\_news\\_113\\_458969](http://naviny.by/rubrics/economic/2015/06/05/ic_news_113_458969).

<sup>34</sup> Евразийский банк развития, *ЕАЭС и страны Евразийского континента: мониторинг и анализ прямых инвестиций 2016*, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.eabr.org/general/upload/EDB\\_Centre\\_2016\\_Report\\_41\\_FDI\\_Eurasia\\_RUS.pdf](http://www.eabr.org/general/upload/EDB_Centre_2016_Report_41_FDI_Eurasia_RUS.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Latvijas Republikas Ārlietu ministrija, “Latvijas Republikas un Baltkrievijas Republikas divpusējās attiecības,” 30 November 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/divpusejas-attiecibas/latvijas-un-baltkrievijas-attiecibas#sadarbiba>.

<sup>36</sup> *Naviny.by*, “Латвийские власти не будут запрещать покупку электроэнергии с БелАЭС,” 16 January 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://naviny.by/new/20170116/1484580845-latviyskie-vlasti-ne-budut-zapreshchat-pokupku-elektroenergii-s-belaes>.

### *Border Management*

Latvia and Belarus have very close practical cooperation for border management and have signed numerous agreements to improve border security. According to one previous minister of interior, political détente led to a very cooperative Belarusian stance on detaining illegal immigrants.<sup>37</sup> Latvia also became the first EU country with which Belarus signed an agreement on simplified traffic between border areas, and has supported an overall visa liberalization between the EU and Belarus as well as the EU-Belarus Mobility Partnership launched in 2016.

### *Political Dialogue*

As mentioned above, there have been regular high-level political contacts since the EU sanctions against Belarus were partially lifted in 2008. In 2014, dialogue really took off with eight ministerial level visits taking place in one year and some “side events” such as a game between the Belarusian presidential and Latvian parliamentary team. The scale of rapprochement could be explained by the overall changing mood after the Maidan, as well as by the approaching Latvian EU presidency, but the rapprochement itself, as the Latvian foreign minister noted, began in 2013.<sup>38</sup> During its presidency, Latvia laid a substantial foundation for redefining the Eastern Partnership and making it more differentiated, to fit the aspirations of partners such as Belarus.<sup>39</sup> Thanks to the differentiation principle, for instance, it was possible to address the possibility of a new Belarus–EU agreement (see below).

The intensity of visits remained similarly high in 2015 and 2016. The range of topics discussed — not only bilateral relations but also, for instance, dialogue between the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the EU,<sup>40</sup> the situation in Ukraine, or even a new framework agreement between Belarus and the EU requested by Belarusian foreign minister Vladimir Makei,<sup>41</sup> show that Belarus

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<sup>37</sup> Emīls Dreiblat, “Īmigrācijas apkarošanā pasliktinās sadarbība,” *Kurzemes Vārds*, 15 October 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Romāns Meļņiks, “Rinkēvičs: diplomātiskais process prasa pacietību,” *Diena*, 15 June 2015.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Министерство иностранных дел Республики Беларусь, “Выступление Министра иностранных дел Республики Беларусь Владимира Макея на пленарной сессии саммита инициативы “Восточное партнерство” (22 мая 2015 г., г. Рига),” accessed March 20, 2017, [http://mfa.gov.by/press/news\\_mfa/db9a7111dc650d31.html](http://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/db9a7111dc650d31.html).

<sup>40</sup> *Naviny.by*, “Макей убежден в необходимости диалога между ЕС и ЕАЭС,” 19 February 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2015/02/19/ic\\_news\\_112\\_454365](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2015/02/19/ic_news_112_454365).

<sup>41</sup> *Naviny.by*, “Беларусь удовлетворена прогрессом в отношениях с Евросоюзом, — Макей,” 7 July 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/eu/2016/07/07/ic\\_news\\_627\\_477901](http://naviny.by/rubrics/eu/2016/07/07/ic_news_627_477901).



evidently views Latvia as a platform for making its views known in the wider EU.<sup>42</sup> Lukashenka personally expressed a desire for closer political relations with Latvia.<sup>43</sup> To sum up, Latvia in recent years has positioned itself as one of Belarus's best foreign partners.

### **Belarus and Lithuania: Economy Aside — Clashing Perceptions and Limited Cooperation**

The program of the XVII Lithuanian government (formed in December 2016) indicates that future cooperation with Belarus will depend on the Belarusian government's position regarding safety requirements for Astraviec NPP and the human rights situation in the country.<sup>44</sup> In the meantime Belarusian officials, including Lukashenka, deny any misconducts and have called upon Lithuania to not politicize the construction of NPP.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the separate positions regarding democratic values and human rights, and environmental safety, two areas with significant effects to Belarus–Lithuania relations can be identified: military cooperation, even interconnectivity, between Belarusian and Russian militaries and their joint *Zapad* exercises in Spring 2017; and the formation of a Belarusian national identity at the expense of Lithuanian history.

#### ***Environmental Security***

Lithuania's concerns regarding the construction of Astraviec NPP is based on non-compliance with the safety standards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). For example, in 2014 it was recommended by meeting parties at the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention) to invite IAEA SEED (Site and External Events Design) to evaluate the suitability of the Astraviec NPP site, but when the mission arrived in January 2017, the Belarusian side did not request the analysis. Furthermore, in

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<sup>42</sup> See also e.g. Bens Latkovskis, "Edgars Rinkēvičs: "Diplomātija ir maratons,"" *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze Latvījai*, 15 June 2015.

<sup>43</sup> *Tut.by*, "Лукашенко: Если Латвия поможет нам сблизиться с ЕС, мы будем очень благодарны," 20 February 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/politics/436538.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, "XVII-osios Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės programa (užsienio politikos dalis)" (Program of the XVII Lithuanian Government (foreign policy part), 14 December 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://urm.lt/default/lt/uzsienio-politika/naujienos-kalbos-publikacijos/LR-vyriausybes-programa-UP-dalis>.

<sup>45</sup> Belarusian Television Channel CTV, "Alexander Lukashenko urges not to politicize Belarusian NPP construction," accessed March 20, 2017, <http://en.ctv.by/en/1486129399-alexander-lukashenko-urges-not-to-politicize-belarusian-npp-construction>.

2016 when an accident at the Astraviec NPP site occurred — a 330-tonne reactor was dropped from a 2–4 meter height — Belarusian officials denied the incident for more than two weeks.

Belarus refutes the accusations. Foreign Minister of Belarus Vladimir Makei calls the existing situation a ‘political mess’ and insists that all information was offered to Lithuanian counterparts and it’s the latter that are uncooperative. In his opinion, Lithuanian politicians are using Astraviec NPP to accumulate voters’ support for the election period.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to safety concerns, Lithuania is also suspicious about Russia’s share in Astraviec NPP. For a long time Belarus lacked funds to initiate the construction but as soon as Lithuania announced its plan to build Visaginas NPP (the initiative was stopped by a public referendum in 2012) Russia via its State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom offered support. It is in Russia’s interests to jeopardise the efforts of the Baltic States to secure their energetic independence, especially from Russian energy, and to synchronize their electricity systems with Western European ones.

Astraviec NPP would produce more energy than Belarus needs, thus, the rest would flood the regional energy market with what it is thought to be cheap electricity. In order to avoid falling under energetic dependency of the Kremlin again, Lithuanian political parties signed an inter-party agreement and initiated a law forbidding the purchase of electricity from Astraviec NPP and other unsafe providers. Additionally, Lithuania’s advocacy in Brussels and other European capitals is starting to give results. If we look at the positions of regional countries, Poland has already sided with Lithuania not to purchase electricity from Astraviec NPP, Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid also declared that Europe should not accept this energy on its market,<sup>47</sup> and only Latvia due to fears of jeopardising its relations with Belarus is not considering such a ban.

### *Military Security*

According to the Head of the Lithuanian State Security Department Darius Jauniškis, the Belarusian–Russian military exercises *Zapad 2017* is said to be

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<sup>46</sup> Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of Lithuania, “V. Makej padarė keleta pareiškimų dėl Lietuvos ir Baltarusijos bendradarbiavimo Astravo AE srityje” (Makei made several announcements regarding Lithuania — Belarus cooperation on the matter of Astraviec NPP), 27 May 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://lithuania.mfa.gov.by/lt/embassy/news/ee631046b67d0b57.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, “Can Belarus punish Lithuania for its position on the Astraviec NPP?” *DelarusDigest*, 8 December 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/can-belarus-punish-lithuania-its-position-astraviec-npp-28199>.

the greatest national security challenge for Lithuania.<sup>48</sup> The same is in the case of Astraviec NPP as Russian interests behind the exercises raise the biggest concerns. There is little trust, for example, in the declared numbers of troops and defensive nature of the trainings. Previous *Zapad* exercises had more troops than were declared and included scenarios of occupying Southern territories of Lithuania, thus, closing the Suwalki gap and cutting off Lithuania together with other Baltic states from NATO support via land from Polish territories.

Lukashenka is under constant pressure from the Kremlin, including requests to allow permanent Russian military bases in Belarus. He lacks capital to influence military decisions around the exercises, but tries to compensate at political and international levels. He officially called for NATO observers to be invited to *Zapad 2017* along with colleagues from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States.<sup>49</sup> He is clearly trying to manage any damage the exercises could have to Belarus relations with the EU. Lithuania and the remaining Baltic States reacted by calling for more NATO troops in the region, as well as additional defense plans and faster decision making within the Alliance.

### *Democracy and Human Rights*

Despite pragmatism, best reflected in the economic side of relations with Belarus, Lithuania has always strongly supported Belarusian civil society and pro-democratic opposition forces. As a result of harsh Lukashenka regime-imposed regulations and crack-downs on civil society, Vilnius has become a second home for Belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs). Since 2004 Vilnius has hosted the only Belarusian university in exile — the European Humanitarian University. Several leading Belarusian CSOs obtained Lithuanian legal entity registration and operate from Vilnius, including the Belarusian Human Rights House and international consortium EuroBelarus. Also, international democracy supporting organizations, such as ForumSyd, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, chose Vilnius for their Belarus-focused programs.

A significant share of Lithuania's development cooperation support goes to Belarus and results in activities focused on empowering Belarusian CSOs and

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<sup>48</sup> BNS and *lrytas.lt*, "VSD vadovas: pagrindinis nacionalinio saugumo iššūkis — "Zapad" pratybos" (Head of the SSD: the main national security challenge — Zapad exercises), 9 February 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://lietuvsodiena.lrytas.lt/aktualijos/vsd-vadovas-pagrindinis-nacionalinio-saugumo-issukis-zapad-pratybos.htm>.

<sup>49</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, "The West-2017 Belarus-Russian military exercise: smaller than anticipated", *Belarus Digest*, 24 March 2017, accessed March 25, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/west-2017-belarus-russian-military-exercise-smaller-anticipated-29513>.

building connections between Belarusian and Lithuanian societies. For example, leading Lithuanian think tank the Eastern Europe Studies Centre was established in 2006 with the primary intention to work in Belarus. Some of the Centre's most successful activities include the annual United Students of Belarus Rally, which gathers Belarusian students from Belarus, the EU and other countries; the annual World Belarusians Meeting, which brings together Belarusian and Lithuanian intellectuals for public discussions on joint cultural and historical heritage; consultations between Lithuanian political parties and Belarusian democratic opposition parties; and, finally, the Belarus Reality Check expert discussions.

### *History and Creation of Belarus' National Identity*

Vilnius is chosen by Belarusian civic activists not only because of its close geographical proximity or supportive Lithuanian Government, but also because of shared culture, history and to some extent mentality. During the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries, the territories of present-day Belarus were an integral part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Old Belarusian (or Ruthenian) was used as the main language of documentation and writings, especially in eastern and southern parts of the GDL. Many Belarusians studied at Vilnius University or chose Vilnius for professional activities and as a result made significant contributions to the political, economic and social development of the state.

Partition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth also separated Lithuanian and Belarusian societies and the joint history regained its relevancy only during the first years following 1991 with Belarusian independency. At the beginning it was national activists who aimed to challenge Russophiles and show that based on historical linkages Belarus' place is within Europe not with Russia. Soon these activists became the Belarusian opposition and their ideas were reshaped by Belarusian nationalists and to some extent Lukashenka's regime. The latter embarked on a mission — to convince Belarusians that Belarus could be a viable independent state — and chose re-writing/alternating the GDL history as a way to achieve it. The result includes, but is not limited to: history books claiming Belarus to be the real inheritor of the GDL history, Slavicized names of Lithuanian Dukes, and monuments and art performances presenting Lithuanian rulers as Belarusians.

The success of creating this alternative history can be accredited to the vacuum of cooperation between Belarusian and Lithuanian societies. After Lithuania's EU membership, its society became more related and better informed about its European counterparts than about Belarus, where a visa is needed to visit. Another mistake was made by the Lithuanian Government which overlooked

the danger of false historical claims (the best example is the occupation of Crimea in 2014), thus, leaving history for the historians.

Some Belarusian and Lithuanian historians do agree that the history needs to be studied, written and discussed together. According to Lithuanian historian Rūstis Kamuntavičius, it is equally important to be able to joke about the common past, especially when historical interpretations are constantly shifting.<sup>50</sup> The most recent example of cooperation is a joint project by Belarusian and Lithuanian anthropologists and restorers, which took place in summer 2016, in Nesvizh, Belarus. It aimed to prepare the GDL noblemen Radziwiłł's family mausoleum for public visiting. Furthermore, from 2011 to 2016 the annual International Congress of Belarusian Studies took place in Kaunas; the 2017 edition is to be held in Warsaw. Similar initiatives should be continued and expanded into history-related educational activities for both Belarusian and Lithuanian societies. But in order for these two societies to rediscover one another support from the government's side is essential.

### Latvia and Belarus: Normative and Security Considerations

Compared to the “pragmatic” part of Latvian–Belarusian relations, there is no evidence of normative and security considerations playing a prominent role in negotiations during recent years. Latvia has to adjust, at least partially, to the EU policy that remains more “normative” even after lifting sanctions. However, in relations with Belarus, it has been anything but a passive implementer of EU norms. It seems that the majority of Latvian policy-makers realize Belarus is not an easy partner, but at the same time do not believe their criticism will change anything, and stick to cooperating with the Lukashenka regime on an “as it is” basis.

#### *Democracy and Human Rights*

Latvian policy-makers are not completely oblivious to the fact that “taking into account that Belarus is Latvia's neighbour, it is important for Latvia that Belarus develops as a democratic, economically and socially stable state where human rights and rule of law are respected.”<sup>51</sup> Before, and also on a few occasions

<sup>50</sup> Rūstis Kamuntavičius, “Nuomonė. Pasakojimai apie praeitį: Lietuva ir Baltarusija” (Opinion. Stories about the past: Lithuania and Belarus), *DELFI*, 24 September 2013, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/nuomone-pasakojimai-apie-praeiti-lietuva-ir-baltarusija.d?id=62425721>

<sup>51</sup> Latvijas Republikas Ārlietu ministrija, “Latvijas Republikas un Baltkrievijas Republikas divpusējās attiecības,” 30 November 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/divpusejas-attiecibas/latvijas-un-baltkrievijas-attiecibas>.

after EU sanctions against Belarus were lifted, Latvian press announcements included one or two sentences confirming that democratic reforms and human rights issues had been addressed. However, since the 2010 Belarusian elections, human rights violations are clearly not at the top of the Latvian–Belarusian agenda, and this is clearly appreciated by the Belarusian regime. Latvia has been quick to commend any real or seeming achievements of Belarus, and slow to condemn any violations. Unlike Lithuania it does not invest any major effort in supporting Belarusian civil society or opposing it either. Belarus, for its part, has on several occasions criticized Latvia for alleged human rights violations,<sup>52</sup> but without any far-reaching consequences for bilateral relations.

### *Security*

Belarus, on the one hand, enjoys good political dialogue with the West that helps find new lucrative deals and legitimize itself domestically. The West, including Latvia, highly values the role of Belarus in regulating the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>53</sup> Since 2015, Latvia and Belarus have even held bilateral security consultations. On the other hand, for Lukashenka, better relations with the West cannot easily compensate for benefits obtained from his main ally — Russia. Thus, he is forced to look for compromises not only in economics (e.g. asking for dialogue between the EEU and the EU), but also in the field of politics and security. While Belarusians have been discussing regional security with NATO,<sup>54</sup> as well as having bilateral meetings with Latvian counterparts on such issues as arms control,<sup>55</sup> they also maintain close security cooperation with Russia. The most visible sign has been the major *Zapad* military exercises, most recently in 2013 and now planned for 2017. And while Lukashenka's military cooperation with Russia is clearly not purely voluntary, it seems that he personally shares his Russian colleagues' inimical attitude to NATO: "We have noticed for a while now, how new NATO forces are being deployed by our Belarusian borders. Belarus is reacting to this in an adequate and clear manner, but without unnecessary hubbub and noise. In case of conflict, Belarusian armed forces will start fighting

<sup>52</sup> "Стенограмма интервью Министра иностранных дел Республики Беларусь В. Макея программе "Неделя" телеканала "СТВ", состоявшегося 25 июля 2014 г., accessed March 20, 2017, <http://mfa.gov.by/press/smi/f65ae74dce8d6bd4.html>.

<sup>53</sup> БЕЛТА / *Tut.by*, "Без Беларуси не было бы того, что есть". Дипломат из Латвии похвалил Минск за помощь по Украине," 15 December 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/economics/523915.html>.

<sup>54</sup> *Tut.by*, "НАТО будет поддерживать диалог и укреплять партнерство с Беларусью," 8 December 2015, <https://news.tut.by/politics/476153.html>.

<sup>55</sup> *Naviny.by*, "Белорусские и латвийские военные анализируют Договоренности о мерах доверия и безопасности", 10 February 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, [http://naviny.by/rubrics/eu/2015/02/10/ic\\_news\\_627\\_453861](http://naviny.by/rubrics/eu/2015/02/10/ic_news_627_453861).

first, and afterwards Russian military will arrive from the [Russian] West.”<sup>56</sup> The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been more moderate but still anti-NATO in its announcements; while it does not consider NATO forces in neighbouring states a direct threat, it is nevertheless planning a response.<sup>57</sup> According to Alexander Alesin, Belarus is currently arming itself with Polonaise missiles, similar to Russian Iskanders, potentially endangering Latvia.<sup>58</sup> So, while security concerns raised by Belarus are not prominent in Latvian discourse, there is some underlying realization that Belarus is not a perfectly friendly partner, either.

## Conclusion

While the two seemingly very similar Baltic states find themselves in the same geopolitical environment, and with a largely similar bag of issues, in recent years their approaches towards Belarus have diverged rather significantly. It seems that while Lithuania is submerged into political dispute with Belarus and remains a hub for pro-democratic forces of that country, Latvia has taken over the role of “good cop”.

The EU has historically played an important role in Baltic-Belarus relations, delimiting the playing field. Latvia and Lithuania are both strong supporters of the Eastern Partnership and Belarus’s engagement therein, and each have a need to prove their credibility and expertise to Western European allies. At the same time, neither Latvia nor Lithuania treat the EU’s general policy uncritically. Importantly, they have opposed sanctions due to their economic repercussions and the alleged potential to push Belarus closer to Russia. Latvia also used its EU presidency for bringing the EaP more in line with the expectations of reluctant partners including Belarus (and has continued the same course of action afterwards). Here the Ukrainian crisis, subsequent re-evaluation of the EU’s policy towards its neighbours, and lifting sanctions from Belarus have enabled a major political breakthrough in relations with Belarus, at least as far as Latvia is concerned.

<sup>56</sup> Александр Алесин, ““Полонезы” могут поставить в один строй с “Искандерами””, 2 November 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://naviny.by/article/20161102/1478065869-polonezy-mogut-postavit-v-odin-stroy-s-iskanderami>.

<sup>57</sup> БЕЛТА / *Tut.by*, “Макей о размещении НАТО в Европе: Мы понимаем логику партнеров, но не приветствуем эти шаги,” 7 July 2016, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/politics/503507.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Александр Алесин, ““Полонезы” могут поставить в один строй с “Искандерами””, 2 November 2016, <http://naviny.by/article/20161102/1478065869-polonezy-mogut-postavit-v-odin-stroy-s-iskanderami>.

Latvia and Lithuania often find economic cooperation as the main way to engage Belarus. The cooperation is not without its problems, due to Belarusian attempts to manipulate and pit the two Baltic states against each other, inherent fallacies of the Belarusian economic, political and legal system, and the inauspicious geopolitical environment. However, the coalition of “pragmatic” forces and interested lobbies has been enough to keep Latvia and Lithuania politically interested in closer relations with Belarus. The Ukrainian crisis and subsequent lifting of EU sanctions created a more favourable political environment for cooperation with Belarus, but did not bring fundamental changes in both sides’ priorities; economics has always been a key issue for Belarus and the Baltics.

Two areas where there are currently visible differences between Latvian and Lithuanian approaches are military security and democracy support. Both countries have appreciated the Belarusian role in the Ukrainian crisis. They also realize the danger of Russian–Belarusian security cooperation as evidenced first and foremost by the *Zapad* exercises. However, their interpretations of Belarus as a security threat differ. Lithuania has voiced serious concerns regarding the Belarusian role in the *Zapad* exercises as well as about Astraviec NPP, while Latvia neither explicitly labelled Belarus as an adversary, nor considers the NPP to be a major threat. Democratic values and human rights are yet another immovable stone in Lithuania’s relations with Belarus. The March 25, 2017 crack down on peaceful protesters in Minsk might result in another wave of EU sanctions to Belarus, especially in the case of imprisoning the political opposition. However, Latvia has moderated its rhetoric on democracy in Belarus, preferring to go after other goals that are more attainable in the short term.

Latvia and Lithuania are currently on somewhat different tracks in relations with Belarus, but both of them face a similar challenge: reassessing their interests and maximising their own benefits from relations with the uneasy neighbour in the current geopolitical environment. At the same time, both Baltic states have to nurture people-to-people links and use them to re-connect Belarusian, Latvian and Lithuanian societies.



# The Poland–Belarus Relationship: Geopolitics Gave New Impetus, but no Breakthrough

*Andrei Yeliseyeu*

The relationship between Poland and Belarus has had good and bad times during the last 26 years. Periodically Warsaw played an important intermediary role in improving EU–Belarus relations. In other periods of time, however, the bilateral relationship was marked with animosity and reciprocal reproaches. From 2011–2013 Poland–Belarus relations were arguably at their lowest point. The annexation of Crimea and Russia’s aggressive policy in eastern Ukraine gave the go-ahead to a gradual EU–Belarus rapprochement, and the intensification of contact between Poland and Belarus.

Although Belarus remains Russia’s closest military and political ally, it still lacks formal contractual relations with the EU and continues pursuing repressive and undemocratic domestic policies.

The country shares extensive historic and cultural heritage with Poland. Its geographical proximity and mediatory role in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, economic stagnation in Russia and the latter’s more aggressive foreign policy are important factors pushing Belarus in a European direction — at least to some extent. Belarus’ relations with Poland as its largest neighbouring EU country can be seen as a litmus test for EU–Belarus relations in general.

Before discussing the most important developments in Poland–Belarus relations that have taken place in recent years, this chapter starts with a brief overview of the political and economic relations between these countries up to 2014. A separate section briefly explains the dispute over the Union of Poles in Belarus, which remains one of the most controversial issues in their relations. Furthermore, the study looks at important aspects of mobility between the two countries, namely short-term travel and long-term travel arrangements including the Polish Cards, and delays with a local border traffic regime.

## Ups and Downs in Poland–Belarus Relations Since the 1990s

Poland–Belarus relations began formally on 27 December 1991, the day when Warsaw recognized Belarus' independence. The Treaty on Good-Neighbourly Relations signed in June 1992 became a legal basis for bilateral relations. During the first part of the 1990s both countries were busy with their domestic political and economic issues, while in the second part of the decade Poland invested most of its foreign policy efforts on integration into the EU and NATO, while Belarus sought deeper relations with Russia.

As a candidate country to the EU and later as a full EU member, Poland was part of a series of diplomatic conflicts between the EU and Belarus, starting from July 1998. This is when the EU introduced visa sanctions against Belarusian officials for the first time. In the following two decades sanctions were introduced and expanded a number of times before being suspended and lifted time and again. In addition to periods of cooled EU–Belarus relations, since 1996 occasional outbreaks of disputes between Poland–Belarus over the issue of the Union of Poles occurred.

In response to growing repressions against democratic activists and independent media in Belarus, in 2006–2007 the Polish government, formed by the conservative Law and Justice political party, initiated a number of projects assisting Belarus' civil society. The Kalinowki Scholarship program offered grants to Belarusian democratic activists who faced political repressions in Belarus. A satellite *Belsat* TV broadcasting into Belarus from Poland was established. *Belsat* was supposed to provide the Belarusian population with an important alternative to dominant state-run television programming in the country. So far, Poland has invested more than 40 million USD into *Belsat*. Furthermore, Poland has provided financial assistance to other independent media (e.g., *Radio Racyja*, *European Radio for Belarus*) and Belarusian NGOs.

In 2008, Poland along with Sweden initiated the European Union's Eastern Partnership Program. The project was intended to strengthen the economic and political ties of six eastern European countries, including Belarus, with the EU. That same year the Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski paid an official visit to Belarus, followed by Polish Deputy Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlik's visit in 2009. In its pursuit of closer Belarus' engagement from 2008–2010, Warsaw had to partly compromise its position concerning the issue of the Union of Poles in Belarus. One outbreak of conflict surrounding the Union of Poles occurred in February 2010 amid a period of EU–Belarus rapprochement. Although it cooled down after the Polish presidential plane crash in April 2010, this tragedy did not bring a breakthrough for bilateral relations.

The lowest point in Poland–Belarus relations followed the violent crackdown on peaceful protesters, democratic opposition and civil society in the aftermath of the 2010 Belarus' presidential election. In February 2012, when reacting to

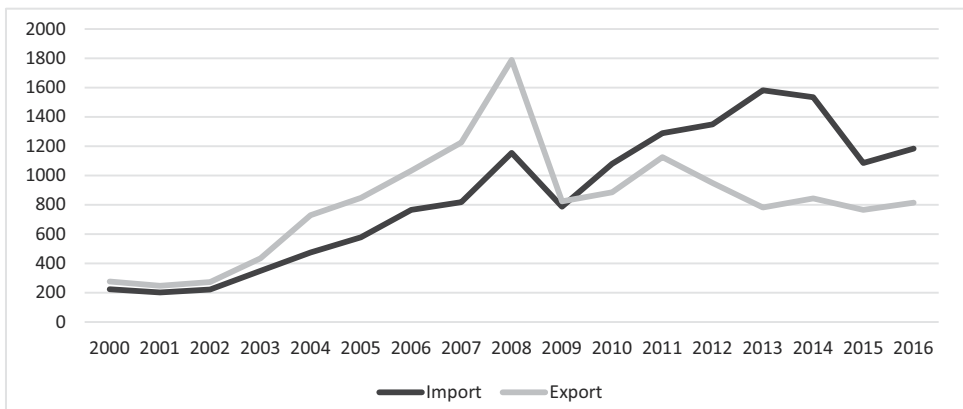
broadening sanctions by the EU, Polish ambassador Leszek Szerepka and EU ambassador Maira Mora were expelled from Minsk. Throughout 2011–2012 Belarusian state media attacked Poland’s authorities and its eastern policy. Media reports went as far as saying that Polish authorities allegedly financed militants aimed at destabilizing Belarus and overthrowing Lukashenka. Furthermore, in 2011 Poland discredited itself in the eyes of Belarus’ civil society by unintentionally passing on sensitive financial information concerning Belarusian human rights defender Ales Bialacki to Minsk.

Despite the hard line taken by the EU and Poland towards Belarusian authorities in particular, from 2006–2008 and 2011–2014 there has been no progress with Belarus’ democratisation. In 2008 and 2015 Belarusian authorities released political prisoners as required by the EU. However, neither the electoral process nor the overall human rights’ situation in the country improved. The Western coercive diplomacy and sanctions policy turned out to be only partially successful, due to limited EU leverage over Belarus, and consistent Russian political and economic support.

As for Poland–Belarus trade relations, they have not been affected by the occasional EU sanctions which targeted specific individuals and companies rather than economic sectors or state enterprises. The lion’s share of Belarus’ export to Poland consists of mineral and chemical products, wood and ferrous metals. Main Belarusian imports from Poland are agricultural products, machinery and equipment, as well as metals and chemicals.

Poland is among Belarus’ largest trade partners. As seen in Graph No. 1, up until 2008 Belarusian exports to Poland exceeded imports, but since that year an opposite trend persists. In fact, the volume of a negative trade balance

**Graph No. 1. Belarus–Poland trade in 2000–2016.**



*Author’s compilation based on Belarusian Statistics Committee data.*

with Poland is much larger, given that Belarusians spend hundreds of millions of dollars (more than 700 million USD in 2014) on consumer goods annually in Poland, and these expenses are not counted in official trade statistics.

Furthermore, a decrease in Polish imports to Belarus in 2015–2016 was not as steep as official statistics indicate. In order to bypass the Russian embargo, part of Poland's agricultural products came to Belarus under the guise of other states' producers. As a closer analysis of trade statistics suggests, in 2015 some Polish imports were counted in Belarusian statistics in favour of Ecuador, Morocco and Turkey, while in 2016 trade statistics were artificially distorted, favouring — only on paper — a number of West and Central African countries, including Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Burkina Faso.

### The Unresolved Dispute over the Union of Poles in Belarus

The Polish minority in Belarus is composed of 295,000 people according to the 2009 Belarus census, while Belarusian ethnicity was declared by 47,000 citizens of Poland in 2011. Both minorities are concentrated in the Poland–Belarus borderland and are for the most part well integrated into local societies.

According to the 2009 Belarusian census, 58 percent and 34 percent of the Polish minority representatives named Belarusian and Russian as their mother tongues, respectively, while only 5 percent opted for Polish.<sup>1</sup> There are two secondary schools with Polish as language of instruction (in Hrodna and Vaŭkavysk) and a dozen other secondary educational institutions with Polish as an occasional subject.<sup>2</sup> However, Polish is rarely spoken at home among the Polish minority in Belarus. When asked what language they speak at home, less than 2 percent spoke Polish, while Belarusian and Russian were selected by 41 percent and 51 percent of ethnic Poles, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Belarusian as a language of domestic communication was declared by most Belarusian minority members in Poland.

While Poland has pursued a reasonably sustainable coherent diaspora policy, Belarus has been mostly inactive in this regard. A good example of Poland's meaningful assistance to its diaspora is the Law on the Polish Card. This 2007

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<sup>1</sup> Belarus National Census 2009. Population by ethnicity and mother tongue, *Belarusian Statistical Committee*, accessed April 25, 2017, [http://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/perepis\\_2009/5.8-0.pdf](http://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/perepis_2009/5.8-0.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Belarus, CERD/C/BLR/18-19, 15 November 2012, p. 16, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/51ed02304.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Belarus National Census 2009. Population by ethnicity and languages spoken at home, *Belarusian Statistical Committee*, accessed April 25, 2017, [http://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/perepis\\_2009/5.9-0.pdf](http://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/perepis_2009/5.9-0.pdf).

legislation gave Polish minority members in Belarus, as well as in other post-Soviet countries, a number of important benefits. In contrast to Poland, any Belarusian diaspora policy is largely incoherent and selective. The law *On Belarusians living abroad*, which was adopted as late as 2014, was met with disappointment by Belarusian diaspora as their aspirations, such as cheaper or free Belarusian visas, were not taken into account.<sup>4</sup>

The Union of Poles in Belarus, which came into existence in June 1990, has been active in defending cultural rights and promoting the Polish culture in Belarus. Thanks to its endeavors, sixteen centers of Polish culture were set up across the country, and the newspaper *Głos z nad Niemna*'s print-run reached as much as 12,000 copies at one point. However, since the mid-1990s the organization's activities became restricted in Belarus.

As Tadeusz Gawin, who chaired the Union of Poles from 1990–2000, wrote in his book: in 1995 a number of high Belarusian officials benevolent to the Union lost their offices. That same year the first attempts by the Belarusian KGB to recruit members of organizations took place.<sup>5</sup> From this time on, Gawin describes himself being under the constant pressure of Belarusian security bodies. A state ban on the opening of a Polish school at the Belarusian city of Navahradak in 1996 was the first in a series of scandals in relations between Belarusian authorities and the Union of Poles.

In 2005, a year after the referendum in Belarus took place on the prolongation of presidential terms, the European Union imposed sanctions against a number of Belarusian officials and repressions against the Union of Poles intensified. The organization split in two, largely a result of deliberate actions from Belarusian state bodies. The Belarusian Ministry of Justice did not recognize the newly elected Union's Chairman Anzhalika Borys (Andżelika Borys, in Polish), which led to her and her followers secession from the Union, recognized later by the authorities.

In June 2005 the then secretary of the Polish Embassy, Marek Bućko, was expelled from Belarus. The following month the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs ordered the Director of the Consular Department, Andrzej Buczak, to leave the country. In turn, Poland recalled its ambassador from Belarus and sent a few diplomatic notes protesting events around the Union of Poles.<sup>6</sup>

Ever since, two Union of Poles has functioned in Belarus; one is recognized by the Belarusian state and registered by the Ministry of Justice, and the other

<sup>4</sup> Andrei Yeliseyeu, "Emigration and diaspora policies in Belarus", INTERACT Research Report 2014/27, accessed April 25, 2017, [https://www.academia.edu/13691443/Emigration\\_and\\_diaspora\\_policies\\_in\\_Belarus](https://www.academia.edu/13691443/Emigration_and_diaspora_policies_in_Belarus)

<sup>5</sup> Tadeusz Gawin, "Związek Polaków na Białorusi. Historia niszczenia niezależności 1988–2005", Białystok, 2006, 88.

<sup>6</sup> Ryszard Zięba, "Główne kierunki polityki zagranicznej Polski po zimnej wojnie", Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2010, 238–239.

is not. Members of the Union not recognized by the Belarusian state have found their activities under increased limitations and repression. They have been persistently attacked in Belarusian state media and occasionally harassed by law enforcement agencies and security bodies. According to the Criminal Code of Belarus, participants of unregistered organizations can be punished with three years' imprisonment.

A new escalation around the Unions of Poles emerged in January 2010 after the election of a new Union of Poles chairman in the Belarus' town of Ivianiec. It brought victory to Tereza Sobal who was a member of the unregistered Union of Poles in Belarus. Dissatisfied with the results of the election, Belarusian authorities initiated a capture of the Polish cultural centre in Ivianiec in the registered Union's favour.

On 9 February 2010 Polish Ambassador Henryk Litwin was called into Warsaw for consultations. Four days later, during his visit, Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov was handed a letter by Polish President Kaczynski, which was addressed to his Belarusian counterpart. In this letter Lukashenka was asked to solve the problem surrounding the Union of Poles based on democratic principles. The letter remained unanswered and no amicable solution was proposed by Belarus.

On 17 February the Belarusian court ruled that the cultural centre was to become a property of the registered Union. That same day the Polish parliament passed a resolution condemning Belarus' actions and calling for personal sanctions. A few days later the Polish president hosted Borys as a sign of support to the Union of Poles that is unrecognized by Belarus. Tensions between the countries over the Union of Poles deescalated somewhat after the April 2010 plane crash that killed the Polish President Lech Kaczynski and his wife.

Despite sustained, numerous attempts by Warsaw to influence Minsk to change its attitude to the unrecognized Union of Poles, to date no breakthrough has taken place. The organization remains unregistered, and access to the Polish cultural centres for its members remains restricted. In December 2016, Borys was elected a head of the unregistered Union of Poles anew, which brought a *déjà vu* effect to the 2005 state of things.

Relations between the *Belarusian minority in Poland* and Polish authorities have been much more positive, although not perfect. They were overshadowed by the criminal proceedings against eleven members of the Editorial Board of *Niwa Weekly* (a newspaper for Belarusians in Poland), including some prominent figures of the Belarusian minority of Poland. The process was initiated in 2003 after the Supreme Control Chamber of Poland reported certain violations by *Niwa*, mostly related to legislation on book-keeping. Although in 2006 the trial finally found all *Niwa* editorial members not guilty, the persecution caused damage to the image and cultural activities of Belarusian minority organizations

in Poland. Criminal charges also impaired political activities of Belarusian minority representatives at a regional level. It was suggested that prosecution became possible — at least to some extent — because of the personal negative attitudes of some Polish law-enforcement officials towards representatives of national minorities.<sup>7</sup>

## Migration and Visa Relations between Poland and Belarus

In October 2003, on the eve of entering the EU, Poland introduced short-term national visas for the citizens of neighbouring eastern states, including Belarus. The visa requirements were quite simple and visa fees for Belarusians were rather low. However, four year later when Poland was accessing the Schengen zone, the country had to revoke national legislation regulating short-term entries for foreigners. Instead, in December 2007 Polish consulates started issuing Schengen visas, which brought a manifold increase in visa fees. As long as Belarus did not have — and still does not — a visa facilitation agreement with the EU, a standard fee for a Schengen visa increased to EUR 60.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, visa procedures also became more cumbersome than before.

This resulted in an almost four times decrease in visas issued by Polish consulates in 2008 against previous year: from 271,000 to 74,000 visas. As a result, in 2008 the number of border-crossings at the Poland–Belarus border section dropped below the level registered in 1990, which prompted talk of a ‘true collapse of the bilateral movement of persons.’<sup>9</sup> It was only in 2012 the numbers of short-term visas issued by Polish consulates in Belarus surpassed the 2007 visa statistics.

Two factors affected the performance of Polish consulates in Belarus. First, for years Belarus did not allow the expansion of Poland’s consular staff. Second, many thousands of Belarusians had to overpay visa intermediaries because of persistent hackers’ manipulations with online registrations for visa applications at the Polish consulate’s web pages. The latter problem was partly solved by the establishment of authorized visa centres across Belarus in 2016. They facilitate access to visa procedures for applicants for an additional fee of EUR 15.

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<sup>7</sup> Study of the problems of Belarus–Poland borderland in the context of the EU enlargement, pp. 128–129, accessed April 25, 2017, [https://spring96.org/files/book/en/Pamiezza\\_en.pdf](https://spring96.org/files/book/en/Pamiezza_en.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> As Ukraine and Russia had functioning visa facilitation agreements with the EU by 2008, a standard fee for a Schengen visa for their nationals stood at EUR 35.

<sup>9</sup> Tomasz Komornicki, “Flows of persons and goods across the Polish segment of the outer boundary of the European Union — results of a research project”, in Tomasz Komornicki et al. (ed.), *European Union: External and Internal Borders, Interactions and Networks*, Vol. 20 of Europa XXI, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, 2010, 13.

Despite these problems, Poland issues a high share of visas (45 percent in 2016) in the total numbers of Schengen visas given in Belarus. A good performance by Polish consulates makes Belarus fifth in the world (after Russia, China, Ukraine, and Turkey) in terms of absolute numbers of Schengen visas and first in terms of Schengen visas per capita. Furthermore, Polish consulates in Belarus are known for particularly low levels of visa refusals and for the largest share of multiple-entry Schengen visas among other EU countries' consular bodies in the country.

While visa procedures for Belarusian travellers to Poland have become much more costly and complicated in the last decade, a number of facilitations in travelling to Belarus were opened for nationals of Poland, as well as other Western countries in recent years. These visa-free options, since June 2015, include entry to the Belarusian section of the Bialovezha National Park for up to three days and to the tourism and recreation park Augustow Canal at the Poland–Lithuania–Belarus borderland, as well as to the Hrodna city and its surrounding area for up to five days, from October 2016. Furthermore, since February 2017 nationals of 80 countries, including all EU Member States, can come to Belarus visa-free through the Minsk airport for up to 5 days. Obviously arrival by plane through Minsk is not a preferred option for many Poles who have a reason to visit Belarus. However, taken that two-way plane ticket from Warsaw to Minsk can be bought in advance for around EUR 100, this seems to allow a significant ease of travel for a section of Polish nationals who plan on paying only a short visit to Belarus.

As for labour migration and long-term travel, Poland is the most popular destination country for Belarusian migrants after Russia. More recently Poland has facilitated access to its labour market and to its higher education system, and has simplified procedures for obtaining citizenship for some categories of Belarusians. As a consequence, the country has become a more popular destination for both temporary labour migrants and permanent immigrants from Belarus.<sup>10</sup> Economic stagnation in Russia has pushed thousands of Belarusian labour migrants to reorient towards Poland. Poland is interested in recruiting more Belarusian seasonal workers, the Polish ambassador to Belarus acknowledged in November 2016.<sup>11</sup> The number of Belarusians who work in Poland under the simplified temporary employment scheme is likely to grow in coming years.

As a result of 1921's Peace of Riga, present-day Belarus was divided between Soviet Russia and Poland. Belarus reunited in 1939 under the Soviet Union after the start of WWII. According to 2008 Polish legislation, Belarusians with

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<sup>10</sup> Andrei Yelisseyeu, "Migration between the EU, Visegrad Countries and Belarus: The Present Situation and the Possible Future", in *Forecasting Migration between the EU, V4 and Eastern Europe. Impact of Visa Abolition (2014)*, 199–200.

<sup>11</sup> Maryna Nosava, "Poland interested to recruit more Belarusian workers", BelaPAN news agency, 9 November 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, [http://belapan.com/archive/2016/11/09/en\\_091111144b/](http://belapan.com/archive/2016/11/09/en_091111144b/).



a command of Polish whose two great grandparents had either Polish ethnicity or Polish citizenship are qualified for the so-called Polish Card. This document, *inter alia*, authorises its holders to seek employment in Poland without a work permit, to carry out economic activity in Poland on the same basis as Polish citizens and, since May 2014, to easily obtain a permanent residence permit. Furthermore, since September 2016, Polish Card holders settling in Poland can acquire Polish citizenship within a year. Since January 2017 those people are entitled to financial assistance during the first nine months of residence in Poland.<sup>12</sup>

Polish Cards have become a rather effective tool of Poland's soft power among Belarus' population. About 75,000 Polish Cards had been issued for Belarusians by mid-2016. In many cases applicants applying for a Polish Card are not Polish minority members who seek a stronger bond with a historic motherland, but persons with solely practical considerations. The actual reasons for many Belarusians applying for Polish Cards include facilitation of their employment in Poland, getting a state education scholarship or a way to receive a free long-term national Polish visa which allows travelling across the Schengen zone.

In 2011 the Belarusian Constitutional Court delivered a decision which says that the respective Polish law goes against the principles of international law and violates a number of international and bilateral agreements.<sup>13</sup> According to later amendments to the Belarusian law "On state service", officials are not allowed to be in possession of Polish Cards and similar documents issued by other foreign countries. Failure to observe this norm is a ground for discharge from office. However, these legal counter measures by Belarus did not affect the functioning of Polish consulates and the numbers of Polish Cards among Belarusian nationals to continue growing.

Another important although still inactive mobility tool between Poland and Belarus is local border traffic (LBT). The 2006 EU Regulation makes it possible for EU countries to conclude agreements with neighbouring third states on a visa-free land border-crossing regime for border residents (a 30–50 km zone on both sides of the border). Belarus has blocked LBT agreements with Poland and Lithuania for the last seven years. Although these were signed and ratified back in 2010, in each of the two cases Belarus stopped short of taking the final necessary step, namely, sending a diplomatic note indicating readiness to launch the agreement. At the same time Belarus has a functioning LBT agreement with Latvia and this has been since 2012. Notably, the Latvia–Belarus borderland is much less populous than Poland–Belarus and Lithuania–Belarus border areas.

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<sup>12</sup> Polish Card. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, accessed April 25, 2017, [http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign\\_policy/polish\\_diaspora/card\\_of\\_the\\_pole/](http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign_policy/polish_diaspora/card_of_the_pole/).

<sup>13</sup> Decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Belarus on 7 April 2011 № II-258/2011, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.kc.gov.by/main.aspx?guid=23203>.

Belarusian authorities' unwillingness to facilitate travelling for hundreds of thousands of Belarusian border residents into Poland's and Lithuania's border areas is for political and economic reasons.<sup>14</sup> During 2011–2013 political relations between Belarus and Poland, as well as Belarus and Lithuania were very cold as both EU countries strongly supported the EU sanctions policy. Except for a special technical reason once mentioned by Belarus, which was the alleged absence of special printers for LBT permits, political tensions were repeatedly cited by Belarusian officials as a barrier to introducing LBT regimes. Supposedly, Belarusian authorities also have a concern that a greater awareness among Belarusians of their western neighbours' living standards would enhance pro-European sentiments and cause a higher level of distrust in economic and political policies in Belarus.

Belarusian officials repeatedly expressed their discontent over frequent shopping of Belarusians abroad. A few years ago Alyaksandr Lukashenka even voiced an idea to impose an exit tax on Belarusians travelling abroad worth 100 USD. Admittedly, facilitated mobility of border residents would increase purchases of consumer goods in Poland and Lithuania, which would further worsen Belarus' balance of payments. For instance, in 2014 alone, Polish estimations show Belarusians spent about EUR 730 million in Poland on consumer goods not registered in customs declarations. In 2015–2016 the figure went down because of the economic downturn in Belarus and decreased purchasing ability of its population.

Lately the Belarusian side has cited an underdeveloped border infrastructure as the actual reason for continued delay with launching long-awaited LBT agreements. According to the article published in the newspaper "*Belarus today*" by Leonid Maltsev, the Head of the State Border Committee, "Preliminary calculations show that about a trillion of [old] Belarusian roubles (which is around 50 million USD — note) are needed for the full-scale functioning of LBT agreements with our neighbours".<sup>15</sup> Thereby, of late Belarusian authorities have come up with a variety of arguments supporting their reluctance to introduce a visa-free regime for border residents. Despite a big part of residents on both sides of the border being enthusiastic about LBT, political and economic considerations by Belarus' authorities make the prospects of these agreements unclear.

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<sup>14</sup> Andrei Yeliseyev, "Keeping the door ajar. Local border traffic regimes on the EU's eastern borders", Finnish Institute of International Affairs, FIIA Report 41, 2014, 70–74, accessed April 25, 2017, [www.fia.fi/assets/publications/FIIA\\_Report\\_41\\_web.pdf](http://www.fia.fi/assets/publications/FIIA_Report_41_web.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Leonid Maltsev, "Big steps of local border traffic" (in Russian), Советская Белоруссия № 5 (24887), 13 января 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.sb.by/obshchestvo/article/bolshie-shagi-malogo-prigranichnogo-dvizheniya.html>.

## Post-Crimea: Geopolitical Considerations Push for Improved Relations

Mindful of the aggressive Russian policy in Ukraine, Belarus sees closer relations with the EU as a tool to decrease the country's political and economic dependence on Russia. In addition, Western sanctions against Russia contributed to its economic stagnation, which in turn provoked a deeper economic downturn in Belarus.<sup>16</sup> Belarus' export promotion program for 2016–2020 has an objective to diversify the country's export so that its third would fall on EU countries by 2020.<sup>17</sup>

The EU's and Poland's willingness to reengage with Belarus is based largely on geopolitical reasoning. Taking into account Belarus' intermediary role in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, establishing closer cooperation with Belarus was seen by many as a timely decision serving both sides' interests. Although the EU and Poland remain engaged with Belarusian opposition and the public at large, their approach towards Belarus has lately become more pragmatic.

Poland–Belarus reengagement started with the Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makeij's visit to Warsaw on 28–29 August 2014. With his Polish counterpart Radoslaw Sikorski and other Polish high officials, Makeij discussed the events in Ukraine as well as topics of bilateral relations.<sup>18</sup> Prior to Makeij's visit, two symbolic joint events are worth mentioning. First, the session of the Poland–Belarus working group on trade and investments within the Committee on Economic Cooperation, and a business forum for Polish and Belarusian businessmen, took place in Minsk in April 2014. Second, a forum of sister cities in Belarus and Poland was hosted in the Polish city Bialystok in May 2014, after a twelve-year break.

In December 2014 the third meeting of the joint Belarus–Poland Commission on economic cooperation was attended by Polish and Belarusian Deputy Prime Ministers Janusz Piechocinski and Mikhail Rusy. Furthermore, in 2014 bilateral working groups on transport, tourism and energy met, and Polish agriculture minister Marek Sawicki paid a visit to Minsk exploring investment opportunities.

In 2015 development of economic and technical contacts between the two countries continued. Throughout the year new joint business meetings took place, including a business forum on woodworking and the furniture industry, in May,

<sup>16</sup> The year of 2017 is projected to be the third consecutive year of economic decline in Belarus. The country's GDP fell 7 percent since 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Belarus' export promotion program for 2016–2020, approved by the Council of Ministers on 1 August 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.government.by/upload/docs/file/aff83a3fc04eb9c0.PDF>.

<sup>18</sup> On the Working Visit of Mr. Vladimir Makei, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, to Poland. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 29 August 2014, accessed April 25, 2017, [http://mfa.gov.by/en/press/news\\_mfa/f9c91d4b9c4a581a.html](http://mfa.gov.by/en/press/news_mfa/f9c91d4b9c4a581a.html).

in Minsk. This event was opened by the Polish Deputy Prime Minister Konrad Pawlik, who was appointed as a new Ambassador to Belarus the following March. In December 2015 the Belarusian city of Hrodna hosted a third forum of sister cities in Belarus and Poland. A number of bilateral projects in culture, tourism, ecology, and border infrastructure were supported within three Euro regions (Bug, Neman, Belovezhskaya Pushcha) functioning at the Poland–Belarus borderland. In November 2015 Belarusian KGB passed on documents concerning Polish prisoners of WWII to Poland, which could be seen as a political signal of Belarusian interest for further engagement.<sup>19</sup>

Release of the remaining political prisoners in August 2015 by Belarus gave the start to increased political contact between Poland and Belarus. Over 22–23 March 2016, Witold Waszczykowski came to Belarus, which was the first visit of Poland's Foreign Minister to Belarus since 2010. In the course of his visit to Belarus, Waszczykowski visited the town of Vaŭkavysk, the birth place of his mother, met with his Belarusian counterpart Makeij and held talks with Alyaksandr Lukashenka. "Nobody is as much interested in independent and stable Belarus as Poland is. I think you do not need yet another unstable state in addition to Ukraine," Lukashenka stated during their talk.<sup>20</sup>

In his address to parliament in April 2016, Lukashenka made it clear that Belarus is very interested in eventually getting financial benefits from developed political relationships with EU countries: "We have begun a new stage in relations with the West, which I would still call "empty talking"... If we do not develop our relations, we will lose interest in each other after some time. In its relations with the West, Belarus's primary interest is investments and joint ventures".<sup>21</sup> Volumes of Polish foreign direct investment into the Belarusian economy are quite low. According to Belarusian statistics, in 2015 Polish FDI stocks in Belarus stood at 195 million USD.

On 11–12 October 2016, Belarusian FM Makeij paid an official visit to Warsaw in connection with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration on good-neighbourliness, mutual recognition and cooperation between Belarus and Poland.

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<sup>19</sup> Polskie Radio, "The Belarusian KGB has provided Polish Internal Security Agency with a document on Polish WWII POWs" (in Polish), 6 November 2015, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.polskieradio.pl/75/921/Artykul/1541436,KGB-Bialorusi-przekazalo-ABW-dokument-o-polskich-jencach-z-II-wojny>.

<sup>20</sup> Internet portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, "Meeting with the Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski" (in Russian), 23 March 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/vstrecha-s-ministrom-inostrannyx-del-polshi-vitoldom-vaschikovskim-13313/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-ministrom-inostrannyx-del-polshi-vitoldom-vaschikovskim-13313/).

<sup>21</sup> Belarusian Telegraph Agency, "President's address to the Belarusian people and the National assembly" (in Russian), 21 April 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-21-aprelja-obratitsja-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-beloruskomu-narodu-intatsionalnomu-sobraniju-190272-2016/>.

Makeij met his Polish counterpart Waszczykowski and Polish President Andrzej Duda. At the final press conference the Belarusian FM publicly acknowledged Belarus' interest in breaking with economic overdependence on Russia: "When it comes to our key partners, we are not going to break away from Russia, we realize that Belarus is overly dependent on it economically. But we want to get rid of this heavy dependence, we want to be less dependent on one state, because this is very disadvantageous during the financial crisis, which we have recently been witness to".<sup>22</sup> Makeij's participation in the Warsaw meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Group and the Eastern Partnership on 12 April 2017 was his third visit to Warsaw since 2014.

On 24 October 2016, Mateusz Morawiecki, Poland's Vice Minister and Minister of Economic Development and Finances, took part in the opening of the twentieth Belarusian–Polish economic forum Good Neighborliness. He also headed the Polish delegation at the fourth meeting of the joint commission on economic cooperation. At the meeting with the Belarusian Prime Minister Andrei Kobiakov, the latter offered Poland the opportunity to purchase energy produced at the Astraviec nuclear power plant, which is to begin functioning in 2018.

Over the past two years, four Poland–Belarus inter-parliamentary meetings took place. This is a new trend in the bilateral relationship, as previously Poland largely ignored official contacts with an undemocratic Belarusian parliament. In 2016 two Polish delegations, one chaired by the Marshal of the Senate of Poland Stanislaw Karczewski and the other by the Deputy Marshal of the Sejm, Ryszard Terlecki, visited Minsk. In January 2017 a Belarusian parliamentary delegation visited Warsaw. On 12–13 April 2017 a Polish parliamentary delegation paid an official visit to Minsk.

It is not clear why Poland puts on emphasis on parliamentary contacts, bearing in mind that a parliament has very limited say in decision-making and generally plays an absolutely marginal role in Belarus' political system. It may be seen as a Poland's attempt to please the Belarus executive which persistently strives for parliament's legitimization in the international arena. Poland is also exploring new forms of cooperation thanks to parliamentary connections. For instance, the Forum of Regions as a new platform of cooperation between Belarus and Poland is in the planning stages of being established, and would gather regional, local and self-government representatives from the two countries. This Forum, according to the Polish Ambassador to Belarus, is to be supervised by the upper

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<sup>22</sup> Mikhas Ilyin, "Makei says geopolitical foes, Foreign Ministry corrects him saying geopolitical actors" (in Russian), Euroradio, 11 October 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/makey-govorit-geopoliticheskaya-vragi-mid-popravlyaet-geopoliticheskie-igroki>.

chambers of the parliaments.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, this way Polish parliamentarians would sometimes get an opportunity to meet with Lukashenka, as was the case during the visit of Stanislaw Karczewski in December 2016.

As long as Poland takes a more pragmatic attitude in its relations with Belarus, future Polish financial support for independent Belarusian media and NGOs is unclear. A worrying sign were the plans by the Polish government to revise its support to *Belsat* TV which was provided during the last 10 years. In December 2016 the Polish government announced its plans to cut funding for *Belsat* TV and possibly terminate broadcasting in the Belarusian language. “The earlier contract between MFA and TVP [Polish TV — note] on the creation of *Belsat* TV has already been terminated,” informed Marek Ziółkowski, Deputy Secretary in the Polish MFA, in January 2017.<sup>24</sup>

As Polish FM Waszczykowski explained, along with the reformatting of *Belsat* the Polish government expects Belarus to agree upon the retransmission of the TVP *Polonia*, a Polish-language channel tailored to Polish diaspora, over Belarusian TV cable networks. However, the head of the Poland-supported Union of Poles in Belarus Anzhalika Borys criticized this idea saying that shutting down *Belsat* would undermine Belarusians’ trust in Poland.<sup>25</sup> According to Polish MP Robert Tyszkiewicz, also the long-time Chairman of the Sejm Commission on affairs in Belarus, risking station’s future is a sign of crisis in Poland’s eastern policy.<sup>26</sup> A number of other Polish politicians and journalists, as well as Belarusian civil society actors, voiced their criticism of the Polish MFA’s proposal to cut support to *Belsat*.

Although the Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło reportedly reassured the network’s director Agnieszka Romaszewska of its continuing support to *Belsat*<sup>27</sup>,

<sup>23</sup> Belarusian Telegraph Agency, “Konrad Pawlik: Forum of Regions will become a new platform of Belarus-Poland cooperation”, 12 December 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://eng.belta.by/society/view/konrad-pawlik-forum-of-regions-will-become-a-new-platform-of-belarus-poland-cooperation-97115-2016/>.

<sup>24</sup> Marek Ziółkowski, “The MFA looks to the East. Tough normalization of relations with Belarus” (in Polish), RP newspaper web-page, 31 January 2017, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.rp.pl/Rzecz-o-polityce/301319909-MSZ-patrzy-na-Wschod-Zmudna-normalizacja-relacji-z-Bialorusia.html#ap-1>.

<sup>25</sup> Radio Racyja, “Anzhalika Borys says Belarusians need *Belsat*” (in Belarusian), December 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.racyja.com/palatyka/anzhalika-borys-belsat-patrebny-gram/>.

<sup>26</sup> Wiadomosci newspaper web-page, “The Foreign Ministry’s confuses diplomacy with journalism. Debate on Waszczykowski’s expose” (in Polish), 9 February 2017, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/14,114884,21350369.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Wprost web-page, “Waszczykowski wanted to cut off funding, Prime Minister intervened. Is *Belsat* TV rescued?” (in Polish), 5 January 2017, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://www.wprost.pl/swiat/10037597/Waszczykowski-chcial-obciac-dotacje-premier-interweniowala-TV-Bielsat-ocalona.html>.

the channel's future remains unclear. Ironically, the worrying news about appeared just before a series of mass social protests across Belarus in February–March 2017. Those were extensively covered by *Belsat* journalists, including through popular live streams, thereby proving the importance of the TV channel for a wider audience. Belarusian authorities reacted with frequent detentions of the network's journalists and raids on its offices, apparently seeking to interrupt live coverage of protests. Needless to say, in the event of shutting it down, Poland would offer invaluable help to Belarusian authorities in their quest for even larger control over flows of information.

Of note, despite intensified contact between the countries in the last three years, the issue of the Union of Poles remains unresolved. Furthermore, in March 2017 Lukashenka publicly stated that Poland maintained training camps for militants preparing for violent riots in Belarus. This statement was later echoed in official media. At the same time some issues of importance to Belarus have not found Poland's favour. For example, in March 2017 the Polish side firmly denied its plans to purchase energy produced at the Belarusian nuclear power plant, citing de-synchronization of power transmission lines and concerns about security standards.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

In 2014 Poland–Belarus relations received a new impetus after three years of having a cold relationship. Since then there has been an unprecedented rise in political contacts between the two countries. Polish foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski paid an official visit to Belarus in 2016 and talked with Alyaksandr Lukashenka. His Belarusian counterpart Uladzimir Makeij has visited Warsaw three times since 2014. As well as these visits, four Poland–Belarus inter-parliamentary meetings took place in 2016–2017. While Warsaw's objective is to prevent Belarus finding itself in insuperable political and economic dependence on Russia, Minsk is hoping to convert improved political relations with the West as an inflow of investments and creation of joint ventures.

Interestingly, recent improvements in Poland–Belarus relations have taken place during the ruling of Law and Justice in Poland. The last time the party controlled the Polish Government in 2005–2007 the latter pursued a consistent policy of democratic support in Belarus and, among other things, initiated the satellite *Belsat* TV for the Belarusian population. However this time, instead of expanding support to democratic Belarusian projects, the Polish Government

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<sup>28</sup> *Tut.by* news portal, "Poland refuses to purchase electricity produced by the Belarusian nuclear plant" (in Russian), 18 March 2017, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/economics/535820.html>.

has put them into question. Discussions about a cut in financial support to *Belsat* and even a possible termination of the channel's broadcasting, is the most illustrative example in this regard.

Witold Waszczykowski, the twelfth Polish foreign minister since Lukashenka's rise to power in 1994, must be aware of the limited successes and painful failures of his many predecessors in their policies towards Belarus. Neither mode of cooperation has motivated Belarusian authorities to implement real democratic changes. There is no reason to expect that lowering support to independent media or Belarusian NGOs would work either. However, it seems that this time Warsaw's willingness to reengage with Belarus is based on geopolitical reasoning to a much greater extent than ever before. Although the EU and Poland remain engaged with Belarusian opposition and the public at large, their approach towards Belarus has lately become more pragmatic.

Despite intensified contact between the two countries in the last three years, the issue of the Union of Poles remains unresolved. The same is true about the local border traffic agreement between Poland and Belarus, which remains blocked by Minsk. Despite this, mobility between the two countries has increased lately thanks to the growing numbers of short-term visas given by Polish consulates, as well as Belarus' recent initiatives on a visa-free entry for foreigners. As a result of changes in Polish national legislation and a growing economic disparity between Poland and Belarus in the former's favour, Poland has become a more popular destination for both temporary labour migrants and permanent immigrants from Belarus. This trend is likely to continue in the future, bearing in mind the introduction of new benefits to holders of the Polish Cards and a continuing economic stagnation in Russia, which has been the most popular destination country for Belarusian labour migrants so far.



# Conclusion

*Andis Kudors*

How can relatively small countries survive in a competitive and uncertain international environment? One possibility is to follow the principles of a free market, to create a trusting relationship with the external world and in case of necessity, align themselves with like-minded countries in order to withstand the pressure of a hegemonic power. There is another option, too — bandwagoning, which means siding with a powerful neighbour, and rendering support to him in international politics and in return receiving cheap energy or other resources. Belarus, under the leadership of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, has chosen the second option. The streets of Minsk are well kept, new stadiums are built and the façades of the buildings are illuminated. This is partly supported by Russia's tax-payers who subsidize the unreformed economy with supplies of cheap energy. The Belarusians in turn have given up their free choice in foreign policy. The wider public in Russia and Belarus has no say on the foreign policy priorities of their respective countries; these decisions in the authoritarian states are taken within very narrow groups. Official Russia is the one who writes the rules and Minsk has a subsidiary role, especially in military-strategical issues. What is a nature of Russia's relations with its neighbors? Only the Baltic States were able to implement an independent foreign policy from Moscow after 1991 without too much harm. In fact, the Balts suffer, too. The hostile influence of Russia is expressed there by media interference in the domestic processes of these countries, spreading propaganda and disinformation; internal integration is hindered as a result. Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine are in a much more difficult situation because since 1991 they have suffered from Russia's military power.

Belarus (so far) is not on this list, because bandwagoning assures peace with the dominant power in the region — that is, Russia. However, the annexation of Crimea made Minsk concerned which in turn urged the launch of “soft Belarusization”, aimed at distinguishing the identities of both nations. This was not easy, because the policy carried out for years by Alyaksandr Lukashenka tended more towards Russification, and Belarusian is now spoken by a smaller portion

of the population than in 1994. Besides that the history of the Belarusian people has usually been written by others; a narrative by representatives of Moscow's authorities about who Belarusians are and who they are not has been voiced louder than, for example, that of Lithuanians or Belarusian historians themselves. In order to show solidarity with Ukraine and thinking about the meaning of Belarus' own symbols, Belarusian officials now pin green-red ribbons to their chest instead of the orange-black ribbons of St. George. The latter ones were compromised because the members of the State Duma and the Federation Council of the Russian Federation adorned themselves with the ribbons of St. George on 18 March 2014 when listening to Vladimir Putin's speech to honour the illegitimate annexation of Crimea. Along with such symbolic gestures aimed as a statement that Belarus is not part of the 'Russian world', each time there is a solution from another economic dispute with Russia, Lukashenka vows unswerving loyalty to their great neighbouring country. That also happened after the recent deterioration of relations and following reconciliation when both presidents met in St. Petersburg on 3 April 2017. However, the climate of bilateral relations has changed. Although it was announced to media that all their differences were resolved, there is still the sensation that the last phase of confrontation was more acute than in previous years.

Tensions between Minsk and Moscow rose drastically in the first months of 2017. The conflict that had roots in the gas disputes of 2016 escalated to new highs during January–March 2017. The escalation was furthered by Belarus' decision to introduce a visa-free travel regime for short-term visits for citizens of around 80 countries. Russia responded with a decision to establish a security zone on the border between the two countries. If this is what the closest allies in the CIS integration projects have to experience, then what will it be like with the rest? Moscow is craving more, but Lukashenka hesitates to render everything into the hands of the Kremlin's overlord; paternalism and arrogance in statements by Russian officials do not stimulate mutual confidence. Although the media speak about the unity of the Slavic peoples, Belarus' and Russian elites do not trust each other much. The Kremlin's traditions in building relationships with neighbouring countries are not helpful when designing a real Union State of Belarus and Russia; two regional integration tools regularly employed by Moscow are the economic arm being twisted and political pressure. Regardless of the high level of economic and military integration of both nations, Moscow's lack of success in achieving the recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence from Georgia by Minsk is indicative.

Currently Lukashenka's regime cannot survive without Russian economic aid but what will happen when the Belarusian president starts feeling that his power threatened by Russia? A critical moment could come in 2019 when the presidential

elections in Russia are over and the lord of Kremlin has more time to focus on affairs in neighbouring countries. There have been concerns about an even nearer future, namely, autumn 2017 when the military exercises *Zapad 2017* take place. What is essential in this respect is how the developments in Belarus are viewed by those dwelling in the Kremlin. Belarus is an important country for Russia; its loyalty is a precondition for Moscow to give or withdraw support for the current Belarusian elite headed by Lukashenka. The present relative stability in relations might change if the Kremlin starts to believe that Belarus is slipping away from the orbit set by Moscow.

Belarus has been functioning as buffer zone between the West and Russia. Future military cooperation between Belarus and Russia will be affected by several factors. One of them is the level of military confrontation between Russia and NATO. The deployment of Allied troops in the Baltic States and Poland will create stronger pressure on Minsk. Russia might insist on the possibility of placing its troops in Belarus on a permanent basis, in order to secure its presence at the strategically important Suwalki corridor, linking the territory of Belarus and the Kaliningrad district. Lukashenka will have to counter manoeuvre — on one hand he will not be eager to accept a considerable Russian military presence in Belarus. On other hand, his rapprochement with the West will require a looser grip on the Belarusian opposition and, similarly to the first scenario, will ultimately weaken the president's power internally. Thus, military cooperation with Russia is becoming a major problem for Belarus.

Positive signals have appeared in Belarus–EU relations after the annexation of Crimea. EU normative foreign policy so far has not born tangible fruit in the democratization of Belarus, therefore Brussels and EU national capitals have started to reconsider previous positions and look for more pragmatic and less politicised areas of relationship. However there are limitations. It is obvious there is no chance to conclude a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with Minsk within the EU Eastern Partnership framework, because Belarus is a member of Eurasian Economic Union. Along with that, Belarus will not consider genuine democratization as one of the possible concessions during the normalization process with the EU.

If Brussels is now turning slowly and cautiously towards a more pragmatic relationship with Belarus, the Baltic States have been following this approach for quite some time. There are certain differences, however, between Latvia and Lithuania, where the latter has been seen more as playing the role of 'bad cop', leaving the 'good guy' character for Latvia. The discussion is mostly about the feasibility of exercising normative foreign policy based on conditions, i.e. cooperation only takes place if sufficient democratic reforms are implemented. The economic interests of Latvia push for a balanced approach, meaning Riga

generally adheres to the common EU position in relations with Belarus, trying not to exacerbate the situation and to take advantage of its ports for the transit of Belarusian goods and materials. If normative foreign policies have been fruitless, maybe it is worth making better use of the engagement approach? It would create more people-to-people links and give an opportunity to the ordinary people of Belarus to learn about their EU and NATO neighbours, and find out they are not a threat.

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**The Centre for East European Policy Studies (CEEPS)** is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation founded in Riga in 2006. The main objectives of CEEPS are: to make its contribution to the development of Latvian foreign policy by doing research work in the scientific fields of politics, history, and the economy of Eastern European countries; to develop cooperation with scientific institutions and other organisations of Latvia and foreign countries; to be aware of, and explain, Latvia's state interests abroad. The most recent CEEPS studies have focused on the influence of Russian public diplomacy and propaganda on the social and political processes in Russia's neighbouring countries. CEEPS activities up until now have been financially supported by the following institutions: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Latvia, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, the Social Integration Foundation (Latvia), the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Germany), the Soros Foundation Latvia, the National Endowment for Democracy (US), the American Latvian Association (ALA), the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the European People's Party (EPP) Group at the European Parliament, and private donors.

**Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)** was founded in 1925 as a political legacy of Germany's first democratically elected president, Friedrich Ebert. Ebert, a Social Democrat from a humble crafts background who had risen to hold the highest political office in his country, in response to his own painful experience in political confrontation, proposed the establishment of a foundation to serve the following aims: furthering political and social education of individuals from all walks of life in the spirit of democracy and pluralism, facilitating access to university education and research for gifted young people by providing scholarships, contributing to international understanding and cooperation. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, banned by the Nazis in 1933 and re-established in 1947, continues today to pursue these aims in all its extensive activities. As a private, cultural non-profit institution, it is committed to the ideas and basic values of social democracy. Current, particular important topics of our work are: fair society, innovation and progress, active democracy.

**Belarusian Foreign Policy: 360°**

Editor: Andis Kudors

Rīga, 2017

The Centre for East European Policy Studies

Ausekļa iela 11–411, Rīga, LV-1010

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Publisher: University of Latvia Press

Aspazijas bulvāris 5, Rīga, LV-1050

*www.lu.lv/apgads*

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Printed by Latgales druka

Baznīcas iela 28, Rēzekne, LV-4601

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