



Research Report

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# Cooperation and Dependence in Belarus-Russia Relations



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# About This Report

In this report, we examine areas of policy convergence and divergence in the Belarus-Russia relationship, particularly regarding foreign and domestic policies, military and security cooperation, and economic and defense industrial ties. We also consider the regional perspectives of Belarus’s neighbors—Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine—and how Belarus poses an evolving threat to their security.

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# Summary

In this report, we consider the evolution of the Belarus-Russia bilateral relationship from the early 2000s through 2023 to identify trends, areas of convergence and divergence, and security implications for Europe.

The relationship between Belarus and Russia is unique and complex. At first glance, their similarities are numerous. Their ties are based on a shared history and language, a deep cultural affinity, legal agreements that codify a strategic partnership, intertwined economies, and shared threat perceptions of the West in general and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in particular. The two governments are led by highly personalist regimes that have decades of experience managing the partnership and share a similar and nostalgic view of the Soviet Union. There is a great deal of convergence across many policies.

However, this relationship is not one between equals, nor is it entirely harmonious; several areas of friction remain unresolved. For many years, Belarus has attempted to carve out space for its own sovereignty and independent choices through a policy of what we refer to as balancing Russian pressure with engagement with other countries. Since 2020, however, Belarus's ability to act autonomously has shrunk dramatically. The watershed year in the relationship was 2020, when Belarus's ability to offset Russian demands diminished. Through a combination of violent government crackdowns on protests that year, alarming its neighbors via a migrant crisis in 2021, and allowing its territory to be used to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Belarus has found itself increasingly isolated and unable to push back on most Russian requests. For Belarus's neighbors, managing the relationship with Minsk is now a challenge as ties (and mutual dependence) between Minsk and Moscow grow stronger. For Moscow, Belarus is the last European country in Russia's perceived sphere of influence and the last strategic buffer against NATO. For Minsk, Russia is the only partner willing to keep Belarus afloat politically, militarily, and financially. The two countries depend on each other for different reasons, and their relationship reflects insecurity and unease with their respective positions.

In this report, we outline areas of policy convergence and divergence in the Belarus-Russia relationship, particularly regarding foreign and domes-

tic policies, military and security cooperation, and economic and defense industrial ties. We also consider the regional perspectives of Belarus's neighbors—Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine—and how Belarus poses an evolving threat to their security. We drew from primary language sources from Belarus, Russia, and neighboring countries, and we conducted interviews with experts. Our research and analysis leads us to the following conclusions:

- Overall, Belarus and Russia are aligned in many respects. There is a great deal of close cultural affinity, and the two countries share political, economic, defense industrial, and military ties that are codified in multiple agreements and treaties. Both countries' threat perceptions of the West overall have been similar over the past 30 years, and alignment has increased since 2020. As Belarus's options for pursuing political, economic, and defense cooperation with states other than Russia have dwindled, Minsk has acquiesced to a greater number of Russian military demands, such as that Russia be granted basing rights or that Belarus play more-active roles in multilateral organizations.
- There remains a difference between the two states on the question of Belarus's sovereignty. The Russian government, which views Belarus through its own great-power prism, sees Belarus as a "brotherly nation" that defers to Moscow in all important matters. The Belarusian government, opposition, and people see themselves as different from Russia and attempt to demonstrate they are a sovereign country—even if these demonstrations are symbolic or suppressed.
- Belarus has sought to carve out a role for itself as a mediator of sorts between Russia and the West, most notably between 2014 and 2020 and particularly in regard to conflict in Ukraine. Those diplomatic opportunities have now mostly been curtailed, but Minsk, under Aleksandr Lukashenko's leadership, is still able to position itself as a mediator when needed, such as negotiating the July 2023 exile of Yevgeny Prigozhin and Wagner Group elements to Belarus.
- The countries have a long-standing defense industrial cooperation that is influenced structurally by their mutual Soviet legacy. The Belarusian defense sector is almost totally dependent on contracts with Moscow.

This intertwining is partially a legacy of the Soviet era but also the result of Belarus losing international investment since 2020.

- Russia prefers to contract components rather than final military products, which limits Belarusian industry's ability to grow beyond a certain point. As one Russian military expert noted, Russia still treats Belarus as the "assembly shop of the Soviet Union" rather than an innovator its own right. Russia uses its role as Belarus's main customer to mold Belarusian industry according to Moscow's needs and keep Minsk firmly in a junior partner status.
- Three events since 2020 have been watershed moments in Belarus's relationship with Russia and its European neighbors: the crackdowns against the 2020 presidential election protests, the 2021 migrant border crisis, and Minsk's support for Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These events have isolated Belarus from Europe generally and its neighbors specifically, which, in turn, has increased Belarus's dependence on Moscow.
- Although Belarus is dependent on Russia in all spheres (a condition that has deepened since 2020), we find that the government in Minsk attempts to assert the appearance of sovereign choice even as its ability to do so is rapidly shrinking. Belarusian leadership's limited means to push back against some Russian requests over the years include delaying implementation of agreements, issuing public criticisms, and delaying responses to the Kremlin's requests.
- As Belarus's economic dependence on Russia grows, the Lukashenko government loses its ability to push back on Russian political and military demands. The codification of the Union State, a legal strategic partnership with Russia, is likely to consolidate Minsk's dependence on Moscow and will likely lead to increased Russian military presence in Belarus over time.
- Russia and Belarus are moving forward with Union State integration, and this process will result in closer military integration, Russian military forward stationing in Belarus, a joint military doctrine, and more-integrated responses in crisis and conflict with regional neighbors or NATO more broadly.
- Belarus's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine has damaged Minsk's relations with Kyiv. Militarily, the majority of the Belarusian

Army is made up of conscripts, and Belarus's forces remain small and weak. This means that these forces are unlikely to be an effective fighting unit for Russia inside Ukraine, but it also means they are unable to resist Russian intervention. The ongoing war in Ukraine offers Belarus a temporary measure of protection from the perceived threat of Russian intervention because the Russian military had sustained severe damage as of early 2023. On the other hand, the conflict has led Russia to seek to leverage its military-to-military ties with Belarus to a greater degree.

- Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland are concerned that diminishing Belarusian autonomy means that the Russian military will be able to operate at Belarus's border with NATO with little impediment, which would reduce warning times in a crisis or conflict. All three countries, along with Ukraine, remain concerned that their borders with Belarus will become increasingly hostile and unstable over time.
- The political regimes in Russia and Belarus are both brittle, and they are interlinked in different ways. A crisis in the Russian government, such as an unexpected leadership change or economic collapse, might bring about a secondary collapse in the Lukashenko government.

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# Introduction

The relationship between Belarus and Russia is unique and complex. Their relationship consists of a close cultural affinity, intertwined economies, similar political systems, and increasingly integrated military-to-military ties. The two governments are led by highly personalist regimes that have decades of experience managing the partnership and share a similar and nostalgic view of the Soviet Union. Russia views Belarus through a great-power lens, seeing it not as an independent nation but as a country that Russia can control. Belarus is economically dependent on Russian support and limited in its ability to act independently. For Russia's leaders, maintaining this dynamic is essential to their beliefs in Russia's own power status. For Russia in 2023, Belarus is the last remaining strategic buffer against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Belarus, for its part, has attempted for many years to carve out space for its own sovereignty and independent choices through a policy of balancing Russian pressure with engagement with other countries. But as Belarus's position has worsened over time, Russia has been able to make increasing demands that erode Belarus's sovereignty.

There is a great deal of convergence in policies and governance styles of the two countries. The Belarusian and Russian governments are each other's closest allies, and each views the other as a strategic partner. Neither government was put in place with a fair election, and both use concentrated presidential authorities to neutralize domestic opponents.<sup>1</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko have much in common in terms of leadership style and the personalist sys-

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<sup>1</sup> Yana Gorokhovskaia and Isabel Linzer, "The Long Arm of Authoritarianism," *Foreign Affairs*, June 2, 2022.

tems of government that they have built around themselves and have led for decades. They represent the same form of autocratic leadership and would rather change their countries' constitutions regarding presidential term limits than step down.<sup>2</sup> Both leaders have a nostalgic view of the Soviet era that ranges from positive to wistful.<sup>3</sup> Belarus stands out as the only former Soviet nation in which use of the Russian language has increased since the end of the Soviet Union, and Soviet heritage is still at the center of national ideology and discourse of the Lukashenko government.<sup>4</sup> Putin and Lukashenko also share a negative assessment of many Western liberal values, which they see as a threat to their regimes and their countries' stability.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, in many respects, the interests of the two countries and their leaders diverge, and the view from Belarus is different. Russian leaders view themselves as the senior partner and Belarusian leadership as the junior partner. Although there is a large degree of overlap in cultural affinity and historical memory, Belarus has a different view of itself, its pre-Soviet history, its nationhood, and the role that it could play regionally and internationally. The Belarusian people are not all in alignment with the views of their government, as shown by large-scale protests in 2020 against the outcome of the presidential election. The Belarusian opposition, from exile abroad, continues to envision a different and independent future for Belarus. Even Lukashenko, despite his loyalty to the Kremlin and deep autocratic preferences, has tried to find avenues where he could assert even a modicum of independence; he has outright rejected the concept of full absorption into the Russian Federation, and, until recent years, he has slow-walked integration policies. However, Minsk's actions since 2020 have isolated it from

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<sup>2</sup> Maxim Trudolyubov, "Breaking Presidential Term Limits in Russia and Beyond," *The Russia File*, Kennan Institute blog post, June 30, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> David Masci, "In Russia, Nostalgia for Soviet Union and Positive Feelings About Stalin," Pew Research Center, June 29, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Kamil Kłyśński and Wojciech Konończuk, *Opposites Put Together: Belarus's Politics of Memory*, OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, October 2020; Andrei Manakov, "Russian as a Native Language in the Post-Soviet Space in Comparison with the Results of the 1989 Census," *Pskov Journal of Regional Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 46, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Cooley, "Ordering Eurasia: The Rise and Decline of Liberal Internationalism in the Post-Communist Space," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2019.

international investment or supports, and its poor financial prospects have led it to greater dependence on Moscow, ultimately reducing its ability to pursue an independent path.

## Study Questions and Approach

Our goal in doing this study was to provide an understanding of how the Belarus-Russia relationship has evolved in the recent past and to assess how it is likely to continue to evolve in the future. We also sought to analyze the broader security implications of the Belarus-Russia relationship.

### Research Questions

We asked the following questions regarding the complicated Belarus-Russia bilateral relationship:

- What are the areas of convergence and divergence with respect to Belarusian and Russian polices, threat perceptions, and defense commitments to one another?
- To what degree are Belarusian and Russian political, economic, and military interests aligned or divergent?
- What are the security implications of the evolving Belarus-Russia relationship for the region more broadly?

Within each chapter, we draw on analysis of available open-source literature and data and interviews with experts to address these questions and to provide insights regarding trends between Belarus and Russia and implications for the United States and NATO.

### Approach

To conduct this study, we assembled a RAND team of researchers who possess deep regional and linguistic expertise and are fluent in Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian languages. Our team sought out relevant experts to interview and reviewed information from primary and secondary sources available from Belarus, Russia, and their neighbors.

Our ability to conduct research in these languages provided access to new research and insights that were crucial to this report. Our study team also drew on its professional experience in economics, political science, and defense industrial research to assess aspects of Belarusian and Russian state and defense budgets, military capabilities and strategy, and economic ties. We conducted more than a dozen interviews with regional subject-matter experts (SMEs) from Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine to develop our understanding of the perspectives of Belarus's European neighbors on the Belarus-Russia relationship. These SMEs were academics, embassy officials, and members of think tanks. Interviews were conducted both in person in Vilnius, Lithuania, and Washington, D.C., and virtually between May 2022 and January 2023. Most of these insights are captured in Chapter 6, although references to the interviews can be found throughout.

## Source Limitations

Real world constraints limited some of the methodologies applied to the study. Russia's war on Ukraine, Belarus's role in the war, changing Russian laws, deterioration in the security environment, and deteriorating relations between the United States and Russia led to visa bans on multiple RAND researchers. As a result, we did not travel to Russia or Belarus to conduct research or interviews and instead relied on primary source materials from both countries. Materials from Belarus and Russia are increasingly government-censored (blocking Western access to some websites and requiring workarounds) or self-censored (with news outlets and reporters seeking to avoid rapidly tightening penalties or shifting laws). The Russian government has criminalized public discussion related to military capabilities, force structure, or how the war in Ukraine is unfolding. Those in Russia who speak on these topics, particularly to Western organizations, are at personal risk of running into legal challenges with the rapidly changing Russian criminal code, as definitions of *foreign agent* or *discrediting the Armed Forces* continue to expand in scope and as penalties become harsher.<sup>6</sup> When possible, we have attempted to corroborate reports from Belarus and Russia with other sources or to caveat them appropri-

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<sup>6</sup> "Foreign Agents Painted by Topic," *Kommersant*, September 30, 2021; Don Melvin, "Russia Bans 'Undesirable' NGOs, Sparking International Outcry," CNN, May 24, 2015;

ately and note that the information is likely heavily controlled or censored—particularly in early 2022 and onward.

## Structure of This Report

In Chapter 2, we discuss the foundational legal documents that link Belarus and Russia in unique ways. We provide the baseline for understanding bilateral ties and how those legal arrangements affect political, economic, and security concerns for Belarus and Russia. Chapter 3 describes the evolving political relationship between Belarus and Russia since the early 2000s to early 2023 and identifies areas of convergence and divergence between their domestic and foreign policy goals. In Chapter 4, we discuss threat perceptions and military and security cooperation between the two countries and identify areas of convergence and divergence. Chapter 5 describes economic relations and defense industrial ties, outlines areas of interconnectedness between Belarus and Russia, and reviews how the relationship has changed over time. Chapter 6 provides regional perspectives of Belarus’s neighbors and their viewpoints on the evolving Belarus-Russia relationship, including perspectives from multiple SMEs from Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. This chapter also offers outlooks for Belarus’s political orientation as expressed by regional literature and our SME interviews. Chapter 7 concludes the report with implications on the evolving Belarus-Russia relationship, what it means for regional security, and implications for the United States and NATO allies.

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Alec Luhn, “Vladimir Putin Declares All Russian Military Deaths State Secrets,” *The Guardian*, May 28, 2015.



# Treaties, Agreements, and Legal Frameworks

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia and Belarus continued their cooperation in the political, economic, and military spheres. They codified this cooperation through a series of agreements. The relationship between Russia and Belarus is unique in terms of the two nations' legal ties and responsibilities to one another, and many of these obligations originate from the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet era. This chapter provides an overview of Russian and Belarusian mutual commitments under bilateral and main multilateral agreements, treaties, and other legal frameworks. This overview provides a foundational reference for the analysis that will follow in subsequent chapters. We do not cover in detail all multilateral organizations that Belarus and Russia are part of, but we do note that Belarus is party to 85 percent of international agreements that Russia is party to, according to the United Nations (UN) treaties database.<sup>1</sup>

## Post-Soviet Institutional Foundation: Commonwealth of Independent States

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) serves as an originating forum for institutionalized regional cooperation among post-Soviet states. The Belovezh Accords that Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine signed on Decem-

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<sup>1</sup> UN, United Nations Treaty Collection, database, undated-b. According to the database, Belarus is a party to 62 (85 percent) of the 73 international agreements to which Russia has become a party since 1991.

ber 8, 1991, simultaneously declared the dissolution of the Soviet Union and established the CIS. Most of the remaining former Soviet states joined weeks later under the Alma-Ata Protocol.<sup>2</sup> In 1993, members adopted the CIS Charter, which sets the structure of the organization and details its goals. Chief among these goals are security and economic cooperation, respect of the equality and sovereignty of members, peaceful dispute settlement, and promotion of human rights.<sup>3</sup> The charter charges various intergovernmental councils with facilitating coordination of activities toward these goals in the spheres of foreign policy, military, economic, legal, and parliamentary affairs.

The facilitation of a free-trade agreement among nearly all CIS members, reached in 2011, perhaps represents the key achievement of the organization over its 30-year history. This accomplishment contrasts with what many analysts saw as halting progress in the first decade of the CIS.<sup>4</sup> Still, taken in the context of the difficult domestic and international political situations into which the post-Soviet states were born, the CIS succeeded in providing a baseline forum “to discuss problems and [manage] some issues of ‘low politics’ (for example railroad transport, police cooperation) while being so weak on major political or economic issues that it demands virtually nothing from its members,” as Paul Kubicek writes.<sup>5</sup>

CIS member efforts at political cooperation and regional economic integration beyond the free-trade agreement continued after 2011, but these efforts have occurred in other regional forums and outside CIS institutions, as will be discussed in the sections that follow. In the words of one analyst at the Kremlin-associated Valdai Club think tank, the CIS has become “more reminiscent of an annual heads of state conference” and has drifted away from the

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<sup>2</sup> Georgia joined in 1993, and the Baltic states never joined. Since 2008 and 2014, Georgia and Ukraine, respectively, have ceased formal cooperation with the CIS. Turkmenistan never achieved full member status, and Afghanistan and Mongolia remain observer state members.

<sup>3</sup> Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States, signed at Minsk, Belarus, January 22, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Sakwa and Mark Webber, “The Commonwealth of Independent States, 1991–1998: Stagnation and Survival,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3, May 1999, p. 379.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Kubicek, “The Commonwealth of Independent States: An Example of Failed Regionalism?” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, February 2009, p. 248.

focus of substantive integration projects that its framers envisioned.<sup>6</sup> It operates as a forum that tends to reflect the power distribution of its members, with Russian hegemony expected as the rule, rather than serve as a force to provide members with new opportunities for innovative cooperation.

## Security Cooperation Agreements

### Collective Security Treaty

Russian and Belarusian mutual defense obligations stem from the Collective Security Treaty (CST) adopted by CIS members, which entered into force on April 20, 1994, and from the related Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a formal body for mutual defense and security cooperation that was created in 2002. The CST is a crucial multilateral treaty that binds all members to mutual defense and security cooperation. Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were also members as of 2022; Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan were original members but did not extend their membership in 1999; and Uzbekistan rejoined from 2006 to 2012.<sup>7</sup>

Mirroring Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, Article 4 of the CST obligates its members to provide “necessary assistance, including military” in the case of aggression against any other member.<sup>8</sup> Article 4 of the CST contains this key provision: Members consider acts of aggression against one as if against all and must, on request of the targeted member, “immediately” provide military and other available assistance. The CST also requires members to notify the UN when they invoke Article 4, and other provisions require that members act in accordance with the UN Charter. Provisions are made in Articles 1 and 2 that require members to engage in consultations when other collective security arrangements in Eurasia arise; when

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<sup>6</sup> Muratbek Imanaliev, “The Commonwealth of Independent States: Not Subject to Reform,” Valdai Discussion Club, July 4, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Putz, “CSTO Deploys to Kazakhstan at Tokayev’s Request,” *The Diplomat*, January 6, 2022; Richard Weitz, *Assessing the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Capabilities and Vulnerabilities*, U.S. Army War College Press, 2018, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> CSTO, “History of Creation, Fundamentals of Activities, Organizational Structure,” webpage, undated-b.

threats to members' "safety, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty" arise; and, in general, when other foreign policy matters arise.<sup>9</sup>

The remaining portions of the treaty commit Russia and Belarus to other requirements typical of mutual defense pacts. Article 1 of the treaty commits its members to abstain from the use of force in interstate relations. Articles 1 and 8 prohibit members from joining military alliances against other members or make other agreements at odds with the provisions of the CST. Articles 3, 5, and 6 create and establish procedures for a CST council that is composed of members' heads of state and is charged with coordinating activities under the treaty. Other articles make provisions for regulating military facilities (Article 7), obligations under other treaties (Article 8), dispute resolution (Article 9), accession (Article 10), and treaty extension (Article 11).<sup>10</sup>

In 2002, CST members chartered the CSTO "with the stated focus of preserving territorial integrity and seeking closer cooperation with other multilateral institutions."<sup>11</sup> Article 7 of the CSTO charter requires that members take such joint measures as "creation of coalition (collective) forces of the Organization, regional (united) groups of armies (forces), peacekeeping forces, united systems and the bodies governing them, [and] military infrastructure." Article 7 also requires a commitment to military and economic cooperation, military supply, internal security and law enforcement, and training for external and internal security forces,<sup>12</sup> and it effectively requires that establishment of military bases by any nonmembers on CSTO territory be approved by unanimous consent, giving any member a veto on such bases.

Article 8 of the CSTO charter requires coordination on terrorism, trafficking, transnational crime, and migration policy—such as border security, information exchange, cybersecurity, and emergency response—and

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<sup>9</sup> CSTO, "Collective Security Treaty, dated May 15, 1992," webpage, April 23, 2012a.

<sup>10</sup> CSOT, 2012a.

<sup>11</sup> GlobalSecurity.org, "Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)," webpage, updated May 1, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> CSTO, "Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, dated October 07, 2002," webpage, April 27, 2012b.

on conventional security threats. Articles 9 and 10 require coordination on foreign policy and national legal frameworks, respectively. As provided in Articles 11 through 18, the CSTO comprises a Collective Security Council made up of heads of state; a Permanent Council, Secretary General, and Secretariat that form a standing organization; and councils that facilitate policy coordination on foreign policy, defense, internal security, military industry, and parliamentary affairs. Remaining articles in the charter make provisions for membership, withdrawal, observers, budget, and other matters. Iran, India, Mongolia, Pakistan, Serbia, and Afghanistan have each been CSTO observers at various points during the organization's history.<sup>13</sup>

In 2009, members adopted an agreement establishing an all-volunteer Collective Rapid Reaction Forces [Kollektivnyye Sily Operativnogo Reagirovaniya] (KSOR) arm of the CSTO, "designed to counter terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, natural disasters and to enhance the CSTO's role in ensuring international security,"<sup>14</sup> but not to settle disputes among members.<sup>15</sup> Following initial exercises in October 2009 in Kazakhstan that involved 7,000 personnel from Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, Belarus committed to provide 2,000 troops to the KSOR in 2010 and began doing so.<sup>16</sup> In 2012, the CSTO formed a Military Committee and established a CSTO Joint Staff to oversee and command the KSOR and other organizational military and peacekeeping forces.<sup>17</sup> The KSOR holds two annual exercises, titled Interaction and Frontier, and participates in others. As of 2019, the CSTO stated the KSOR force consisted of 18,000

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<sup>13</sup> "Afghan and Serbian Parliaments Acquire Observer Status at CSTO PA," KazInform, April 12, 2013; "More Than 2,000 Belarusian Soldiers to Participate in CSTO's Military Contingent," RIA Novosti, May 26, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> "More Than 2,000 Belarusian Soldiers . . .," 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Belarus held out on joining the arrangement for several months to protest a Russian ban on Belarusian dairy imports. See "Belarus to Join CSTO's Rapid Reaction Forces," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 3, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> "More Than 2,000 Belarusian Soldiers . . .," 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Roger McDermott, "The Kremlin, General Shamanov and Transforming the CSTO," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 9, No. 179, October 2, 2012.

personnel.<sup>18</sup> The CSTO also has other force groupings: CSTO peacekeeping forces of 3,600 personnel, the United Russian-Armenian Grouping of Forces, and the United Air Defense System of Russia and Belarus.<sup>19</sup>

The first formal invocation of Article 4 occurred in January 2022 by Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. In response to his request, in which he called protestors terrorists, the CSTO deployed a military force under a peacekeeping mission. Reports indicate that Belarus committed 500 troops and Russia committed 3,000 to support the CSTO contingent, although later reports indicated that forces totaled only 2,500 of 3,600 troops that members initially promised.<sup>20</sup> Forces arrived in Kazakhstan quickly: Russian paratroopers arrived January 5 and Belarusian units on January 6. Additional forces from Armenia, Russia, and Tajikistan followed on January 7.<sup>21</sup> Forces began withdrawing January 13 and completed their withdrawal January 19.<sup>22</sup>

At the time this report was written, the most recent meeting of the CSTO Collective Security Council occurred in November 2022 in Yerevan. Armenia's security concerns in light of ongoing territorial disputes with Azerbaijan featured prominently on the agenda.<sup>23</sup> The summit produced several statements by the subsidiary bodies of the CSTO on such topics as regional security, arms control and nonproliferation, anti-Nazism and anti-extremism, and biological security. But Armenia blocked consensus over

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<sup>18</sup> CSTO, "February 4 The Collective Rapid Reaction Force, the CSTO RRF, Turns 10 Years Old," webpage, February 4, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> CSTO, "CSTO Structure," webpage, undated-a. We do not have numbers for the United Russian-Armenian Grouping of Forces or the United Air Defense System of Russia and Belarus.

<sup>20</sup> Putz, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> "U.S. Has Questions About Kazakhstan's Request for CSTO Troops, Blinken Says," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 8, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> "Russia-Led CSTO Troops Begin Withdrawal from Kazakhstan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 13, 2022; "Russia-Led Military Alliance Completes Withdrawal from Kazakhstan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 19, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> "CSTO Collective Security Council to Discuss Assistance to Armenia in Yerevan on Nov 23," Interfax, November 18, 2022.

adoption of a final summit statement because, it said, the CSTO had not met its needs for assistance to deal with Azerbaijan.<sup>24</sup>

## Shanghai Cooperation Organization

In 2001, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Although Belarus was not a full member at the time this report was written, it was in Observer status and had applied for full membership in 2022, during a time when it had very limited economic engagement with the West. From the start, SCO members have held that the collective is not a mutual defense or alliance arrangement.<sup>25</sup> As chartered, the SCO operates as a political consultative forum that does not commit members to concrete, substantive actions in its areas of cooperation. SCO members are bound to little beyond participating in dialogue toward cooperation that can result in additional commitments of varying specificity or formality. SCO members have the power to use their vote to block consensus on formal decisions, including decisions to suspend or expel members. Observer members negotiate the terms of their participation in the SCO on an individual basis; the text of these agreements does not appear to be public.

Belarus became an SCO dialogue partner in 2010 and dropped to observer status in 2015. As part of its membership bid in 2022, Belarus put forth a variety of proposals for security, economic, energy, and information technology (IT) cooperation with SCO members officials of SCO member states; in November 2023, Belarus ratified a memorandum of accession to the SCO.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Grzegorz Kuczyński, “CSTO Summit in Yerevan Was Bitter Pill for Putin,” *Russia Monitor*, November 29, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Bates Gill, “Shanghai Five: An Attempt to Counter U.S. Influence in Asia?” Brookings Institution, May 4, 2001. The SCO grew out of a border dispute-resolution forum established in 1996 that was composed of the SCO’s original members, called the “Shanghai Five.” This group gradually expanded its agenda to encompass a broader variety of security and economic cooperation items.

<sup>26</sup> As of December 2022, Afghanistan and Mongolia are observer states with Belarus; Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey are dialogue partners. See “Belarus’ Priorities in Shanghai Cooperation Organization Identified,” BelTA, November 1, 2022; “Russia Supports Belarus’ Plans to Join Shanghai Cooperation

The SCO has expanded its membership from the ranks of observer member states twice: It accepted India and Pakistan as full members in 2015 (formally adding them as members in 2017) and Iran in 2022 (with formal membership beginning in 2023).<sup>27</sup> SCO expansion seems likely to continue. During the September 2022 summit held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, the SCO added Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia as dialogue partners, and leaders affirmed support for adding Bahrain, Kuwait, the Maldives, Myanmar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as partners next.<sup>28</sup>

The SCO charter articulates broad goals and tasks of the forum in security, economic, and other realms (Article 1); requires members adhere to such principles as sovereignty, equality among members, “gradual implementation” of cooperative undertakings, peaceful dispute settlement,<sup>29</sup> and the “SCO not being directed against other States and international organizations” (Article 2); and sets “areas of cooperation” for members (Article 3).<sup>30</sup> Articles 4 through 11 establish the organization of the SCO, set the timelines

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Organization—Ambassador,” TASS, September 12, 2022; Shanghai Cooperation Organization, “SCO Secretary-General Meets with President of the Republic of Belarus,” September 21, 2022; “Belarus Ratifies Memorandum on Joining Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” TASS, November 28, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Aamna Khan, “What Does Iran’s Membership in the SCO Mean for the Region?” *The Diplomat*, September 20, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> “Bahrain, Kuwait, Maldives, Myanmar, UAE May Become SCO Dialogue Partners—Kremlin,” TASS, September 13, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, signed in Saint Petersburg, Russia, June 7, 2002. The broad “areas” in which Article 1 of the SCO charter commits its members to cooperate include regional security and “the promotion of a new democratic, fair and rational political and economic international order;” countermeasures to “terrorism, separatism and extremism,” narcotics and arms trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration; regional integration through political, economic, legal, environmental, cultural, science-and-technology, education, energy, transport, and financial cooperation; economic growth and living-standards improvement; global economic integration; human rights promotion; and broader diplomatic cooperation.

<sup>30</sup> Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2002. Separately, Article 3 articulates the following “main areas of cooperation:” regional peace and security, foreign policy coordination, transnational issues, disarmament and arms control, regional trade and investment, infrastructure development, environmental management and joint development projects, disaster prevention, legal coordination, and science and technology cooperation.

for required meetings of bodies composed of SCO heads of state and other national and SCO officials, and articulate the functions that SCO bodies perform. Article 16 provides that SCO decisions are made by consensus.<sup>31</sup>

## Economic Agreements

### Eurasian Economic Union

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) finds its roots in the statement of intent that Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan signed in 2009 to establish a Common Economic Space (CES, also sometimes called a *Single Economic Space*). The CES agreement “specified a common market for goods, capital, and labor; coordinated tax, monetary, fiscal, and trade policies; and unified energy, transport, and IT networks” and began operating in 2012 under the auspices of the Eurasian Economic Commission.<sup>32</sup> As these agreements were finalized, Putin concurrently proposed a new agreement to further integrate the three nations’ economies on the basis of the existing customs union and CES agreements. Negotiations led to the conclusion of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014 and its entry into force in 2015. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan acceded to the EEU treaty in 2015.<sup>33</sup>

The stated aim of the EEU is to reduce barriers to flows of capital, goods and services, and labor across member states’ borders, and the group has facilitated the conclusion of additional agreements to that end. In the first three years of the institution, EEU members concluded agreements liberalizing 52 service sectors.<sup>34</sup> The EEU website highlights important agree-

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<sup>31</sup> Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> EEU, “Timeline,” webpage, undated; Evgeny Troitskiy, “The Eurasian Economic Union at Five: Great Expectations and Hard Times,” *The Russia File*, Kennan Institute blog post, January 14, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> EEU, undated. Observer status has been granted to Moldova (2018), Uzbekistan (2020), and Cuba (2020). Such requests and their granting primarily serve as political signaling of a desire for a closer association with EEU policies and possible accession but does not come with firm legal commitments outside the obligation to “refrain from actions that may compromise the interests of the Union.” See Eurasian Economic Commission, “Observer State Status at the EAEU,” undated.

<sup>34</sup> Troitskiy, 2020.

ments reached on the digital economy (2016), exceptions and restrictions on trade barriers (2017), customs code (2018), labor pensions (2019), and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (2020).<sup>35</sup> The EEU agenda has postponed progress on financial integration until 2025.<sup>36</sup> The development of EEU institutions has thus proceeded much further than prior attempts at a custom union in 1995 and a CES in 2003.<sup>37</sup>

The terms of the EEU and subsidiary agreements do not formally bind participants to many commitments.<sup>38</sup> For example, the EEU institutional framework does not contain monitoring, dispute resolution, or enforcement mechanisms with sufficient power to facilitate economic integration beyond the limited, short-term interests of its members.<sup>39</sup> Potential institutional strengths are undermined by others. For instance, researchers Dragneva and Hartwell observe that

[t]he [Eurasian Economic Commission, the executive body of the EEU] has been endowed with some very important powers in fields such as tariff and customs regulation, the adoption of technical standards, and imposition of trade defence measures. However, the process is embedded in a hierarchical decision-making structure, which means that any of its acts can be revoked or revised by the higher bodies of the [EEU]: the Interstate Council and the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting at the level of heads of government and heads of state, respectively.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> EEU, undated.

<sup>36</sup> Troitskiy, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Evgeny Vinokurov, "Eurasian Economic Union: Current State and Preliminary Results," *Russian Journal of Economics*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Kataryna Wolczuk, "Myth 10: 'The Eurasian Economic Union Is a Genuine and Meaningful Counterpart to the EU,'" *Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia: How They Affect Western Policy, and What Can Be Done*, Chatham House, May 13, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Rilka Dragneva and Christopher A. Hartwell, "The Eurasian Economic Union: Integration Without Liberalisation?" *Post-Communist Economies*, Vol. 33, Nos. 2–3, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Dragneva and Hartwell, 2021, p. 212.

As a result, they conclude, “compliance depends on member states’ discretion.”<sup>41</sup> The EEU also provides its membership with the international legal standing to enter into collective agreements with external parties. For example, the EEU has reached agreements on trade with Vietnam (2016), Singapore (2019), and Serbia (2019); agreements on trade and economic cooperation with China (2017); and an interim agreement on trade with Iran (2018) that led to negotiations on a full agreement that began in 2020.<sup>42</sup> The provisions of these agreements, however, do not include that EEU members grant extensive trade concessions beyond what is required by preexisting bilateral relationships with these partners. For example, the agreement with China does not reduce tariffs or other protectionist measures, it only “provides for procedural cooperation and exchange of information on the basis of existing WTO [World Trade Organization] arrangements.”<sup>43</sup>

## Other Economic Agreements

The Belarusian-Russian economic relationship outside the EEU is also influenced and regulated by agreements that coexist with the EEU treaty. In the realm of trade, in 2012, a free trade agreement for the CIS entered into force with provisions that reiterated WTO standards on a regional basis.<sup>44</sup> In investment, the 2008 Eurasian Investment Agreement (among Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan) and the 2010 Belarus-Kazakhstan-Russia Agreement on Services and Investment form the framework for international investment. Together with the EEU treaty, these treaties provide a basis for reciprocity in the rights and privileges extended to cross-border financing and service provision, notification of investment treaties concluded with outside parties, and other standard provisions of investment treaties.<sup>45</sup> Russia has concluded 84 bilateral

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<sup>41</sup> Dragneva and Hartwell, 2021, p. 212.

<sup>42</sup> EEU, undated. Dragneva and Hartwell note that the EEU is negotiating agreements with Egypt, Israel, and India (Dragneva and Hartwell, 2021, p. 213).

<sup>43</sup> Dragneva and Hartwell, 2021, pp. 214–215.

<sup>44</sup> World Trade Organization, Regional Trade Agreements Database, undated.

<sup>45</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, International Investment Agreements Navigator, database, undated.

investment treaties (63 remain in force) and Belarus has concluded 30 (56 remain in force), but they have not concluded any bilateral investment treaties with each other.<sup>46</sup>

The presidents of Russia and Belarus announced in 2021 that the two states are negotiating agreements to begin operating a single gas market beginning in 2024 and a single oil and oil-products market in future years.<sup>47</sup> If realized, the institutionalization of terms of a cross-border energy economy would mark a departure from the roughly annual bilateral agreements negotiated by the Russian and Belarusian leadership that have set energy prices. In December 2022, Belarus and Russia agreed to a three-year pricing scheme for gas, a departure from the usual one-year agreements of the past.<sup>48</sup> This could mark progress toward the goal of a common energy market, reflect a desire for stability in the face of Western sanctions imposed in response to Russia's war on Ukraine, or, most likely, a combination of the two factors.

## Legal Framework for the Union State Between Belarus and Russia

The *Union State* is a set of legal agreements between Belarus and Russia that is intended to codify the nations' strategic partnership and many of their economic, military, domestic, and foreign policies. The Union State has been a work in progress since the mid-1990s, but it has accelerated and expanded since 2021. In 1996, Russia and Belarus signed an agreement to

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<sup>46</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, undated. As of December 2022, five of Russia's bilateral investment treaties have been terminated, as have three of Belarus's.

<sup>47</sup> "Belarus, Russia Expected Soon to Sign Intergovernmental Agreement on Handling Spent Nuclear Fuel—Belarusian Energy Ministry," Interfax, November 10, 2022; "Russia and Belarus Agree Closer Energy, Economic Integration," Reuters, September 9, 2021; Ann M. Simmons, "Russia, Belarus Agree on Economic Integration Pacts," *Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> "Belarus, Russia Agreed on Three-Year Fixed Gas Price for First Time—Belarusian PM," Interfax, December 20, 2022; Rosemary Griffin, "Russia to Keep Gas Price Unchanged for Belarus in 2022," *SE&P Global Commodity Insights*, September 10, 2021.

grant each other military training ranges for firing practice of air defense units.<sup>49</sup> By 1999, the two had established the concept of a Union State as a legal basis for the long-term strategic partnership.<sup>50</sup> This document, named the Draft Constitutional Act of the Union State, defined a series of “major goals” the Union State was expected to accomplish, including establishment of the following defense policies:

- Ensure peaceful and democratic development.
- Establish a single economic and customs area and legal framework.
- Ensure sustainable economic development.
- Pursue foreign, defense, and social policies.
- Ensure security and fight against crime.

The establishment of the Union State also created the Council of Ministers (the executive body of the Union State), which consists of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Union State; the heads of the governments of Russia and Belarus; the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Economics, and Finance of the participating states; the heads of main administrative and operational governing bodies of the Union State; and the Secretary of State of the Union State). The Chairman of the Council of Ministers is the Supreme State Council of the Union State. This position may be occupied by the head of government of one of the participating states on a rotational basis.<sup>51</sup>

Over the years, defense and security goals appeared at the forefront of the Union State’s agenda. In 1996, the initial focus for Union State cooperation was providing training grounds for air defense units. By 2005, the Union State’s goals extended beyond small-scale narrow defense concerns, and the Council of Ministers of the Union State signed a resolution identifying key measures needed to implement the security concept of the Union

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<sup>49</sup> Alexei Matveev, “The Union State Is Strengthening Defense,” *Defense & Security*, No. 14, February 12, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, “Belarus and Russia,” webpage, undated-b; Union State, “Proekt Konstitutsionnogo Akta Soiuznogo Gosudarstva” [“Draft Constitutional Act of the Union State”], webpage, April 14, 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Union State, “Sovet Ministrov” [“Council of Ministers”], webpage, undated.

State until 2008. The document, titled “Set of Measures to Implement the Security Concept of the Union State Until 2008,” intended to give new life to integrated processes toward further unification of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation. It identified the following main issues that the two countries needed to resolve:<sup>52</sup>

- Establish a legal basis in different spheres of security assurance of the Union State.
- Create a set of measures to implement defense of the Union State from foreign and domestic threats.
- Ensure military security, defense of domestic borders, and high operational readiness of the Union State.
- Improve support for economic, hydrometeorological, and ecological security during implementation of cooperative programs, measures, and projects.
- Conduct agreed-on activities to warn, detect, suppress, and disclose illegal activities aimed against the security of the Union State and those conducted on its territory.
- Unite the work of special operations and law enforcement agencies in the fight against terrorism and other extremist activities.

This process began in 2000, when the Council of Ministers created a plan listing 27 working groups and field activities geared toward improving joint planning, operations, and infrastructure between the two militaries.<sup>53</sup> In 2001, the council released a directive to assess the military locations and assets that would be intended for joint use as part of the

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<sup>52</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, “Kompleks Osnovnyh Meropriiatii po Realizatsii Kontseptsii Bezopasnosti Soiuznogo Gosudarstva na Period do 2008 Goda” [“Set of Measures to Implement the Security Concept of the Union State Until 2008”], October 29, 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, “Plan Sovmestnyh Meropriiatii po Obespecheniiu Funktsionirovaniia Regional’noi Gruppirovki Voisk (Sil) Respubliki Belarus’ i Rossiiskoi Federatsii v 2001 Godu” [“Joint Action Plan to Ensure Operation of the Regional Forces Group of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation in 2001”], October 11, 2000.

regional grouping.<sup>54</sup> In 2002, it passed a resolution to develop a program for improving infrastructure assets. This resolution called for 846.154 million rubles (550 million rubles from Russia and 296.154 million rubles from Belarus) to implement the program from 2008 to 2012.<sup>55</sup> In 2008, the program was to be funded through 2014 for 123.141 million rubles (80 million rubles from the RF and 43.141 million rubles from Belarus).<sup>56</sup> A new funding program was established in 2017.

To develop the Regional Group of Forces, the Council of Ministers established a joint program in 2007 to train Belarusian service members in military training centers in Russia.<sup>57</sup> The main goals of that program were creating joint education programs, increasing the defense readiness of their respective armed forces, and creating a “cadre potential” (reserves).

Minor updates occurred throughout the next decade to expand military technical cooperation (2009) and broaden military training programs

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<sup>54</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, “O Podgotovke Predlozhenii po Razrabotke Programmy ‘Sovershenstvovaniie I Soderzhanii Ob’iektov Voiennoi Infrastruktury, Planiruiemykh k Sovmestnomu Ispol’zovaniiu v Interesah Obespecheniia Regional’noi Gruppyroki Voisk (Sil) Respubliki Belarus’ I Rossiiskoi Federatsii” [“On Preparing Recommendations to Develop the Program ‘Improving and Maintaining Military Infrastructure Targets for the Joint Use in the Interests of Supporting the Regional Forces Group of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation”], July 2, 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, “O Programme Soiuznogo Gosudarstva ‘Sovershenstvovaniie Ob’iektov Voiennoi Infrastruktury, Planiruiemykh k Sovmestnomu Ispol’zovaniiu v Interesah Obespecheniia Regional’noi Gruppyrovki Voisk (Sil) Respubliki Belarus’ I Rossiiskoi Federatsii” [“Improving Military Infrastructure Assets for Joint Use in the Interests of Supporting the Regional Group of Troops (Forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation”], May 8, 2008.

<sup>56</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, “Ob Itogah Vypolneniia Programmy Soiuznogo Gosudarstva ‘Sovershenstvovaniie Ob’iektov Voiennoi Infrastruktury, Planiruiemykh k Sovmestnomu Ispol’zovaniiu v Interesah Obespecheniia Regional’noi Gruppyrovki Voisk (Sil) Respubliki Belarus’ i Rossiiskoi Federatsii” [“On Changes to the Joint Program ‘Training of Belarusian Military Personnel in Military Educational Institutions of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation”], October 21, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, “Sovremennaia Programma ‘Podgotovka Belorusskikh Voienno-sluzhashchih v Voienno-Uchebnykh Zavadeniiah Ministerstva Oborony Rossiiskoi Federatsii” [“Contemporary Program ‘Training of Belarusian Servicemembers in Military Training Centers of the Ministry of the Russian Federation”], April 26, 2007.

(2015). There were also rumors of a joint document on the Regional Group of Forces (2016) that would not be publicly available, and a joint military doctrine planned for 2018 was released in 2022. In late 2021, the Supreme State Council updated the main document that guides the creation of the Union State. Putin and Lukashenko announced some 28 agreements on various integration efforts referred to as “union programs” within the Union State framework.<sup>58</sup> The programs, formally approved in November 2021, outline goals and principles in areas from currency integration and indirect taxation to energy pricing, counterterrorism, and science and technology. Key agreements featured a new Union State military doctrine and a migration scheme.

The resolution listed several goals.<sup>59</sup> We compared the original agreement in 1999 with the 2021 document to identify changes. The 2021 document repeats some of the previously stated goals, such as creating a unified economic space and Union State. The 2021 document lists the following expanded goals: implementing (versus just establishing) a unified customs-tariff and trade policy for third party countries and international organizations, creating a unified economic space and “equal business conditions,” coordinating tax and customs laws, and implementing a unified macroeconomic policy and common financial market. New goals were also added: creating and executing a Union State budget; implementing a policy on occupational health and safety standards, social security, and pensions; and creating a legal basis for creating Union State property.

The expanded and new goals in 2021 suggest an increase in expectations from the Union State not just in the military and military-technical spheres—as the official Union State documents have emphasized over the years—but also in domestic spheres, such as occupational health and safety, business, finance, and property laws. These goals stretch beyond joint defense cooperation to protect Belarus and Russia against foreign and domestic threats. The new document also moves forward into implemen-

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<sup>58</sup> Simmons, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Supreme State Committee of the Union State, “Ob Osnovnykh Napravleniiah Realizatsii Polozhenii Dogovora o Sozdanii Soiuznogo Gosudarstva na 2021–2023 Gody” [“On Primary Goals to Realize Provisions of the Agreement on Creation of the Union State in 2021–2023”], November 4, 2021.

tation of the policies—as least in intent. Although some of these arrangements articulate the framework for joint undertakings in detail, there are few mechanisms to ensure the provisions of these agreements are enforced. The timing of this resolution—following increasing isolation of Belarus by the West after the 2021 migrant crisis and 2020 election protests—likely reflects the Kremlin’s increased leverage to obtain policy concessions from Minsk.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> ISW Russia Team, *Russia in Review: December 1, 2021–January 11, 2022*, Institute for the Study of War, January 14, 2022.



## Political Relations

The Russian and Belarusian leaders share many views on domestic and international affairs. First, Putin and Lukashenko have much in common as leaders and the personalist systems of government that they have built around themselves. They represent the same form of autocratic leadership, and they would rather change their countries' constitutions regarding presidential term limits than step down. Lukashenko has been the president of Belarus since 1994; Putin has ruled Russia since 1999 (except for a stint as prime minister from 2008 to 2012). Both leaders have a nostalgic view of the Soviet era that ranges from positive to wistful. They also share a negative assessment of many Western liberal values, seeing them as a threat to their regimes and to their countries' stability. In addition, Belarusian society has traditionally supported the idea of integration with Moscow and felt cultural affinity with Russia.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in many political ways, the two governments seem bound to coop-

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1995 national referendum, 87 percent of voters supported economic integration with Russia (Kłysiński and Konończuk, 2020, p. 23). In 2006, 56.4 percent of Belarusians supported the idea of unification with Russia, and 25.6 percent were against it; in the same survey, only 7.2 percent described the relations between the two countries as hostile or competitive (Zinaida Vasilievna Sikevich, "Russkie, ukrainsy, belorusy: vmeste ili vroz'?" ["Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians: Together or Apart?"], *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya* [Sociological Research], No. 9, 2007).

Other surveys conducted between 2006 and 2016 showed that Belarusians usually chose Russia over the European Union (EU); however, they did not want to unify (Artyon Shraibman, *The House That Lukashenko Built: The Foundation, Evolution, and Future of the Belarusian Regime*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 12, 2018, pp. 13–15). Instead, they seemed to favor the status quo of two independent states with close ties (Pavlyuk Bykovskii, "Pochemu vse men'she belorusov khotyat soyuza s Rossiei" ["Why Fewer and Fewer Belarusians Want a Union with Russia"], *Deutsche Welle*, February 6, 2020). In 2016, 73.9 percent identified as culturally closer to Russians; 25.8 percent identified as closer to Europeans ("The Most Important Results of

erate closely. But the interests of the two countries and their leaders diverge in other areas. In this chapter, we will discuss (1) how Russia and Belarus define their foreign policy objectives and (2) the partners' respective roles in achieving these goals.

## Russia's and Belarus's Political Objectives in Bilateral Relations

### Russia's Political Objectives

Belarus has always been critically important to Russia's foreign policy objectives in the post-Soviet era, both as stated in official documents (specifically, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation) and as interpreted by the expert community. The special role of Belarus in Russia's foreign policy is indicated by the fact that only a few countries are explicitly named by the Foreign Policy Concept, and Belarus is one of them—moreover, it is the only one with which Russia “is committed to expanding strategic cooperation . . . with a view to promoting integration in all areas” within the Union State.<sup>2</sup>

In Russian strategy, the main explicitly stated political objective with regard to neighboring states is to “assist them in eliminating existing and preventing emergence of new hotbeds of tension and conflicts in their territory.”<sup>3</sup> Given the history of Russia's covert influence and overt interventions against democratic transformations in the post-Soviet space, this foreign policy objective can be interpreted as ensuring that the political choices of Russia's neighbors support Moscow's dominance in the region. Historically, Russia has achieved this by backing local autocratic pro-Russian politicians and preventing—or, if necessary, suppressing—

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the Public Opinion Poll in March 2016,” Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, March 29, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016,” webpage, November 30, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016.

democratic pro-Western movements.<sup>4</sup> Such support creates a feedback loop in which pro-Russian politicians are indebted to Moscow, which claims to “never abandon its allies.”<sup>5</sup> A government elected in a fair democratic process is more unpredictable and harder to control—and more likely to receive Western support. Therefore, autocratic tendencies in Moscow-backed leaders seem to be just as important as positive views on cooperation with Russia. Belarus is no exception: Moscow seeks in Minsk a pro-Russian, anti-Western, and preferably autocratic partner.<sup>6</sup>

Belarus is particularly important in the region because it is a predominantly Slavic, Russian-speaking, Christian Orthodox country with a positive view of the Soviet era and a government that holds negative views of Western liberal values. As such, it is central to Russia’s ideological concept of *Russkiy mir* (Russian world), which—in the words of foreign policy objectives—seeks to

strengthen Russia’s role in international culture; promote and consolidate the position of the Russian language in the world; raise global awareness of Russia’s cultural achievements and national historical legacy, the cultural identity of the peoples of Russia, and Russian education and research; consolidate the Russian-speaking diaspora.<sup>7</sup>

*Russkiy mir* is Russia’s ideological concept for the reintegration process of the post-Soviet space. Through the use of soft-power instruments (some of them covert), Russia seeks to maintain its influence in the region with a Russia-centric vision of a shared historical past.<sup>8</sup> No other post-Soviet coun-

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Person and Michael McFaul, “What Putin Fears Most,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 33, No. 2, April 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Andrei Sushentsov, “Strategicheskaya konkurentsia v Vostochnoi Evrope i rol’ Belorussii” [“Strategic Competition in Eastern Europe and the Role of Belarus”], Valdai Discussion Club, November 20, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Gorokhovskaia and Linzer, 2022; Jadwiga Rogoża, Katarzyna Chawryło, and Piotr Źochowski, “A Friend in Need. Russia on the Protests in Belarus,” *OSW Commentary*, No. 349, August 20, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Ammon Cheskin and Angela Kachuyevski, “The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Post-Soviet Space: Language, Politics and Identity,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 71,

try meets the membership criteria of the Russian world as well as Belarus does: Regardless of Russia's efforts, most inhabitants of former Soviet republics (except for Russia itself) do not identify Russian as their first language, are not ethnically Russian or Slavic, and do not profess Russian Orthodox Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Belarus stands out as the only country in the region where the use of the Russian language has increased over time, and Soviet heritage is still at the center of Belarusian national ideology.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Russia has used multiple tools in its attempts to keep Ukraine in its orbit as another central component of its ideological *Russkiy mir* model in the post-Soviet era,<sup>11</sup> but Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions of that country have resulted in a rapid Ukrainian shift away from Russian cultural and ideological influences. As a result, Russia is increasingly pressured to keep Belarus in this *Russkiy mir* and cannot afford to lose ideological influence there. With other former Soviet republics cultivating distinct national identities, the idea of the "Russian world" might not survive without Belarus.

The cultural similarities between Russia and Belarus are also relevant to the autocratic rule in both countries. As many experts point out, the emergence of a truly democratic government in Belarus would be seen in Moscow as a threat to the stability of the Russian regime because the potential transformation could inspire Russian people to follow the lead of other post-Soviet countries and claim democratic power.<sup>12</sup> Although Russia has always been generally wary of "color revolutions" and viewed them as Western interference, such a change in Belarus might be perceived as particularly threatening: If democracy proves feasible in Russia's politically and culturally closest neighbor, why not in Russia itself?

Russia's need to maintain influence in the near abroad also arises from other core foreign policy objectives. In Russia's worldview, a country must

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No. 1, 2019. See also Timofei Bordachev, *Space Without Borders: Russia and Its Neighbors*, Valdai Discussion Club, December 2021.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the Russian ethnicity and language use decline in the former Soviet republics, see Manakov, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Manakov, 2021; Kłysiński and Konończuk, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Orysia Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighborhood*, Chatham House, April 2016.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Person and McFaul, 2022; and Rogoża, Chawryło, and Żochowski, 2020.

have influence over its periphery in order to be a great power and “a center of influence in today’s world,”<sup>13</sup> which in and of itself is Moscow’s goal. In the Russian view, every great power has a right to an area of privileged interests where other great powers should not interfere.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, one of Russia’s key objectives in Belarus is to ensure that neither the United States nor the EU can gain significant influence.<sup>15</sup>

Russia’s 2016 Foreign Policy Concept indicates that, in its quest to shape the world order, the Kremlin assigns great importance to international organizations and cooperation frameworks.<sup>16</sup> The UN holds the central role here because it formally puts Russia and the United States on an equal footing in the Security Council. Veto power is Moscow’s main instrument for protecting its interests in the UN. To maintain its status in the organization and support its talking points on the international stage, Moscow seeks loyal partners that will vote with Russia in the General Assembly. Moscow also seeks Belarus’s support for other diplomatic initiatives (for example, diplomatic recognitions of Russia-backed quasi-states) and Russia-led Eurasia integration frameworks.

The desire for great-power status is as much a matter of prestige and national pride as it is supposed to provide security and economic advantages. Meanwhile, ensuring national security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity are the primary objectives of Russia’s foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> Belarus plays a special role in this regard because it is located between NATO member states (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia) or partners (Ukraine) and mainland Russia. Belarus’s role as a buffer zone gained further importance after Russia launched the full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022. As of January 2023, the Russian Ground Forces had taken severe losses in the war against Ukraine, and the units responsible for the defense

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<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, RAND Corporation, RR-1826-OSD, 2017, pp. 9–17.

<sup>15</sup> The same applies to China; however, Beijing has not tried to gain political influence in Belarus. See Jakub Jakóbowski and Kamil Kłysiński, “The Non-Strategic Partnership: Belarus-China Relations,” *OSW Studies*, No. 81, January 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016.

against the Baltics and Finland are no exception.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO enhances NATO's posture vis-à-vis Russia. Putin announced the formation of new units in Russia in response; he also announced that SS-26 Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems will be provided to Belarus and that Russian tactical nuclear weapons will be based there.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, exploiting economic opportunities in the post-Soviet space—including in Belarus—is important for Russia's economic goal "to create a favorable external environment that would allow Russia's economy to grow steadily and . . . would promote . . . higher standards of living and quality of life for its population."<sup>20</sup> Economic cooperation—discussed in Chapter 5 of this report—also has a political dimension. Historically, Moscow has sought to take over the most-profitable industries in Belarus and maintain that country's economic dependence on financing and trade with Russia. The goal of these efforts was twofold: to increase the profits of Russian companies and to maintain political influence and effective control over the domestic affairs of Belarus.<sup>21</sup>

## Belarus's Political Objectives

Belarus formulates its foreign policy objectives similarly to Russia, albeit without ambitions to be a center of influence on the global stage. Belarus's strategic priorities, according to official documents, are "protection of state sovereignty and territorial integrity" and "protection of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of the individual, the society and the state."<sup>22</sup> Some of its main explicitly stated objectives are promoting international security and stability, developing good relations with neighbors, improving living

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<sup>18</sup> Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, "Russia's Stripped Its Western Borders to Feed the Fight in Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> "Russian Military Announces Plan to Expand, Create New Units," Associated Press, December 21, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Wojciech Konończuk, "Difficult 'Ally': Belarus in Russia's Foreign Policy," *OSW Studies*, No. 28, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, "Politics," webpage, undated.

standards and the country's all-around development, and promoting and protecting Belarusian rights abroad.

Russia has a special place among Belarus's partners. The cooperation is called *strategic*, and Russia is named first among "the most important and promising vectors" in Belarus's foreign policy concept.<sup>23</sup> Minsk also highlights that it has been "consistently advancing the ideas of integration, [taking] an active and constructive position in integration unities in the post-Soviet space—the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)."<sup>24</sup> All of these integration frameworks were Russian initiatives.

Minsk also aims to strengthen ties with Beijing; Belarus and the People's Republic of China regularly exchange visits of high-level officials.<sup>25</sup> The two countries established the Belarusian-Chinese Intergovernmental Cooperation Committee, and they continue to develop interagency and interregional contacts.<sup>26</sup> In September 2022, the presidents of the two countries announced that they were raising the level of bilateral relationships to a comprehensive strategic partnership.<sup>27</sup> In this Foreign Policy Concept, Minsk "stands for the normalization of dialogue and extension of relations with the United States."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, "Priorities of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus," webpage, undated-e.

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, undated-e.

<sup>25</sup> Lukashenko has visited China 12 times: in 1995, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2013, and once each year from 2015 through 2019. Chinese presidents have visited Belarus twice, in 2001 and 2015. Another eight visits were paid by several chairmen of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, premiers of the State Council, and vice presidents. See Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the People's Republic of China, "On Political Relations Between Belarus and China," webpage, undated.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, "Belarus and Countries of Asia, Australia and Oceania," webpage, undated-a.

<sup>27</sup> The announcement was followed by signing cooperation documents in science and technology, judiciary, agriculture, and e-commerce. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "President Xi Jinping Meets with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko," September 16, 2022. For more on Belarus-China relations, see Andrei Yeliseyev and Olga Aleszko-Lessels, *Relations Between Belarus and China in 2020–2022: What Lies Behind the "All-Weather Partnership,"* Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, December 2022; and Jakóbowski and Kłysiński, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, undated-e.

Minsk also admits that the EU is an “objectively important partner” but highlights that the interactions are focused on economic issues.<sup>29</sup>

Behind this general language hides Lukashenko’s long-standing struggle to preserve his country’s sovereignty and power without political or economic changes. The struggle for sovereignty stems from the fact that Belarus is politically, financially, and economically dependent on Russia to the point that Minsk’s autonomy is very limited.<sup>30</sup> This problem is not new. Back in 2001, one regional expert noted that

Belarus has not broken off its bonds with Moscow after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Throughout the whole period of the Belarusian independence we can observe the country’s strong political, economic and military dependence on Russia. This dependence allows Russia to control, and even shape, the processes that take place in Belarus in all the areas mentioned.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout this report, we will demonstrate that this dependence continues and, in many ways, has even deepened.

As we will discuss in Chapter 5, Belarus has largely preserved a quasi-Soviet economic system in which the state controls much of the industrial production. This allows the government to maintain a high level of employment and to control wages, which in turn stabilizes the sociopolitical situation.<sup>32</sup> But this system also allows many unprofitable enterprises to continue operating only because of the state’s support, which makes this model very costly. Thus, Belarus needs Russian economic support to survive, which, in turn, gives Moscow great leverage.

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<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, undated-e.

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, “Will Belarus Be the Next Ukraine?” *Foreign Affairs*, February 5, 2020; Sushentsov, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, “The Republic of Belarus or the Belarusian Republic?” *OSW Studies*, No. 3, November 2001, p. 51.

<sup>32</sup> In addition, state-owned companies use short-term contracts, thus forcing workers’ loyalty. See Kamil Kłysiński, “How to Get Out of the Crisis Without Reforms? The Belarusian Authorities Confront Growing Economic Problems,” *OSW Commentary*, No. 202, March 22, 2016b.

Furthermore, Lukashenko needs Russia's political support in the national and international arena. Russian media (particularly television) are still widespread and popular in Belarus, and Belarusians have largely positive views on Russia, so Moscow's public support is valuable in Belarusian politics.<sup>33</sup> If political support proves to be insufficient, Russia can also help stabilize the situation with its security forces. Lukashenko reportedly might have sought this type of assistance in the face of mass protests after the 2020 presidential election.<sup>34</sup>

In turn, Russia's backing in the international arena is supposed to shield Belarus from foreign interference, which Minsk considers to be any action that could undermine Lukashenko's rule. In the past, Belarusian officials used the *foreign interference* label for such activities as foreign funding for Belarusian civil society; sanctions and visa restrictions on government officials; political statements in support of protesters; or any comments questioning the legitimacy of Lukashenko's rule, even negative press.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, Lukashenko seems to fear that NATO could undertake an armed intervention, which political and military cooperation with Russia is supposed to prevent.<sup>36</sup> As regional experts note, Belarus effectively outsourced military security to Russia and focused its own limited resources on internal security.<sup>37</sup> This indicates that Minsk has long failed to recognize Russia as a

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<sup>33</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, "How Russian Media Is Trying to Save Lukashenko's Belarus," *Al Jazeera*, September 18, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> "Russia Ready to 'Ensure Security' in Belarus," *Deutsche Welle*, August 15, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> "Belarus' MFA Slams Visa Restrictions on Government Officials as Interference in Internal Affairs," *BelTA*, January 18, 2023; "Belarusian Foreign Ministry Angered by Estonia's Undiplomatic Actions," *BelTA*, September 23, 2022; "Lukashenko Slams Foreign Interference in Belarus Election, Domestic Affairs," *BelTA*, June 25, 2020; "Union State MPs to Discuss Measures to Counteract Foreign Interference Via NPOs," *BelTA*, October 19, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Lucian Kim, "Facing the Biggest Challenge Ever to His Power, Lukashenko Looks to Russia for Help," *NPR*, August 25, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Belarus spends more on internal security than on national defense. See Piotr Żochowski, "Lukashenko's Last Line of Defence. The Belarusian Security Apparatus in a Time of Crisis," *OSW Commentary*, No. 402, August 2021b.

military threat, although that seems to have changed after Russia's annexation of Crimea.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, experts note that Lukashenko has a very principled view of his country's sovereignty; they say he seems to interpret *sovereignty* as "independence in domestic policy and autonomy as Russia's partner in the international arena where he has no obligation to unconditionally support all the goals of Russian foreign policy."<sup>39</sup> Sovereignty is an important element of national ideology, as the state itself is praised for its nation-building role.<sup>40</sup> This allows Lukashenko to escape a difficult choice between two alternative sources of national identity: distinct Belarusian national heritage—Belarusian language, culture, and historical memory beyond the Soviet Union (which is claimed by the opposition)—and a glorified Soviet past providing too few arguments for why separation from Russia occurred.

Therefore, the Belarusian president maneuvers carefully in relations with Russia to minimize the price for the support that Moscow provides. Furthermore, to balance Russia's leverage, Belarus has in the past sought to engage other partners—China, the EU, or the United States—as much as possible without political concessions.<sup>41</sup> Those opportunities have largely been curtailed as the result of (1) Lukashenko's reticence to engage in anti-corruption efforts that are attached to Western financial aid, (2) his government's harsh responses to protests against the 2020 presidential election results, and (3) Minsk's support to Russia for the war in Ukraine.

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Coalson and Rikard Jozwiak, "Worried About Moscow, Belarus's Lukashenka Drifts Toward Brussels," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 27, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Kamil Kłysiński and Piotr Żochowski, "The End of the Myth of a Brotherly Belarus? Russian Soft Power in Belarus After 2014: The Background and Its Manifestations," *OSW Studies*, No. 58, November 2016, p. 46. See also Natalia Leshchenko, "The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenko Regime in Belarus," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 8, October 2008; Mankoff, 2020; Shraibman, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Piotr Rudkouski, "Soft Belarusianisation: The Ideology of Belarus in the Era of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict," *OSW Commentary*, No. 253, November 2017. See also Kłysiński and Konończuk, 2020; and Kłysiński and Żochowski, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> This balancing has been a characteristic feature of Belarusian foreign policy for a long time. For example, see Sean Maguire and Michael Stott, "Buffeted Belarus to Carve Own Path Between East/West," Reuters, August 9, 2007; and Shraibman, 2018.

This balancing policy also has a security dimension. Understanding its geographical position between Russia and the West (and recognizing Belarusians' fear of being dragged into a war between the two), Minsk in the past sought a neutral status.<sup>42</sup> In late 2016, Lukashenko even proposed launching a new Helsinki process to ease the tensions in the Euro-Atlantic region and Eurasia.<sup>43</sup> In the 2017 Annual Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Lukashenko made a point to remind the international community of his country's stabilizing role:

This land is, by the way, the geographical center of our dear Europe. It is a bridge, as Ms. Muttonen said today, between the East and the West. This is the place for resolving topical issues. And today Belarus is a donor of our regional, and perhaps, global security and will remain so. . . . Today the country is viewed as a pole of stability in the European region, and this factor will be growing more pronounced. Minsk has become a recognized venue for promoting settlement in our neighboring Ukraine.<sup>44</sup>

On the one hand, this proposal might have been motivated by genuine fear that tensions between Russia and the West will escalate to war. In 2019, Belarus's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs said in an interview:

To pretend that everything is business as usual is irresponsible. We see the manifestations of this: military conflicts, tensions which can lead to a worse scenario. Being a country that has gone through the worst of it (Great Patriotic War) Belarus feels a special responsibility for seeking out a peace agreement.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, Minsk might have believed that the role of regional mediator would weaken the Western pushback against human rights abuses.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The seeking of neutral status was written into the Belarusian constitution until 2022.

<sup>43</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, "Address to OSCE PA Plenary Session in Minsk," transcript, July 5, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, 2017.

<sup>45</sup> "MFA: Belarus Will Continue to Promote Helsinki 2 Initiative," BelTA, July 18, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Kamil Kłysiński, "Stability, Not Values: The EU Lifts Sanctions Against Belarus," OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, February 17, 2016a.

## State of Cooperation in 2023

### Russia's Successes and Failures

As of January 2023, Russia had achieved many of its key political objectives in relations with Belarus. From Russia's perspective, the cooperation between the two countries is closer than ever. Belarus not only remains a pro-Russian autocratic country, it also has drifted away from the West over the past two years in the wake of the crackdown on civil society after its 2020 presidential election, its role in the migration crisis on the EU eastern border, and its support for Russia's war against Ukraine.

The electoral fraud in the 2020 presidential election led to the largest mass protests in the country's history.<sup>47</sup> Faced with unprecedented public resistance, Lukashenko turned to two instruments he knew best: political support from Russia and repressive methods of the Belarusian security apparatus.<sup>48</sup> That, in turn, derailed the rapprochement with the West that followed Russia's annexation of Crimea. Before the crackdown on the protests, the progress in relationships with the West was considerable. In February 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Minsk, marking the first visit to that country by a U.S. Secretary of State since 1994. While he was there, U.S. and Belarusian officials discussed exchanging ambassadors for the first time since 2008.<sup>49</sup> But the new wave of repression led to a new cycle of Western sanctions.<sup>50</sup>

The main factor driving a deeper wedge between Belarus and the West was Minsk's efforts to orchestrate a migration crisis on the EU border, which put an end to a long-standing Belarus narrative about the country's role

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<sup>47</sup> Shaun Walker, "Tens of Thousands Gather in Minsk for Biggest Protest in Belarus History," *The Guardian*, August 16, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Yuras Karmanau and Vladimir Isachenkov, "Putin: Russia Is Ready to Provide Security Help to Belarus," *Washington Post*, August 27, 2020; Max Seddon, "Lukashenko Seeks to Shore Up Moscow's Support for Belarus Crackdown," *Financial Times*, September 13, 2020; Vlad Kobets and David J. Kramer, "Lukashenko's Brutal Crackdown Has Lethal Help from Moscow," *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> "Pompeo: Belarus Doesn't Need to Pick Between U.S. and Russia," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 1, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Holds the Belarusian Regime to Account on Anniversary of Fraudulent Election," press release, August 9, 2021; Council of the European Union, "Timeline—EU Restrictive Measures Against Belarus," webpage, undated.

in providing border security. By directly threatening the stability of three NATO and EU member states—Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland—Lukashenko demonstrated that Belarus is a threat to stability, not its guarantor. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, countries directly affected by Minsk’s decision to destabilize the border have described it as a hybrid war.<sup>51</sup> This crisis is unprecedented even for usually strained relations with the EU.

Consequently, Lukashenko found himself in political and economic isolation, which limited his room for maneuvering with Russia. In the past, Lukashenko would leverage Belarus’s relationship with the West in negotiations with Russia’s leader. However, the severity of the crisis in the relationship with the EU and the United States in 2020 and 2021 meant that the Belarusian threat of Western drift was not credible. Meanwhile, the inefficient Belarusian economy was already suffering because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and repressions coupled with sanctions further undermined the most-modern parts of the economy (for example, the IT sector).<sup>52</sup> Belarus needed another tranche of budget financing, and it became clear that, once again, only Russia would keep Belarus afloat.<sup>53</sup>

Therefore, after years of resistance, Lukashenko agreed to advance integration within the Union State. In November 2021, the Supreme State Council of the Union State adopted the resolution “On Basic Principles of Implementation of Provisions of the Agreement on Creation of the Union State in 2021–2023,” which launched 28 programs for deeper Belarus-Russia integration. The programs are supposed to ultimately lead to a unification of economic, social, and energy policies.<sup>54</sup> Regional experts point out

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<sup>51</sup> Joanna Hyndle-Hussein and Piotr Żochowski, “The Lithuanian-Belarusian Migration Crisis,” OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, June 16, 2021; Piotr Żochowski, “Belarus: An Escalation of the Migration Crisis,” OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, October 27, 2021c.

<sup>52</sup> Kamil Kłysiński, “The Cost of a Police State: Belarus’s Economic Problems,” *OSW Commentary*, No. 392, May 11, 2021b.

<sup>53</sup> Darya Korsunskaya, “Russia Will Send Belarus First \$1 Billion of Loan by Year’s End,” *Reuters*, September 16, 2020; Anton Troianovski, “Russia and Belarus Inch Closer to a Full-Blown Merger,” *New York Times*, September 9, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> “Sovet ministrov Soyuznogo gosudarstva utverdil resheniya ob uglublenii integratsii (+ sodержanie 28 programm)” [“Union State Council of Ministers Confirmed Decision on Deepening Integration (+ Support for 28 Programs)”], *Zerkalo*, September 10, 2021.

that implementation of the integration will be a lengthy process, which Lukashenko will likely try to delay as much as possible.<sup>55</sup> So far, Belarus has managed to fend off Russia's demand for supranational bodies or a single currency. But the evidence from the economic integration among Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan within the EEU suggests that those 28 integration programs of the Union State will, in practice, force Belarus to adopt Russian standards and control.<sup>56</sup>

The final blow to Minsk's policy of balancing between Russia and the West is Belarus's active role in Russia's war against Ukraine. By providing its territory and military support for Russia's invasion, Minsk unequivocally sided with Moscow, thus abandoning its former balancing policy, relatively good relations with its southern neighbor, and position of neutrality. The shift from neutrality was formally confirmed by the changes in the constitution adopted in February 2022, which removed clauses about maintaining nonnuclear status and striving for neutrality.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the war in neighboring Ukraine provides Lukashenko with another justification for the radical security measures and repressions of political dissent.<sup>58</sup> It also gave an impetus for deployment of the Regional Groups of Forces—that is, joint Belarusian-Russian troops.<sup>59</sup> Military cooperation between Russia and Belarus has always been close (see Chapter 4). Lukashenko has publicly maintained that his forces will not directly participate in the war in Ukraine unless Belarus is attacked. But he agreed to their presence in launching both the invasion itself and continued missile attacks on Ukraine, as well as to the use of training grounds for troops and hospitals to care for wounded

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<sup>55</sup> Kamil Kłysiński and Piotr Żochowski, "Russia-Belarus: A Sham Acceleration of Integration," OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, November 5, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Iwona Wiśniewska, "Eurasian Integration: Russia's Attempt at the Economic Unification of the Post-Soviet Area," *OSW Studies*, No. 44, July 30, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Piotr Żochowski, "Transformation of Lukashenko's System of Government: The Draft of Belarus's New Constitution," OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, January 21, 2021a.

<sup>58</sup> Alesia Rudnik, "Belarus Dictator Targets Anti-War Saboteurs with Death Penalty," Atlantic Council, May 19, 2022a.

<sup>59</sup> "Belarus and Russia to Deploy Joint Regional Military Group," Deutsche Welle, October 10, 2022.

Russian soldiers. Russian forces are likely to remain in Belarus until Russia is completely defeated in Ukraine or until Russia announces a victory—a situation that solidifies Belarus’s status under Moscow’s control.

In the long term, however, the war in Ukraine could undermine Russia’s soft power in Belarus. Given Belarus’s historical memory of World War II, during which the Belarusian Soviet Republic lost one-quarter of its population, anti-war sentiments are strong among the Belarusian people. Results of a 2022 Chatham House online survey indicate that Belarusians do not support Russia’s war, and only a very slim minority (less than 10 percent) believes that Belarus should join the war on Russia’s side.<sup>60</sup> The same study shows that, after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, more Belarusians started to view Russia negatively (21 percent in August 2022 compared with 9 percent in January 2022), although Ukraine’s reputation also suffered (19 percent negative views in August 2022 compared with 15 percent in January 2022).<sup>61</sup> Finally, the war seems to have changed Belarusian attitudes toward the military alliance with Russia. The percentage of respondents who said they believed that Belarus should remain in CSTO dropped from 63 percent in November 2020 to 42 percent in June 2022.<sup>62</sup> The crackdown on protests following the 2020 election demonstrated that, if necessary, Lukashenko will not hesitate to disregard public opinion. Still, the decline in positive sentiments toward Russia is hardly in Moscow’s interest.

The two areas where Russia likely still sees room for improvement are Minsk’s support for Moscow’s diplomatic positions and further political integration within the Union State. Belarus usually votes with Russia in the UN General Assembly; however, Minsk has never officially recognized as independent states the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics (Ukrainian territories recognized by Russia as independent on February 21, 2022, later illegally annexed by Russia), or Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgian territories recognized by Russia on August 26, 2008).

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<sup>60</sup> Chatham House, “How Belarusians’ Views on the War Have Changed over Six Months. The Results of a Public Opinion Poll Conducted Between 6 and 17 June 2022,” undated, pp. 4–5.

<sup>61</sup> Chatham House, undated, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> Chatham House, undated, p. 13.

Furthermore, it took Minsk more than seven years to name Crimea a Russian territory.<sup>63</sup>

It is unclear how important it is now for the Kremlin that Belarus recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. After the 2008 war with Georgia, Russian diplomats indicated that Moscow expects Belarus to recognize them.<sup>64</sup> However, Minsk has always seen it as a contentious issue between Russia and the West and therefore has avoided taking sides.<sup>65</sup> There were three UN General Assembly votes on the status of internally displaced persons and refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetia in which Belarus did not vote with Russia (abstained or did not vote)—an otherwise rare occurrence. Between 1991 and 2021, Belarus voted in opposition to Russia in only 4 percent of cases, according to researcher Eric Voeten and his colleagues.<sup>66</sup> Lukashenko claimed that the West would impose sanctions on Belarus for recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia but that he would take the step if Russia compensated Minsk for possible losses; the Kremlin alleg-

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<sup>63</sup> “Belarus Leader, in U-Turn, Says Annexed Crimea Is Legally Russian,” Reuters, November 30, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> “Rossiya zhdyet ot Belarussii priznaniya Abkhazii i Yuzhnoy Osetii” [“Russia Expects Belarus to Recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia”], *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, November 22, 2008.

<sup>65</sup> “Belarus ne toropitsya priznavat’ nezavisimost’ Abkhazii i Yuzhnoy Osetii” [“Belarus Is in No Hurry to Recognize the Independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia”], *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, September 24, 2008.

<sup>66</sup> United Nations Digital Library, “Status of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Georgia: Resolution/Adopted by the General Assembly,” voting data set entry, 2010; United Nations Digital Library, “Status of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Georgia: Resolution/Adopted by the General Assembly,” voting data set entry, 2011; United Nations Digital Library, “Status of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Georgia: Resolution/Adopted by the General Assembly,” voting data set entry, 2012. According to UN voting data aggregated by Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey between 1991 and 2021, Russia and Belarus took opposite sides in only 4.6 percent of votes; one of the countries abstained or was not present while the other voted yes or no 23.7 percent of the time; and the two countries were in complete agreement 71.7 percent of the time (Erik Voeten, Anton Strezhnev, and Michael Bailey, “United Nations General Assembly Voting Data,” Version 29, Harvard Data-verse, June 29, 2022).

edly declined.<sup>67</sup> In 2021, Belarusian officials claimed that the issue was not on the bilateral agenda.<sup>68</sup> However, in September 2022, Lukashenko visited Abkhazia for the first time and openly admitted that the visit was a result of his conversation with Putin in Sochi.<sup>69</sup> This could indicate that the issue remains important for the Kremlin.

Finally, from Russia's point of view, there is still an unfulfilled potential of political integration within the Union State. This issue has a history that dates back to the 1990s, when Lukashenko himself was seeking greater integration because he reportedly saw it as a chance to rise on Russia's political stage.<sup>70</sup> Putin's arrival at the Kremlin quickly revealed the difference in motivations. Putin wanted to accelerate the integration process, but in the early years of his presidency, the ideological aspect of integration was secondary to more-practical matters. As one expert noted,

The Russians appear to want to achieve two things: one, to lower the costs of Belarusian economic overreliance on Russia; two, to strengthen its control over the Belarusian economy. Moscow's ultimate goal, it seems, is to merge the two economies as far as possible and in the process retake control of Belarus's most strategic and profitable sectors. In the political sphere, Moscow clearly wants to sustain Minsk's de facto political dependence on it.<sup>71</sup>

In 2002, Putin went as far as to propose a merger between the two countries, which Lukashenko immediately interpreted as a proposal to incorpo-

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<sup>67</sup> "Lukashenko rasskazal, pochemu Minsk ne priznal Abkhaziyu i Yuzhnyu Ossetiyu" ["Lukashenko Told Why Minsk Did Not Recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia"], *Regnum*, August 7, 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Nikita Folomov, "My ne toropimsya: Chto oznachayut zlukhi o priznannii Abkhazii i Yuzhnoy Osetii" ["We Are Not in a Hurry: What Do the Rumors About the Recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia Mean?"] *Gazeta.ru*, November 14, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Aleksandr Burakov, "Kak v Tbilisi otreagirovali na visit Lukashenko v Abkhaziyu" ["How Lukashenko's Visit to Abkhazia Was Received in Tbilisi"], *Deutsche Welle*, September 29, 2022.

<sup>70</sup> Wierzbowska-Miazga, 2001, p. 52.

<sup>71</sup> Rafał Sadowski, *Belarus–Russia: Whither Integration?* monograph, OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, May 2003, p. 18.

rate Belarus into Russia and thus publicly rejected.<sup>72</sup> Faced with Lukashenko's assertiveness, Russia in late 2006 initiated a process of increasing oil and natural gas prices for Belarus, which until then had been sold at a large discount.<sup>73</sup> Since then, the price, volume, and conditions of delivery of oil and natural gas—on which Belarus depends—have become a recurring argument in Russia's negotiations with Belarus.

In the first half of the 2010s, Russia's focus shifted from the Union State to a larger integration project—what later became the EEU. This integration initiative was addressed to the entire post-Soviet space “to counteract the economic expansion of the European Union and China” and “to guarantee for Russia that the strong politico-economic influences in this area will be maintained.”<sup>74</sup> However, in late 2018, Russia shifted its attention back to the Union State with a renewed focus on political integration.<sup>75</sup>

From 2019 to 2023, the extent of supposed integration seemingly continued to vary between 28 and 33 integration road maps (details became public only after they were adopted as 28 programs). In 2019, both sides were signaling that they were very close to achieving consensus until Dmitriy Medvedev announced a 31st road map on the creation of supranational bodies, the introduction of a single currency, and a single emission center, which Lukashenko immediately publicly disputed.<sup>76</sup> Although the difficult

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<sup>72</sup> Gregory Feifer, “Russia: In Surprise Move, Putin Backs Russia-Belarus Merger; Lukashenko Rebuffs Plan,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 15, 2002.

<sup>73</sup> Konończuk, 2008.

<sup>74</sup> Wiśniewska, 2013, p. 5. Also see Olga Shumylo-Tapiola, *The Eurasian Customs Union: Friend or Foe of the EU?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 3, 2012. In speeches and policy papers, Putin advocated integrated economic spaces from “Vladivostok to Lisbon,” but the idea never gained much traction in the EU (Vladimir Putin, “Bezopasnost' v mire možhno obespechit' tol'ko vmeste s Rossiei” [“Security in the World Can Only Be Ensured Together with Russia”], RG.ru, February 26, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> “Medvedev nazval varianty razvitiya integratsionnogo proekta s Belarus'yu” [“Medvedev Named Options for Developing the Belarus Integration Project”], RG.ru, December 13, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Anton Khodasevich, “31-ya ‘dorožhnaya karta’ udarit po suverenitetu Belarussii” [“31st ‘Roadmap’ Will Tackle Belarus's Sovereignty”], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, December 24, 2019.

economic situation and crackdown on the protests following the 2020 election again limited Belarus's space to maneuver and forced Lukashenko to agree to 28 integration programs, there is little reason to believe that Russia will not push for more-formal control over Belarus and its foreign policy in the future. According to documents reportedly leaked from the Russian presidential administration and dating to 2021, Moscow plans to implement full integration within the Union State by 2030.<sup>77</sup> That does not necessarily mean the incorporation of Belarus into Russia, however; the Kremlin enjoys Minsk's supporting voice in international organizations. However, given the history of integration and Lukashenko's resistance to economic reforms, it seems likely that political integration will deepen.<sup>78</sup>

## Belarus's Successes and Failures

Until 2020, the biggest success of Belarus—or rather of Lukashenko—in the relationship with Russia is the fact that Belarus survived so many years without significant political and economic overhauls while maintaining a modicum of sovereignty. Despite the huge imbalance in political, military, and economic potentials of the two countries, Lukashenko has been surprisingly assertive in dealing with Russia, skillfully exploiting Moscow's fear of Minsk's potential drift toward the West. The 2020 election and subsequent mass protests forced Lukashenko to choose a side; since then, relations with the West have deteriorated, leaving the president with little room to maneuver. Nevertheless, Lukashenko was able to stay in power and stabilize the political situation while resisting Russia's persistent demand for closer political integration. Similarly, despite some speculations that Putin might be pressuring Lukashenko to send Belarusian troops to Ukraine, that has not yet occurred.

Belarus's biggest failure, on the other hand, is the price it is already paying for the support it has received, although—given the difference in potentials—this outcome is hardly surprising. Over the years, Belarus had to

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Weiss and Holger Roonemaa, "Revealed: Leaked Document Shows How Russia Plans to Take Over Belarus," *Yahoo News*, February 20, 2023.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Carpenter and Vlad Kobets, "What Russia Really Has in Mind for Belarus," *Foreign Affairs*, September 8, 2020.

participate in Russia's integration projects, most recently on a bilateral basis. By abandoning its balancing policy and unequivocally siding with Russia in the war with Ukraine, Belarus drastically limited its ability to cooperate with other actors—not only the West but also China. Even though Minsk and Beijing announced a comprehensive strategic partnership, experts noted that the economic cooperation has not met the expectations of either side; furthermore, the arrangement suffered from the sanctions imposed on Minsk between 2020 and 2022.<sup>79</sup> In March 2023, Lukashenko visited China to talk about advancing economic cooperation, but there is no indication so far that Beijing is willing to subsidize the Belarusian economy on par with Moscow.<sup>80</sup> In the past, Beijing seemed careful not to compete with Russia for political influence in Belarus.<sup>81</sup> The lack of an alternative to Russia, coupled with the deterioration of the economic situation, has further solidified Moscow's leverage over Minsk.

Finally, even indirect involvement in the war with Ukraine buries Belarus's alleged pursuit of neutral status. The claim has always been unfounded—given the military alliance with Russia—but Minsk was able in the past to use its position between Russia and Ukraine to host talks and thus elevate its own diplomatic importance. Now, this opportunity is gone. Although Kyiv recognizes that Lukashenko has not sent troops to Ukraine—which would be cause for breaking off even the bare minimum of diplomatic relations that remained active as of January 2023<sup>82</sup>—Ukraine's Western partners did impose sanctions on Belarus for its involvement in the war.<sup>83</sup> In the meantime, Turkey took over the mediator role from Belarus while the negotiations were still feasible.

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<sup>79</sup> Yeliseyeu and Aleszko-Lessels, 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko," March 1, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Jakóbowski and Kłysiński, 2021.

<sup>82</sup> "Kuleba Explains What Would Cause Ukraine to Sever Diplomatic Relations with Belarus," *Ukrainska Pravda*, July 18, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> Council of the European Union, "Russia's Military Aggression Against Ukraine: EU Agrees New Sectoral Measures Targeting Belarus and Russia," press release, March 9, 2022.

## Lessons of the Past

Since the beginning of Putin's presidency, the relations between Russia and Belarus have been defined by Putin's quest to regain control over the post-Soviet space and Lukashenko's quest to stay in power with as few economic alterations and political concessions as possible. Putin, operating on the assumption that bilateral relations should reflect the balance of power between the two countries, believes that Belarus should effectively cede its sovereignty and *de facto*—although not *de jure*—become part of the Russian Federation. Lukashenko, operating in his best interest, prefers to be the president of an independent state, with full control over the domestic situation and economic assets—not the head of a puppet government on a par with Russian governors or heads of local administration. However, Minsk's ability to operate independently is limited by such structural factors as Belarus's anachronistic, quasi-Soviet economic system and its dependence on Russian imports and financial support.

Consequently, over the years, the dynamics between the two countries largely followed a predictable pattern. Russia would use its economic and political leverage to pressure Minsk to make concessions, and Belarus would respond by searching for other international partners or even improving relations with the EU to threaten Moscow with its potential Western drift. However, because Belarus was never ready to implement any economic or political changes required by Western institutions, the cooperation would remain largely unfruitful and deteriorate in the aftermath of political repressions (usually surrounding the electoral process). That, in turn, would leave Belarus with little choice but to surrender to some of Russia's demands.

This pattern first emerged in 2006, when Russia announced renegotiations of oil and gas contracts to bring them closer to market conditions and thus deprive Belarus of its energy subsidies.<sup>84</sup> Lukashenko responded with political statements about “a mistake to be reliant on Russia alone” and “a bipolar foreign policy based on friendly relations with neighbors on both sides.”<sup>85</sup> But at the same time, he called the EU human rights demands

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<sup>84</sup> Konończuk, 2008.

<sup>85</sup> Maguire and Stott, 2007.

“impossible,” thus undercutting the credibility of the threat.<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, Belarus was able to lessen some of Russia’s demands, but Russia has continued to use energy subsidies as leverage in political negotiations.

A few years later, in 2010, when Russia launched the customs union project, Belarus was again hesitant to participate unless Russia abolished export customs duties on crude oil and oil products.<sup>87</sup> To signal alternative courses of action, Minsk sought crude oil supplies from Venezuela and credit lines in China, and it entertained the EU’s offer to cooperate.<sup>88</sup> In response, Russia reduced supplies of natural gas to Belarus and launched an information campaign against Lukashenko just a few months before the presidential election of 2010.<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, Lukashenko bowed to Russia and signed a declaration on the establishment of a CES of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan just a couple of weeks before the election. He also launched a new wave of repressions against political opposition right after the election, and the EU responded with new sanctions.

The period between 2011 and 2014 was marked by Belarus’s growing economic problems and compliance with Russia’s expectations to establish the EEU by 2015.<sup>90</sup> At times, Belarus signaled the possibility of closer ties with the EU, but they were short-lived episodes. Russia’s annexation

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<sup>86</sup> Maguire and Stott, 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Igor’ Karnei, “Tamozhennyi soyuz: poka bez Belorussii” [“Customs Union: So Far Without Belarus”], Radio Svoboda, May 29, 2010.

<sup>88</sup> Yuriy Humber, “Belarus’ Quixotic Leader Defies Russia,” Bloomberg, September 23, 2010; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, “Materialy podkhoda k presse Ministra inostrannykh del Respubliki Belarus’ Sergeya Martynova v ramkakh vizita v Minsk Yevropeyskogo Komissara po voprosam rasshireniya YeS I Yevropeyskoy politike sosedstva Shtefana Fyule (MID, 15 noyabrya 2010 g.)” [“Materials of the Approach to the Press of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus Sergei Martynov Within the Framework of the Visit to Minsk of the European Commissioner for EU Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy Štefan Füle (MFA, November 15, 2010)”], press release, November 15, 2010.

<sup>89</sup> “Russia Cuts Gas Supplies to Belarus by 60%,” *The Guardian*, June 23, 2010; Dmitry Travin, “Belarusian ‘Godfather’ Falls Out with His Masters,” Open Democracy, July 12, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Kamil Kłysiński, “Lukashenko Agrees to Make Crucial Concessions to Russia,” OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, December 1, 2011.

of Crimea reportedly scared Lukashenko.<sup>91</sup> Consequently, he focused on maintaining sovereignty and doubled down on the balancing policy. The West, in turn, lowered its expectations regarding human rights in Belarus and was ready to continue dialogue regardless of Lukashenko's record.<sup>92</sup> The balancing policy arguably peaked at U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo's visit to Minsk in February 2020. The attempt to distance Belarus from Russia also entailed changes in state ideology and incorporation in the official narrative of praise for non-Soviet elements of Belarusian history.<sup>93</sup> These factors led to a reassessment of the relationship with Belarus by the Russian expert community and possibly to the Kremlin's decision to reinvigorate the Union State.<sup>94</sup> This time, however, the final blow to Minsk's autonomy was delivered not by Russia but by Lukashenko himself when he decided to double down on repressions and anti-Western rhetoric after the 2020 election.

## Conclusions

The state of Belarus-Russia political cooperation is as much the result of Moscow's determination to reestablish control over a "brotherly nation" as it is an arguably inevitable consequence of Lukashenko's resistance to political and economic changes. Russia and Belarus remain locked in a cycle of political and economic codependence. For years now, Lukashenko has continued to face the same trade-off: (1) democratize and reform Belarus, with the likely result of losing power but maintaining the country's sovereignty with Western economic support or (2) maintain control over the domestic situation in Belarus through repression and an anachronistic economic system, with the likely result of losing autonomy in relations with Russia. Despite temporary and arguably opportunistic rapprochements with the West since the early 2000s, Lukashenko has demonstrated where his priori-

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<sup>91</sup> Aleksandr Yaroshevich, "Lukashenko ispol'zuyet movu kak shchit ot 'russkogo mira'" ["Lukashenko Uses MOV as a Shield from the 'Russian World'"], Navini.by, July 9, 2014.

<sup>92</sup> Kłysiński, 2016a; Anaïs Marin, *Belarus: Time for a "Principled" Re-Engagement*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, February 25, 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Kłysiński and Żochowski, 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Kłysiński and Żochowski, 2016.

ties lie.<sup>95</sup> There is no reason to believe that these priorities will change now that Russia has deployed troops of the Regional Group of Forces on Belarusian soil—troops that can serve as an additional lever against Minsk.

The two countries and their leaders converge on the key factor supporting their respective powers: the authoritarian form of government, which they both want to protect. They also converge on the perception of threats to their regimes: Western interference, which they also see similarly. They seem to believe that any form of social protest is sponsored and incited by the West. Each country understands that it needs the other, albeit for different reasons, and that there are no good substitutes in pursuit of those specific goals. For Moscow, Belarus is the last European country in Russia's perceived sphere of influence. For Minsk, Russia is the only partner willing to keep Belarus afloat. Despite recurrent conflicts, it seems that Moscow can accept subsidizing the Belarusian economy as long as Minsk is willing to pay an appropriate political price. That price, however, is precisely the issue over which the two countries diverge. Lukashenko wants to preserve his country's sovereignty (or, rather, his sovereignty), although his ability to push back has declined steadily, especially since 2020.<sup>96</sup> In turn, Putin wants to ensure that Belarus will never fall out of Russia's perceived sphere of influence, and the approach to ensure this has been to limit Belarus's sovereignty to the point of de facto control, even if preserving de jure independence.

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<sup>95</sup> Sushentsov, 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, "Lukashenko's Commitment to Belarusian Sovereignty Is Overstated," Chatham House, February 18, 2020.

# Military and Security Cooperation

This chapter provides an assessment of Belarusian and Russian threat perceptions, military and security cooperation between the two countries, and how Russia and Belarus have leveraged their relationship to manage past internal crises. We first identify Russia's highest priority threats and the role that Russia envisions for Belarus in safeguarding its national security interests. We then discuss Belarusian threat perceptions, examining both external and internal threats. We conclude with a discussion of the convergences and key divergences in Russian and Belarusian threat perceptions and security policies.

## Threat Perceptions

### Russia's Threat Perceptions

Russia views Western nations, and particularly the United States and NATO, as the main sources of military threats to its national security. Russia's most recent national security strategy (*Strategiia Natsional'noi Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), published in July 2021, describes a period of transformation in the modern world characterized by new rules and structures for a new world order.<sup>1</sup> In it, the West's ambition to retain hegemony, the intensification of interstate conflicts, and the decline in the effectiveness of global security have increased the threat of the use of military force against Russia. Specifically, NATO's growing military infrastructure near Russia's

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<sup>1</sup> Government of the Russian Federation, "Strategiia Natsional'noi Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii" ["National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation"], July 2, 2021, in *Flag Rodiny* [*Flag of the Fatherland*], No. 26, July 9, 2021.

borders, continuous pressure on Russia and its allies and partners, active reconnaissance, and training in the use of large military formations and nuclear weapons against Russia are blamed for intensifying military threats against Russia. The United States, according to this strategy document, poses a broader threat to strategic stability and global security because of its continuing pursuit of a global missile defense system and its plans to place short- and medium-range missiles in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, Russia's national security strategy calls for its national defense to rely on a military policy of strategic deterrence and prevention of military conflicts and to improve its military organization and activities.

Russia views the United States and NATO as the main sources of military danger to its national security. Since 2014 (the last publication of Russia's military doctrine), the United States has been the source of military danger in almost every geographic region surrounding Russia, except for Central Asia. According to Russian military science literature, Russia's past threat assessments also concluded that, in both the near term (out to 2030) and the long term (out to 2045), Russia would be most likely to face foreign threats from the southwestern and eastern directions, with another likely threat from the West in the long term (see Table 4.1). The primary foreign threats are defined as those characterized by global economic expansion of the world financial capital and of some adjacent states.<sup>2</sup>

Russia's threat assessments in the mid-2000s concluded that Russia's biggest domestic threat at the time was the overthrow of the regime and, in the long term, the loss of territory to the Islamic caliphate. This perhaps stemmed from a close proximity in time to Russia's conflicts in the North Caucasus and the spread of such international terrorist groups as al Qaeda. The primary domestic threats are defined as those characterized by domestic financial crises, external financing of domestic subversive actions, and social or political dissatisfaction that leads to low standards of living and ultimately to destruction of statehood, loss of independence, sovereignty

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<sup>2</sup> D. V. Surin, "Klassifikatsiya, Ranzhirovaniie i Ekspertnaya Otsenka Vnezhnih i Vnutrennih Ugroz pri Analize Obespecheniia Natsionalnoi Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii" ["Classification, Organization and Expert Evaluation of External and Internal Threats in the Analysis of Ensuring National Security of the Russian Federation"], *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk [Academy of Military Sciences Bulletin]*, Vol. 3, 2004.

**TABLE 4.1**
**Local and Regional Locations of Military Dangers and Threats to Russia**

Region	Catalyst of Military Danger (Threat)	Location of Military Danger (Threat)
Southwest	Ukraine's territorial claims (with support from United States and NATO) against Russia, Azerbaijan's claims (with support from Turkey) against Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia's intentions (with support from United States and NATO) to reacquire Abkhazia and South Ossetia	Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, supported by NATO
East	Japan's territorial claims on Kuril Islands, Sakhalin Island, Kamchatka Peninsula, and parts of Primorskiy Krai	Japan, United States, South Korea
West	Territorial claims by Baltic countries, Poland, and Germany against Russia and Belarus. Efforts by United States and West to oust a geopolitical competitor and to create a rim of subservient border states in Eastern Europe	United States, Baltics, Poland, Germany
Arctic	Claims on control of natural resources in the Arctic shelf by other countries, damaging Russia's national interests	United States, NATO
Central Asia	Claims that extremist Islamist organizations in Central Asia, the Xinjiang-Uighur autonomous region in China, and the North Caucasus and Volga regions in Russia are (1) creating Islamic caliphates by carving out parts of territories in Russia, China, and Kazakhstan, and (2) initiating power grabs in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan	Extremist Islamist organizations, operating outside and within the borders of Russia, Kazakhstan, and other countries
Russian territory	Terrorism	Domestic
North Caucasus Federal District, Volga Region	Separatism, terrorism	Domestic

SOURCE: Features information from Sambu Tsyrendorzhev, "Prognoz Boiennyh Opasnostei include Ugroz Rossii" ["Forecast of Military Dangers and Threats Against Russia"], *Zashchita i Bezopasnost'* [Defense and Security], No. 4, 2015.

and territorial integrity.<sup>3</sup> The likelihood of domestic threats was often rated higher than foreign threats.<sup>4</sup>

Globalization has been the main catalyst for Russian perceptions of the rise of external threats to Russia's national security, followed by the fall of the Soviet Union and perceptions of a decline in Russia's "former might and authority."<sup>5</sup> And although some Russian academics have argued that the threat of mutually assured destruction from U.S. and Soviet nuclear weapons has dissipated with the end of Cold War hostilities between the two superpowers, Russian military academics specializing in post-Cold War issues say that this one threat has been replaced by many new, albeit smaller, threats—making the world, and Russia, less safe.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the global scope of post-Cold War sources of potential danger to Russia extended to such power centers as the United States and its allies, NATO countries in the EU, Japan and South Korea in the Asia-Pacific, and China.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, assessments have remained unchanged regarding areas of heightened risk of military conflict for Russia, encompassing the West, the Far East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East. However, the likelihood of a threat from each of these regions is debatable, as is what would motivate an attack. Assessments of the risks posed by China (Far East) and NATO (West) have particularly dominated this debate. One perspective views China as a strategic partner and close political ally with whom armed conflict is unlike-

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<sup>3</sup> Surin, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Tsyrendorzhiev, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> "Sovremennoe Geopoliticheskoe Polozhenie Rossii i Osnovnyie Istochniki Voennykh Ugroz Ee Bezopasnosti" ["Russia's Modern Geopolitical Situation and the Primary Sources of Military Threats to Its Security"], *Na Boevom Postu [On the Battlefield]*, July 10, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Lutovinov, "Sistema Voennykh Ugroz Bezopasnosti Rossii: Voenno-Politicheskii Analiz" ["System of Military Threats to Russia's Security: Military-Political Analysis"], *Voiennyye Znaniia [Military Knowledge]*, No.1, January 2009.

<sup>7</sup> A. F. Klimenko, "Metodika Otsenki Voennykh Ugroz i Mery po ih Neutralizatsii" ["Methodology of Assessing Military Threats and Means to Neutralize Them"], *Voiennaia Mysl' [Military Thought]*, No. 5, 1993.

ly.<sup>8</sup> Another perspective portrays it as posing a realistic military threat because China's mobilized military would outnumber Russia's population, and China has nuclear weapons and can withstand heavy losses.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, NATO has been considered a threat for several reasons, such as its

- aggression in Yugoslavia in 1999
- preponderance of forces and defense budget
- capability to surround Kaliningrad and reduce freedom of movement in the Baltic Sea
- proclivity for diminishing Russia's strategic warning ability and air defense
- military infrastructure expansion close to Russia's borders.<sup>10</sup>

Other observers of Russian military security have argued that NATO is not a threat because Western countries are averse to personnel or equipment losses and large-scale aggression can turn into a nuclear exchange that will cause millions of personnel losses on both sides.<sup>11</sup>

The perspectives that argue against either China or NATO posing a realistic military threat conclude that threat assessments need to account not just for military potential of one country or another but also the military-political leadership's intent and relevant preparations.<sup>12</sup> Early in the post-Cold War era, for example, Iran's influence was considered a source of potential danger because of the rise of pan-Islamic states and Russia's passive foreign policy

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<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Lutovinov and A. F. Klimenko, "Diskussionnaia Tribuna: Nepravil'no Otsenivaia Ugrozy Voiennoi Bezopasnosti Rossii, Mozhno Sozdat' ikh Samim" ["Discussion Forum: By Incorrectly Evaluating Threats to Russia's Military Security, We Can Create Them Ourselves"], *Voiennaia Mysl' [Military Thought]*, No. 4, January 7, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandr Sharavin, "Tret'ia Ugroza: Voiennoe Stroitel'stvo Rossii Vedetsia Bez Ucheta Opasnosti, Ishodiashchei Vostoka" ["Third Threat. Russia Is Not Considering Danger from the East in Its Defense Building"], *Nezavisimoe Voiennoe Obozrenie [Independent Military Review]*, No. 36, September 28, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Lutovinov and Klimenko, 2001; Government of the Russian Federation, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Sharavin, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Lutovinov and Klimenko, 2001.

toward Iran.<sup>13</sup> Today, as Russia continues to wage war against Ukraine, China and Iran are two of Russia's closest partners. Russia has formed a special relationship with China, as observed through the countries' meeting in Uzbekistan during the SCO's September 2022 Summit and their publicized "no limits" partnership.<sup>14</sup> This partnership involves economic and military cooperation with Russia becoming increasingly dependent on China economically.

Finally, although earlier assessments in military scientific circles had forecast a general decrease in the likelihood of confrontation between Russia and the United States out to 2020, these groups still had concluded that the United States would continue to use force to pressure Russia and create military threats to Russia's national security. The United States has remained an uncontested potential threat source for Russia. The primary strategic and political-military factors underlying this pervasive perspective have been Washington's ambition for world domination and its one-sided foreign policies and appropriation of the world's natural resources, especially oil.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the information potential of such countries

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<sup>13</sup> Klimenko, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> On Russia's growing liquefied natural gas, gas, and fuel exports to China, see Steve Inskeep and Emily Feng, "Xi-Putin Meeting Marks a Closer Relationship Between the 2 Global Powers," *NPR Morning Edition*, September 12, 2022; Clara Ferreira Marques, "China Is Winning the Post-Ukraine Game, at Russia's Expense," Bloomberg, September 11, 2022; and Anastasia Larina, "Stoimost' Eksporta Rossiiskogo Gaza v Kitai Vyroslo na 177% v Etom Godu" ["Price of Exports of Russian Gas to China Grew by 177% This Year"], *Kommersant*, December 20, 2022. On Russian and Chinese warships operating together in the Bering Sea waters off Alaska, see Melody Schreiber, "A U.S. Coast Guard Ship Unexpectedly Encountered Chinese and Russian Warships off Alaska," *Arctic Today*, September 26, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> B. B. Korabel'nikov, "Osobennosti Geopoliticheskoi Obstanovki v Mire. Voennyie Ugrozy Rossii" ["Uniqueness of the International Geopolitical Situation. Military Threats to Russia"], *Voienno-Strategicheskii Analiz [Military Strategic Analysis]*, No. 1, 2019; R. P. Koshkin, "Analiz Mezhdunarodnoi Obstanovki, Osnovnyie Vyzovy i Ugrozy Bezopasnosti Rossii" ["Analysis of the International Situation, Challenges and Threats to Russia's Security"], *Voienno-Strategicheskii Analiz [Military-Strategic Analysis]*, No. 1, 2019; V. P. Malyshev and E. Ia. Bogatyrev, *Analiz Voiennykh Ugroz Natsional'noi Bezopasnosti Rossii i ikh Vliianie na Planirovanie Meropriiatií Grazhdanskoi Oborony [Analysis of Military Threats to Russia's National Security and Their Role in Civil Defense Planning]*, Tsentr Strategicheskikh Issledovanií Grazhdanskoi Zashchity MCHS Rossii [Center for Strategic Research in Civil Defense for Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations], 2009, pp. 283–302.

as the United States, other NATO members, and China has increased Russia's perception of threats from these countries because of their ability to conduct military information operations.<sup>16</sup> On February 24, 2022, the day that Russia invaded Ukraine, Putin repeated his claim that Russia's "fundamental threats" continue to come from "irresponsible policies in the West" regarding Russia, specifically "NATO's expansion to the East, its military infrastructure approaching Russian borders."<sup>17</sup> In his speech, Putin listed military operations in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria as examples of "bloody military operations" and "illegitimate uses of force" by those "who have declared themselves the victors of the Cold War" (namely, the United States).<sup>18</sup> Putin also blamed the West for propagating Russia's domestic threats, claiming that the West "actively supported separatism and mercenary gangs" in southern Russia in the early 2000s.<sup>19</sup>

## Russian Views of Threats to Belarus

Table 4.1 notes Russian strategy perceptions that the United States, the Baltics, Poland, and Germany are the primary sources of military threats to Russia coming from the western strategic direction. More recently, some Russian commentators have stoked fears that the United States' measures to strengthen defense and its deterrence posture on NATO's eastern flank are reminiscent of Europe's military preparations prior to beginning of war.<sup>20</sup> NATO conducted 88 military exercises in 2020 and the large-scale exercise Steadfast

<sup>16</sup> N. A. Molchanov, "Informatsionnyi Potentsial Zarubezhnyh Stran kak Istochnik Ugroz Voiennoi Bezopasnosti RF" ["Information Potential of Foreign Countries as a Sources of Threats to Military Security of the RF"], *Geopolitika i Bezopasnost'* [*Geopolitics and Security*], 2008; Sambu Tsyrendorzhiev, "O Kolichestvennoi Otsenke Stepeni Voiennoi Bezopasnoti" ["On Quantitative Analysis of the Level of Military Security"], *Voennaia Mysl'* [*Military Thought*], No. 10, October 2014.

<sup>17</sup> President of the Russian Federation, "Obrashcheniie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii" ["Address by the President of the Russian Federation"], transcript, February 24, 2022a.

<sup>18</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2022a.

<sup>19</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2022a.

<sup>20</sup> Aleksandr Bartosh, "Iskliuchitel'niie Amerikanskiie Shchupal'tsa" ["Exceptional American Tentacles"], *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie* [*Independent Military Review*], No. 15, April 23, 2021.

Defender in 2021.<sup>21</sup> As part of that exercise, the United States deployed significant military forces to Europe, and NATO forces conducted defensive and offensive maneuvers in eastern Europe and the Baltics against Kaliningrad to repel an invasion from Russia. Russian analysts painted the exercises in a negative light, claiming that they were a sign that the NATO military threat to Russia was becoming more of a reality.<sup>22</sup> These analysts also claimed in 2021 that the United States has been increasing its military pressure on Russia by turning Ukraine into a “gray zone” and one of the key areas of hybrid warfare against Russia close to Russia’s borders,<sup>23</sup> and they have proposed that the ideas of “American fascism” and “Russophobia” spreading through such places as Ukraine, the Baltics, and Poland are a sign of real and present danger to Russia—including military danger.<sup>24</sup> These campaigns, coupled with the attempted coup in Belarus, increase the military threat perception in this area. Finally, Russian analysts claim that (1) new missile defense systems in Romania and (2) partial deployment of U.S. forces from Germany to Poland and the Baltics increase the threat of a large-scale conventional war and potential for provocation of military escalation along Russia’s borders or against deployed Russian peacekeeping forces.<sup>25</sup> In this context, Belarus is not a direct threat to Russia but a gateway through which the United States and European countries can threaten Russia’s national security.

But for some Russian analysts, the 2020 election in Belarus has shown that Belarus may not be a reliable ally. One reason for this view is that the relationship between Belarus and Russia is not rooted in a shared ideology. Russian analysts believe that Belarus’s lack of ideology is what can generate a roadmap toward a stable future for the bilateral relationship.<sup>26</sup> This is a

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<sup>21</sup> The Russian-language source (Bartosh, 2021) translates the *Steadfast Defender* exercise as *Defender Europe*.

<sup>22</sup> Bartosh, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Bartosh, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> L. I. Ol’shtynskii, “Kharakter Sovremennoi Voennoi Ugrozy Rossii i Opyt Istorii” [“Nature of the Modern Military Threat to Russia and Experience of History”], *Voen-naia Mysl’* [Military Thought], No. 6, June 30, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Ol’shtynskii, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Kirill Koktysh, “Belorussikiie Protesty: Uroki I Vyvody” [“Belarusian Protests: Lessons and Conclusions”], *Natsional’naia Oborona* [National Defense], No. 10, October 31, 2020.

purely Russian point of view: As noted in Chapter 3, even the Lukashenko government has its own concept of national identity that is separate from Russia and predates the Soviet Union. Well before Russia actually invaded Ukraine, its actions there created an ideological vacuum that allowed in pro-Western, nationalistic views. This, in turn, increased polarization between Russia and the West and could help explain why pro-Western attitudes dominated Belarus media and played a big role in the protests that followed the 2020 Belarusian election.<sup>27</sup>

With all that in mind, some Russian analysts have proposed establishing a “Eurasian ideology” that would lead to a stronger Union State with “politically autonomous managing bodies.”<sup>28</sup> This group sees value in Belarus’s industry and engineering class for the Eurasian Union’s new digital technology industry—but with Russia’s agreement and support. For this ideology and the Eurasian Union to succeed, a new Constitution that emphasizes institutions versus personalities would be necessary.<sup>29</sup> Put another way, Russian analysts are concerned that Belarus without Lukashenko might not be the ally it is today, and the Union State will not endure without a strong, formalized foundation. Neither can the Union State exist without Belarusian society’s indoctrination in, acceptance of, and popular support for integration efforts between Russia and Belarus.<sup>30</sup>

Even if Belarus is not a threat to Russia’s national security today, the future may be different, and Moscow must develop legal, institutional, and economic means to keep Minsk “in a comfortable state for Russia.”<sup>31</sup> Military means are still an option: Russia has already shown in Syria that it can

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<sup>27</sup> Daniel Bush, “No Modest Voices: Social Media and the Protests in Belarus,” Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, August 28, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Koktysh, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Koktysh, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> O. V. Bahlova and A. N. Slugina, “Interregional Cooperation and Integration Within the Framework of the Union State of Belarus and Russia: Specifics of Integration and Information Support,” *Regionology: Russian Journal of Regional Studies*, No. 1, Issue 30, January–March 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Timofei Bordachev, “Aktualen li Belorusskii Vopros? Perezhivut li Osobyie Otnosheniia Moskvyy i Minska Nyneshnii Krizis?” [“Is the Belarusian Issue Relevant? Will the Special Relationship Between Moscow and Minsk Survive the Current Crisis?”] *Profil’ [Profile]*, August 7, 2020.

support friendly regimes using military force, and it has used various types of intervention in post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine. But in the case of Belarus, renewed communication between Lukashenko and Putin can become one of the main guarantors of security for Belarus.<sup>32</sup>

## Belarus's Threat Perceptions

### External Threats

Similar to Russia, Belarus views the West, and Western influence, as a key external threat to its regime. This shared threat perception is a defining feature of the close relationship between the two countries; according to one expert, it has brought Putin and Lukashenko “closer together as leaders.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite its apparent closeness with Russia, however, and although this view is not codified in any official Belarusian strategy documents, analysts of Belarus claim that Minsk nevertheless perceives Moscow to be a principal external threat to a sovereign Belarusian regime.<sup>34</sup> This perception stems from the primacy that the Lukashenko regime accords to maintaining Belarusian sovereignty and a measure of independence and from the notion that Putin seeks to limit Belarus's freedom of maneuver. As one scholar explains, Belarus “believes it has the right to decide ultimately on how to respond to any invasion or penetration of its airspace by extraneous military forces.”<sup>35</sup>

This emphasis on the perseverance of Belarusian sovereignty has, at times, been at odds with Russia's apparent intentions toward Belarus. Russia has historically sought a greater military presence on Belarusian territory. In recent years, Russia has gradually sought greater command and control over Belaru-

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<sup>32</sup> Bordachev, 2020; Vasily Kashin, “Kakoie Znachenii Belorussii Imeiet Dlia Strategicheskoi Bezopasnosti Rossii” [“What Is the Importance of Belarus for the Strategic Security of Russia?”], *Profil' [Profile]*, September 15, 2020; Koktysh, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Expert on Russia and Eurasia, interview with the authors, November 2, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> The perception that Russia represents an external threat to the Belarusian regime is reflected in Belarusian military doctrine. See Ben Challis, *Belarus Beyond 2020: Implications for Russia and the West*, policy brief, European Leadership Network, August 2020, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> See Gregorio Baggiani, *The Sensitive Strategic Position of Belarus Between the Russian Federation, EU, and NATO*, NATO Defense College Foundation, 2020.

sian military forces, as exemplified by the transfer of the regional grouping of forces under the command structure of Russia's Western Military District.<sup>36</sup> Joint military exercises have also revealed Russia's disregard for Belarusian sovereignty by testing "how effectively [Russia] could bypass Belarusian command and control systems to effectively takeover Belarusian military units."<sup>37</sup> Although the Union State offers certain military and economic advantages for Belarus, moreover, it is also perceived as offering a "pretext" for Russia to "intervene militarily in Belarus to maintain stability, peace, and order," according to one expert interviewed.<sup>38</sup> These factors have led to a perception that Putin "has the capacity"—and is inclined—to "terminate whatever is left of Belarusian autonomy" at a moment of his choosing.<sup>39</sup> As one expert we interviewed explained, "For Putin, Belarus does not exist as a nation."<sup>40</sup>

The ongoing war in Ukraine offers Belarus a temporary measure of protection from the perceived threat of Russian intervention. A prolonged war means that Russia is preoccupied with its military offensive in Ukraine, which may reduce the Russian appetite and capability for greater interference in Belarusian internal affairs.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the conflict has led Russia to seek to leverage its military-to-military ties with Belarus to a greater degree. Commentators have noted that, although Lukashenko might be uncomfortable with the increased Russian presence in Belarus during the war, he has effectively turned Belarus into a staging area for the Russian army and has limited other opportunities for Belarus.<sup>42</sup> If Russia were to win the war in Ukraine, there is a perception that "Lukashenko [and Belarus] would be next," according to a Lithuanian SME interviewed for this report.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Challis, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Challis, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Expert on Russia and Eurasia, interview with the authors, November 2, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Expert on Latvia, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Former government official, interview with the authors, October 26, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Expert on Lithuania, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Artyom Shraibman, "Where Does Belarus Stand in the Russia-West Standoff?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Expert on Lithuania, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

Belarus also views Lithuania as a key external threat to the regime. This stems from the fact that many members of the Belarusian opposition reside in Vilnius. As one expert explained,

This is a nightmare for Belarus because the opposition is in Lithuania. They are saying that [the opposition is] preparing terrorist groups now and posing a threat to Belarus through terrorism.<sup>44</sup>

### Internal Threats

The Lukashenko regime also perceives serious internal threats to its stability and continued dominance. Lukashenko likely perceives these internal threats as posing a greater near- to medium-term risk to the survival of his regime than the external threats we have just discussed. Lukashenko aims to “retain power and remain in history as the creator of the Belarusian state,” which requires suppressing dissent from within the country and particularly from the Belarusian opposition movement.<sup>45</sup> One expert noted, however, that the Belarusian opposition has been “effectively suppressed.”<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, the Belarusian military itself is also viewed as a potential internal threat to the Lukashenko regime: One expert explained that Lukashenko “does not trust his own soldiers.”<sup>47</sup> There is a perception that increasing integration between the two countries’ militaries would exacerbate this risk:

Wages in the Belarusian army remain several times lower than in the Russian army, [so greater integration] would create feelings of resentment among the Belarusian military regarding the Belarusian state’s attitude towards them.<sup>48</sup>

There is also a perception that the Ukraine war may increase the risk of internal dissent by exacerbating existing domestic flashpoints. Lukashenko

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<sup>44</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Expert on Russia and Eurasia, interview with the authors, November 2, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Expert on Lithuania, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Ryhor Astapenia and Dzmitry Balkunets, “Belarus-Russia Relations After the Ukraine Conflict,” *Belarus Digest*, August 2016, p. 10.

perceives that Belarusian society does not want the country to become more involved in the conflict; opinion polls have “show[n] that Belarusians do not support sending troops” to Ukraine.<sup>49</sup>

## Overview of Military-to-Military and Security Cooperation

The threat perceptions discussed in the preceding section have informed cooperation between Russia and Belarus. In particular, convergences in Russian and Belarusian threat perceptions have driven the expansion of cooperation between the two countries. In this section, we provide an overview of military and security cooperation between Russia and Belarus.

### Origins and Evolution of Military and Security Cooperation

Since 1996, when Russia and Belarus signed an agreement to grant each other military training ranges for firing practice of air defense units, Russia and Belarus have cooperated in the military and military-technical spheres.<sup>50</sup> Over the years, defense and security goals have been at the forefront of the Union State’s agenda. In 1996, the focus was on providing training grounds for air defense units; by 2005, the Union State’s goals extended beyond small-scale narrow defense concerns. At the turn of the century, prior to establishing an overarching security policy for the Union State, the Council of Ministers signed a resolution listing 27 working groups and field activities geared toward joint planning, operations, and infrastructure to support such activities.<sup>51</sup> The following year, the Council of Ministers released a directive to approve work assessing the military infrastructure assets that were planned for the joint use of the Regional Forces Group of Belarus and the Russian Federation.<sup>52</sup> Later in the decade, the council passed a resolution that called for implementation

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<sup>49</sup> Expert on Lithuania, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Matveev, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, 2000.

<sup>52</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, 2001.

of 2008–2012 funding for the Military Infrastructure Program in the amount of 846.154 million rubles (\$12.13 million).<sup>53</sup> In 2008 alone, the program was to be funded for 123.141 million rubles (\$1.77 million).<sup>54</sup> The program was not funded in 2013 and ended in 2014.<sup>55</sup>

Between 2007 and 2016, the Council of Ministers released a series of funding resolutions for the Joint Action Plan (such as the 2015 resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Union State titled “On the Joint Action Plan to Ensure Operation of the Regional Forces Group of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation in 2016”).<sup>56</sup> These resolutions authorized use of Union State budget resources to fund the plan. Overall, Russia’s contribution to support the Regional Forces Group averaged approximately 66 percent of the Union State budget approved for this effort between 2007 and 2016, indicating Russia’s continued support for the Union State’s activities in this area.<sup>57</sup>

In line with the plans to develop the Regional Forces Group, the Council of Ministers established a joint program in 2007 to train Belarusian service members at training centers in Russia.<sup>58</sup> The program’s goals included

- deeper integration of participating states in the military sphere, to be accomplished (1) by educating service members in joint programs and

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<sup>53</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, 2008. This amount reflects 550 million rubles (\$7.89 million) from the Russian Federation and 296.154 million rubles (\$4.25 million) from Belarus.

<sup>54</sup> This amount reflects 80 million rubles (\$1.15 million) from the Russian Federation and 43.141 million rubles (\$0.62 million) from Belarus.

<sup>55</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, “O Plane Sovmestnyh Meropriatii po Obespecheniiu Funktsionirovaniia Regional’noi Gruppировki Voisk (Sil) Respubliki Belarus’ i Rossiiskoi Federatsii v 2016 Godu” [“On the Joint Action Plan to Ensure Operation of the Regional Forces Group of the Republic of Belarus and Russian Federation in 2016”], September 29, 2015b.

<sup>57</sup> The total Union State budget for the Joint Action Plan decreased from its total of 420 million rubles (\$6.02 million) in 2007 to 28.5 million rubles (\$0.41 million) in 2016—a reduction of approximately 93 percent—with Russia’s portion of contributions to the Union State’s budget decreasing from approximately 70 percent in 2007 to 66.7 percent in 2016. A more detailed description of the Union State’s budget for its various programs is in the appendix.

<sup>58</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, 2007.

- (2) through plans to increase defense readiness of their armed forces and creation of cadre potential
- training cadres of the Armed Forces of Belarus in deficient specialties to staff positions in the Regional Forces Group of the Armed Forces of Belarus and Russian Federation with highly qualified service members.

During this time, Russia and Belarus sought to deepen their military-technical cooperation. In 2009, the Supreme State Council passed a resolution that called for Russia's Federal Service on Military-Technical Cooperation and the State Military-Industrial Committee of the Republic of Belarus to prepare an agreement between the two nations to improve their military-technical cooperation.<sup>59</sup> The council also directed the State Military-Industrial Committee of Belarus and the Military-Industrial Commission of Russia to prepare another agreement that would ensure mutual delivery of both military equipment and other equipment for dual and civilian use in times of heightened threat and in wartime.

In 2015, the council signed a resolution to broaden the scope of personnel training programs between Russia and Belarus. This resolution was intended to accomplish several goals:

- Develop high civil-social activism, patriotism, and readiness for civil and constitutional duties.
- Strengthen the trusted relationship and combat ties; also develop ambition for military service in the current generation, along with desire to serve the Fatherland, readiness to defend the Union State, and respect for the history of the brotherly nations of Belarus and Russia.
- Instill a culture promoting healthy and safe lifestyles.
- Develop creative potential and satisfaction of individual needs for intellectual, moral, and physical development.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Supreme State Committee of the Union State, "Ob Uglublenii Sotrudnichestva Voiennoi i Voienno-Tekhnicheskoi Oblastiah" ["On Deepening Cooperation in the Military and Military-Technical Areas"], February 3, 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, "O Iezhegodnom Provedenii Meropriiatiia Soiuznogo Gosudarstva 'Voienno-Patrioticheskaiia Smena Uchashchihsia Suvorovskih Voiennyh (Hahimovskogo Voienno-Mosrkogo) i Kadetskih Uchilishch Belarusi i Rossii'" ["On Annual Activity of the Union State 'Military-Patriotic Exchange of Suvorov's Military (Nahimovkii Naval) and Cadet Colleges of Belarus and Russia'"], September 29, 2015a.

Unlike the joint program to train Belarusian service members in 2007, the 2015 resolution did not have a strict focus on military training; instead, it emphasized the military-patriotic aspects of military service that Russia emphasized with its own military and federal service personnel.<sup>61</sup>

In 2016, the Council of Ministers approved a series of classified documents guiding the joint actions of the Regional Forces Group under a single resolution.<sup>62</sup>

In March 2021, Russia and Belarus reached an agreement to build three joint military training centers in the Nizhegorodsk and Kaliningrad regions (*oblasti*) of the Russian Federation and in the Grodnensk region of the Republic of Belarus.<sup>63</sup> Two joint military training centers were being used in Belarus in December 2021 to train Air Force and Air Defense forces.<sup>64</sup> In October 2022, an announcement on the Telegram channel “Pool of the First” (Pul Pervogo) indicated that Lukashenko had signed an agreement with Russia about creating and operating joint military training centers for Armed Forces service members.<sup>65</sup>

In November 2021, Russia and Belarus approved several Union State documents that will ultimately determine further integration of the two countries.<sup>66</sup> Among them was the Union State military doctrine for 2018–2022, “On the Military Doctrine of the Union State,” which was originally

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<sup>61</sup> Council of the Ministers of the Union State, 2015a.

<sup>62</sup> Council of Ministers of the Union State, “O Planirovaniu Primeneniia Regional’noi Gruppировки Voisk (Sil) Respubliki Belarus’ i Rossiiskoi Federatsii” [“On Planning the Use of the Regional Forces Group of the Republic of Belarus and Russian Federation”], September 29, 2015c.

<sup>63</sup> “Rossiia i Belorussiia Ukrepliaut Voiennoe Sotrudnichestvo” [“Russia and Belarus Strengthen Military Cooperation”], *Krasnaia Zvezda [Red Star]*, No. 23, March 8, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Oleg Falichev, “Uzory ‘Kaleidoskopa’” [“‘Kaleidoscope’ Designs”], *Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kur’er [Military-Industrial Courier]*, No. 50, December 28, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Pul Pervogo, “Belarus’ i Rossiya planiruyut sozdat’ uchebno-boevye tsentry sovmeystnoy podgotovki voennosluzhashchykh sil” [“Belarus and Russia plan to create combat training centers for joint training of military personnel of the armed forces”], Telegram, October 31, 2022.

<sup>66</sup> “Vladimir Putin: Dlia Rossii Belorussiia Po-Nastoiashchemu Bratskaia Respublika, Bratskii Narod” [“Vladimir Putin: For Russia, Belarus Is Truly a Brotherly Republic, Brotherly People”], *Krasnaia Zvezda [Red Star]*, No. 124, November 18, 2021.

expected to be signed in 2018.<sup>67</sup> During the November 2021 meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State, State Secretary of the Union State Dmitrii Mezentsev noted that approval of the military doctrine was necessary because of the “changes in the military-political situation in the region, emergence of new challenges and threats for Russia and Belarus, [and] unprecedented pressure on our countries.”<sup>68</sup>

The new document was finally published in February 2022, a week before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The new Union State military doctrine focuses on “the period of increasing military threat” during which both countries agree to several military plans and activities intended to deepen their military integration, such as the following ways to improve the organization and activities of the Regional Forces Group:

- Develop the infrastructure for the Regional Forces Group.
- Establish the joint command for the Regional Forces Group.
- Increase integration of the Regional Forces Group with the activation of the joint command during the period of increasing military threat.
- Organize regular exercises.
- Create a common legal framework to support the creation and use of armed forces units of both countries.
- Create a common command system.
- Create a common military education system.<sup>69</sup>

These developments—along with Russia and Belarus performing such exercises as Zapad-2021 and announcing the creation of the “common defense space” in December 2022—signified the overall deepening of mili-

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<sup>67</sup> “Minsk i Moskva do Kontsa 2018 Mogut Podpisat’ Voiennuiu Doktrinu” [“Minsk and Moscow Could Sign Military Doctrine Before the End of 2018”], *News Front*, October 26, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> “Vladimir Putin: Dlia Rossii Belorussia Po-Nastoiashchemu . . .,” 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Anna Maria Dwyer, “New Military Doctrine of the Union State of Belarus and Russia,” Polish Institute of International Affairs, February 15, 2022.

tary cooperation between the two countries, just in time for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>70</sup>

## Russia's Military Presence in Belarus: Military Cooperation Russia's Way

The history of military-related agreements between Russia and Belarus underscores the importance of this military alliance to Russia. Russia has long been concerned by the state of Belarusian armed forces' fighting ability and military equipment, particularly because of the latter's proximity to NATO members.<sup>71</sup> Belarusian military reforms in 2008 provided better pay and benefits to its professional military corps but not adequate resources to replace or upgrade its aging Soviet weaponry.<sup>72</sup> Belarus used what it had to prioritize upgrading its Air Forces and Air Defense Forces. In the past, Minsk has asked Moscow to subsidize purchases (or provide free supplies) of weapons, combat aviation, and S-400 (SA-21) surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, and Russia has donated several S-300PS (SA-10B) SAM systems to Belarus.

Furthermore, to assure military security for itself and for Belarus as the buffer state, Russia has been deploying Russian military assets and establishing Russian military bases on Belarus's territory for decades. Despite Minsk's historical resistance to allowing permanent military basing for Russian forces in Belarus, Russia had a small contingent of 850 Russian military personnel stationed in Belarus under an agreement dating back to January 6, 1995.<sup>73</sup> That contingent consisted of an early warning surveillance radar unit belonging to the Independent Radar Unit stationed at Gantsevichi, Baranovichi

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<sup>70</sup> Ekaterina Postnikova, "Russia and Belarus to Hold Exercises of the Military Space Forces," *Defense & Security*, No. 514, January 16, 2023. Some sources also refer to "single defense space." For example, see Russia Team, *Indicators and Thresholds for Russian Military Operations in Ukraine and/or Belarus*, Institute for the Study of War, Updated February 17, 2022, p. 219.

<sup>71</sup> Anton Lavrov, "Belarusian Army: Current State and Outlook," *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 6, December 31, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Lavrov, 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Mikhail Barabanov, "Russian Armed Forces Abroad," *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 4, December 31, 2010.

(southwest of Minsk in the Brest region) and the Navy's 43rd Communications Center in Vileyka (northwest of Minsk in the Minsk region).<sup>74</sup>

And Russia has continued to pursue its military expansion goals in Belarus. In 2013, Minsk provisionally agreed to allow Moscow to station a regiment of 24 upgraded Su-27SM3 fighters and several transport helicopters at Lida airfield in Belarus on a permanent basis.<sup>75</sup> The move was supposed to compensate for the retirement of all Belarusian heavy fighters but, with eventual plans to deploy additional combat planes to Belarus, Russia's fighter aircraft capability on Belarusian territory "would completely eclipse the modest fighter fleet of Belarus itself."<sup>76</sup> Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Lukashenko was disinclined to give Russia that much influence, especially in the absence of any direct military threats from NATO, and Russia's plan never came to fruition. Instead, Belarus agreed to host Russian aircraft at its airfields on a temporary basis only and under Belarusian operational command. In 2014–2015, Russia again attempted to set up a permanent Russian military base in Baranovichi, Belarus. Putin and Lukashenko failed to reach an agreement, and Lukashenko's government closed the issue.

In addition to improving Belarus's fighter capability, Russia and Belarus agreed to build up the military infrastructure that could support joint military operations in Belarus. For example, prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Zyabrovka airfield in Belarus served as a logistics hub providing troop housing; a field hospital; and equipment, such as helicopters and military tents.<sup>77</sup>

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, a portion of its forces that moved against Kyiv had forward deployed to locations in Belarus. Russia may have been using "as many as nine" air bases in Belarus to launch strikes

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<sup>74</sup> The agreement was set to expire in 2020 but appeared to be extended in October 2021 during a meeting between Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin. See Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Ups Defense Ties with Belarus amid Tensions with NATO," Associated Press, October 20, 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Lavrov, 2016, p. 17.

<sup>76</sup> Lavrov, 2016, p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> Kristofer Miller, "Rossiia Uvelishila Kolichstvo Voiennyh I Tekniki v Okkuporovanom Krymu I Belarusi—SMI" ["Russia Increased the Number of Military and Equipment in Occupied Crimea and Belarus—Mass Media"], *Priamyi [Direct]*, February 11, 2022.

using Sukhoi fighter jets against Ukraine.<sup>78</sup> Russian contract soldiers reported to locations in Belarus as early as January “for assignment” or “for training.”<sup>79</sup> Forces and combat troops deployed to Mozry, the city of Gomel, and the city of Rechitsa, fewer than 45 kilometers away from the Ukraine border.<sup>80</sup>

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine also sparked concern that Russia might deploy its tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, and this agreement ultimately came to pass. At a meeting in June 2022, Lukashenko asked Putin to consider modifying Belarusian Su-25s to carry nuclear weapons, as “a mirror response” to U.S. and NATO flight exercises that the Belarusian president claimed were training to carry weapons with nuclear warheads.<sup>81</sup> At the time, Russia’s president stated that, although an equivalent response might be appropriate, “for us even to mirror, probably, is not worth it, there’s no need.”<sup>82</sup> To carry out Moscow’s responsibility of assuring the security of the Union State and other states of the CSTO, Putin suggested the possibility of modifying the Belarusian Su-25s instead—and in Russian aircraft factories. Aircrew to fly the modified aircraft would also have to train in Russian military training centers. Lukashenko said in 2022 that this process was complete.<sup>83</sup> Putin announced in March 2023 that Russia would construct storage facilities to house tactical nuclear weapons at Minsk’s request by July 1.<sup>84</sup> Two months later, on May 25,

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<sup>78</sup> Kyrylo Ovsyaniy, “A Source of Death: Air Bases in Russia, Belarus, and Crimea Used in Moscow’s Assault on Ukraine,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 24, 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Mark Krutov, “‘They’re Going to Ukraine’: Social Media Chatter Sheds Light on Russia’s Military Mobilization,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 20, 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Krutov, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> President of the Russian Federation, “Vstrecha s Prezidentom Belorussii Aleksandrom Lukashenko” [“Meeting with the President of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko”], transcript, June 25, 2022b. Lukashenko may have misspoken when he mentioned Su-35s in his speech; Belarus does not have any Su-35s.

<sup>82</sup> President of the Russian Federation, 2022b.

<sup>83</sup> Jaroslaw Adamowski, “Belarus Claims Nuclear Weapons Mods Are Completed on Its Warplanes,” *Defense News*, August 29, 2022.

<sup>84</sup> Laura Gozzi, “Ukraine War: UK Defends Sending Depleted Uranium Shells After Putin Warning,” BBC News, March 21, 2023; Angela Howard, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 25, 2023*, Institute for the Study of War, March 25, 2023. In the March 25 report, however, the Institute for the Study of War assesses that Russia’s deci-

2023, Russia and Belarus signed agreements to advance this effort.<sup>85</sup> Neither Minsk nor Moscow provided details of the number or location of these weapons, and Putin claimed that some tactical nuclear weapons were deployed in July 2023.<sup>86</sup> These public announcements, together with Lukashenko's recent promise to give nuclear weapons to any nation that joined Russia and Belarus, are likely an attempt to showcase their alignment.<sup>87</sup>

Recent efforts to boost military cooperation between Russia and Belarus also include modernization of military infrastructure for shared use, which would be necessary to support deployment of the joint Regional Forces Group in Belarus.<sup>88</sup> In October 2022, Lukashenko and Putin agreed to deploy the joint Regional Forces Group in Belarus, and the Belarus Defense Ministry announced the start of a large-scale rotation of military units on its border with Ukraine. The deployment of forces established and ensured combat readiness for the joint air defense system, with agreement from both sides to continue providing security for both countries by prioritizing combat readiness and by continuing joint training, mutual arms deliveries, and their joint production.<sup>89</sup> During the June 2022 meeting, Putin also promised to give Belarus the Iskander-M missile system that can operate ballistic and cruise missiles with conventional or nuclear warheads. Lukashenko announced that, as of December 2022, Belarus had received the Iskander-M system and placed Belarus's first Russia-delivered S-400 Tri-

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sion to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus is “irrelevant to the risk or escalation to nuclear war.” Placing these weapons in Belarus does not improve their capability to reach any targets that are not within their range from locations in Russia.

<sup>85</sup> Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 25, 2023*, Institute for the Study of War, May 25, 2023.

<sup>86</sup> “Deployment of Russian Tactical Nukes in Belarus Logical Response to US— Expert,” TASS, March 27, 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Yuliya Talmazan, “‘Nuclear Weapons for Everyone’ Who Joins Belarus and Russia, Putin Ally Promises,” NBC News, May 29, 2023; Hird et al., 2023.

<sup>88</sup> Isachenkov, 2021.

<sup>89</sup> Vladimir Karnozov, “Spetssluzhbam Rasstavili Priorityty” [“Special Force Received their Priorities”], *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie [Independent Military Review]*, No. 48, December 23, 2022.

umph SAM system in combat readiness status.<sup>90</sup> Belarus's only missile brigade, the 465th Missile Brigade based in Yuzhny, Asipovichy (approximately 60 miles southeast of Minsk), reportedly operates the Iskander-M system.<sup>91</sup> Additional Russian warplanes and an airborne early warning and control aircraft have also deployed to Belarus.<sup>92</sup> As of 2023, Belarus was host to approximately 9,000 Russian troops, 170 tanks, up to 200 armored fighting vehicles, and 100 guns and mortars of at least 100 mm caliber.<sup>93</sup> However, there was no good estimate on the total Russian troop presence in Belarus.

## Russia and Belarus Joint Exercises

Military cooperation between Russia and Belarus has also hinged on conducting regular joint exercises to fulfill Russia's desire for Belarus to provide an effective buffer between it and the West by strengthening Minsk's defense potential.<sup>94</sup> Belarusian air defense troops have held field exercises on Russian territory using the necessary equipment, ammunition, flying targets, and training ranges provided by Russia free of charge, which means Russia also shouldered the bulk of the costs during these joint military exercises. The emphasis on air defense is consistent with the Union State's priorities expressed through official documents and with the Unified Regional Air Defense System set up by Russia and Belarus in 2010.

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<sup>90</sup> Karnozov, 2022; Uliana Bezpalko, "Vadym Skibitsky: Rosyia Mozhe Vesty Viinu Shche 2023-i, Maksimum 2024-i Rik" ["Vadym Skibitsky: Russia Can Continue to Wage War into 2023, 2024 at Most"], RBC-Ukraine, March 23, 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Timothy Wright and William Alberque, "The Credibility and Implications of Russia's Missile and Nuclear Proposal to Belarus," IISS, July 21, 2022. The Iskander-M system extends the Belarusian Armed Forces' ground-launched missile capability range from 300 km to 500 km, placing Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic within its range and offering redundant coverage over Poland (the Russian Iskander-M system in Kaliningrad also covers Poland).

<sup>92</sup> Tom Balmforth, "Putin and Lukashenko Dwell on Cooperation, Not Ukraine War, After Summit," Reuters, December 19, 2022b.

<sup>93</sup> "Belarus and Russia Are to Create Joint Military Training Centers," *Militarnyi* [Military], October 31, 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Mikhail Barabanov, "Zapad-2017 Strategic Drills," webpage, Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, December 28, 2017.

After a lull during the 1990s, Russia and Belarus resumed joint military exercises with the Zapad-1999 exercise. This exercise was the largest that Russia had conducted since the exercise by the same name in 1985 and the first in the post-Soviet era with a unified Belarusian-Russian force group.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, the SCO and CSTO began organizing exercises of their own that included Russian and Belarusian forces. Beginning in 2003, SCO member militaries and other security forces began conducting “anti-terrorist exercises” across Central Asia, from Xinjiang province in China to Russia’s Far East.<sup>96</sup> Out of similar concerns, through at least 2005, CSTO exercises in which Russia and Belarus participated also took place predominantly in Central Asia.<sup>97</sup> Through the 2000s and 2010s, CSTO and SCO exercises continued to focus on counterterrorism, countertrafficking, and other regional security concerns.

According to data on Russian military exercises since 2013, Belarus is Russia’s most frequent international exercise partner.<sup>98</sup> The bilateral exercise schedule includes Belarusian participation in Russia’s large, strategic-level exercises, such as the Zapad series focused on scenarios defending the Belarusian-Russian western flank, down to smaller, service-specific exercises. More than two-thirds of Belarusian-Russian exercises outside multilateral organization exercises during the 2013–2018 period involved joint force exercises or those of airborne forces; the remaining exercises involved special operations forces, air defense, and air force contingents (see Figure 4.1, panel 1). Out of the 189 exercises sponsored by the CTSO, SCO, and CIS (of which Belarus is a part or an observing member) in which Russia partici-

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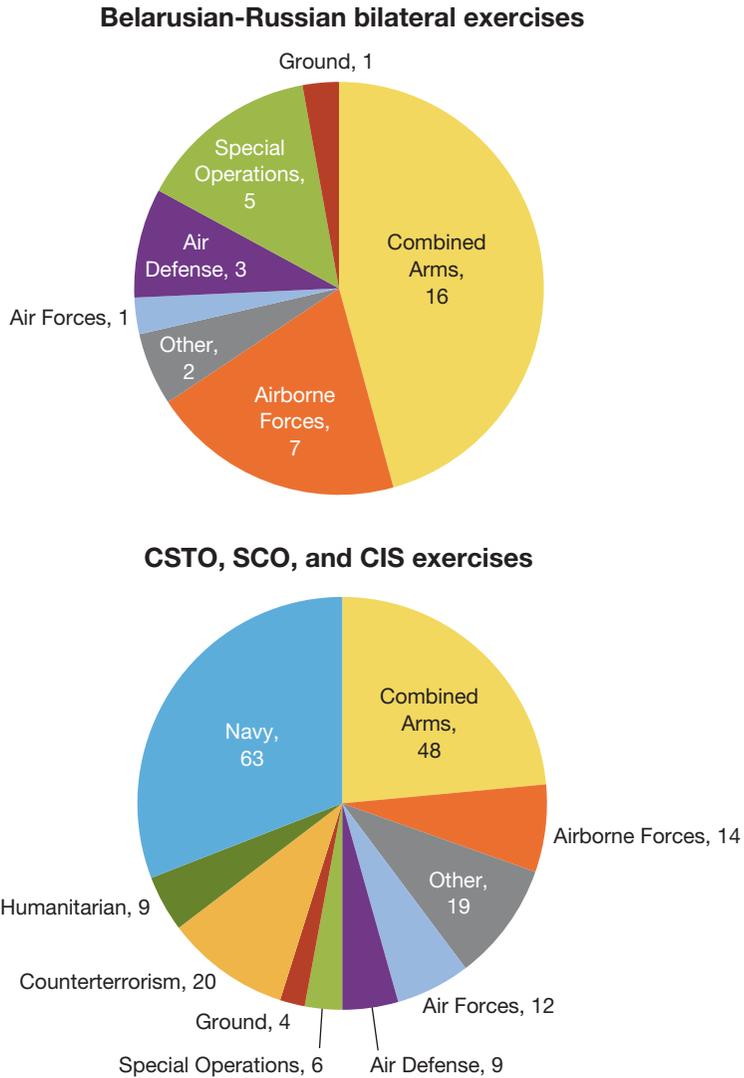
<sup>95</sup> The joint Belarusian-Russian force during this first post-Soviet Zapad exercise, however, existed only on paper. See Oksana Antonenko, “Russia, NATO and European Security After Kosovo,” *Survival*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1999, p. 135; Konstantin George, “Russia Resumes Big Military Exercises,” *EIR*, Vol. 26, No. 27, July 2, 1999.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Weitz, “Military Exercises Underscore the SCO’s Character,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 25, 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Roy Allison, Stephen White, and Margot Light, “Belarus Between East and West,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2005, p. 494.

<sup>98</sup> See Oleg Skira, “Komanduiushchii Vozdushno-Desantnymi Voiskami Geroi Rossii General-Polkovnik Vladimir Shamanov: ‘Nikto, Krome Nas!’” [“Commander of Airborne Forces Russia’s Hero General Colonel Vladimir Shamanov: ‘No One But Us!’”], *Orientir* [Guide], No. 8, August 31, 2015.

**FIGURE 4.1**  
**Count of Military Exercises by Force Type: 2013–2021**



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of data on Russian military exercises compiled in October 2022 from open-source media reports (including Skira, 2015) in Casey Mahoney, "Russia-Belarus Exercises," memorandum to Dara Massicot, RAND Corporation, October 17, 2022.

NOTE: Some exercises apply to more than one category and are counted more than once.

pated during this period, approximately one-third of them were naval exercises, another third of them were joint force or counterterrorism exercises, and the remainder was split among other types (see Figure 4.1, panel 2).

Between September 2020 and mid-2021, Belarusian-Russian exercises occurred nearly monthly and focused on integration of battalion-sized combined units, particularly airborne and air-assault forces.<sup>99</sup> In September 2020, Russian airborne and Belarusian air assault forces exercised for the first time as a single battalion-sized combat formation in Brest.<sup>100</sup> In March 2021, three combined battalions were established, and in June 2021, it is likely that multiple Belarusian-Russian battalions operated as a “consolidated unit” in the Slavic Brotherhood 2021 exercise with Serbia in Krasnoyarsk.<sup>101</sup>

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Belarus has continued to train with Russia as it tries to maintain a support-oriented posture short of committing its troops directly. Belarus began a unilateral command-staff exercise in June 2022 focused on improving “the coherency of command-and-control and logistics support,” capabilities that would likely enhance their resupply support to Russian forces; Ukrainian general staff reports from May 31, 2022, stated that Russian forces are withdrawing Belarusian stocks of tanks and infantry fighting vehicles.<sup>102</sup> In April 2022, Ukrainian general staff and social media reports noted an increase in Belarusian training activities and air defense deployments in central Belarus.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> George Barros, *Belarus Warning Update: Russia Expands Unit Integration with Belarusian and Serbian Militaries in June Slavic Brotherhood Exercises*, Institute for the Study of War, June 25, 2021b, p. 2.

<sup>100</sup> George Barros, “NEXTA Actively Encourages Belarusian Security Service Defections,” Institute for the Study of War, September 20, 2020, p. 2.

<sup>101</sup> George Barros, *Russia Opens Permanent Training Center in Belarus and Sets Conditions for Permanent Military Basing*, Institute for the Study of War, April 8, 2021a, pp. 2–3; Barros, 2021b, p. 2.

<sup>102</sup> Karolina Hird, Mason Clark, George Barros, and Grace Mappes, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 14*, Institute for the Study of War, June 14, 2022; Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 31*, Institute for the Study of War, May 31, 2022.

<sup>103</sup> Mason Clark, George Barros, and Karolina Hird, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 2*, Institute for the Study of War, April 2, 2022.

In February 2023, Lukashenko said he would continue to let Russia use Belarusian territory to stage its attacks but would not commit any forces to the war unless Ukraine “attacked Belarus.”<sup>104</sup> The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe determined that, as of April 2022, Belarus was not legally considered a cobelligerent in the war on the following grounds:

Although Belarus allows its territory to be used to launch Russian attacks on Ukraine, the Mission considers that as of 1 April it is not a party to the IAC [international armed conflict], as long as it does not itself commit acts of violence or other acts that would constitute direct participation in the hostilities by persons attributable to Belarus. Similarly, NATO member States are not parties to the IAC by the mere fact that they supply weapons or share general intelligence information.<sup>105</sup>

### Zapad Exercises from 2009 to 2021

The Zapad-series exercises are perhaps the most important strategic joint exercises for the two countries. These exercises occur every four years, are one of Russia’s major strategic exercises, and aim to develop “operational concepts, test Russian military and civilian integration, [and] experiment with force structure, reserve mobilization, or logistical elements.”<sup>106</sup> Portions of the associated exercise events take place in Belarus and are usually directed against Western aggressors.<sup>107</sup> The scale of Zapad has, on average, trended upward, in step with other training operational tempo increases in the Russian military. The 2009 exercise was the largest Russia had conducted up to that point

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<sup>104</sup> Steve Rosenberg [@BBCSteveR], “Today in Minsk I asked Alexander Lukashenko: ‘A year ago you let Russia use your country as a staging ground for the invasion of Ukraine. Are you prepared to do that again?’” post on the X platform, February 16, 2023.

<sup>105</sup> Wolfgang Benedek, Veronika Bílková, and Marco Sassòli, *Report on Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes, and Crimes Against Humanity Committed in Ukraine Since 24 February 2022*, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2022.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Kofman, “Zapad-2021: What to Expect from Russia’s Strategic Military Exercise,” *War on the Rocks*, September 8, 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Konrad Muzyka, *Defending the Union: Zapad-2021*, International Centre for Defence and Security, December 2021, p. 2.

in the post-Soviet era and involved 12,500 service members.<sup>108</sup> In 2013, some analysts suspected that up to 75,000 personnel might be notionally involved; in 2017, analysts' most-plausible estimates ranged from 45,000 to 60,000.<sup>109</sup> By comparison, the 2015 bilateral Belarusian-Russian exercise Union Shield, which occurs two years after each Zapad exercise, involved 8,000 troops.<sup>110</sup> By 2021, official and suspected unofficial participants in Zapad had likely grown to involve "every single military unit from the [Western Military District]," along with Central Military District and Southern Military District forces and the Belarusian armed forces. The Russian defense ministry announced that the exercise had reached the participation level of an estimated 200,000 troops (many of them in a notional role and not actually deployed); a leading expert assessed that it was probably the largest exercise "in western Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union."<sup>111</sup>

Zapad exercises since 2009 have been based on scenarios involving Western aggression (see the text box on the next page).<sup>112</sup> They begin as an internal or hybrid provocation in Belarus by Poland, Lithuania, and/or Scandinavian countries backed by Western coalition forces. Western forces' failures to achieve objectives typically lead the West to escalate to a conventional attack on Belarusian or Russian soil, which invites a full-scale defensive and counteroffensive response by Russian and Belarusian forces. Although experts tend to agree that nuclear use has not been an

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<sup>108</sup> GlobalSecurity.org, "Zapad ('West') exercises," webpage, updated January 10, 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Keir Giles, *Russia Hit Multiple Targets with Zapad-2017*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2018, p. 2; Glen E. Howard and Jānis Bērziņš, "Foreword," in Liudas Zdanavičius and Matthew Czekaj, eds., *Russia's Zapad-2013 Military Exercise: Lessons for Baltic Regional Security*, Jamestown Foundation, 2015, p. iv. The conservative tally of 48,000 accounts for 23,000 in areas explicitly identified as Zapad-2017 training areas and the remainder in other areas across Russia; see Igor Sutyagin, "RDS Special: Formations and Units Involved in 'Zapad-2017' Russian-Belarusian Strategic Exercises," *RUSI Defence Systems*, Vol. 19, October 6, 2017.

<sup>110</sup> Similar to exercises in the Zapad series, Union Shield 2015 focused on joint special operations and conducting "joint mobile defense with a transition to offensive actions" (Matthew Czekaj, "Introduction," in Zdanavičius and Czekaj, eds., 2015, p. 1).

<sup>111</sup> Muzyka, 2021, pp. 17-18

<sup>112</sup> John R. Piloni, "The Belarusian-Russian Joint Defense Agreement," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2009, p. 547.

## Description of Zapad Exercises: 2009–2021

**Zapad-2009** came a year after the Russo-Georgian War. The main exercise scenario phases were “(1) repelling an attack by NATO armies on Belarus coming from Polish territory; (2) a counter-offensive to the west through Poland.”<sup>a</sup> The war begins “when Belarus was attacked by Poland and Lithuania for allegedly mistreating its Lithuanian minority.”<sup>b</sup>

**Zapad-2013** was “based on conflicts in the Middle East,” according to Belarusian defense minister Jurij Zjabodin.<sup>c</sup> It “simulated an incursion by foreign-backed ‘terrorist’ groups originating from the Baltic States” targeting Belarus in urban centers that (appearing to mimic NATO conventional capabilities) respond by conducting an amphibious landing against a stand-in for Kaliningrad that leads to “classic large-scale conventional theater operations involving combined joint operations, missile strikes, and so on.”<sup>d</sup> A key goal was to assess “new regulations developed by the armed forces of Russia and Belarus.”<sup>e</sup>

**Zapad-2017** is based on a scenario in which extremists receiving support from “the adversaries in the exercise . . . intended to represent Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland [seek] to partition Belarus and annex its northwestern regions [i.e., Grodno]” and also invade Kaliningrad.<sup>f</sup> As in other cases, analysts tend to agree that, despite the identification as terrorists or provocateurs, the enemies in the exercise are “not any saboteurs or terrorists but regular armies of other countries.”<sup>g</sup>

**Zapad-2021** uses stand-ins for Lithuania, Poland, a Scandinavian country, and likely NATO coalition forces that support secessionists in the Grodno region who have been attacking “mainland Belarus and Russia.” The Western coalition seeks to topple the Belarusian regime and annex western Belarus “through hybrid means” and, failing that,

launches military operations against Belarus.<sup>h</sup> Military operations of the Western coalition begin with strikes on forces in Baranovichi, air and air defense assets in Minsk, and navy communications in Vileyka, and they continue with a ground offensive 150 km into Belarus.<sup>i</sup> Forces exercised at “training ranges in Brest, Baranovichi, Domanovsky, Obuz-Lesnovksy, Rushanskiy, and the region surrounding Grodno” in Belarus and “nine training ranges in Russia.”<sup>j</sup>

<sup>a</sup> European Parliament, Written Question P-5291/09, Parliamentary Questions, December 11, 2009.

<sup>b</sup> GlobalSecurity.org, 2023.

<sup>c</sup> Jörgen Elfying and Peter A. Mattsson, “Zapad 2013: A Multifaceted Exercise with Unique Ingredients,” in Zdanavičius and Czekaj, eds., 2015, p. 19.

<sup>d</sup> Czekaj, 2015, p. 2; Stephen Blank, “What Do the Zapad 2013 Exercises Reveal?” in Zdanavičius and Czekaj, eds., 2015, pp. 9–10. Russian forces “included [Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti; Federal Security Service] FSB, interior ministry troops, police, and even local officials” (Liudas Zdanavičius and Matthew Czekaj, eds., *Russia’s Zapad 2013 Military Exercise: Lessons for Baltic Regional Security*, Jamestown Foundation, 2015, p. 6).

<sup>e</sup> Elfying and Mattsson, 2015, p. 19.

<sup>f</sup> Kofman, 2021; GlobalSecurity.org, 2023.

<sup>g</sup> Warsaw Institute, *Zapad-2017 Lessons Learned*, October 16, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>h</sup> Muzyka, 2021, pp. 4–5.

<sup>i</sup> Specific sites that the West targets include “the concentration areas of the 11th Tank Army and 51st CAA, the airbase in Baranovichi, S-300 batteries around Minsk, Machulishchi Air Base, the 43rd Communications Centre of the Russian Navy in Vileyka, and the railway junction in Luninets” (Muzyka, 2021, p. 6).

<sup>j</sup> Kofman, 2021.

explicit part of Zapad exercises since 1999, the use of dual-capable systems in these drills suggests that Russian doctrine leaves the nuclear option open in such scenarios, particularly because Zapad exercises are usually followed by end-of-year strategic nuclear exercises.<sup>113</sup>

Capabilities that Russia and Belarus exercise during Zapad are typically wide ranging: “Maneuvers and drills conducted during Zapad-2013 reflected virtually the entire range of conceivable military operations except for nuclear strikes” and involved Belarusian troops’ first amphibious landing.<sup>114</sup> The Zapad-2017 exercise focused on civil defense and apparently involved nuclear elements.<sup>115</sup> The Zapad-2021 exercise apparently lacked nuclear elements but focused on large-scale conventional fighting in a fully joint environment.<sup>116</sup> Russia forward deployed units with combat service support, including the 18th Division in Kaliningrad formed in 2017, for new formations in the Russian force structure; it also deployed the Regional Forces Group organized under the Union State military doctrine.<sup>117</sup> The participation of the Regional Forces Group, coupled with the forward deployment to Belarus, highlighted the Kremlin’s desire to use the exercise to integrate Belarusian forces further into Russia-led force structures. Russia also activated rear-support formations “to ensure the steady flow of equipment

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<sup>113</sup> Despite speculation and uncorroborated reports that Zapad-2021 would or did feature a nuclear use scenario, the use of Tu-95 to test air defenses and of dual-use short-range ballistic missiles only makes possible—but does not lead to a decisive conclusion—that the exercise involved a nuclear element. See Muzyka, 2021, p. 2, fn. 2, and pp. 16–17; and Bruno Tertrais, “Does Russia Really Include Limited Nuclear Strikes in its Large-Scale Military Exercises?” *Survival Online*, February 15, 2018. Compare with, for example, Chris Bott, “Zapad 2021 Brief,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 147, September 2021; and Dylan Malyasov, “Russian Army Carries Out Mock Nuclear Attack on American Troops in Poland,” *Defence Blog*, September 20, 2021.

<sup>114</sup> Quotation from Elfying and Mattsson, 2015, p. 17. See also Blank, 2015, who further writes that the exercise “featured search and rescue, amphibious landing and anti-landing operations, air and ground strikes on enemy targets, anti-submarine warfare, missile strikes with long-range precision strike assets, airborne and air assault operations, and so on” (p. 9).

<sup>115</sup> Muzyka, 2021, p. 18.

<sup>116</sup> Muzyka, 2021, p. 18.

<sup>117</sup> Kofman, 2021.

to the frontlines,” although units exercised riverine and river crossing operations.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, the scope of the forces used during Zapad-2021 suggests that, rather than merely reestablish the status quo ante, Russia aimed to drive to Kaliningrad with a ground force and to conduct counterforce strikes deeper into NATO territory as key campaign objectives during the sort of contingencies it imagines for the Zapad exercises.<sup>119</sup> The inclusion of a task in Zapad-2021 to “deflect and parry a strategic NATO aerospace attack on both Russian forces and [on] critically important infrastructure in the Russian homeland” suggests that Russia perceives that NATO itself might be willing to risk escalation in direct attacks on Russia while NATO pursues annexation of Belarusian territory.<sup>120</sup>

The time frame for the exercise has also grown. By 2021, it had come to encompass preparatory activities by the Russian and Belarusian armed forces in the months leading to the September exercise, defense and counterattack phases during the exercise, and a follow-up nuclear escalation management phase following Zapad during the *Grom* (Thunder) exercise.<sup>121</sup>

### Other Joint Exercises

Following Zapad-2021, Russia’s Minister of Defense (General of the Army Sergey Shoigu) and Belarus’s Minister of Defense (Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin) approved a plan in October 2021 for joint exercises in 2022 that would involve more than 100 activities.<sup>122</sup> The plan favored joint activities for the joint Regional Forces Group and joint military systems, emphasized practical exercises, and included tasks to implement previous joint decisions.<sup>123</sup> During a meeting with Lukashenko at the beginning of the year, Shoigu also underscored the newly operational joint training center

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<sup>118</sup> Muzyka, 2021, p. 18.

<sup>119</sup> Frederik Wintermans and Dan G. Cox, “Building the Russian Concept of Operations in the Baltic Sea Region: An Experimental Approach,” *Military Review*, March 2022, p. 7–8.

<sup>120</sup> Kofman, 2021.

<sup>121</sup> Wintermans and Cox, 2022, p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> Valerii Komissarov, “Ukrepliat’ Bezopasnost’ Soiuznogo Gosudarstva” [“Strengthening the Security of the Union State”], *Strazh Baltiki* [Guard of the Baltics], No. 42, October 29, 2021.

<sup>123</sup> Komissarov, 2021.

created to conduct joint air and air defense training. According to Shoigu, the main task that the Union State's air defense system needs to be able to do is "to practice its skills practically daily and show its effectiveness, including to those that need to see them."<sup>124</sup>

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus conducted exercise Allied Resolve from February 10 through February 20, 2022, as a readiness check for reaction forces. The intent of Allied Resolve-2022 was to suppress and counter outside aggression and terrorism and ultimately to protect the interests of the Union State.<sup>125</sup> For practical field activities, Belarusian-Russian forces used Belarusian training areas, some of which are close to Belarus's borders with NATO and Poland and its border with Ukraine. During the exercise, Belarus's Ministry of Defense announced that Belarus was already hosting some units with standard equipment from Russia's Far East, including fighters, artillery systems, the S-400 SAM system, and a division of Pantsir-S short-range SAM systems.<sup>126</sup> In all, up to 100 combat and support systems were already on combat duty at the Brest Oblast' training area as part of the joint regional air defense system of Belarus and Russia.

In September 2022, a large group of Belarusian forces deployed to Russia for the Vostok-2022 strategic exercise. Vostok-2022 involved almost all Armed Forces of Belarus and parts of Russia's East Military District, Aerospace Forces, and Airborne Forces.<sup>127</sup> In all, the exercise involved tens of thousands of "polite people" and associated equipment,<sup>128</sup> including the Iskander missile system, S-400 SAM systems, and Su-35 fighters. Vostok-2022 was considerably smaller than previous iterations of the exer-

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<sup>124</sup> Dmitriy Litovkin, "Ot Bresta do Vladivostoka" ["From Brest to Vladivostok"], *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie [Independent Military Review]*, No. 5, February 11, 2022.

<sup>125</sup> Litovkin, 2022.

<sup>126</sup> Litovkin, 2022.

<sup>127</sup> Litovkin, 2022.

<sup>128</sup> "Polite people," is "the catchphrase used in Russia to describe the thousands of soldiers who annexed Crimea in February and March . . . the soldiers were caustically dubbed 'little green men' in Ukraine and 'polite people' in Russia due to their alleged gentle demeanor." See Tom Balmforth, "Russia Mulls Special Day to Recognize Its 'Polite People,'" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 4, 2014.

cise, most likely because most of the Russian Ground Forces and Airborne units, other than conscripts, were fighting in Ukraine. Belarusian forces, along with other international troops, participated in the exercise.

The two countries then conducted anti-sabotage drills in October 2022, when Russian service members arrived in Belarus to join the joint Regional Forces Group.<sup>129</sup> A new army exercise, which took place between October 24 and November 1 of that year in Brest, involved drills for civil defense forces. According to Moscow, the Russian army deployed a field hospital in Homel on November 24 as part of the exercise.

In January 2023, the Regional Forces Group conducted joint tactical flight training aimed at improving operational compatibility between Belarus and Russian aviation units conducting joint training and combat tasks.<sup>130</sup> During the training, operational tasks involved aerial reconnaissance, joint air patrol of Belarusian airspace, command and control of aircraft forces with the A-50 early warning and control aircraft, tactical landing of airborne forces, close-air support, and evacuation of the wounded. At the same time, Belarus's military leaders recognized the responsibility levied on logistics personnel and command staff supporting joint air operations to train personnel to receive aviation equipment and prepare ranges for employing aviation in combat.

Operational and combat training remains the most important (and most long-standing) goal of joint exercises between Russia and Belarus. These exercises appear to rehearse, and perhaps increase, the forces' capability to fight the types of conflicts that are of greatest concern to Moscow and Minsk. Despite these exercises, however, Belarusian military readiness remains lower than Russian readiness was before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Tom Balmforth, "Flurry of Military Activity in Belarus Stirs Concern in Ukraine," Reuters, December 7, 2022a.

<sup>130</sup> Aleksandr Khokhlov, "Polkovnik Andrei Luk'ianovich: 'Sovmestnoiie Letno-Takticheskoiiie Ucheniie Prizvano Ukrepit' Bezopasnost' Soiuznogo Gosudarstva" ["Colonel Andrei Luk'ianovich: 'Joint Tactical-Flight Training Used to Strengthen the Security of the Union State'"], webpage, Permanent Committee of the Union State, January 19, 2023.

<sup>131</sup> Komissarov, 2021.

## Joint Operations Between Russia and Belarus

Aside from conducting joint exercises and limited cooperation against Ukraine, Russia and Belarus are also conducting joint out-of-area deployments. Russia's Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin approved an agreement with Belarus in 2022 to send up to 200 Belarusian troops equipped to provide humanitarian aid to Syria's Hmeymim air base—where Russia's aviation groups are based.<sup>132</sup> These troops will operationally report to Russia's center for reconciliation but will remain under the command of Belarusian authorities. Moscow will also provide Belarusian troops with living accommodations, food, and a translator; Moscow will also evacuate troops in case of danger. It appears that Belarus might have deployed medical personnel as part of this request: In February 2023, Yury Sluka, Belarus's Ambassador to Syria, visited the mobile hospital of the Belarus Armed Forces located in the Ismailia district and praised the importance of the hospital's mission to assist Syria in such crises as the earthquake on February 6, 2023.<sup>133</sup> Belarus's role in joint operations with Russia is in line with its training and exercising trends discussed earlier, which suggested that Belarus seeks to maintain a support-oriented posture but is not capable of projecting combat power, although some limited auxiliary support is possible.

## Internal and Regime Security

### Russian and Belarusian Crisis Management

In addition to the military and security cooperation described in the preceding section, Russia and Belarus have provided support to each other during internal crises. In this section, we discuss how either country might help the other manage regime stability and how each country might deal with a political transition in the other. We also provide an overview of the two countries' cooperation in managing crises resulting from internal upheavals, such as the 2011 protests in Russia and the 2020 election in Belarus.

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<sup>132</sup> Litovkin, 2022.

<sup>133</sup> Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the Syrian Arab Republic, "On the Visit of the Ambassador of Belarus to Syria Yury Sluka to the Aleppo Governorate," February 23, 2023.

The bilateral relationship between Russia and Belarus as of 2023 is heavily influenced by the individual in power in Belarus: Aleksandr Lukashenko. One expert has noted that Moscow likely recognizes that, although the existing regime in Belarus has a “pronounced personal character,” the two countries must build a foundation for cooperation that can continue regardless of whether any individual leader is in power.<sup>134</sup> Russian observers of the Belarus-Russia relationship believe that Belarus has been “good for Moscow” in the state in which it has been since 1998.<sup>135</sup> However, Lukashenko’s actions following the 2020 election have reignited discussions among Russian observers regarding the success of the integration of the Belarus-Russia relationship. The election highlighted the fact that the integration process lacks “a strong mechanism to protect the existing political regime in Belarus.”<sup>136</sup> On the one hand, Russia recognized the election as legitimate and blamed the West—particularly the United States—for orchestrating the protests that occurred after the election.<sup>137</sup> On the other hand, Russia may also be seeing that its integration with Belarus has been dependent on the personality of its current leader: If President Lukashenko were not in power, what would that mean for the future of the Union State?

Furthermore, although Russia does not view Belarus as a threat under Lukashenko’s rule, this attitude might change if the regime in Minsk also changes. This view is in line with the perspective that cooperation between the two countries is fundamentally driven by personality. Russia is forced to support Lukashenko and his regime “for all its obvious flaws” but also wants to leverage his dependence on such support “to create the strongest, inextricable link between Belarus and Russia.”<sup>138</sup>

Our interviews revealed that regime change in Belarus and Russia’s reaction to it would largely depend on future developments in Russia’s war with Ukraine. A prevailing opinion among Belarusian analysts is that Russia’s relative victory in Ukraine would be a threat to the existence of Belarus and

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<sup>134</sup> Bordachev, 2020.

<sup>135</sup> Bordachev, 2020.

<sup>136</sup> Bordachev, 2020.

<sup>137</sup> See for example, Koktysh, 2020.

<sup>138</sup> Kashin, 2020.

to Lukashenko, but one of our interviewees suggested that the same may be true following Russia's relative defeat in Ukraine.<sup>139</sup> A defeat could result in two outcomes. If the war internally weakens or destabilizes Russia, then Lukashenko could stay in power, and Belarus could remain sovereign.<sup>140</sup> Alternatively, a peaceful transition of power could occur in Belarus—perhaps with little interference, or otherwise—following the template set by Russia's previous intervention in Belarus's 2020 election.<sup>141</sup> However, a long Ukrainian conflict will also weaken Belarusian opposition and Belarusian society's will to oppose Lukashenko's regime, thus reducing the potential for regime transition in Belarus.

## Crisis Management in Bilateral Relations

Minsk and Moscow have had what some researchers have called “a tormented friendship” over the years, culminating in the “crisis phase in the evolution of the Union State.”<sup>142</sup> Minsk and Moscow have had several public disagreements since the formation of the Union State and have managed them in different ways over time. A few examples are as follows:

- **Gas subsidy disputes.** In 2004, a disagreement regarding gas subsidies led Belarus to sever a contract to sell 50 percent of Beltransgaz to Russia's Gazprom. The agreement had specified that Belarus would be able to purchase gas for the same price as the Russian domestic market for five years. Russia subsequently broke this agreement and raised gas prices for Belarus. Belarus refused to pay the new price, and Gazprom

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<sup>139</sup> Expert on Latvia, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>140</sup> Expert on Latvia, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>141</sup> Atlantic Council Fellow, interview with the authors, October 26, 2022; independent defense analyst on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, December 14, 2022.

<sup>142</sup> Michael Lambert, “The Belarusian Irony of Fate in Abkhazia,” Russian International Affairs Council, blog post, January 20, 2022; Andrey Suzdaltsev, “Krizis soyuznogo gosudarstva Belorussii i Rossii” [“The Crisis of the Union State of Belarus and Russia”], *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya* [World Economics and International Relations], Vol. 64, No. 3, March 2020.

stopped importing gas to Belarus as of January 1, 2004. A new contract between Belarus and Gazprom was not signed until June 2004.<sup>143</sup>

- **Withholding recognition for Russia’s occupations or illegal annexations.** In 2009, Lukashenko refrained from publicly recognizing the independence of the Georgian separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He said that Russia offered Belarus a \$500 million loan with good terms in exchange for their formal recognition of the “independence” of these regions, which he refused, saying, “It has come to this—they came and said: If there’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia, there will also be \$500 million . . . You know, we don’t want to sell issues and positions . . . We will decide on this issue by ourselves.”<sup>144</sup> Russia retracted their loan. In the trade war that followed, Russia banned the import of dairy products from Belarus. This ban was lifted in summer 2009; later that year, Lukashenko expressed his regret over the incident.<sup>145</sup> Belarus also did not “recognize” Crimea as Russian territory for seven months in 2014 after Russia illegally annexed it. Also in 2014, Belarus reestablished a border with Russia that had been dissolved since 1995.
- **Rejecting economic projects.** Lukashenko also vetoed the Eurasian Union, which led to the creation of the EEU instead, “making it more difficult for Russia to counterbalance Chinese, European and American influence.”<sup>146</sup>

On the other hand, Minsk and Moscow have also helped each other during some domestic crises that could have seriously affected the countries’ political positions without the other’s intervention or aid, such as in the following examples:

<sup>143</sup> For additional details on this dispute, see Judy Dempsey, “Gazprom Wins Belarus Victory,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2005.

<sup>144</sup> “Belarus Leader Rejects Conditions on Russian Loan,” Reuters, June 5, 2009.

<sup>145</sup> This trade war was termed the *Milk War*. For additional background, see Ellen Barry, “‘Milk War’ Strains Russia-Belarus Ties,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2009; Clifford J. Levy, “Russia Ends Dairy Ban on Belarus,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2009.

<sup>146</sup> Lambert, 2022.

- **Intelligence cooperation.** The various aspects of the Belarus-Russia relationship have also involved the countries' intelligence agencies. The Russian FSB is the main foreign intelligence service partner of the Belarusian Kamitet dziaŕžaŭnaj biaspieki Respubliki Belarus [State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus] (KGB).<sup>147</sup> Most of the Belarusian KGB's operations against Russian nationals are against individuals who are also on Russia's wanted list, although some operations have targeted Russian activists who support the Belarusian opposition.<sup>148</sup>
- **Crisis support.** In 2020, protests broke out in Belarus in response to the presidential election, which many citizens viewed as fraudulent. To the world, these protests showed that Lukashenko was losing popular support in Belarus. Lukashenko's regime eventually squashed the protests but not without help from the Kremlin—this aid was mainly economic, although military assistance was offered. Outside observers of the election widely agree that Putin also recognized the election as illegitimate but decided to support Lukashenko for security reasons.<sup>149</sup> In August 2020, Putin officially congratulated Lukashenko on his election victory, noting that his leadership in Belarus will undoubtedly contribute to further cooperation in the Union State, EEU, the CIS, and the CSTO.<sup>150</sup>
- **Tracking Russian draft dodgers.** In September 2022, during Russia's war with Ukraine, Putin issued a decree on partial mobilization. Following this announcement, reports began to emerge of Belarusian security

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<sup>147</sup> Expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023; Aleksey Nikolsky, "The Belarusian KGB," *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 2, April 30, 2018.

<sup>148</sup> Nikolsky, 2018. However, in 2014, the Belarusian KGB arrested Vladislav Baumgartner, CEO of the Russian fertilizer maker Uralkali. Minsk was seeking revenge against Uralkali's owner, Suleman Kerimov, for pulling out of a joint supply deal with Belaruskali (the Belarusian potash producer) and causing losses in tax revenue for Belarus. Under pressure from the Kremlin, Minsk eventually released Baumgartner.

<sup>149</sup> Expert on Latvia, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022; former government official, interview with the authors, October 26, 2022; and Center for Eastern Studies expert, interview with the authors, November 16, 2022.

<sup>150</sup> President of the Russian Federation, "Pozdravleniie Aleksandru Lukashenko s Pobedoi na Vyborah Prezidenta Belorussii" [Congratulations for Alexander Lukashenko on the Belarusian Presidential Election Victory"], press release, August 10, 2020.

forces working on verbal orders to track down Russian draft dodgers who had fled to Belarus.<sup>151</sup> Public reports have identified only limited, isolated incidents, and the extent to which Russian citizens have fled to Belarus to escape conscription is unclear. One report, for example, stated that on September 27, five Russian men were removed from a train entering Belarus.<sup>152</sup> If this incident is indicative of a larger trend, it would seem to indicate that Lukashenko has agreed—or, at the very least, is doing as much as he sees fit to give the impression that he has agreed—to aid Putin in rounding up draft dodgers and returning them to Russia.

## Conclusions

In some ways, Russia and Belarus present the model for Russia's desired relationship with a former Soviet state. In other ways, theirs is a contentious relationship filled with stresses and obstacles. Important to this relationship is both countries' view of threats to their national interests. Russia and Belarus share a perception that the West, and Western influence, present a realistic military threat to their interests. NATO's expansion, increased NATO military training tempo, growing presence of U.S. forces and equipment closer to Russia's and Belarus's borders, and U.S. investments in more-capable missile defense systems appear to be the main arguments in Russian and Union State strategic documents that the military threat from the West is real today.

There are, however, important differences in the two countries' threat perceptions. Critically, interviewees stressed that Belarus views Russia itself as an external threat to Belarusian sovereignty and national interests. This perception has led Belarus to resist Russian efforts to establish a permanent air base on Belarusian territory. Belarus thus faces the challenge of main-

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<sup>151</sup> “‘Po Kwartiram, Po Nomeram’: Belorussikim Silovikam Dali Ukazaniie Otslezhivat’ Rossiian, Skryvaiushchihsia ot Mobilizatsii” [“Apartment By Apartment, Door by Door: Belarusian Security Forces Received Orders to Track Russians Dodging Mobilization”], *Nashaniva.com*, September 22, 2022; Ryhor Nizhnikau, “The Growing Divide Between Lukashenko and the Belarusian Elite,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 18, 2022; Alesia Rudnik, “Will Putin Send Mobilized Russians to Belarus for a New Kyiv Offensive?” *Atlantic Council*, October 3, 2022b.

<sup>152</sup> Nizhnikau, 2022.

taining the beneficial aspects of cooperation with Russia while preserving some degree of freedom of action. In addition, although Russia does not consider Belarus to be a direct threat to its national interests, it does see Belarus as a potential gateway for Western influence and aggression against Russia. Overall, Russia faces a problem of how to both reassure Belarus that it does not seek to undermine Belarusian sovereignty and influence Belarus to distance itself from the EU and the West.<sup>153</sup> Although Russia finds it profitable to preserve Belarus's sovereign statehood, it has been difficult for Russia to ensure that Belarus remains friendly toward Russia.

The Belarus-Russia link appears to be vulnerable in the military and security cooperation areas, as well. The Union State structure serves as an important mechanism for aligning Russia's and Belarus's military and security cooperation goals. However, some scholars have observed that it may also serve as an impediment to broader cooperation between the two countries.<sup>154</sup> In the preceding sections, we have discussed (1) Russia's desire for permanent military basing in Belarus and Belarus's pushback on the issue, (2) Russia's desire to train Belarusian service members in Russia's military education and training centers and Belarus's desire to limit its reliance on such training in Russia, (3) Belarus's growing participation in joint exercises and military operations with Russia, and (4) Lukashenko's limited and unstable support to Russia's war in Ukraine. We also discussed several non-military public disagreements between the two countries since the formation of the Union State and their cooperation during domestic crises. These discussions demonstrated that the national interests of each country have tended to prevail over the national interests of the Union State.<sup>155</sup>

Despite the difficulties in the implementation of the military aspects of the Union State, both Russia and Belarus appear interested in continuing the arrangement (at least for now), as evident in the long-awaited publication of the Union State military doctrine. However, this arrangement appears to be more important to Russia than it is to Belarus. We noted in earlier discus-

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<sup>153</sup> Bordachev, 2021.

<sup>154</sup> Russian International Affairs Council, "Russia and Belarus: In Search of Effective Alliance Formula During the Period of Geopolitical Turbulence," May 9, 2019.

<sup>155</sup> Russian International Affairs Council, 2019.

sions that Russia has contributed approximately 70 percent of the Union State budget for the Regional Forces Group. Russia's Defense Minister Shoigu also has underscored efforts to boost military cooperation between Russia and Belarus through modernization of military infrastructure for shared use. Still, Belarus remains a willing member of the Union State's military structure. Its air policing of the Union State borders under the joint Union State air defense system, among other provisions, and its support to Russia's war in Ukraine, are a sign that Belarus views this arrangement as beneficial to its national interests as well.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Preigerman, Ievgenii, "Belorussko-Rossiiskoe Sotrudnichestvo v Kontekste Voyny v Ukraine" ["Belarusian-Russian Cooperation in the Context of the War in Ukraine"], *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, September 28, 2022.



## Economic Relations and Defense Industrial Ties

Belarus has relied on Russia as its largest economic and defense industrial partner since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In many ways, this partnership has been beneficial to Belarus, which has been able to extract rents from energy supplied from Russia to Europe via its geographic position and intact Soviet-era industrial base. Also, Belarus's agricultural exports have preferential access to Russia thanks to customs unions; the country is licensed to repair, modernize, and export Russian secondhand military equipment and technology to the rest of the world; and its unique defense industrial products may even account for up to 15 percent of Russia's annual State Defense Order. At the same time, the country has regularly taken precautions to maintain sovereignty over strategically important niches in its economy and defense industrial base. It has been reluctant to give Russia too much power in the Union State; it has blocked Russian privatization of strategic Belarusian state-owned enterprises (SOEs) involving energy and defense; and it has sought to increase trade and strategic partnerships with Europe, Central Asia, China, and South America. However, support for Russia's war in Ukraine has further ostracized Belarus from the West, and sanctions will likely force Belarus into further economic and defense industrial integration with Russia.

### Belarus's Economic Ties with Russia

The Belarusian economy is largely dependent on Russia, an interconnect- edness stemming from legacy industrial assets and production during the Soviet Union. Lukashenko postponed difficult yet liberalizing market

reforms in the 1990s following Belarus's independence, resulting in significant state control of the economy via SOEs.<sup>1</sup> These SOEs are estimated to account for up to one-third of employment in Belarus and contribute up to one-third of its gross domestic product (GDP), making Belarus an outlier even among its post-Soviet neighboring countries.<sup>2</sup> Some of the most strategic Belarusian SOEs are the Naftan Oil Refinery in Novopolotsk, the Mozyr Oil Refinery, and fertilizer producer Belaruskali.

Belarus is facing increasing economic and political isolation because of economic sanctions on behalf of the United States, Europe, and such international lenders as the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These sanctions are the result of Lukashenko's efforts to repress civil society after the disputed presidential election in 2020, and of Belarus's support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and its continued military action in the country.<sup>3</sup> Russia remains Belarus's largest trading partner by far (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2), and the countries have signed several treaties—the Union (1997), the Union State (1999), the Customs Union (2010), and the EEU (2015)—all with the goal of greater economic integration that could eventually lead to further political integration. However, little outside customs, labor, and travel agreements has been achieved despite efforts to create strong bilateral institutions and implement a common currency. This is invariably because of Belarusian reluctance to be a junior partner or Russia's refusal to kowtow to Belarusian demands.<sup>4</sup> The war in Ukraine may rejuvenate integration as Belarus finds itself increasingly dependent on Russia economically now that sanctions have eroded the few economic advantages that Minsk had over Moscow.

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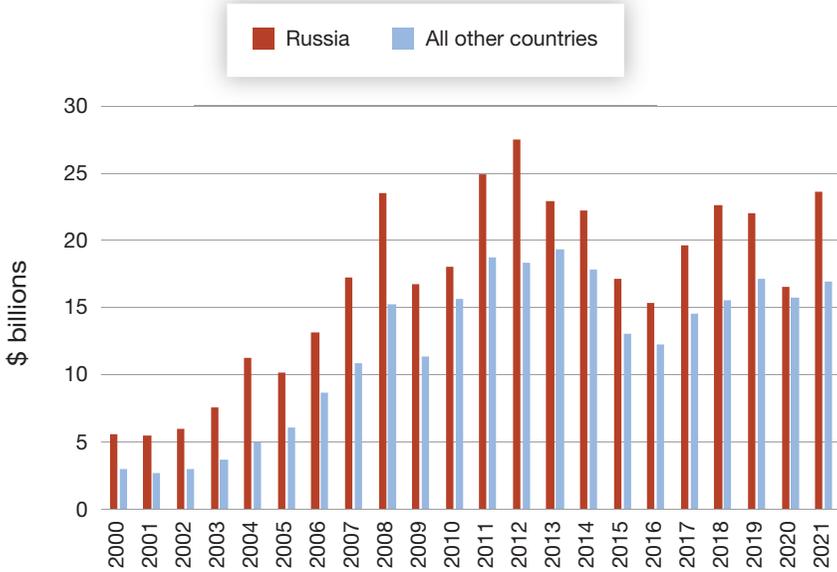
<sup>1</sup> Cory Welt, "Belarus: An Overview," Congressional Research Service, December 10, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Richmond, Dora Benedek, Ezequiel Cabezon, Bobana Cegar, Peter Dohleman, Michelle Hassine, Beata Jajko, Piotr Kopyrski, Maksym Markevych, Jacques Miniane, et al., *Reassessing the Role of State-Owned Enterprises in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe*, International Monetary Fund, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher A. Hartwell, Kateryna Bornukova, Dzmitry Kruk, and Benedikt Zoller-Rydzek, *The Economic Reconstruction of Belarus: Next Steps After a Democratic Transition*, European Parliament, March 2022.

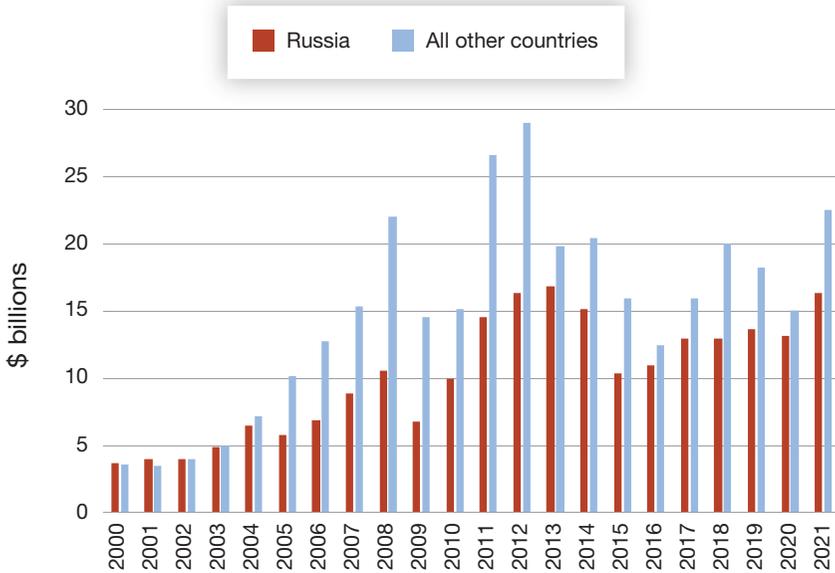
<sup>4</sup> Cameron, David R., "As Russia & Belarus Develop Their Union State & Hold Huge Military Drills, Russia Goes to the Polls," Yale Macmillan Center, September 15, 2021.

**FIGURE 5.1**  
**Imports to Belarus: 2000–2021**



SOURCE: Features information from IMF, International Financial Statistics database, undated-b.

**FIGURE 5.2**  
**Exports from Belarus: 2000–2021**



SOURCE: Features information from IMF, undated-b.

## Overview of Belarus’s Economy and Nonmilitary Manufacturing

The state has an outsized role in the Belarusian economy. SOEs—specifically, those with a state share exceeding 50 percent—are estimated to account for nearly one-third of employment and GDP in Belarus.<sup>5</sup> Although a strong IT sector has developed in Belarus over the past 15 years, the private sector as a share of GDP remains considerably lower than in neighboring countries.<sup>6</sup> The World Bank estimates that the GDP of Belarus was approximately \$62 billion in 2020: Agriculture accounted for 7.1 percent, industry for 30.8 percent, manufacturing for 21.5 percent, and services (for example, IT) for 49.5 per-

<sup>5</sup> IMF, “Republic of Belarus: Staff Report for the 2018 Article IV Consultation,” December 17, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> IMF, 2018.

cent.<sup>7</sup> Exports were valued at nearly \$36 billion that same year.<sup>8</sup> Information and communication technologies accounted for approximately 13.1 percent of exports; transportation services, 10.3 percent; potassic fertilizers, 5.5 percent; refined petroleum fuels, 4.9 percent; cheese, 4.2 percent; and motor vehicles and tractors, 3.2 percent.<sup>9</sup> Refining petroleum fuels and the domestic production and export of potassic fertilizers are seen as strategically important within Belarus and thus remain in the hands of the state. More than 90 percent of refined petroleum fuels were exported to European markets prior to the war in Ukraine (for example, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands).<sup>10</sup> Refined petroleum fuels also have contributed 20–30 percent of federal budget revenues, on average, since the 2010s and are thought to be a valuable protection racket for the Belarusian security services.<sup>11</sup> Belaruskali is also strategically important and previously contributed to nearly 15 percent of the global supply of potassic fertilizers.<sup>12</sup> (Figures 5.3 and 5.4 present Belarus’s top trading partners, excluding Russia.)

Conversely, 75–80 percent of all Belarusian agricultural exports in 2020 went to Russia. This was partly driven by legal trade and partly driven by illegal “re-exporting” of sanctioned EU-originated food products.<sup>13</sup> Russia is the largest foreign investor in Belarus: Foreign direct investment from Russia made up 30 percent of total foreign direct investment in 2020, or nearly 7 percent of Belarusian GDP that year (see Table 5.1).<sup>14</sup> Approximately 93 percent of imported natural gas and crude oil to Belarus in 2020

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<sup>7</sup> World Bank, “World Development Indicators: Structure of Value Added,” Table 4.2, World Development Indicators database, undated.

<sup>8</sup> UN, UN Comtrade Database, undated-a; Harvard Center for International Development, The Atlas of Economic Complexity, database, undated.

<sup>9</sup> UN, undated-a; Harvard Center for International Development, undated.

<sup>10</sup> UN, undated-a (code 2710, petroleum oils, refined).

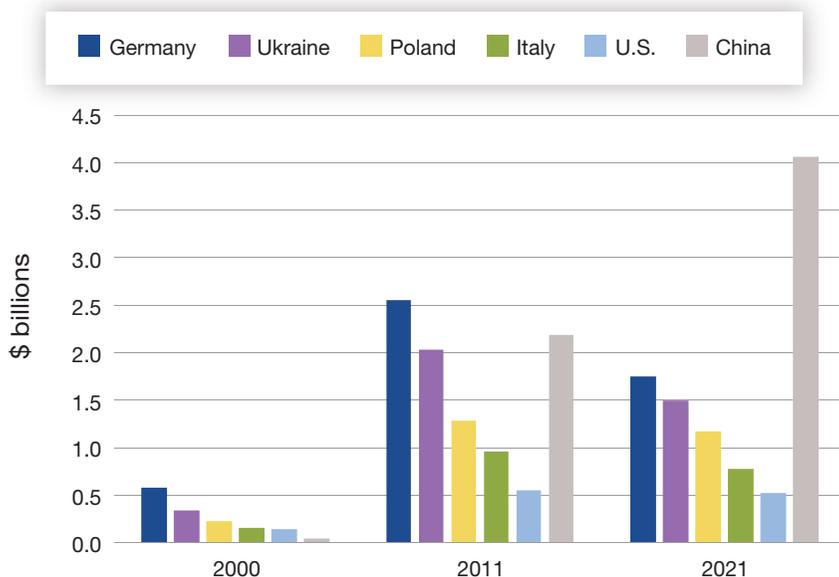
<sup>11</sup> Maxim Samorukov, “The Importance of Being Russian: Can Belarus Survive the Kremlin’s War Against Ukraine?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 3, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Samorukov, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Hartwell et al., 2022, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> IMF, Coordinated Direct Investment Survey, database, undated-a (Direct Investment Positions Inward).

**FIGURE 5.3**  
**Top Importing Countries to Belarus, Excluding Russia: 2000, 2011, 2021**



Features information from IMF, undated-b.

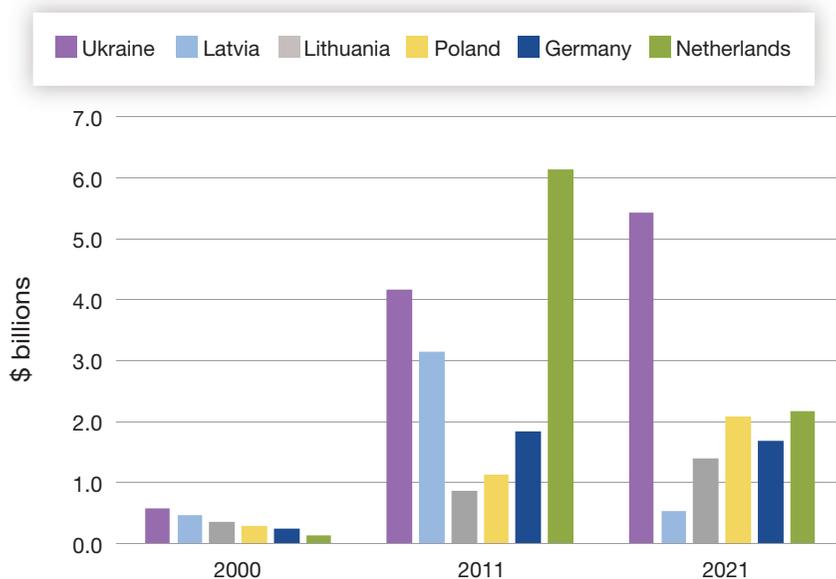
was from Russia;<sup>15</sup> domestically extracted crude oil, natural gas, and biomass (peat, firewood, biofuels) accounted for only 12 percent of Belarus's total energy consumption that year.<sup>16</sup> Although Belarus's first nuclear power plant at Ostrovets came online in 2020 and has begun to diversify the country's electricity generation mix, nuclear makes up only a small amount of the country's total consumption to date (see Figure 5.5). The Ostrovets plant has also been financed with a \$10 billion line of credit from Russia that orig-

<sup>15</sup> UN, undated-a. Commodity code 2709 (petroleum oils and oils obtained from bituminous minerals; crude) valued at \$3.4 billion; commodity code 2711 (petroleum gases and other gaseous hydrocarbons) valued at \$2.5 billion.

<sup>16</sup> National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, *Energy Balance of the Republic of Belarus in 2020*, 2020.

FIGURE 5.4

### Top Export Destinations from Belarus, Excluding Russia: 2000, 2011, 2021



Features information from IMF, undated-b.

TABLE 5.1

### Top Five Sources of Foreign Direct Investment in Belarus: 2010 and 2020

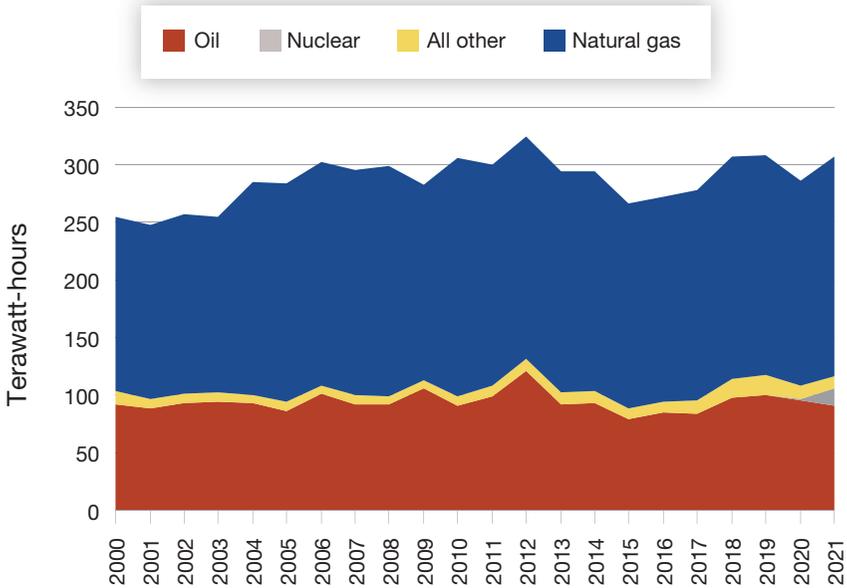
Country	2010	2020
Russia	5,878	4,215
Cyprus <sup>a</sup>	1,356	2,954
Netherlands	254	608
Turkey	518	560
Austria	297	537

SOURCE: Features information from IMF, undated-a.

NOTE: Amounts are in billions of U.S. dollars.

<sup>a</sup> Common "roundtripping" destination that could include foreign direct investment originating from Belarus and Russia.

FIGURE 5.5

**Belarus Energy Consumption by Source: 2000–2021**

SOURCE: Features information from Our World in Data, "Energy Consumption by Source and Country," webpage, undated.

inated in 2011, and construction has been overseen by Russia's Rosatom (see the next section). Overall, the IMF estimates that Russia subsidizes Belarus at roughly 10–20 percent of Belarus's GDP per year.<sup>17</sup>

## The Shift from Independence to Integration with Russia

Prior to the war in Ukraine, Belarus was able to leverage opportunities to extract rents given its presence in customs unions with Russia and its geographic position between Russia and Europe.<sup>18</sup> This is coming to an end, however; Belarus's support for Russia has led to severed ties with Europe

<sup>17</sup> Sergei Guriev, "The Political Economy of the Belarusian Crisis," *Intereconomics*, Vol. 55, No. 5, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Samorukov, 2022.

and made the country more susceptible to Russian economic pressure. Sanctions have already begun to affect Belarus's transportation sector: Belarusian freight trucks have been banned from entering the EU (with some exceptions for medical inventory). This hurts an industry estimated at \$4 billion a year and might disrupt smuggling and fraud controlled by business associates of Lukashenko.<sup>19</sup> However, the real pressure point that Russia has at its disposal to coerce Belarus to further integrate is energy.

Russia has long supplied Belarus with discounted energy: specifically, natural gas and crude oil. Although this arrangement has generated revenues for Belarus, it has also made the country energy-reliant on Russia to the extent that not only domestic consumption but also exports are affected. Before the war, natural gas would transit Belarus to Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Kaliningrad (Russia), and Germany via the Yamal-Europe pipeline, owned by Russian state-owned Gazprom and operated by Gazprom-TransGaz. Belarus would levy transit fees on that gas that were worth approximately \$300–\$400 million per year.<sup>20</sup> Now that Gazprom has been sanctioned and Russia has halted flows via Yamal-Europe, those transit fees have ceased. At the moment, Belarus still pays less than other countries for Russian natural gas, which is critical for domestic heat and electricity generation and manufacturing. Gazprom releases information on export prices (including excise taxes and customs duties) on a regional level for the former Soviet Union and “Far Abroad” (that is, Western Europe), and prices paid by Belarus are often mentioned in press reporting. In 2022, for example, Putin stated that Belarus would pay \$128.50 per thousand cubic meters of natural gas.<sup>21</sup> An estimate for the period 2013–2021 suggests that Belarus paid, on average, 40 percent less per thousand cubic meters than Western European countries (see Figure 5.6). According to an analysis by the Moscow Institute for Energy and Finance Foundation, Russian energy subsidies to Belarus via lower natural gas prices equated to

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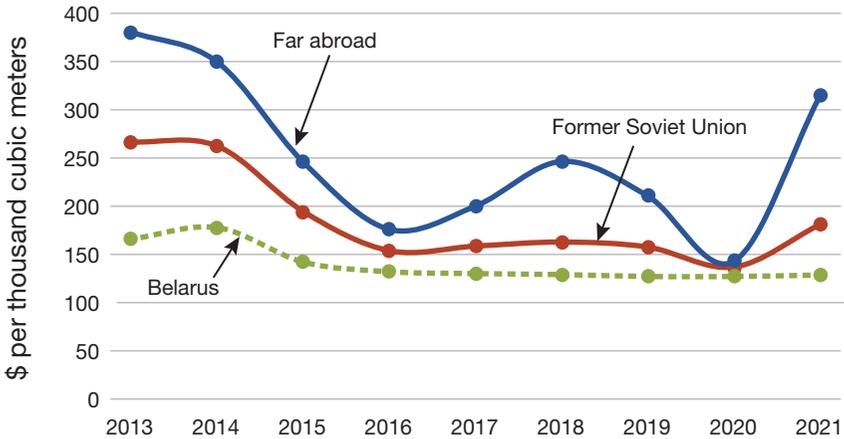
<sup>19</sup> Samorukov, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Samorukov, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> “Russia’s Loans to Belarus Will Total \$630-640 Mln by End of 2022—Putin,” TASS, September 9, 2021.

FIGURE 5.6

### Natural Gas Prices: Former Soviet Union, “Far Abroad,” and Belarus



SOURCES: Features information on Gazprom from multiple reports: Mosenergo, *Annual Report*, 2013–2021; Li Luo, “Gazprom’s Grip: Russia’s Leverage Over Europe,” data visualization tool, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2013; “Belarus to Pay \$166, \$178 for Natural Gas in 2013, 2014,” Kazinform International News Agency, April 2, 2012; “Belarus Says \$73 per 1,000 Cubic Meters a Fair Price for Russian Gas,” Reuters, May 12, 2016; “Belarus-Russia Gas Price Talks Underway—Official,” TASS, August 26, 2016; “Belarus to Pay \$130 per 1,000 Cubic Meters of Russian Gas in 2017—President,” TASS, April 8, 2017; Vusala Abbasova, “Belarus Seeks Lower Gas Price from Russia Amid Negotiations,” *Caspian News*, May 16, 2020; “Belarus, Russia in Agreement on Next Year’s Price for Natural Gas,” BeTA, December 25, 2020; “Natural Gas Price for Belarus in 2022 Will Be at 2021 Level—Kremlin,” TASS, July 13, 2021.

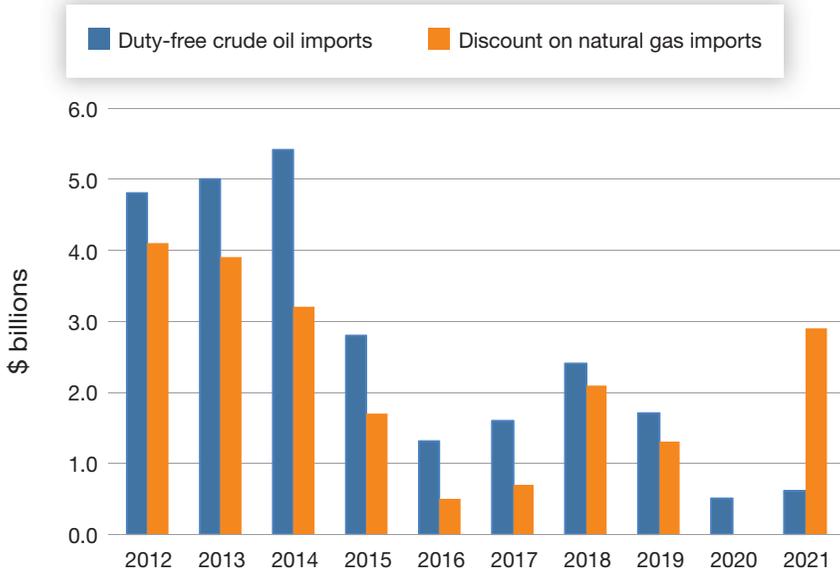
\$20 billion over the period 2012–2021 (see Figure 5.7).<sup>22</sup> However, as the war in Ukraine continues and the Yamal-Europe pipeline remains dormant, there are no guarantees that Belarus will continue to receive natural gas at such a discount, and this could allow Russia to coerce Belarus to further support the war and even toward further integration.

Until recently, Russia also provided Belarus with duty-free crude oil imports. Belarus, in turn, would refine the crude oil at its state-owned Novopolotsk and Mozyr refineries, which have a combined capacity of 22

<sup>22</sup> Elena Barysheva, “How Russian Money Keeps Belarus Afloat,” *Deutsche Welle*, July 30, 2021.

FIGURE 5.7

### Estimated Russian Energy Subsidies to Belarus via Gas and Oil: 2012–2021



SOURCE: Features information from Moscow Institute for Energy and Finance Foundation via Barysheva, 2021.

metric tons per year, for export to European markets.<sup>23</sup> The same analysis by the Moscow Institute for Energy and Finance Foundation estimates that these subsidies totaled \$26 billion over that same decade (see Figure 5.7). However, Russia has, in effect, been raising crude oil prices for Belarus since 2015 by phasing out export duties in favor of a domestic extraction tax on producers.<sup>24</sup> This phaseout, combined with sanctions on Belarusian refined petroleum products, means that Belarus must now sell its refined petroleum

<sup>23</sup> International Energy Agency, *Belarus Energy Profile*, June 2021.

<sup>24</sup> IMF, “Republic of Belarus: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2021 Article IV Mission,” December 20, 2021. There had been Belarusian opposition to the policy change, but Belarus accepted the tax maneuver in 2021, suggesting that Belarus may have less ability to resist Russian pressure than it did before. See Mateusz Kubiak, “Belarus Secures Russian Oil and Gas Supplies for 2021,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 18, No. 4, January 7, 2021.

products at a price that is less competitive than Russian products (because Russian refineries receive government subsidies) in a market using Russian infrastructure.<sup>25</sup> At the time this report was written, Belarus-refined petroleum products were being redirected to St. Petersburg, Russia,<sup>26</sup> and it is not clear who the prospective buyers of these exports will be. The same can be said of Belarus's strategic fertilizer industry. Belarus has been sanctioned from exporting potassium fertilizers via seaports in Lithuania and Ukraine and is being forced to find alternative routes and markets because of the war. Although demand for Belarusian fertilizers is strong in Africa and Asia (China has grown in recent years as an importer of agricultural products and fertilizer), it is logistically challenging for those exports to reach markets without access to seaports. At the time this report was written, a portion of the country's potassic fertilizer exports were being redirected to ports in Murmansk, Russia.<sup>27</sup> All of this, of course, is pushing Belarus closer to integration with Russia as it continues to lose facets of its economy that had an advantage over Russian producers. Increasingly, Belarus may have to rely on the generosity of Russian lending as its budget revenues begin to decline from changes to its export markets.

Since the early 2000s, Russia has been a significant source of financing for Belarus; government debt to Russia has averaged between 40 percent and 50 percent of all external government debt. By mid-2020, the most recent year of complete data, we estimated government debt to Russia at \$7.9 billion, or nearly 13 percent of Belarus's GDP.<sup>28</sup> Belarus relied on funding from international organizations, such as the IMF and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) (the lending arm of the World Bank Group), after the 2009 financial crisis and ensuing recession. However, the

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<sup>25</sup> Samorukov, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> "Belarus Began Diesel Exports to St Petersburg in April, Traders Say," Reuters, May 5, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> "Belarus Wants to Export Fertilizer via Ports in Russia's Murmansk Region—Lukashenko," Interfax, September 8, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> We used data from World Bank, "Belarus: GDP (Current US\$)," World Development Indicators database, updated March 1, 2023; and Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, government bond issuance prospectus for U.S. \$500,000,000, 5.875 percent, notes due 2026, and for U.S. \$750,000,000, 6.378 percent, notes due 2031, June 22, 2020.

pressure from these lenders to enact economic reforms at home (that is, targeting the SOE sector), and the backlash stemming from Lukashenko's refusal to cede the presidency in 2020 has led Belarus to rely more on Russia and the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development (EFSD), a Russia-led development bank, for loans. The IMF and World Bank Group announced they would stop all lending to Belarus in 2022 because of its support for Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> More recently, the World Bank declared Belarus's debt unserviceable.<sup>30</sup> Figure 5.8 illustrates the extent to which Russia has consolidated its place as the main external lender to Belarus. (We present the balance of Belarus's external debt since 2005 by lender in the appendix.) In autumn 2022, Russia and Belarus agreed to an additional \$1.5 billion in loans to Belarus at competitive rates to support import substitution projects, such as automobile manufacturing, to be dispersed over several years.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Russian share of loans in Belarus's external portfolio will continue to grow because of the war. Although sanctions and economic pressures on Belarus will likely continue, it should be noted that Russian and EFSD loans and lines of credit to Belarus come with favorable terms not available on the open market, such as grace periods, extended payment deadlines, and discounted rates. In addition, these loans can be used for infrastructure projects, retiring older debts, and potentially to pay off debts to Russian companies.<sup>32</sup> The loans prop up Belarus and are another example of how Belarusian dependence on Russia has been tacitly increased over the years. Table 5.2 presents significant Russian and EFSD loans made to Belarus since 2007.

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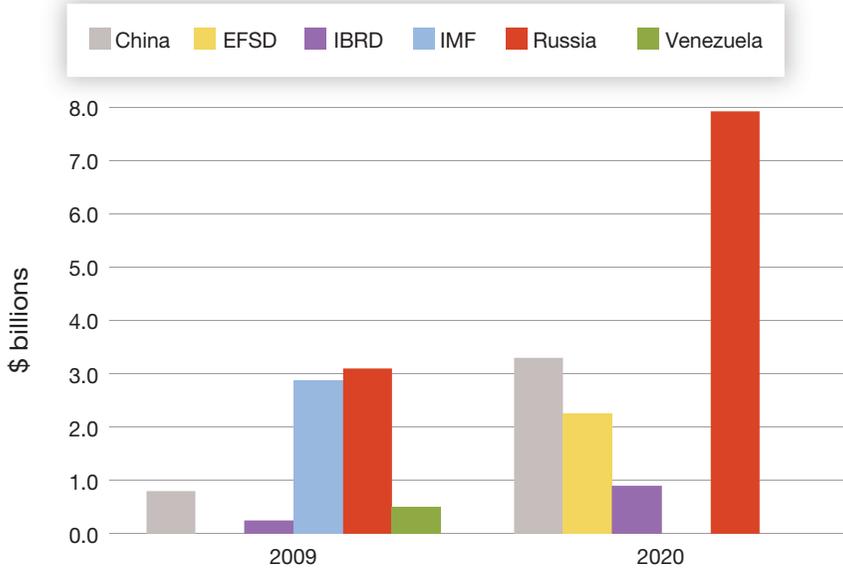
<sup>29</sup> World Bank Group, "World Bank Group Statement on Russia and Belarus," March 2, 2022a. Belarus was set to receive \$1 billion from the IMF via special drawing rights for all members to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. See Eric Martin and Aliaksandr Kudrytski, "Belarus to Get \$1 Billion from IMF, Undermining U.S. Push," Bloomberg, August 13, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> World Bank Group, "World Bank Places Loans to the Republic of Belarus in Non-Performing Status," press release, October 17, 2022b.

<sup>31</sup> "Belarus Agrees on \$1.5-Billion Loan from Russia to Fund Import-Substitution Projects—PM," Interfax, October 7, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Barysheva, 2021.

**FIGURE 5.8**  
**Belarus External Debt Balance: Top Lenders in 2009 and 2020**



SOURCES: Features information from Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, government bond issuance prospectus for U.S. \$600,000,000, 8.75 percent, notes due 2015, July 30, 2010; and Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, 2020.

TABLE 5.2

**Significant Loans from Russia and Connected Entities to Belarus: 2007–2020**

Lender	Amount (\$)	Year	Description
Russian government	1.5 billion	2007	15-year credit agreement
Russian government	1 billion	2008	15-year credit agreement with 5-year grace period on repayment of principal amount
Russian government	500 million	2009	5-year grace period on repayment of principal amount
Russian government	10 billion	2011	Line of credit for constructing nuclear power plant at Ostrovets
Vnesheconombank	500 million	2011	Line of credit for constructing nuclear power plant at Ostrovets
EFSD	10 billion	2011	10-year credit agreement with 3-year grace period: five tranches worth \$2.6 billion paid out between 2011 and 2013
Russian government	870 million	2015	Two loans with a maturity of 10 years
EFSD	2 billion	2016	Seven tranches paid out between 2016 and 2018; however, only six tranches totaling \$1.8 billion had been paid as of 2020
Russian government	\$700 million	2017	Loan with a maturity of 10 years to finance external public debt
Russian government	1.5 billion	2020	\$500 million tranche received in September 2020, \$500 million tranche received in June 2021, approximately \$500 million to be received in 2022
Russian government	1.5 billion	2022	Pending loan to finance import-substitution programs, not dispersed

SOURCES: Features information from Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, 2010; Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, government bond issuance prospectus for U.S. \$800,000,000, 8.95 percent, notes due 2018, July 30, 2011; Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, government bond issuance prospectus for U.S. \$800,000,000, 6.875 percent, notes due 2023, and for U.S. \$600,000,000, 7.625 percent, notes due 2027, June 27, 2017; Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, government bond issuance prospectus for U.S. \$600,000,000, 6.20 percent, notes due 2030, February 26, 2018; Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus, 2020; “Russia Confirms Second Loan for Belarus, Raises Issue of Detained Citizen,” Reuters, May 29, 2021; “Russia’s Loans to Belarus Will Total \$630–640 Mln by End of 2022—Putin,” 2021.

## Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on Economic Ties

Belarus is becoming increasingly isolated, both politically and economically, because of its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United States, EU, and international lenders (such as the IMF and IBRD) have all placed sanctions on Belarus.<sup>33</sup> As a result, Belarusian trucks with cargo can enter the EU only under limited circumstances; Belarusian refined petroleum fuels and potassic fertilizers can no longer be exported to EU states and must be shipped through Russia, competing for infrastructure with subsidized Russian competitors; and international organizations will no longer lend to Belarus.<sup>34</sup> Prior to the war, one of Belarus's largest importers of refined petroleum fuels was Ukraine—but no longer. Belarus now faces sanctions from the West and political pressure from Russia.<sup>35</sup> The fact that the Yamal-Europe natural gas pipeline from Belarus to Ukraine and Europe also sits dormant does not bode well for Belarus. Not only has Belarus been deprived of revenues from flows through the pipeline, but there is also no guarantee that Belarus will continue to receive discounted gas for its own domestic needs in the future—and its nuclear generation industry is still in its infancy and dependent on Russia.<sup>36</sup> The close economic relations with Russia have brought great benefits to Belarusian elites and the state, but the war has undoubtedly caused consternation, given the purported connections of the security services and Lukashenko's associates to the critical energy and transportation sectors. Another major facet of Belarus's economy is its defense industrial base, which also has deep ties to Russia. We explore these ties in detail later in this chapter.

## Belarus's Economic Ties: Summary and Conclusions

Belarus has been simultaneously dependent on Russia economically and cognizant of the need to defend certain strategic state-owned industries that have generated rents, such as refined petroleum fuels and potassic fertiliz-

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<sup>33</sup> World Bank Group, 2022a.

<sup>34</sup> Samorukov, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> UN, undated-a; Harvard Center for International Development, undated.

<sup>36</sup> Barysheva, 2021.

ers. The war in Ukraine, however, is offsetting long-held Belarusian advantages. As a result, Belarus may increasingly find itself on a level playing field with Russian oil refineries and fertilizer producers while its citizens may see natural gas prices rise, and the state may be forced to take on more loans that originate in Russia or via the EFSD. In many ways, this makes Belarus similar to a Russian region, only without the perks: For example, it receives loans in lieu of federal budget transfers and it no longer receives subsidized energy but must compete with Russian industries. Political integration via the Union State has been a thorny issue in Belarus because Minsk is reluctant to be a junior partner to Moscow. If trends hold, further economic dependence on Russia could ultimately trigger further political integration if the benefits of autonomy no longer outweigh the costs.

## Overview of Belarus and Russia's Defense Industrial Ties

Belarusian and Russian defense industrial relations have a long and established history. The key Belarusian defense capability areas have grown out of its position within the Soviet defense industrial sector—a manufacturer of components and parts for the final products produced in Russia. Today, the two countries continue to maintain a close defense industrial relationship; Russia remains Belarus's main market and cooperation partner. However, military-technical relations between the two also reflect the broader Belarusian attempts to assert its sovereignty. In the defense industry, it has manifested in the form of Belarus refusing to sell its most-strategically valuable defense enterprises to Russia and seeking to diversify its market and cooperation partners. This section presents a short overview of the Belarusian defense industry and its key capabilities.

### Overview of Belarus's Defense Industry

The structure and capabilities of the Belarusian defense industry are rooted in Cold War-era history and Belarusian security and defense relations with Russia. Therefore, a short insight into the history of the Belarusian defense industry facilitates a better understanding of the defense industrial landscape today. During the Cold War, Belarus had the third-largest defense industry in

the Soviet Union after Russia and Ukraine. However, it was hardly comparable with the other two; Belarus's industry was comparatively small—one source estimates that it accounted for approximately 2 percent of the total Soviet military industrial complex.<sup>37</sup> Because Belarus was located relatively close to the border with the Western adversaries, it hosted almost no final equipment production sites, instead developing and manufacturing components and systems.<sup>38</sup> The exceptions were (1) the Minsk Automobile Plant (more commonly known as MAZ), which produced trucks and specialized vehicles on truck chassis, along with four-axle vehicles for missile systems, and (2) the Mogilev Automobile Plant (more commonly known as MoAZ), which manufactured dual-purpose tractors used in towing medium-range ballistic missiles.<sup>39</sup> Belarus-made military components did have military significance, however; Belarus specialized in the production of military radio electronics, optics, and optoelectronics, and it housed repair facilities for aircraft, armored vehicles, and air defense systems—approximately 120 organizations at the height of the Soviet Union.<sup>40</sup> Belarusian industry had a role in developing and producing a variety of Soviet radars—including ones used in the Soviet missile warning, space control, and missile defense systems—and Belarus hosted leading Soviet optical industry and integrated circuit manufacturers.<sup>41</sup>

The strategic, political, and economic changes of the 1990s that were triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War created challenging times for the Belarusian defense industry. The coun-

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<sup>37</sup> In comparison, Russia is estimated to have constituted 33 percent of the total industry and Ukraine 14 percent. See Tomas MalmLöf, "A Case Study of Russo-Ukrainian Defense Industrial Cooperation: Russian Dilemmas," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> The military industries of the Soviet republics were not designed to be independent from Russia. See Mikhail Zhirokhov, "Belorusski OPK: Podyem Ili Put V Nikuda" ["Belarusian Military Industry: Rise or the Road to Nowhere"], *Mind UA*, March 1, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Yuri Zverev, "'Polonezi', Bezpilotniki I Roboti: Sekret Uspeha Belorusskovo VPK" ["Polonezes', Drones and Robots: The Secret of the Success of the Belarusian Military-Industrial Complex"], *Evrasiya Ekspert* [*Eurasia Expert*], October 16, 2017a.

<sup>40</sup> Mikhail Barabanov and Viktor Dyatlikovich, "Oboronno-promyshlenniy Kompleks Belorusii" ["The Defense-Industrial Complex of Belarus"], *Ekspert Voruzhenii* [*Arms Export*], Vol. 4, No. 84, July–August 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Zverev, 2017a.

try fell into economic distress, demand from Russia contracted, there were almost no orders from the Belarusian Ministry of Defense (except for modernization and repair services), and Belarus lost the Central and Eastern European markets (which were starting to adopt NATO standards).<sup>42</sup> At the same time, Minsk was required to adhere to the Treaty on the Reduction of Conventional Arms in Europe and dispose of large amounts of Soviet military equipment, which drove Belarus to become an exporter of surplus Soviet equipment owned by the Ministry of Defense.<sup>43</sup> The industry contracted: The number of sector employees fell from an estimated 250,000 in 1995 to 15,000 in 2014.<sup>44</sup> For the industry to survive, it had to restructure and find additional markets. More-recent trends in Belarusian defense industry are detailed in the following sections.

### Structure of the Belarusian Defense Industry

In the post-Soviet era, the Belarusian defense industry has experienced several structural changes:

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<sup>42</sup> One source estimates that Belarusian exports and collaborative defense and special-purpose products to Russia fell from approximately 20 percent in 1992 to only 8 percent in 2009. See A. N. Leonoich and N. S. Tihonovich, “Respublika Belarus Na Mirovikh Rinkah VVT” [“The Republic of Belarus in the International Weapons and Military Technology Markets”], in L. V. Pankov and O. V. Gusaver, *Sbornik Materialov Vserossiiskiu Nauchnoi Konferencii ‘Voyenno-Ekonomicheskoye Razvitiye V Svete Globalnih Transformatsii’* [Collection of Materials of the All-Russian Scientific Conference “Military-Economic Development in the Light of Global Transformations”], conference proceedings, Primakov National Institute for Global Economy and International Relations, 2019; Anatolii Tsiganok, “Voyenno-Tehnicheskoye Sotrudnichestvo Rosii i Belarusi” [“Military-Technical Cooperation Between Russia and Belarus”] *Nezaviskmoye Ekspertnoye Mneniye* [Independent Expert Thought], blog post, February 4, 2009; S. F. Vikulova and A. N. Leopnovicha, eds., *Osnovi Voyennoi Ekonomiki* [Foundations of the Military Economy], Belorusskiy natsionalnyy tekhnicheskii universitet [Belarusian National Technical University], 2021.

<sup>43</sup> According to the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the country got rid of 1,341 armored vehicles and 130 military planes. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, “Conventional Arms Control and Confidence-Security-Building Measures,” webpage, undated-d.

<sup>44</sup> Still, it fared better than the Russian defense industrial base, contracting by only 40 percent rather than by 70–80 percent—mainly because of its primary focus on advanced electronics, which found demand in the commercial sector. See Barabanov and Dyatlikovich, 2010; Tsiganok, 2009; Vikulova and Leopnovicha, 2021.

- Several SOEs were created during the 1990s specifically to facilitate the sale of surplus military equipment abroad and to promote Belarus's maintenance, repair, and modernization services abroad—including Belvneshpromservis,<sup>45</sup> Beltechexport, and Belpetsvneshtekhnika.<sup>46</sup>
- The State Military Industrial Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Gosudaarstvennii Voyenno-Promishlennii Komitet Respubliki Belarus [in Russian], Derzhauni Voenna-Pramiskobi Kamitet Respubliki Belarus [in Belarusian]) was established by the president in 2003.<sup>47</sup> The committee's task is to lead and manage the development and implementation of state policies in the fields of defense industrial research, development and production, export control, and military-technical cooperation with other countries.<sup>48</sup> This consolidated the defense industry; previously, the military-industrial complex was subordinated to the Ministry of Industry, whereas the military repair plants were controlled by the Ministry of Defense.
- Most existing defense enterprises were incorporated into open joint-stock companies in 2009 as a result of the denationalization and privatization processes in the country. Most of the so-called republican unitary enterprises were incorporated,<sup>49</sup> with 100 percent of the shares owned by the government of Belarus.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Belvneshpromservis has since been sanctioned by the United States for attempting to provide military material to Syrian actors. See Joby Warrick, "New Sanctions Target Syria's Arms Suppliers," *Washington Post*, September 19, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> BelTechExport, "About Company," webpage, undated-a; Belvneshpromservis, "About," webpage, undated-a.

<sup>47</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, "Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus, No. 599," December 30, 2003b.

<sup>48</sup> State Military Industrial Committee of the Republic of Belarus, "Ab Kamitecie" ["About the Committee"], webpage, undated-a.

<sup>49</sup> Republican unitary enterprises are government-owned corporations that have no ownership rights to the assets that they use in their operations; these assets are normally owned by the state or municipalities. This type of enterprise is more common in former Soviet Union states.

<sup>50</sup> Vikulova and Leopnovicha, 2021; Zverev, 2017a.

- The new political realities allowed for the creation of private enterprises in the defense sector.<sup>51</sup> Among these enterprises were Minotor-Servis, which was founded in 1991 and works in armored vehicle upgrade, and Scientific and Technical Center DELS, which was founded in 1992 and works in micro- and radio-electronics.<sup>52</sup>
- Belarus has formed holdings in three main areas (communication and control systems, geoinformation control systems, and radar systems) aimed to facilitate “jointly coordinated implementation of the development and implementation” of these systems and ensure full work-cycle coordination among the involved companies.<sup>53</sup>

As a result of these changes, the Belarusian defense industry became more centralized and coordinated. As of 2019, 155 organizations (most of which are state-owned) were licensed by the State Committee for Military Industry to carry out activities related to military products, and 102 entities were licensed to carry out foreign trade activities, such as trade and services related to “specific goods.”<sup>54</sup> The core of the Belarusian industry is composed of approximately 23 major military-technical enterprises that employ an estimated 17,000 people.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Lukashenko prioritized invest-

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<sup>51</sup> Vikulova and Leopnovicha, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Minotor-Servis, homepage, undated; Scientific-Technical Center DELS, “O Kompanii” [“About Company”], webpage, undated.

<sup>53</sup> Agat, “Istoriya Kompanii” [“Company’s History”], webpage, undated; KB Radar, “Holding ‘Sistemi Radiolokatsii’” [“Radar Systems Holding”], webpage, undated.

<sup>54</sup> *Specific goods* are defined by the Belarusian government as “military products, dual-use goods (works, services), as well as goods (works, services), controlled by the interests of national security, included in the lists of specific goods (works, services).” See regulations on the procedure for licensing activities related to specific goods (works, services) in President of the Republic of Belarus, “Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus, No. 71,” February 16, 2012. The State Committee for Military Industry issues special permits that allow entities to carry out activities related to military products, in accordance with decree. Also see State Military Industrial Committee of the Republic of Belarus, “Litsenzirovaniye Deyatelnosti, Svyazannoy S Produktsiyey Voyennogo Naznacheniya” [“Licensing of Activities Related to Military Products”], webpage, undated-b; Government of Belarus, “Law on Export Control,” No. 363-Z, May 11, 2016; IHS Jane’s, “Belarus–Defence Industry,” *World Defense Industry*, November 16, 2022b.

<sup>55</sup> Leonovich and Tihonovich, 2019.

ments in telecommunications, opto-electronics, navigation equipment, digital screens, and automated controls using the existing defense industrial base and the country's comparative advantage.<sup>56</sup>

### Key Capabilities of the Belarusian Defense Industry Today

The key capabilities of the Belarusian defense industry today are largely based on its historic legacy. Its leading companies represent

- manufacturing of vehicle chassis used for rocket transport installations; optical equipment for main battle tanks; armored vehicles and air platforms; command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) components, such as electronic equipment and components for ground platforms
- services, such as modernization and repair of armored vehicles, fixed and rotary wing aircraft, and weapons
- disposal of weapons and military equipment.<sup>57</sup>

Figure 5.9 summarizes key Belarusian defense industrial specializations.

C4ISR component manufacturing, the most established area of specialization for the Belarusian defense industry, is used in developing and manufacturing (1) a wide variety of electro-optical systems (such as weapon sights and electro-optical technologies for aircraft systems and meteorological applications); (2) radar hardware, software, and components and their repair and upgrade; (3) electronic self-defense systems for air and ground vehicles; (4) simulation technologies (such as aircraft flight simulations, anti-tank guided missile shooting simulations, and simulation systems for a variety of armored vehicles and trucks); and (5) unmanned (predominately air) vehicles. Some of the leading enterprises operating in this area are Peleng, Alevkurp, Integral, Agat, Aerosistema, and the 558th Aircraft Repair Plant. As mentioned later in this chapter, the Belarusian C4ISR industry is also of specific interest to Russia.

Another area of strength and strategically important export to Russia is formed by the development and manufacturing of heavy logistics and trans-

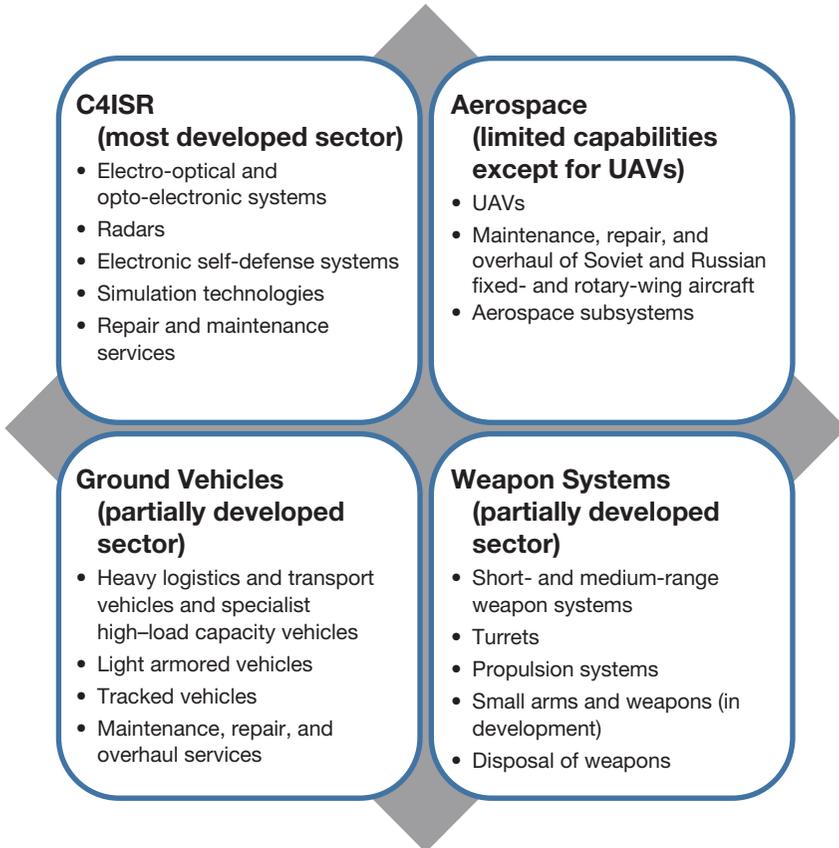
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<sup>56</sup> Barabanov and Dyatlikovich, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Vikulova and Leopnovicha, 2021.

FIGURE 5.9

## Summary of Key Belarusian Defense Industrial Capabilities



SOURCE: Features information from open-source materials.

NOTE: UAV = unmanned aerial vehicle.

port vehicles, specialist high-load capacity vehicles, and missile transporter-electrolaunchers. This industrial sector primarily developed because many Soviet and now Russian missile systems use Belarus-made specialized chassis. The leaders in this domain are Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT), Minsk Tractor Plant (also known as MZK), and Minsk Automobile Plant.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Vikulova and Leopnovicha, 2021; Tsiganok, 2009.

As discussed later in this chapter, these products are of particular interest to Russia because of their use in missile transport; however, Russia has been seeking to reduce its dependence on Belarus in this area.

Over the past decade, Belarus has been interested in increasing or developing new capabilities in the areas of armored vehicle design and production, missile systems, and UAVs. Belarus's armored vehicles feature various versions that are largely based on older Soviet vehicles. The industry's latest developments (multipurpose amphibious vehicle Vitim, light armored vehicle Volat V-1 [also known as MZKT-490100], and armored reconnaissance and patrol vehicle Cayman) are generally mobile wheeled protected armored vehicles that offer protection from small-arms fire and can be used for reconnaissance, escort missions, or specialized missions. Although some of the newly developed vehicles have been delivered to the Belarusian Armed Forces, their initial production may also increase Belarusian industry's export potential.<sup>59</sup> Key companies are listed in Table 5.3.

Belarus has been seeking to edge toward being self-sufficient in rocket technology.<sup>60</sup> In 2020, while visiting the enterprise "OKB TSP," Lukashenko spoke about the need for Belarus to develop its own missiles as a way of reducing its strategic dependence on other countries.<sup>61</sup> Lukashenko has also declared interest in the development of missiles to ensure that Belarus is able to "inflict unacceptable damage to the enemy."<sup>62</sup> One Belarusian source even elevates the development of the indigenous rocket industry to the level of belonging to a limited club of rocket- and rocket launcher-producing countries to the likes of space technology-producing countries.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Samuel Cranny-Evans, "Belarus Boost: Volat Develops MZKT-490100 Series Light Armoured Vehicles," *International Defence Review*, July 22, 2019.

<sup>60</sup> IHS Jane's, "Belarus Targets Increased Self-Sufficiency in Missile Technology," June 2, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Sargs, "Baltkrievija Apņēmusies Vairoto Pašpīetiekamību Raķešu Tehnoloģijās" ["Belarus Has Decided to Become Self-Sufficient in Rocket Technologies"], June 2, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> "Lukashenko Rasskazal, Zachem Belarusi Raketnoye Vooruzheniye I kakaya Stoit Strategicheskaya Zadazha" ["Lukashenko Told Why Belarus Needs Missiles and What Is the Strategic Task"], BelTA, May 22, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> "Raketnoye Proizvodstvo BV Belarusi: Celi, Etapi, I Lutshiye Obraztzi" ["Rocket Production in Belarus: Goals, Stages, and Best Examples"], *ONT*, May 24, 2020.

TABLE 5.3

**Belarusian Defense Industry's Recent Developments: Armored Vehicles, Trucks, and Vehicle Chassis**

Company Name	Product	Product Description
Minotor-Servis	Vitim <sup>a</sup> —multipurpose amphibious vehicle	In 2017, Minotor-Servis started to produce the first batch of Vitim, <sup>b</sup> a family of 4 × 4 and 6 × 6 wheeled amphibious armored vehicles with a steel hull that is reported to provide protection from 7.62 mm ammunition (equivalent to Level 2 STANAG 4569). <sup>c</sup>
MZKT	Volat V-1 (also known as MZKT-490100)—light armored vehicle	Volat-1 were delivered to the Belarusian Armed Forces in 2017. These have several variants, such as an electronic warfare against UAVs variant (when combined with the Groza-S EW system made by KB Radar), and an electronic intelligence variant. <sup>d</sup>
140th Repair Plant	Cayman (also known as BRDM)—armored reconnaissance and patrol vehicle	Cayman was first presented in 2015, and the first vehicles were delivered to the Belarusian Armed Forces in 2017. The vehicle is a deep-modernization version of the Soviet BRDM-2. <sup>e</sup>
Beltechexport 140th Repair Plant Peleng	T-72 BME modernized version	This modernized version of Main Battle Tank (MBT) T-72 is intended primarily for export.

<sup>a</sup> Dylan Malyasov, "Minotor-Service Started the Production of the First Batch of Newest Vitim Multi-Purpose Armored Vehicles," *Defense Blog*, March 8, 2017a.

<sup>b</sup> Malyasov, 2017a.

<sup>c</sup> IHS Jane's, "Minotor-Service Details Vitim Amphibious Armoured Vehicle Family," *International Defence Review*, May 4, 2018.

<sup>d</sup> IHS Jane's, 2018.

<sup>e</sup> IHS Jane's, "'Cayman' in Land Warfare Platforms; Armored Fighting Vehicles," July 16, 2021.

Belarus's interest in developing locally produced weapons is likely related to the sometimes frustrated military-industrial relations with Russia (discussed later in this chapter)—for example, previous reports of Russia not being interested in codeveloping a rocket with Belarus or offering its testing sites, or Belarus's long-standing request to acquire Iskander missile systems

from Russia.<sup>64</sup> However, Belarus has had limited success so far, and efforts in the rocket and missile development have led to few results:

- In 2020, Belarus launched the modernized Buk air defense system, which is reportedly fully produced in Belarus.<sup>65</sup>
- The Belarus-China cooperation project Polonez multiple rocket launcher (entered service in 2017) can use 200 km (baseline variant) and 300 km (extended-range variant) range Chinese missiles, with Belarus only slowly edging toward indigenous versions of these missiles because of limited Belarusian expertise of rocket motor manufacturing.<sup>66</sup>

The development of UAVs and counter-UAV systems has also been among Belarusian priorities. As a result of constant development since at least 2011,<sup>67</sup> the UAV field has become one of Belarus's defense industrial specialties. Today, several enterprises are involved in the development, production, and repair of UAVs (see Table 5.4), with some being produced from Russian or Chinese designs.<sup>68</sup> Key products are the Burevestnik (developed in 2016) and Burevestnik-MB long-range UAV (first presented in 2018, and not to be confused with Russia's Burevestnik missile), the Berkut family of UAVs, the Inela 9 and 6M reconnaissance UAVs, the Sky rotary-wing surveillance UAV, and the Grif series of fixed-wing surveillance UAVs. The field of unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) has seen fewer developments, but one notable example is the Bogomol tracked anti-tank UGV, first presented in 2017.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "Lukashenko Rasskazal, Zachem . . .," 2020.

<sup>65</sup> "Raketnoye Proizvodstvo BV Belarusi . . .," 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Dmitry Fediushko, "Belarus to Adopt Extended-Range Missile for V-300 Polonez-M MRL System," *Missiles & Rockets*, March 19, 2019.

<sup>67</sup> In 2011, the Physics Technology Institute set up the Research and Development Centre for UAV Technologies (also called the Scientific Manufacturing Centre of Multipurpose Unmanned Systems), the purpose of which was to develop UAV technologies.

<sup>68</sup> Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans, "Unwanted UAVs: Belarus' Military Drones," *Oryx*, October 30, 2022.

<sup>69</sup> IHS Jane's, 2022b.

TABLE 5.4

### Belarusian Defense Industry's Recent Developments: Unmanned Aerial and Ground Vehicles (selected)

Company Name	Product	Product Description
Scientific and Production Centre for Multifunctional Unmanned Systems	Burevestnik—medium- and long-range UAVs  Burevestnik-M—long-range combat UAV	Burevestnik was unveiled in 2016. <sup>a</sup> Burevestnik-M was first unveiled in 2018, has a maximum flight range (no communications) of up to 300 km, and can be equipped with special-purpose payloads—it has been shown fitted with loitering munitions. <sup>b</sup> Burevestnik is reportedly the first combat UAV in the service of Belarusian Armed Forces. <sup>c</sup>
AGAT Control Systems	Irkut/Berkut—family of small tactical UAVs	These are small tactical drones that can be mounted on light armored vehicles. <sup>d</sup>
AGAT Control Systems KB Indela 558th Aircraft Repair Plant	Grif—fixed-wing surveillance UAVs	Grif-100E is designed to do air optical, electronic, and radiation reconnaissance; electronic countermeasures; and detection of emergencies. <sup>e</sup>
Belpetsvneshtekhnika	Bogomol—anti-tank UGVs	This medium-size tracked anti-tank UGV was first displayed in 2017 and is intended to be used as a robotic anti-tank weapon for reconnaissance, patrol, and combat. <sup>f</sup>
NPT MBK	Busel—family of small tactical UAVs	This family includes the Busel-M50, which uses GPS, GLONASS, and autopilot system for navigation. <sup>g</sup>
KB Indela	Belar YS-EX—medium-altitude long-endurance UAV	Belar YS-EX MALE is a new version of the older Yabhon Flash-20 UAV. <sup>h</sup>

NOTE: GPS = Global Positioning System; GLONASS = GLObalnaya NAVigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema (a Russian form of GPS).

<sup>a</sup> Republican Centre for Technology Transfer, “Long-Range Unmanned Aircraft System ‘Burevestnik’ for Terrain and Objects Monitoring,” December 4, 2020.

<sup>b</sup> BelTechExpert, “‘Burevestnik Mb’ Long-Range Unmanned Aerial Special-Purpose System,” webpage, undated-b.

<sup>c</sup> Nikolai Novichkov, “Belarus Unveils New UAVs and UCAVs,” *International Defence Review*, July 6, 2018.

<sup>d</sup> IHS Jane’s, “Belarus Expands UAV Offering,” *Defense Weekly*, May 30, 2017.

<sup>e</sup> Belvneshpromservis, “Unmanned Aerial Vehicle ‘Grif-100E,’” webpage, undated-c.

<sup>f</sup> IHS Jane’s, “Bogomol [Archived], Land Warfare Platforms: Logistics, Support & Unmanned,” November 29, 2022c.

<sup>g</sup> IHS Jane’s, 2017: Belvneshpromservis, “Tactical Unmanned Aerial Systems ‘Busel,’” webpage, undated-b.

<sup>h</sup> Dylan Malyasov, “Belar Ys-Ex Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Debuts At MILEX 2017,” *Defence Blog*, May 21, 2017b.

Belarus's strength continues to be the modernization of obsolete Soviet air defense systems, particularly short- and medium-range ones. Its industry has the capability to produce vehicle-mounted weapons, anti-tank missiles and missile systems, and air defense systems—including the manufacturing of propulsion systems and turrets. One example is the S-125-Pechora-2TM medium-range air defense system made by Tetraedr.<sup>70</sup> Together with China, Belarusian companies have also developed Polonez, a long-range, high-precision, multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS).

## Belarus's Defense Industry and the International Market

Russia is by far Belarus's largest and most significant defense industrial partner, the largest market for its components and systems, and the largest provider of military technology to Belarusian forces. This being the case, this section will focus specifically on Belarusian-Russian industrial relations. However, Belarus's defense industrial relations with other countries are relevant when trying to understand the relationship between Belarusian and Russian military industries: Belarus has sought to diversify its defense industry away from Russia (at least to some extent) and develop competitiveness on the global market while being subject to Russian attempts of takeover.

## Belarus's Defense Industry's Relations with Russia

Belarusian-Russian defense industry relations are viewed by some authors as part of military integration.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, prior to 2020, Oleg Dvigalev, the Chair of the State Military-Industrial Committee, highlighted the role of the Belarusian military-technical industry in maintaining a political balance with Russia and even using it as a platform to potentially resolve the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>72</sup> The defense industrial cooperation between

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<sup>70</sup> IHS Jane's, 2022b.

<sup>71</sup> Grazvydas Jastutis, "The Dynamics of Military Integration Between Russia and Belarus," *Lithuanian Political Science Yearbook*, 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Alexander Alesin, "Zenitniye Raketniye Kompleksi: Tak Mozhno Daleko Zayehat" ["Anti-Aircraft Missile Systems: That Way You Can Go Far"], *Belrynok*, February 8, 2018.

the two countries takes place within the context of their political and security cooperation, but at least one interviewee said that the fluctuations in the political and diplomatic relations between Belarus and Russia have not affected their military and defense industrial ties.<sup>73</sup> Still, defense industrial cooperation does not take place on equal terms. According to one Polish expert, although the Belarusian defense industry needs Russia as a partner for its survival, Russia's perspective is that cooperation with Belarus has been "a result of favorable conditions."<sup>74</sup> Detailed official data are sparse, but Belarusian officials say that more than one-third of the country's defense industrial exports went to Russia as of 2018.<sup>75</sup> Other observers note that Belarus may have reached the highest percentage of Russian state defense orders in 2015, fulfilling approximately 15 percent of the order, largely as a result of Russia's suddenly severed ties with the Ukrainian industry.<sup>76</sup> Either way, Belarus continues to be dependent on Russia as a customer because of its role as a supplier of parts and components rather than final products. At the same time, Russia has become dependent on some Belarusian exports and services (specifically, specialized chassis used in missiles)—a dependence it has sought to reduce.

Our analysis reveals at least some strategic-level disagreements between Belarus and Russia, particularly as related to Belarusian defense industrial capabilities development and enterprise ownership and to that field's expansion to some neighborhood markets. Lukashenko has fought off Russia's

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<sup>73</sup> Expert on the Belarus-Russia relationship, interview with the authors, December 14, 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Andrzej Wilk, *Russia's Belarusian Army: The Practical Aspects of Belarus and Russia's Military Integration*, Centre for Eastern Studies, March 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Oleg Dvigalev, "Sotrudnichestvo I Garmonichnoye Razvitiye Otnoshenii Mezhdum Dvumya Bratskimi Gosudarstvami B Interesakh Ukrepneniya Obshei Bezopastnosti," ["Cooperation and Harmonious Development of Relationships Between the Two Brotherly Governments in the Interests of Strengthening Mutual Security"], State Military Industrial Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> "Belarussiya nanesla udar po boyegotovnosti rossiyskoy armii" ["Belarus Dealt a Blow to the Combat Readiness of the Russian Army"], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, August 20, 2020; Yuri Zverev, "Strategicheskoye Predpolozheniye: Kak Belarus Pomogayet Obespechit Voyennuyu Bezopastnost Rossii" ["Strategic Setting: How Belarus Is Helping Ensure the Military Security of Russia"], *Yevrazia Ekspert [Eurasia Expert]*, November 11, 2018.

attempts to take over some of the country's strategic assets—specifically, its key industrial plants. Belarus's bilateral ties with Russia and its participation in the CSTO have disrupted at least one arms deal with Azerbaijan in 2018 (for the sale of the Polonez missile system).<sup>77</sup> These friction points, and others that we identify in this section, could be viewed as part of the larger Belarusian struggle to maintain at least some sort of strategic independence from its Eastern neighbor albeit while maintaining close military relations and benefiting its defense industry.

The legal basis for military-technical cooperation between the two countries lies in the CST (May 1992) and the Agreement Between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Belarus on Military-Technical Cooperation (October 1993).<sup>78</sup> The latter agreement states that

the parties, through their authorized government bodies, will take measures to implement mutually beneficial bilateral military-technical cooperation by: maintaining and developing existing cooperative ties in the development and production of military products; implementation of mutual deliveries of military products; provision of military services.

It also states that

mutual development and supply of weapons are carried out on the basis of intergovernmental agreements, mutual deliveries of spare parts of components supplies through cooperation, training and auxiliary equipment, as well as military services are carried out on the basis of contract concluded by authorized economic entities of the Parties.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Armenia Reportedly Blocks Belarus-Azerbaijan Arms Deal," *Eurasianet*, February 6, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Zlata Kokoshkina, "Voprosi Voennovo I Voenno-Tehnicheskovo Sotrudnichestva Mezhdur Rosiiskoi Federatsii I Respublikoi Belarus" ["Issues of Military and Military-Technical Cooperation Between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus"], *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizhn' [International Affairs]*, No. 8, 2019.

<sup>79</sup> As quoted in Kokoshkina, 2019; M. V. Sozykin, "Istoricheskii Opit Oboronno-Tehnologicheskoi Integratsii Rosii I Respubliki Belarus" ["Historical Experience Defense-Technological Integration of Russia and the Republic of Belarus"], *Aktualniye Stranitsi Politicheskoi Istorii [Current Pages of Political History]*, 2016.

Defense-industrial cooperation is also facilitated by other agreements: a bilateral Agreement on Industrial and Scientific-Technical Cooperation Between Defense Industry Enterprises (May 1994) and a Treaty on the Development of Military-Technical Cooperation (December 2010).<sup>80</sup> The latter document simplified the procedures for mutual supply of products and services in support of the military and law enforcement services.<sup>81</sup> In addition, Belarus and Russia in 2020 renewed their agreement on the Implementation of the Program of Military-Technical Cooperation Between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, in 2002, Belarus and Russia launched an intergovernmental commission of military-technical cooperation.<sup>83</sup>

It is inherently challenging to assess the full complement and financial value of the defense industrial transactions between Belarus and Russia because the transactions occur through mechanisms that make accounting difficult.<sup>84</sup> Structurally, the defense industrial cooperation between Belarus and Russia takes place in various forms. Most of the military-technical trade between the two countries takes place in the form of parts and components (such as opto-electronic components) rather than final products, but military-technical cooperation also happens via barter mechanisms to supply spare parts, discounted sales, training of specialists, and established links between defense enterprises. Both countries cooperate within inter-

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<sup>80</sup> Dvigalev, 2018; Government of Belarus, “Dogovor Mezhdru Rosiiskoi Federatsii I Respublikoi Belarus O Razvitiu Voyenno-Tehnicheskovo Sotrudnichestvo” [“Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on the Development of Military-Technical Cooperation”], December 23, 2010.

<sup>81</sup> Dvigalev, 2018.

<sup>82</sup> “Voyenno-Tehnicheskii Vklad Belrusi V Bezopastnosti Stran ODKB” [“Belarus’s Contribution to the Security of the CSTO Countries”], *Novosti VPK*, July 22, 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Dvigalev, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Some of the most widely used arms transfers databases, such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) database and IISS Military Balance Plus, are able to capture only a few of the official military transfers. Accounting for Belarusian-Russian defense imports and export may be even more difficult because of the fact that supplies are transferred between the countries without customs restriction, quantitative limitations, or licenses, according to their cooperation agreement signed on May 20, 1994. See Wilk, 2021.

state financial-industrial groups, joint ventures, or with Belarusian companies being part of Russian holdings.<sup>85</sup> The total market value of this barter mechanism is not known.

For example, Belarus and Russia in 2000 founded Defense Systems (in Russian: *Oboronniye Sistemi*)—an interstate financial and industrial group, the purpose of which is to facilitate cooperation on military development, production, and modernization of air defense systems. Initially the aim of the group, which consists of Belarusian and Russian defense enterprises, was to modernize the Pechora-2M missile system and other air-defense missile systems.<sup>86</sup> In 2015, Belarusian enterprises joined the Russian Radio-Electronic Technologies Concern to form the REB Technology consortium that works on the modernization of radio-electronic combat systems.<sup>87</sup> Both countries have engaged in bilateral joint ventures, such as Vizir (for the development and manufacture of sights).<sup>88</sup> Research and development of other defense products are also produced collaboratively; the Program of Military-Technical Cooperation Between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation Until 2020 indicated that priority research and development programs should feature

the development of an automated command and control system for motorized rifle battalions, development of tracked chassis for ground forces weapons, modernization of armored vehicles (incl. sights, fire

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<sup>85</sup> Wilk, 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Army Guide, “Defence Systems Interstate Financial & Industrial Group,” webpage, undated; Vikulova and Leopnovicha, 2021; Wilk, 2021.

<sup>87</sup> “Belarus, Russia Set Up Joint Venture to Modernize Electronic Warfare Systems,” BelTA, June 18, 2015; “KRET Presented a Project for Establishing ‘REB Technology’ Joint Venture Between Russia and Belarus,” *Russian Aviation*, August, 21 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Mikhail Barabanov, “Oboronno Promishlennii Kompleks Belarusii” [“Defense-Industrial Complex of Belarus”], *Eksport Vooruzhenii [Arms Export]*, Vol. 23, No. 440, June 13, 2012. This trilateral cooperation involves the French company Sazh and the Russian JSC Special Design Bureau of Mechanical Engineering, and its aim is to produce and install thermal imagers on armored vehicles. See Belarusian Institute for System Analysis and Information Support of the Scientific Sphere, “Preimushestvo Oboronnoi Promishelnosti Belarusi—V Shirote Diamazona Voyennih Tehnologii” [“The Advantage of the Defense Industry of Belarus Is in the Breadth of the Range of Military Technologies”], June 15, 2005; Leonoich and Tihonovich, 2019; Vikulova and Leopnovicha, 2021.

control systems, control and verification and diagnostics equipment), [and] developing the imaging equipment for the Earth remote sensing spacecraft E-Star.<sup>89</sup>

Collaborative examples are Sosna-U thermal sights (used in modernized T-72B3 and T-90A) made by the Belarusian Peleng and the Russian Vologda Optical and Mechanical Plant (VOMZ) under license.<sup>90</sup> Some service-related actions may not be captured by Western reports; in 2022, Ukrainian sources reported that the employees of the 558th Aircraft Repair Plant regularly went to Russia to repair aircraft at the Russian 121st Aircraft Repair Plant.<sup>91</sup> This may be to address the shortages of experienced engineers and maintenance technicians that the Russian military is experiencing as a result of the war in Ukraine.

This bilateral defense relationship also involves mergers and acquisitions, although Belarus has not generally agreed to Russian companies taking over its largest and most strategically significant enterprises.<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, some Russian companies have acquired or merged with Belarusian ones, thus integrating their production chains.<sup>93</sup> Some examples are the 2011 Russian Radiophysics (part of Almaz-Antey) acquisition of the Belarusian Gomel Design Bureau for System Programming (also known as KBSP), which works in radar systems software, and the Russian JSC Scientific and Production Association “Kvant” (part of Concern Radioelectronic Technologies and Rostec), forming a joint venture with Belarusian industry called

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<sup>89</sup> Kokoshkina, 2019.

<sup>90</sup> IHS Jane’s, “Sosna Gunner’s Multichannel Sight,” May 31, 2022a.

<sup>91</sup> “Belarusian Specialists Repairing Russian Combat Aircraft, Says Ukraine’s Intel,” *New Voice of Ukraine*, August 20, 2022.

<sup>92</sup> For more information on failed Russian purchases of Belarusian companies, see the section titled “Problems and Challenges in the Belarusian-Russian Defense Industrial Relations.”

<sup>93</sup> Note that the ownership of some Belarusian defense companies may not be clear. For example, the arms exporter Beltech Holding was sold in 2016 to an unknown new owner. See “Eksporter Vooruzhennii ‘Beltech Holding’ Prodan za \$30 Millionov” [“Arms Exporter Beltech Holding Sold For \$30 Million”], *Charter 97*, January 7, 2016.

REB Technology, which works in the maintenance, repair, and modernization of electronic warfare systems.<sup>94</sup>

It should be noted that Russia also acts as a supplier to the Belarusian industry. According to Russian academic Yuri Zverev, approximately 940 Russian companies supply 67 Belarusian military-industrial producers with 4,000 products.<sup>95</sup> Belarusian-Russian defense industrial cooperation also involves enterprises that do not strictly produce military products. According to Polish expert Andrzej Wilk, nearly 280 Russian companies, most of which are not part of the defense industry, provide various materials and components to the MZKT.<sup>96</sup>

Belarus is a supplier to the Russian industry of components and sub-components; in 2018, the State Authority for Military Industry of Belarus reported that about 99 local enterprises were supplying 1,880 parts and components to 255 Russian military industry actors.<sup>97</sup> According to Polish expert Wilk, more than 30 percent of the Belarusian defense production in 2019 was exported to Russia.<sup>98</sup> Some reports on the Russian defense order estimates suggest that, as of 2018, Belarusian supplies reached as high as approximately 15 percent of the annual Russian defense order.<sup>99</sup> Data also indicate that approximately 50 percent (and according to some sources, even 80 percent) of the exports of the leading specialized chassis manufacturer MSKT goes to Russia (the other largest market likely being China).<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia has been and remains interested in Belarusian heavy-load chassis manufacturers and in its radio electronics, opto-

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<sup>94</sup> Yuri Zverev, "Voyenno-Tekhnicheskoye Sotrudnichestvo Rossii i Belarusi: Perspektivi i Riski" ["Military-Technical Cooperation Between Russia and Belarus: Prospects and Risks"], *Evrasiya Ekspert* [*Eurasia Expert*], November 1, 2017b.

<sup>95</sup> Zverev, 2017b.

<sup>96</sup> Wilk, 2021.

<sup>97</sup> Kokoshkina, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Wilk (2021) also observes that Belarusian military exports to Russia may be used as part of repaying its loans.

<sup>99</sup> Kokoshnikina, 2019; "Voyenno-Tekhnicheskii Vklad Belrusi v Bezopastnosti Stran ODKB," 2020.

<sup>100</sup> Dvigalev, 2018.

electronic devices and sights, and robotics—Belarusian specialists have already participated in the robotization of the Russian BMP-3.<sup>101</sup> Belarus-made parts and components are used in Russian MBTs, infantry and airborne combat vehicles, armored recovery vehicles, MLRSs and rockets for them, self-propelled artillery guns and howitzers, anti-tank missile and anti-aircraft missile and gun systems, and small arms and melee weapons.<sup>102</sup> Belarus also acts as an official re-exporter of Soviet and Russian military technology and carries out licensed maintenance, repair, and overhaul of such technology.

### Belarusian Industrial Supplies and Services to Russia

Russian imports of military products from Belarus include electronic components; optical equipment; chassis for missile systems; spare parts of T-90S, T-72A and T-80U MBTs; airborne and infantry combat vehicles; artillery systems; and anti-tank and anti-aircraft complexes.<sup>103</sup> Generally, Russia seems interested in Belarus as a means of addressing its own gaps in manufacturing certain components, specifically electronic and optoelectronic components and multi-axle special wheeled chassis.<sup>104</sup> Various authors claim that Russia continues to be particularly dependent on Belarus-made electronic products (see the description below and Table 5.5 for more information and examples).<sup>105</sup> Also, Belarus continues to serve as the maintainer and repairer of Soviet and Russian equipment both for Russia and for third countries.

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<sup>101</sup> Alexandr Tihanskii, “Voyennii Ekspert Nazval Kluchiviye Vigodi Voenno-Tekhnicheskovo Sotrudnichestva Belarusi I Rossii” [“Military Expert Named Key Benefits of Military-Technical Cooperation Between Belarus and Russia”], *Evrasiya Ekspert* [*Eurasia Expert*], August 16, 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Zverev, 2017b.

<sup>103</sup> This list captures only the key imports and is not exclusive. See “Voenno-Tekhnicheskii Vklad Belrusi V Bezopastnosti Stran ODKB,” 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Malmlöf, 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Andrey Frolov, “Defence Technologies and Industrial Base,” in Richard A. Bitzinger and Nicu Popescu, eds., *Defence Industries in Russia and China: Players and Strategies*, EUISS, December 1, 2017b.

TABLE 5.5

**Belarus's Defense Industry's Products in Russian Equipment (selected)**

Product Type	Examples
Flight and navigation systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Systems produced by Ekram are used in combat aircraft Su 27UB, Su-27K, Su-30, and Su-35.</li> </ul>
Aerial photographic equipment and high-precision measurement tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equipment made by BelOmo is used in the Russian aerospace sector.</li> </ul>
Optical devices, sights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sosna-U multichannel gunner's sight (made by Peleng) is used on the modernized versions of T-72 and T-90 MBTs and on T-80 and infantry fighting vehicles. (Note that this sight is produced in Russia under license.)</li> <li>Belarusian sights are used by Rosoboronexport in armored vehicles that it supplies to third countries.<sup>a</sup></li> <li>Sight Vesna-K is used in BMP-3F.</li> </ul>
Electronic warfare equipment and avionics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>These are used in modernized Su-27s and in Sukhoi PAK FA (T-50).<sup>b</sup></li> </ul>
Fire control systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>These are used in armored vehicles.</li> </ul>
Special heavy duty wheeled chassis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MZKT-made chassis are used in several Russian missile systems, such as Iskander, Bastion, Bal, Bereg, and Tor anti-aircraft systems. They are also used as Strategic Missile Forces engineering support and camouflage vehicles.</li> <li>Chassis made by the MZKT are used in the anti-aircraft missile and gun systems Tunguska.</li> </ul>
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hydraulic systems made by the 558th Aircraft Repair Plant are used in the Beriev Be-200 Altai amphibious aircraft.<sup>c</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup> Sozykin, 2016.

<sup>b</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, "Belarusian Defence Industries: Doubling Exports and Launching Ballistic Missile Production," *BelarusDigest*, May 30, 2017b.

<sup>c</sup> Dvigalev, 2018.

However, the importance of the Belarusian industry for Russia should not be overstated; it may be Russia's cooperation with Asian and Middle Eastern countries that has been instrumental in helping it substitute imports from the West. For example, Indian chipsets are reportedly now used in GLONASS satellites, and Southeast Asian countries (such as Taiwan, Indonesia, and Malaysia) have become suppliers of electronic components.<sup>106</sup>

The main areas of Belarusian-Russian defense industrial cooperation are as follows:

- **Electronics and opto-electronics.** Optical and electro-optical system components form an important and impactful area of Belarusian exports to Russia. Belarusian sights are used in various Russian MBTs and infantry fighting vehicles; opto-electronic equipment and photographic equipment are used on Russian remote earth-sensing satellites on jets; and chips are used in missiles. Other exports include automated control systems and electronic warfare components.<sup>107</sup> For example, a Belarusian official claimed in 2018 that almost all modern Russian military capabilities are using information displays made or designed by the Display Design Bureau.<sup>108</sup>
- **Multi-axle special wheeled chassis.** Russia is estimated to constitute one-half of all the exports of MZKT products. Multi-axle special wheeled chassis MZKT-79221 made by MZKT are used in intercontinental ballistic missile Topol-M and Yars.<sup>109</sup> Other Russian platforms that use MZKT-made chassis are Iskander, coastal missile systems Bastion and Bal, MLRS Uragan-1M, self-propelled launchers and mobile radars of the S-400 Triumph anti-aircraft missile system, engineering support and camouflage vehicles of the engineering units of the Strategic Missile Forces, heavy mechanized bridges of TMM-6, the first prototype of the S-500 Prometheus air defense system (chassis of

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<sup>106</sup> Maria Shagina, "Drifting East: Russia's Import Substitution and Its Pivot to Asia," CEES Working Paper, No. 3, Center for Eastern European Studies, April 2020.

<sup>107</sup> Zverev, 2017b.

<sup>108</sup> Dvigalev, 2018.

<sup>109</sup> Zverev, 2017b.

the MZKT-7930 family), launchers and detection radars for S-300P air defense systems, Smerch heavy multiple rocket launchers, Bereg coastal self-propelled artillery systems, and combat duty support vehicles of the RVSN (MZKT-543M chassis).<sup>110</sup> MZKT is highly dependent on its exports to Russia: Reportedly, 80 percent of its production goes to the Russian market.<sup>111</sup> Caterpillar chassis made by the MZKT are used in Russian anti-aircraft Tunguska systems and the Tor self-propelled anti-aircraft missile system.<sup>112</sup>

- **Maintenance, repair, and overhaul.** Belarus provides maintenance, repair, and overhaul services to military platforms. Although a lot of the repair work is done on Belarusian inventory or on Russian items intended for export, some is also reportedly done on equipment owned and operated by Russia. It was reported in early 2023 that local industry may be required to repair the Russian equipment that is being transported into Belarus and has recently been taken out of storage. One of the leaders in the field of fixed-wing platform repair is the 558th Aviation Repair Plant in Baranovichi, which has already been working closely with many major Russian aircraft producers and which repairs rotary and fixed-wing aircraft, including Mi-8, MiG-29, and Su-27.<sup>113</sup> A leader in ground platform repair is Minotor-Servis (Minsk), which repairs and maintains combat tracked vehicles, including ones used in Tunguska, Buk, Shilka, and Tor air defense systems.<sup>114</sup> In 2021, Belarus and Russia signed an agreement to establish a repair and maintenance program of the Tor-M2 air defense system with Belarusian involvement and to open a Tor repair and maintenance location in Belarus, likely to support the air-defense systems used by Belarus and other countries. Vyacheslav Dzirkaln, Deputy Director General for Foreign Economic Affairs, called this development “an important step in the

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<sup>110</sup> Bohdan, 2017b.

<sup>111</sup> Dvigalev, 2018.

<sup>112</sup> Zverev, 2017b.

<sup>113</sup> Dvigalev, 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Zverev, 2017b.

creation of a service center for the repair and maintenance of the TOR air defense system on the territory of our partners.”<sup>115</sup>

Both countries also cooperate on research and development. According to the Program of Military-Technical Cooperation Between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation Until 2020, the two countries are working together on research and/or development of Dnepr information exchange systems and radar stations, Dvina mobile motorized rifle battalion automated control systems, continued development of caterpillar chassis for Ground Forces, modernization of armored vehicles, sights and diagnostic equipment, and imaging equipment for the Earth remote sensing spacecraft E-Star.<sup>116</sup>

### Problems and Challenges in the Belarusian-Russian Defense Industrial Relations

Belarusian-Russian defense industrial relations have been rocky. Russia reportedly has been using its influence and weight (1) to manipulate and limit Belarus’s ability to reach out to new markets and cooperation partners when doing so does not fit Russia’s own foreign policy interests or (2) to play with Belarusian expectations to receive military platforms that it is asked to upgrade.<sup>117</sup> Thus, reports suggest that Minsk was expecting to receive the Russia-made fighters that were returned by the Indian Air Force in 2007 in exchange for the more modern Su-300MKI either for free or for a symbolic price. Instead, most of the airplanes were overhauled at the 558th Aircraft Repair Plant in Baranovichi but then sold to Angola.<sup>118</sup> Another unmet Belarusian expectation was that Azerbaijan could become the first foreign buyer of Polonez in 2017. At least some reports suggest that Russia may have intervened, seeking to maintain its control over arms supplies to Azerbaijan and Armenia and “to act as a kind of a guarantor” for the resolution of the

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<sup>115</sup> “Sinergiya Kompetentsii” [“Synergy of Competencies”], exhibition prospectus, MILEX 2021: Belarusian Military Exhibition, June 25, 2021.

<sup>116</sup> As recounted in Zverev, 2017b.

<sup>117</sup> Bohdan, Siarhei, “Belarusian Arms Export Grows with New Rockets and Missiles Planned,” *BelarusDigest*, February 13, 2018.

<sup>118</sup> Zhirokhov, 2018.

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>119</sup> The reported potential deal was called off, likely following pressure from Russia to avoid Polonez being used against Russian Iskander missiles purchased by Armenia, which also happens to be a fellow member of the CSTO.<sup>120</sup>

Russia and its enterprises have also attempted to take over strategically significant leading Belarusian defense players. However, Belarus's leaders have managed to wiggle out of pressure to sell their companies. In one case, Russian Kamaz sought to acquire MZKT, but the three-year negotiations eventually failed.<sup>121</sup> In another case, the Russian United Aircraft Corporation has been signaling since 2014 its interest in acquiring shares in the 558th Airplane Repair Plant, which has developed Russian and Soviet plane repair and modernization capabilities and is one of the leading Belarusian makers of electronic warfare systems.<sup>122</sup> Other failed attempts include Roskosmos seeking to buy shares of Peleng in 2012 and a plan to merge Russian Electronics (part of Rostec) with the Belarusian Integral.<sup>123</sup>

Over time, and especially in the 2010s, Russia started to reduce the dependence of its defense industry on foreign suppliers.<sup>124</sup> This was in line with Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin's calls to end Russia's dependence on imported components, the December 2013 Government Decree No. 1224 to establish "a ban and restrictions from foreign countries destined for the needs of the country's defense and security sector," and Putin's call in

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<sup>119</sup> Zhirokhov, 2018.

<sup>120</sup> Around the same time, the Russia-Azerbaijan deal for the sale of the Russian coastal missile Bal-E fell through, reportedly because of Russia's concerns about the safety of its Caspian Sea Flotilla. See "Bal Zdes' Neumesten" ["The Ball is Out of Bounds Here"], *Kommersant*, May 12, 2018; Bohdan, 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Zverev, 2017b.

<sup>122</sup> Some sources speculate that the deal given to the 588th Airplane Repair Plant to refurbish Russian planes intended for Indonesia may have been intended as an advance payment. See Siarhei Bohdan, "Not All Roads Lead to Moscow: Belarusian Arms Industries Between Russia and China," *BelarusDigest*, August 14, 2017c.

<sup>123</sup> Zverev, 2017b.

<sup>124</sup> Shagina, 2020.

2014 for the Russian military-industrial complex to ensure that all military capabilities are manufactured in Russia to remove external dependencies:<sup>125</sup>

We must do everything to ensure that everything that is used by the military-industrial complex, everything that the military-industrial complex needs, all this is done on our territory, so that we do not depend on anyone in any of the areas of re-equipment of the army and fleet for new weapons systems.<sup>126</sup>

This seems to indicate that Russia increasingly thought of Belarusian industry as a liability—or, in some ways, as a competitor—to its national industry and started to reduce its dependence.<sup>127</sup> For example, Russia replaced Belarus-made night sight matrices with locally made ones.<sup>128</sup> Russia has also been trying to develop specialized heavy-load vehicles used for the transport of strategic missiles that are similar to those made in Belarus.<sup>129</sup> The loss of these exports to Russia could create economic problems for the Belarusian defense industry because it would need to seek out new markets for highly specialized products or adjust the specialization profiles of the affected enterprises.

<sup>125</sup> Andrey Frolov, “Russian in Place of Foreign,” *Russia in Foreign Affairs*, No. 1, 2017a.

<sup>126</sup> “Putin Prizval Proizvodit V Rossii Vsyo Neobhodimoye dlia Oborony” [“Putin Urged to Produce in Russia Everything Necessary for Defense”], *TASS*, May 14, 2014.

<sup>127</sup> This is despite the fact that, in 2015, Secretary General of the CSTO Nikolai Bordyuzha claimed that “the course taken in Russia for import substitution in the defense industry does not cancel cooperation with member states of this organization.” See “‘Peleng’ zamenil ‘Fotoprilad’ dlya ‘Khrizantemy’” [“‘Azimuth’ Replaced ‘Fotoprilad’ for ‘Chrisanthemum’”], *Novosti VPK*, May 12, 2015.

<sup>128</sup> Frolov, 2017a.

<sup>129</sup> These attempts, however, have not been successful. The reasons are the bankruptcy of a potential Russian manufacturer, another Russian chassis manufacturer still being dependent on Belarus for the supply of certain vehicle parts even for indigenous production, and various development issues. See “Belarussiya nanessa udar po boyegotovnosti rossiyskoy armii,” 2020; Siarhei Bohdan, “Can Belarus Keep a Strong Position on the Global Arms Markets?” *BelarusDigest*, March 13, 2017a; Frolov, 2017a; “Perspektivnoye Specialnoye Shassi SKKSH-586” [“Promising Special Chassis SKKSH-586”], *Voyennoye Obozreniye [Military Review]*, September 17, 2020; “V Rosii Razrabatvayetsya Novoye Kolesnoye Shassi Dlya Kompleksov Voiskovoi PVA” [“Russia Is Developing a New Wheeled Chassis for Military Air Defense Systems”], *TASS*, September 23, 2022.

Belarusian defense industry representatives have openly criticized Russia for its policy to substitute Belarusian components in its military equipment. The 2009 bilateral defense technical cooperation agreement and other agreements served as the basis to at least formally simplify the procedures for the supply of military services between the countries to security and defense institutions.<sup>130</sup> However, Belarusian state and industry representatives—including the chairman of the state military industrial committee, Aleh Dvihalyou, and representatives from such companies as Minotor-Servis and Integral—have been among Belarusian critics of the continuously challenging Belarusian access to Russian state defense orders.<sup>131</sup>

### Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on Belarus-Russia Defense Industrial Relations

The two defense industries of Belarus and Russia have always been enmeshed, but Belarus's efforts to cultivate ties beyond Russia have been undermined since 2014 and especially since 2022. The Russia-Ukraine war seems to have pushed Belarusian defense industry back into full dependence on Russia.<sup>132</sup> In May 2022, shortly after the start of the war, Belarus's Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko announced that Belarus would increase its defense cooperation with Russian defense industry. This action was likely motivated by both the impact of sanctions and the increased Russian demand for Belarusian defense products.<sup>133</sup> As a result of Belarus's support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its defense industry is moving toward even closer cooperation with Russia. An example of one such step to closer defense industrial integration is Belarus's ratification of an agreement to pursue closer military-technical cooperation with Russia in May 2023.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Zverev, 2017a.

<sup>131</sup> Bohdan, 2018.

<sup>132</sup> This is despite some calls reported in the Russian media following the start of the 2014 war to reduce Russian defense industrial dependence on all external sources, including Belarus. See Zverev, 2017a.

<sup>133</sup> "Belarus Increases Cooperation with Russia in Defense Industry—PM," TASS, May 24, 2022.

<sup>134</sup> "Belarus Ratifitsirovala Soglasheniye S Rossiei V Voennoi Sfere" ["Belarus Ratified the Agreement with Russia in the Military Sphere"], *Evraziya Ekspert* [*Eurasia Expert*],

Another is the May 2023 drafting of a strategy for scientific and technological development of the Union State, aiming to increase technological independence from external imports.<sup>135</sup> The new economic and security conditions have led the defense industry to become, in the words of State Secretary of the Belarusian Security Council Aleksandr Volfovich, “one of the most important . . . sectors of the economy.”<sup>136</sup> In the process, Belarus has lost its ability to use its strategic defense industrial capabilities as a bargaining tool.<sup>137</sup>

Russian demand is only likely to grow. As of August 2022, Colonel of the Reserve and Professor of the Academy of Military Sciences of the Russian Federation Alexander Tikhansky commented that all weapons made in Belarus were in demand in Russia at that moment.<sup>138</sup> In addition, the 2014 and 2022 wars may have created more industrial cooperation opportunities for the Belarusian industry because Russia had to seek substitution for components that were made by the Ukrainian defense industry and for imports lost because of Western sanctions.<sup>139</sup> Following the Russian incursion into Ukraine in 2014, for example, Belarusian economist Alexander Sinkevich claimed that “Now Russia is abandoning its attempts, observed over the past decade, to reduce production cooperation with the Belarusian military-industrial complex and create entirely its own Russian technological chains.”<sup>140</sup> Polish expert Wilk observes that Belarus took over some of

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May 12, 2023.

<sup>135</sup> “Belarus, Russia Draft Sci-Tech Development Strategy for Union State,” BelTA, May 26, 2023.

<sup>136</sup> “Defense Industry Described as Important Part of Belarusian Economy,” BelTA, May 17, 2023.

<sup>137</sup> Vladimir Vuyachich, “Sovremennyi vooruzhennyye konflikty pred’yavlyayut novye trebovaniya k voyskam i tekhnike” [“Modern Armed Conflicts Place New Demands on Troops and Equipment”], *Voенно-Politicheskoe Obozrenie* [Military-Political Review], October 13, 2022.

<sup>138</sup> Tihanskii, 2022.

<sup>139</sup> Shagina, 2020.

<sup>140</sup> “Economist: Ukrainsko-rossiyskiy krizis otkryvaet novye vozmozhnosti dlya belorusskogo VPK” [“Economist: The Ukrainian-Russian Crisis Opens Up New Opportunities for the Belarusian Military-Industrial Complex”], *Novosti VPK*, September 4, 2014.

the contracts as Russian-Ukrainian defense industrial links were severed in 2015, and this resulted in the value of supplies from Belarus to Russia reaching “the highest level in history, estimated at 15 percent of the value of Russian defense orders.”<sup>141</sup> One reported example that directly applies here is the replacement of Ukraine-made thermal imaging sights on the anti-tank guided missile Khrizantema-S with ones made in Belarus.<sup>142</sup> This trend of increasing Belarusian arms deliveries to Russia was confirmed in May 2023 by Dmitry Pantus, chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee of the Republic of Belarus.<sup>143</sup>

Transfers of military equipment to Belarus announced in December 2022, as well as the increased presence of Russian Armed Forces in Belarus, may be indications of further expansion of the Belarusian maintenance and repair capabilities—and, according to some analysis, of Belarus assuming a greater role in equipping and maintaining the Russian Army. In October 2022, Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus Anatoly Sivak announced that Belarus would add to its skills list the ability to maintain the Sukhoi Superjet SSJ100, which he claimed as a promising area of cooperation within the aviation industry as part of Russian import substitution efforts.<sup>144</sup>

A further impetus for closer Belarus-Russia relations is provided by Western sanctions on Belarusian defense industry actors and individuals.<sup>145</sup> Belarus has admitted to working with Russia to “navigate around

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<sup>141</sup> Wilk, 2021.

<sup>142</sup> Zverev, 2017a.

<sup>143</sup> “Voyennaya Promishlennost Belarusi Uvelishila Postavki Voennoi Tehniki V RF” [“Belarusian Defense Industry Increased Deliveries of Military Technology to the Russian Federation”], Evroradio, May 18, 2023.

<sup>144</sup> “Belarussiya Planiruyet Osvoit Tehnicheskoye Obsluzhivaniye Samolotov Superjet 100” [“Belarus Plans to Master the Maintenance of Superjet 100 Aircraft”], *Aviatsiya Rossiya* [Aviation of Russia], October 19, 2022.

<sup>145</sup> Certain Belarusian defense industrial actors were already sanctioned prior to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war; the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control activated sanctions against a list of Belarusian defense and security companies following the brutal crackdown on the Belarusian opposition, with additional sanctions put in place in 2021. See European Commission, “Belarus,” in EU Sanctions Map database, July 17, 2022.

Western sanctions.”<sup>146</sup> Although Belarusian officials state that its defense industry had been prepared for sanctions, the real impact of the sanctions on the Belarusian defense industry has not been clear. According to March 2022 comments from Prime Minister Golovchenko, “The Belarusian defense industry has lived under sanctions for a while, so we prepared in advance for the situation to take a turn for the worse,” and, “We did import replacement, reinforced ties with Russian producers which are some of the world leaders in the production and trade of armaments and military equipment.”<sup>147</sup> Industry representatives and officials have spoken about efforts being made to counter sanctions, such as import replacement, localization, and strengthening industrial relations with Russia.<sup>148</sup> Official statements suggest that Belarus’s industry is seeking to develop domestic cooperation to improve import substitution and ensure “maximum possible localization.”<sup>149</sup> As part of its import substitution program, Russian industry is likely most interested in Belarusian microelectronics, machine tool building, transport engineering, nuclear energy, chemical industry, metallurgy, and IT industries.<sup>150</sup>

Belarus has also been seeking to mitigate sanctions on its own—for example, by replacing the sanctioned high-ranking individuals. In December 2022, the military-industrial private company Tetraedr replaced its director and founder, Andrei Vakhouski, with a top executive from Belvneshprom-

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<sup>146</sup> Belarus has also been alleged to be among a list of countries that host shell companies and intermediaries used to circumvent sanctions on Russia. See “Belarus’ Prime Minister Confirms Weapons Exports to Russia,” *BNE IntelliNews*, May 27, 2022; Marie Jégo and Virginie Malingre, “Guerre En Ukraine: Ces Petits Arrangements Qui Permettent À La Russie D’échapper Aux Sanction” [“War in Ukraine: These Small Arrangements That Allow Russia to Escape Sanctions”], *Le Monde*, April 28, 2023.

<sup>147</sup> “Belarus Increases Cooperation with Russia in Defense Industry—PM,” 2022.

<sup>148</sup> Grigory Solonets, “Will Detect Everything!” *VPK Belarus*, Vol. 2, No. 44, 2022.

<sup>149</sup> Solonets, 2022.

<sup>150</sup> “Belarussiya Planiruyet Osvoit Tehnicheskoye Obsluzhivaniye Samolotov Superjet 100,” 2022; “Belarus’ Planiruet Osvoit’ Tekhnozluzhivanie Rossiyskikh ‘Superdzhetov’” [“Belarus Plans to Master the Maintenance of Russian ‘Superjets’”], *Evraziya Ekspert* [*Eurasia Expert*], October 19, 2022.

servis (another defense industrial enterprise), following Canadian sanctions imposed on Tetraedr in November 2022.<sup>151</sup>

Even stronger defense industrial relations between the two countries may be motivated by factors related to Russian defense industrial capacity. According to the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Yuri Borisov, the Russian military-industrial complex will be short 400,000 workers in the near future, including 120,000 positions that require higher education.<sup>152</sup> Belarus may thus also be called on to provide manpower to Russia's defense industrial workforce. Belarus's defense industry has been marred by such problems as difficulties with exports, growth in overdue payments by customers, the fall in oil prices, currency fluctuations, overdue loans and borrowings, shortage of staff, and delayed payrolls. In 2020, Belarus acknowledged that it was able to maintain the level of wages in the defense industry by growing the amount of borrowed resources. Increased demand from Russia might bring the industry the kind of financial support that it needs to mitigate the issues mentioned here.

## Belarusian Defense Industry's Relations with Other Countries

Defense industrial cooperation with Russia is based on the close and long-established defense industrial ties stemming from Belarus's role as a manufacturer of components and subsystems for the Russian industry. Cooperation with other countries has come about gradually since the end of the Cold War.<sup>153</sup> Belarus has been trying to diversify its defense industrial relations with other countries by creating technological cooperation, diversifying sales, and boosting underdeveloped areas of its defense industry to become more competitive in the international market.

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<sup>151</sup> "Belarusian Military Company Replaces Head After Canadian Sanctions," *Euroradio*, December 23, 2022.

<sup>152</sup> This gap constituted slightly less than 25 percent of Russia's 2 million large defense industrial workforce. See "Borisov: Defitsit Kadrov Na Predprinatyah OPK V RF Budet Sostavlyat' Okolo 400 Tisyachi Chelovek" ["Borisov: Shortage of Personnel at Defense Industry Enterprises in the Russian Federation Will Be About 400 Thousand People"], TASS, June 29, 2022.

<sup>153</sup> Vikulova and Leopnovicha, 2021.

Besides Russia, Belarus has most actively engaged in military cooperation activities with countries in Latin America (Ecuador, Bolivia) and the Asia-Pacific (India, Myanmar, Laos), at least in terms of the financial value of defense exports (see Figure 5.10). According to some estimates, Belarus has signed bilateral military-technical agreements with 40 countries, including with CIS and CSTO member states (Tajikistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, and Turkmenistan).<sup>154</sup>

We did not find evidence that Russia might have sought to undermine Belarusian defense industrial cooperation with non-CIS countries. On the contrary, Belarus has been instrumental at times for Russia to be able to sell its used defense equipment by providing repair and upgrade services. In seeking cooperation with non-CIS countries, Belarus has taken a few steps:

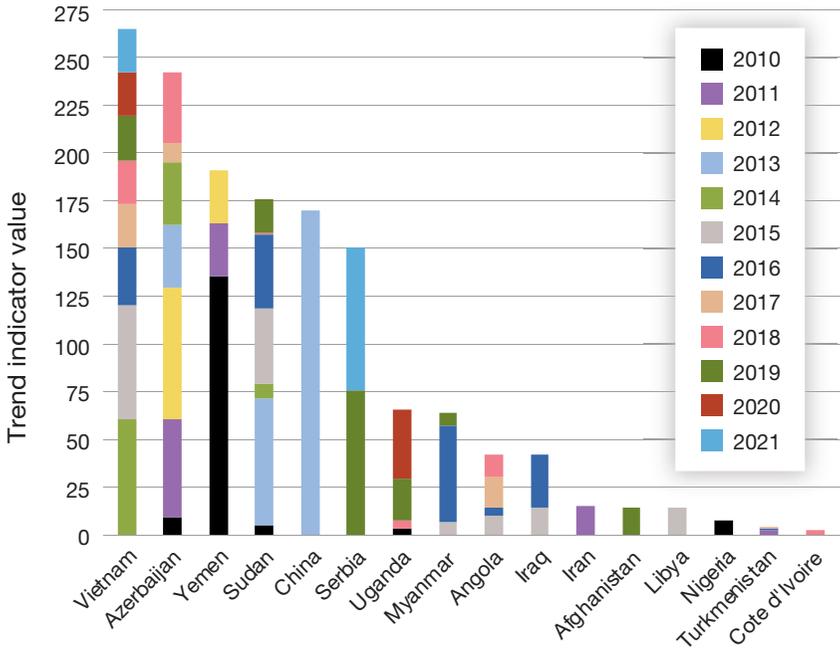
- Belarus has sought to boost exports of old Soviet military equipment and of Belarus-produced products and repair and modernization services, particularly for fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft and for some MBT and armored vehicle capabilities. A key player in this area is the 558th Aircraft Repair plant.
  - Between 2010 and 2022, Belarus mainly exported used Mi-24 and Mi-35 combat helicopters, secondhand weapons (such as self-propelled and towed guns and multiple rocket launchers), modernized SAMs, refurbished transport aircraft (Il-76) and bomber aircraft (Su-24), secondhand modernized armored vehicles (BTR-70MB armored personnel carriers and the Belarusian Kaiman), modernized secondhand ground attack aircraft (Su-25), and modernized secondhand T-72. Belarus also has exported the Vostok-E air search radar to Vietnam, where it is assembled under license.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> For Belarus, cooperation with these countries falls under the title of “foreign countries” and is regulated differently—the basis of military-technical cooperation with non-CIS countries is a 2003 decree on measures to regulate military-technical cooperation of the Republic of Belarus with foreign states. See President of the Republic of Belarus, “Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus, No. 94,” March 11, 2003a; and Vikulova and Leopnovicha, 2021.

<sup>155</sup> SIPRI, “Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 1990 to 2021,” SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, March 14, 2022b.

**FIGURE 5.10**  
**Belarus's Defense Exports: 2010–2022**



SOURCE: Features information from SIPRI, “TIV of Arms Exports from Belarus, 1990–2021,” SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, March 14, 2022a.

- The Middle East and North Africa has been a market of increasing interest for Belarus. Belarus has had a few equipment sales to the region (to Libya, Syria, and Yemen), and the region could be a lucrative market for the Belarusian industry of maintaining, repairing, and upgrading Soviet military equipment. Belarus has been successfully pursuing the UAE market, signing contracts in such areas of delivery as MZKT tank transporters and maintaining and modernizing UAE’s radars.<sup>156</sup> At least prior to 2022, Belarus could have been an interesting

<sup>156</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, “The Belarusian Arms Business: New Deals and Old Collisions,” *BelarusDigest*, November 27, 2017d.

partner for many Middle Eastern countries that had Soviet or Russian equipment but that would have liked to avoid close defense industrial cooperation with Russia.

- Although one of the biggest sales deals in Asia may have been the export of the Vostok-E radar for assembly in Vietnam in 2017, Belarus has been involved in modernizing Russia-exported equipment to such countries as Indonesia and China.<sup>157</sup>
- Belarus has sought joint production opportunities, developing ventures with China and France and pursuing the Middle Eastern market.
  - China plays an increasingly important role in Belarusian defense industry as Belarus has sought to counteract Russia’s influence in its industry. The poster project for this cooperation is the development of Polonez (which consists of a Chinese launcher on an MZKT-7930 chassis). Prior to the Russia-Ukraine war in 2020, one Belarusian observer mentioned the possibility of expanding cooperation with China to the space domain—specifically, joint production of light space launch vehicles—which has also been viewed as a way for Belarus to avoid Russia’s control of the space domain in its neighborhood.<sup>158</sup> Belarus’s first satellite was launched by China, not Russia.

It should be noted that global defense trade statistics may not reflect the full picture of the Belarusian defense industrial engagement abroad; details are obscured by trade arrangements, issues in transaction reporting, and the fact that Belarusian defense exports include both equipment and services. For example, Belarusian sources report that the country sold defense products to 69 countries in 2017; SIPRI lists only five export countries.<sup>159</sup> In addition, data show that some Belarusian sales may be done via intermediaries. For example, according to SIPRI, the 2014 sale of used Mi-24 and Mi-35 helicopters to Libya was done via the UAE. In other cases, sales of

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<sup>157</sup> SIPRI, 2022b.

<sup>158</sup> Alexander Alesin, “Kosmicheskioye Zapuski: Na Orbitu Po-Kitaiski” [“Space Launches: Into Orbit the Chinese Way”], *Belrynok*, May 22, 2020.

<sup>159</sup> Bohdan, 2018; SIPRI, 2022a.

Russia-owned equipment are done via Belarus, which carries out predelivery maintenance and upgrades.<sup>160</sup>

## Belarus Defense-Industrial Ties Summary and Conclusions

The Belarusian defense industry may be well positioned to work with Russia, especially compared with other Eurasian Customs Union states. Belarus's defense companies have been allowed to participate in the Russian State Armament Program, at least theoretically, on the same terms as Russian companies. The 2014 invasion of Ukraine and resulting breakup of Russian-Ukrainian defense industrial cooperation opened opportunities for more cooperation with Belarus as Russia needed to seek out import replacements. Deputy Prime Minister Rogozin explicitly expressed his interest in deeper cooperation with the Belarusian defense industry during his visit to Minsk in 2014. More recently, the 2022 Bilateral Military Technical Cooperation Program with Russia Until 2025 reportedly provides additional support for deepening cooperation, particularly "joint research and development work to create new and modernize existing types of weapons and military equipment, as well as dual-use products," and cooperation on the production of final products.<sup>161</sup> Many analysts wrote that the defense industrial relations benefit both actors and their defense potential; even helping them monopolize the market of the CIS states.<sup>162</sup>

Our analysis shows that the reality of Belarusian-Russian defense industrial cooperation is complex. Both countries have a long-standing defense industrial cooperation colored by their mutual Soviet legacy. Prior to 2020, and particularly before the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war, Belarusian-Russian defense industrial relations were close but fraught with challenges as Belarus

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<sup>160</sup> SIPRI, 2022b.

<sup>161</sup> "Lukashenko Odobril Proyekt Soglasheniya O Realizatsii Programmi VTS S Rossiiei Do 2025 Goda" ["Lukashenko Approved a Draft Agreement on the Implementation of the Military-Technical Cooperation Program with Russia Until 2025"], TASS, August 17, 2022; Malmlöf, 2016.

<sup>162</sup> Jastutis, 2006.

periodically found itself trying to maintain control over its key defense industrial producers. Russia remains Belarus's most significant cooperation partner—one that uses its power as Belarus's major customer to mold Belarusian industry according to its needs. In 2022, one Russian military expert expressed Russia's preference for Belarus to make “final products according to the principle that existed earlier”—meaning that Belarus remains the “assembly shop of the Soviet Union,” with major military platforms and weapons still being manufactured in Russia.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Tihanskii, 2022.



# Regional Perspectives of Belarus's Neighbors

This chapter addresses the regional perspectives of Belarus's European neighbors—Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Ukraine—on the Belarus-Russia relationship. We consulted several primary sources—official national defense and foreign policy documents, news sources, and expert publications on topics of national defense and foreign policy documents—to understand the framework that each country uses to manage the delicate relationship with Belarus and Russia. We also conducted 12 interviews in fall 2022 with regional experts and researchers from Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Ukraine, and we spoke with current and former government officials from the region and engaged the Belarusian opposition. In each interview, we collected expert opinions on the Belarus-Russia relationship, particularly about military, economic, and political developments. We also asked experts to identify what the Belarus-Russia relationship has meant to their country in terms of threats, challenges, and regional stability or instability.

## Lithuania

In the 2000s and prior to 2020, the Lithuanian government maintained a strained yet cooperative relationship with Belarus. During this period, the two countries held a limited number of engagements in the economic, military, and diplomatic spheres. For example, Lithuania offered Belarus transport corridors for Belarusian goods and an alternative route to supply

liquefied natural gas via Klaipeda.<sup>1</sup> When Dalia Grybauskaitė became president of Lithuania in 2009, she tried to reestablish dialogue and build a relationship with Lukashenko. In 2019, President Gitanas Nausėda once again attempted to engage with the Lukashenko government, emphasizing the importance of preserving Belarusian independence and culture.<sup>2</sup> At the time, Lithuanian leaders sought a slow warming of relations between Minsk and Vilnius.

However, the 2020 election in Belarus, which were deemed fraudulent by Lithuanian leaders, resulted in a disintegration of cooperation between the two nations. President Nausėda no longer views Belarus as an independent nation. Instead, he says, the fraudulent election and the war in Ukraine have led to a de facto integration of Belarus into Russia.<sup>3</sup> According to him, the two countries should no longer be viewed as separate, with the implication that Russia's reach and threat have now come closer to Lithuanian territory via Belarus. As military cooperation between Minsk and Moscow increases, Russia's power in the region is strengthened; in the view of some Lithuanian experts, that means that the Russian military is able to extend its reach to the Lithuania border. As a Lithuanian government official pointed out to us during an interview, any future Belarusian integration with Russia would triple the threat along the border, from 250 km to roughly 850 km, combining Kaliningrad and Belarus.<sup>4</sup>

From a security perspective, Lithuania's concerns with Belarus have been steadily increasing since 2020, forcing Vilnius to search for ways to mitigate these pressures. Growing Belarusian reliance on Russia and its inability to act independently has created a more hostile environment on Lithuania's border. The weakening of Lukashenko's regime was identified as a major security threat for Lithuania in its National Threat Assessment from 2022 because a weakened Lukashenko has limited ability to push back on Krem-

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<sup>1</sup> China CEE Institute, "Lithuania's Relations with Belarus Enter the Uncharted Waters," *Weekly Briefing*, Vol. 40, No. 4, May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Vaidotas Beniušis, "Interview with President Gitanas Nausėda," *DELFI Žinios*, August 9, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> "G. Nausėda interviu CNN Baltarusiją prilygino Rusijos gubernijai ir prakalbo apie sankcijų mastą," *15min*, April 11, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

lin requests or demands.<sup>5</sup> This was amplification of the National Security Strategy from 2021, in which Lithuania had identified growing Russian influence in Belarusian politics and economy, and the increasing integration between the two militaries, as a key threat to Lithuanian security.<sup>6</sup>

With the synchronization of the Belarusian and Russian militaries, the interoperability of their forces, their enhanced joint airspace control and defense, and joint military training growing over time, Lithuania's concerns about Belarusian-Russian military integration are being realized, resulting in a severe threat along an expanded border, according to a 2017 Lithuanian defense white paper from the Ministry of National Defense.<sup>7</sup> Lithuania's national defense planning reflects its preparation for the offensive threat posed by Belarusian-Russian military integration. Lithuania's Parliament, in its Defense Policy Guidelines, affirms the principles of total defense and commits to strengthening national defense capabilities.<sup>8</sup> Lithuanian defense policy also seeks a constant U.S. and NATO presence and aims to strengthen public and national resistance to foreign influence. According to a Lithuanian official we interviewed, improvements and capacity developments are being made in line with the threat.<sup>9</sup>

The Lithuanian government remains concerned that Russia can exploit the use of Belarusian territory to implement aggressive policy toward such countries as Lithuania, and destabilizing activities committed by Belarus are often viewed as tacitly approved by Russia. Lithuanian officials and documents have outlined security concerns about different types of Russia-assisted coordinated attacks from Belarus. These potential threats range from propaganda campaigns to the weaponization of migrants for desta-

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<sup>5</sup> Defence Intelligence and Security Service Under the Ministry of National Defence and State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, *National Threat Assessment*, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania, *Nacionalinio saugumo strategija [Lithuanian National Security Strategy]*, December 22, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania, *Lietuvos gynybos politikos: Baltoji knyga [Lithuanian Defence Whitepaper]*, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Agreement Among the Political Parties Represented in the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, on the Lithuanian Defence Policy Guidelines, Vilnius, September 10, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

bilizing Lithuanian society. With the Kremlin's influence expanding to the Lithuania border vis-à-vis Belarus, increased provocations have been observed and, according to official government documents, are expected to increase in the future as Belarusian dependence on Russia expands.<sup>10</sup> These concerns were realized in May 2021 when the illegal immigrant crisis began in Lithuania. In an interview, a Lithuanian official said that Russia is suspected to have orchestrated this operation, pushing illegal migrants from Belarus into Lithuania.<sup>11</sup> According to the official, this was likely a coordinated effort between Russian and Belarusian intelligence services. President Nausėda assessed that Belarus and Russia “turned migrants into live canons for political blackmail and revenge against Lithuania.”<sup>12</sup>

During the migrant crisis, propaganda from Russia and Belarus was used to amplify negative emotions and frighten the local population. This tactic was effective during the migrant crisis and persuaded Lithuanian political radicals to spread messages of hate and war.<sup>13</sup> Such events and disinformation attempts are likely to continue, and potentially increase, as integration deepens between Minsk and Moscow.

Lithuania also views Russian and Belarusian information operations and cyber activities as national security threats. These threats are largely derived from the close cooperation between “Russian and Belarusian intelligence services against Lithuanian interests and joint collection of information necessary for military planning.”<sup>14</sup> As observed in the Lithuanian Military Strategy, the Republic of Lithuania has experienced increased cyber espionage that has the goal of obtaining secret information and negatively influencing Lithuania's military capabilities, political system, society, and econo-

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<sup>10</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> “G. Nausėda interviu CNN Baltarusiją prilygino Rusijos gubernijai ir prakalbo apie sankcijų mastą,” 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Defence Intelligence and Security Service under the Ministry of National Defence and State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022.

my.<sup>15</sup> In a 2021 radio interview, Vice Minister of National Defense Margiris Abukevicius stated that one of Lithuania's priorities is the elimination of untrustworthy technology manufacturers, resulting in the passage of a law that prevents public sector entities from acquiring Russian and Belarusian technologies.<sup>16</sup> The goal of this law is to counter cyberattacks on Lithuania that originate from Belarus and Russia.

According to the National Threat Assessment of 2022, hostile intelligence activities against Lithuania by Russian and Belarusian intelligence services are ongoing.<sup>17</sup> According to the assessment, Lithuanian citizens entering Russia or Belarus are being approached to join efforts countering the Belarusian opposition groups residing in Lithuania and to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda. It is expected that intelligence and disruptive activities by Russia and Belarus against these opposition groups will intensify in the coming years, increasing the information threat to Lithuania.<sup>18</sup>

The Lithuanian government is concerned about the safe functioning of the Astravets nuclear power plant (NPP) in Belarus (25 miles from Vilnius) because of its numerous design and engineering defects.<sup>19</sup> In the 2022 State of the Nation Address, President Nausėda said that the power plant is a tool of aggressive Russian and Belarusian policies.<sup>20</sup> The plant was built

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<sup>15</sup> Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania, *Lietuvos Respublikos karinė strategija [Military Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania]*, March 17, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Andrius Sytas, "Lithuania Looks to Ban 'Untrustworthy' Phones After Chinese Censorship Concerns," Reuters, September 24, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Defence Intelligence and Security Service under the Ministry of National Defence and State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Defence Intelligence and Security Service under the Ministry of National Defence and State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> EU, "Statement by Commissioner Simson on the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant in Belarus," June 21, 2021. As the Commissioner noted,

It is regrettable that Belarus has decided to start the commercial operation of the Astravets nuclear power plant, without addressing all the safety recommendations contained in the 2018 EU stress test report. As the Commission has repeatedly stated, all peer review recommendations should be implemented by Belarus without delay.

<sup>20</sup> President of the Republic of Lithuania, "State of the Nation Address by Gitanas Nausėda, President of the Republic of Lithuania," transcript, June 16, 2022.

by Rosatom, a state-owned Russian nuclear conglomerate, and was directly financed by Moscow. The government of Lithuania claims that responsible authorities in Belarus have been unwilling to cooperate in ensuring the safety of the plant and have displayed an irresponsible attitude toward nuclear safety.<sup>21</sup> Lithuanian officials have expressed concern about the likelihood of a serious nuclear incident that could endanger Lithuanian citizens. In 2020, Lithuania purchased 4 million iodine pills and tested responses in case of a nuclear emergency.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, Belarusian-Russian integration leads to greater concerns of nuclear escalation in a conflict. In a 2022 constitutional amendment by Lukashenko, Belarus removed the section defining Belarus as a “nuclear-free zone.”<sup>23</sup> This amendment makes it possible for Russia to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus and strike from Belarusian territory in future conflicts. By March 2023, Russia announced that it would be building nonstrategic nuclear weapon storage sites in Belarus, ostensibly for aircraft.<sup>24</sup> A Lithuanian official expressed in an interview that NATO would have a difficult time responding to such an attack, given the resulting ambiguity of which party actually fired the missile.<sup>25</sup>

Since 2020, and especially after the war in Ukraine began in 2022, many economic relations between Belarus and Lithuania have stopped or been

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<sup>21</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, “Fundamental Problems of the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant Under Construction in Belarus,” March 29, 2018. According to the Ministry,

The Astravets NPP project in Belarus is being developed in non-compliance with international standards of environmental and nuclear safety, with recurrent serious violations, repetitive incidences on the construction site of Astravets NPP, poor occupational safety culture, lack of competence and expertise in the project development process on the part of nuclear safety regulatory authority and organisations in charge of construction works of Astravets NPP.

<sup>22</sup> “Lithuania Buys \$1 Million Worth of Iodine Pills as Belarus Prepares Nuclear Power Plant Launch,” Radio Free Europe, August 19, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Tony Wesolowsky, “Belarus to Vote on Constitutional Changes Seen as Tightening Lukashenko’s Grip on Power,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 26, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> “Belarus Says It Will Host Russian Nuclear Weapons to Counter NATO,” Reuters, March 28, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

scaled back. Lithuania has built its own liquefied natural gas terminal in Klaipeda—a decision that increases its independence from Russia.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, electricity links with Poland and Sweden have been established, integrating Baltic power systems and diversifying electricity supplies.<sup>27</sup> This eliminates Lithuania's dependence on one main provider: Russia. As an expert noted during an interview, Lithuania seeks to integrate into the European electricity network by 2025.<sup>28</sup>

Belarus still exports a variety of goods to Lithuania, such as wood and heavy metals. Until the outbreak of war, Klaipeda Sea Port was the main Belarusian port, allowing for large quantities of fertilizer to be exported. However, Lithuania has since stopped accepting Belarusian potash fertilizer and no longer allows its transit from Klaipeda Sea Port. Belarus must now export many products through Russia, which is much more expensive.<sup>29</sup> Lithuania also suffered losses as a result of economic ties being disrupted but managed to restructure the flow of goods; its GDP has been minimally affected because it has found replacements for Belarusian goods.<sup>30</sup> Although the port feels the losses, Lithuania's economy has not suffered much, and this has convinced Lithuanian leadership that they cannot rely on Russia or Belarus for cooperation.<sup>31</sup>

Belarusian startups and other companies have been fleeing to Lithuania in recent years, which is also helping compensate for Lithuania's economic losses resulting from severed ties. Because of strong Lithuanian support for civil society and the Belarusian opposition, many educated Belarusians have moved to Vilnius. Lukashenko is not pleased with the opposition living in Lithuania and Poland, and he has taken steps to spread propaganda about Lithuania preparing terrorist groups and attacking Belarus. Vilnius, mean-

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<sup>26</sup> “KN: Seven Firms to Import LNG via Lithuanian FSRU in 2023,” *LNG Prime*, October 12, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Beata Jarosz, “Polish-Lithuanian Link Connects Baltic Electricity Networks to the European Grid,” European Commission, March 29, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Professor at Vilnius University, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Professor at Vilnius University, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

while, will continue to serve as the hub of Belarusian opposition and will invest in people who will make up the core of a new Belarus, according to a Lithuanian expert interviewed for this report.<sup>32</sup>

## Latvia

In the span of only a few years, Latvia's perception of Belarus has changed from a "problematic neighbor" to a serious national and regional security threat.<sup>33</sup> Prior to 2020, Latvia tried to play a role of regional interlocutor—it aimed to maintain open diplomatic and trade relations with Belarus and sought methods of pulling Belarus closer to Europe. Latvia sought to "maintain good neighborly" and "pragmatic" relations with Belarus despite the challenges of trying to work with an authoritarian regime.<sup>34</sup> The countries maintained diplomatic relations: Belarusian foreign affairs ministers made regular visits to Latvia; Latvian high-level officials paid visits to Belarus, though perhaps less frequently.<sup>35</sup> In 2012, Latvia became Belarus's fourth-largest trading partner, quickly expanding to levels comparable to Belarusian-Ukrainian trade; Latvia also became an active investor in Belarus,<sup>36</sup> and these relations opened a transit corridor for Belarusian

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<sup>32</sup> Professor at Vilnius University, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Evija Džatkoviča, "The Year of Belarus in Latvia and the Eastern Partnership of the European Union: From a Problematic Neighbor to a Threat That Is There to Stay Also in 2022," in Sintija Broka and Andris Sprūds, eds., *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2002*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, *Annual Report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the Accomplishments and Further Work with Respect to National Foreign Policy and the European Union 2019*, 2019; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "Latvijas Republikas un Baltkrievijas Republikas Divpusējās Attiecības" ["Bilateral Relations of the Republic of Latvia and Republic of Belarus"], July 28, 2022c.

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2022c; Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of Latvia, "Belarusian-Latvian Relations," webpage, undated. For example, the prime minister of Belarus made visits to Latvia in 1998, 2001, 2008, and 2016. His Latvian counterpart made visits in 1994, 1995, 2009, and 2018.

<sup>36</sup> As of July 2022, 621 Latvian-registered businesses were investing a total of 18.73 million euros in Belarus. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2022c.

exports to other countries.<sup>37</sup> Although tensions rose during Zapad-2013 with Belarusian-Russian exercises in the Baltic region, Latvian-Belarusian cooperation continued.<sup>38</sup> For Latvia, however, Belarus has been a consistent trade partner but not a leading one.<sup>39</sup> As of 2022, Latvian exports to Belarus constituted only 1.1 percent of total Latvian exports.<sup>40</sup>

Until 2020, Latvian strategic documents and openly published threat assessments paid very little attention to Belarus—Russia was the main security concern. Latvia's main interests were to facilitate better Belarus-EU relations and support the strengthening of Belarus-NATO relations.<sup>41</sup> This aim to maintain diplomatic relations with Belarus and balance out Russia might explain why Belarus started appearing in the Latvian government's public threat assessments only in 2019.<sup>42</sup> In terms of Belarusian cooperation with

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Pryce, "Latvia-Belarus Relations: The Role of Trust," Latvijas Ārpolitikas Instituts [Latvian Institute of International Affairs], May 23, 2013; Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to the Republic of Latvia, undated.

<sup>38</sup> Pryce, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Although Latvia's exports to Belarus grew since 2005 from 0.2 percent and reached 2.13 percent of the total Latvian exports, it still remained relatively small. See Central Statistics Bureau of Latvia, "Exports un imports pa valstīm (eiro)—Preču plūsma, Kombinētā nomenklatūra (KN 2 zīmēs), Valstis un Laika periods" ["Export and Import by Country (Euro)—Product Flow, Combined Nomenclature (KN 2 Signs), Country and Time"], webpage, undated.

<sup>40</sup> Their bilateral trade relations are dominated by pharmaceuticals, optics, machinery, plastic products, and minerals, steel, and iron. See Ministry of Economics of Latvia, "Tirdzniecība ar Krieviju, Baltkrieviju un Ukrainu" ["Trade with Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine"], undated; Pryce, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, *Annual Report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the Accomplishments and Further Worth with Respect to National Foreign Policy and the European Union*, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Prior to 2020, Latvian government agencies' threat assessments that were openly published rarely mentioned Belarus as a threat, with the exception of the Russia-led Zapad military exercise series. The Constitution Protection Bureau of the Republic of Latvia [Satversmes Aizsardzības Birojs] (SAB) started including a discussion of Belarus in its annual reports only in 2019. The coverage of Belarus in these reports since 2019 has now increased significantly; openly published threat assessments describe at length the regional threats emanating from an unstable Belarus and pay special attention to Belarus-Russia relations. We drew this information from a review of SAB reports written between 2013 and 2022.

the EU, Latvia's stated position was not to force Belarus to choose between the EU and Russia: Instead, it pursued a more delicate policy by which Latvia and the EU could "strengthen the statehood of Belarus and promote its economic development," thus potentially leading to greater Belarusian independence from Russia but not necessarily to Belarusian alignment with the EU.<sup>43</sup> This effort also involved trying to increase awareness within the EU about Latvia's concerns regarding its priority region within the European Neighborhood Policy—specifically, the EU's Eastern neighbors.<sup>44</sup> To this end, Latvia hosted the EU's Eastern Partnership Summit during its Presidency of the Council of Europe in 2015; in 2016, Latvia actively supported lifting several EU sanctions against Belarus and facilitated the creation of the EU-Belarus Mobility Partnership.

The year 2020 was a watershed moment in the bilateral relations of these countries. Lukashenko's suppression of the opposition and civil protests dispersed illusions about the potential for democratic change.<sup>45</sup> The 2020 suppression of the Belarusian opposition, the 2021 forced landing of an EU-registered plane to arrest a member of the Belarusian opposition, and the 2021 migrant crisis of the Latvia-Belarus border degraded bilateral relations between the two countries. Belarus's participation in Russia's war on Ukraine in 2022—by providing logistics, medical support, and technical assistance—has further harmed Latvia-Belarus relations, according to SAB.<sup>46</sup> Riga expects that the threat from Minsk to Latvia and other NATO and EU countries will only continue to grow.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Diāna Potjomkina, *A More Geopolitical Eastern Partnership: U-Turn or "The Lady's Not For Turning"?* Latvian Institute of International Affairs, November 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Elizabete Elīna Vizgunova-Vikmane and Maija Laizāne, "Latvian-Belarusian Relations Under the Shadow of the Ukrainian War," in Sintija Broka and Kārlis Bukovskis, eds., *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2023*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> SAB, *Parskats 2022 [Annual Report 2022]*, 2023a.

<sup>47</sup> SAB, "Šī Gada 28. Februārī Satversmes Aizsardzības Birojs Publicē 2022. Gada Darbības Pārskata Neklasificēto Daļu" ["On February 28 of This Year, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution Publishes the Unclassified Part of the 2022 Activity Report"], press release, February 28, 2023b.

The 2020 Belarusian election caused a rapid deterioration in Latvian-Belarusian bilateral relations; Latvia chose to stand with the rest of the EU and NATO decisions on sanctions and does not recognize the election results.<sup>48</sup> But Latvia's trust of Belarus was limited even before 2020, and the government was often critical of Minsk's stance on democracy and human rights.<sup>49</sup> The working bilateral relationship that once existed has come to a standstill since 2020, and even more so since 2022. Latvia has stopped almost all state- and municipality-level cooperation with Belarus, leaving only the minimum necessary functions.<sup>50</sup>

Several major bilateral diplomatic crises exacerbated this strain. While hosting the World Hockey Championships in May 2021, the Mayor of Riga hosted the historical Belarusian red and white flag (which became the symbol of the opposition) instead of the official flag of Belarus, thus declaring support for the Belarusian opposition and joining in the international outrage over the forced landing of a passenger airplane by Belarusian authorities to apprehend a Belarusian opposition activist who was on his way from Greece to Lithuania. In response, Belarus expelled the Latvian Ambassador and most of the Embassy's staff. In the summer and fall of 2021, the forced migration crisis (facilitated by Belarusian authorities) expanded to the border with Latvia, resulting in Latvia declaring a state of emergency on its eastern border. In the words of the Latvian Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns, "the actual leader of the Belarusian regime has publicly stated that he is ready to participate in flooding Europe with refugees."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2022c.

<sup>49</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2022c.

<sup>51</sup> Jānis Kincis, "Latvija izsludina ārkārtējo situāciju pierobežā ar Baltkrieviju" ["Latvia Declared Emergency Situation on the Border with Belarus"], *Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji (LSM)* [Public Broadcasting of Latvia], August 10, 2021. Also see Vita Anstrate, "Hokeja Čempionāta Karogu Rindā Pie Viesnīcas Baltkrievijas Oficiālo Karogu Aizstāj Ar Vēsturisko" ["Belarusian Official Flag Changed with the Historic Flag in the Row of Hockey Championship Flags"], *Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji (LSM)* [Public Broadcasting of Latvia], May 24, 2021; "Belarus, Latvia Expel Each Others' Diplomats as Row over Journalist's Arrest Deepens," *Reuters*, May 24, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2022c.

The final blow came with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Similar to other regional partners, Latvia considers Belarus to be Russia's accomplice in the war and blames Lukashenko for dragging Belarus deeper into the conflict.<sup>52</sup> In February 2022, Latvia asked its citizens to leave Belarus because of the country's participation in the war and because the military activity in Belarus could pose a danger to them.<sup>53</sup>

Similar to Lithuania, Latvian government publications consider the role of Belarus to be that of a tool that Russia uses to expand its military presence on NATO's eastern border.<sup>54</sup> The 2020 version of the Latvian State Defense Concept refers to Russia's attempts to reduce Belarusian independence as an example of Moscow's increasing ambitions and warns that "in the future, there may be even more serious attempts to change the geopolitical situation in Europe," including via military power.<sup>55</sup> By 2021, these discussions show concerns about Russia's increased readiness to demonstrate its interests and prove itself as the main regional player, specifically in neighboring countries and regions that it considers to be of vital importance for its national security: Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "Ārlietu ministrijas paziņojums par tā saucamo referendumu par grozījumiem Baltkrievijas Republikas konstitūcijā" ["Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the So-Called Referendum on Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus"], press release, February 27, 2022b.

<sup>53</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "Aicinām Baltkrievijā esošos Latvijas valstspiederīgos pamest valsti" ["We Invite Latvian Nationals in Belarus to Leave the Country"], February 27, 2022a.

<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2022b.

<sup>55</sup> Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia, *Valsts Aizsardzības Konceptija* [State Defense Concept], June 16, 2016. The Latvian State Security Concept also talks about the close link between Latvian internal security and the security in the region, specifically highlighting cross-border threats (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Latvia, *National Security Concept*, 2019). In Ministry of Defense communications, most coverage of Belarus is related to the migrant and border crisis, the deepening of Belarus-Russia military cooperation, and Zapad-2021.

<sup>56</sup> SAB, 2021. *GADA DARBĪBAS PĀRSKATS* [Annual Report 2021], 2021.

Prior to 2020, Belarus was rarely mentioned as a threat, with the exception of the Russia-led Zapad military exercise series.<sup>57</sup>

Latvia views Belarus as an extension of Russia. SAB writes that the international position of Belarus has been affected not only by the aftermath of the 2020 election in Belarus and the fact that Lukashenko chose to protect his own power with the help of Russia but also because Belarus confronted the West on both democratic values and border security.<sup>58</sup>

One Latvian expert we interviewed stated that, in their view, there is not much benefit to be gained from seeking a discussion with Lukashenko.<sup>59</sup> At best, Belarus might choose to release its political prisoners as a symbolic gesture, but its dependence on Putin would prevent it from taking steps toward genuine cooperation with Latvia. Even if Latvia wanted to pursue dialogue with Belarus in hopes of eliminating escalating security threats, Lukashenko would be unable to start substantive dialogue and negotiations on his own terms. The same expert assumes that Moscow would have ultimate control over Minsk's participation in any outside engagements.<sup>60</sup> Another Latvian expert noted that the main threat for Latvia from Belarus is its growing dependence on Russia and the resulting increases to Russian military presence there.<sup>61</sup>

Prior to the migrant crisis, few in Latvia considered the territory of Belarus to pose a significant military threat, according to an interview we had with a Latvian expert. The Latvia-Belarus border was the quietest area on Latvia's eastern border, and the situation was stable (albeit with a smuggling problem).<sup>62</sup> From the perspective of Riga, Minsk was not acting

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<sup>57</sup> We drew this information from a review of SAB reports written between 2013 and 2022.

<sup>58</sup> SAB, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Latvian expert at the Center for East European Policy Studies, interview with the authors, November 3, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Latvian expert at the Center for East European Policy Studies, interview with the authors, November 3, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Researcher at the Latvian Institute of Foreign Affairs, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Researcher at the Latvian Institute of Foreign Affairs, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

aggressively. However, evaporating Belarusian autonomy from Russia in recent years has changed this view. Additionally, recent constitutional amendments that would allow for future nuclear weapons to be hosted on Belarusian soil have heightened fears of a Russian nuclear attack. Fears that Russia could use Belarus as a launching ground for a nuclear attack resonate throughout Europe and have called for changes to Baltic and NATO military planning, and Latvia is now treating the Belarus-Russia border as one single entity, according to this expert.<sup>63</sup>

Hybrid warfare attacks on Latvia are mentioned as a key threat in the 2019 National Security Concept. These hybrid threats are described as military and nonmilitary attacks that supplement each other and are implemented simultaneously.<sup>64</sup> Russia is called out as provoking continued conflict in the region and increasing its military activities along Latvia's borders, including by conducting intelligence operations aimed at influencing the local population. There is concern over the stability of Latvia's internal security as regional dynamics evolve at a different pace and as certain territories, particularly those along the Eastern border with Russia, become susceptible to these hybrid attacks and influence operations.

Efforts to counter such hybrid operations have received particular emphasis since Russia's annexation of Crimea and incursion into the Donbas in 2014 and more so after the migrant crisis in 2021. There is a whole-of-society approach that appears to be unfolding that depends on public- and private-sector cooperation to prevent Russian propaganda from destabilizing Latvia. Two key aspects are (1) reducing economic relations between Latvia and Belarus and (2) reducing the potential for information campaigns from Russia. Latvian businesses are reorienting operations away from Russia and Belarus because of international sanctions and domestic political pressure. In solidarity with Ukraine, many retailers stopped distributing Belarusian goods.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, international sanctions have

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<sup>63</sup> Latvian expert at the Center for East European Policy Studies, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022; Researcher at the Latvian Institute of Foreign Affairs, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Latvia, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> LSM, "Solidarizējoties ar Ukrainu, pārtrauc Krievijā un Baltkrievijā ražotu preču tirdzniecību" ["In Solidarity with Ukraine, the trade of Goods Produced in Russia and

affected the ability of various Latvian industries—such as pharmaceutical production, electric machinery production, and woodworking— to import cheap materials.<sup>66</sup> Domestically, Latvian authorities are building resilience in their security and defense sector, including by prohibiting Belarusian and Russian citizens from participating in companies with national security significance.<sup>67</sup> Some Latvian politicians have discussed the possibility of expropriating properties belonging to Belarus (and to Russia) to repurpose them for Ukrainian refugees and victims of war.<sup>68</sup> However, according to a review of media reports, the Latvia-Belarus border seems to continue to be a route for smuggling illegal cigarettes.<sup>69</sup>

Public opinion toward Belarus has been unfavorable, recently labeling it the most “unfriendly” country after Russia.<sup>70</sup> Those who once viewed Lukashenko as a “capable authoritarian”—corrupt, but effective—have lost respect for him, and Belarus is now largely viewed negatively.

## Poland

For decades, Poland has supported the idea of a democratic and independent Belarus and has seen it as a matter of national security. The strong

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Belarus Has Stopped”], February 26, 2022a.

<sup>66</sup> LSM, “Sankciju Dēļ Kokapstrādes Nozare Zaudēs Lētās Izejvielas No Krievijas un Baltkrievijas” [“Due to Sanctions, the Woodworking Industry Will Lose Cheap Raw Materials from Russia and Belarus”], March 15, 2022.

<sup>67</sup> LSM, “Aizliedz Krievijas un Baltkrievijas juridiskām personām būtiski līdzdarboties Latvijas drošībai nozīmīgās kapitālsabiedrībās” [“Russian and Belarusian Entities Prohibited from Participating in Capital Companies of National Security Importance”], June 16, 2022c.

<sup>68</sup> Linda Spundiņa, “Latvijā ar likumu plāno atsavināt «Maskavas namu», «Jantarnij Bereg» un «Belorusia»,” [“Latvia Plans to Expropriate ‘Moscow House,’ ‘Jantarnij Bereg,’ and ‘Belorusia’ by Law”], Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji (LSM) [Public Broadcasting of Latvia], June 9, 2022.

<sup>69</sup> LSM, “Muita kravas vilcienos atrod 100 000 kontrabandas cigarešu” [“Customs Finds 100,000 Contraband Cigarettes in Freight Trains”], June 20, 2022d.

<sup>70</sup> Mārus Andžāns, “Good and Bad Neighbors: Perceptions in Latvian Society,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 23, 2022.

statehood of Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states was seen as a buffer zone between Poland and Russia and thus a cornerstone of Polish security.<sup>71</sup> Warsaw has sought a constructive dialogue with Minsk while supporting Belarusian civil society. For their part, the Belarusian people perceived Poland and Poles positively as of 2021.<sup>72</sup>

In the first two decades of the 2000s, the Belarus-Poland relationship was tense but functioning. One of Warsaw's main issues with Minsk—besides its rejection of democratic standards—was concern over the Polish minority in Belarus. According to the 2019 census, the Polish diaspora constituted slightly more than 3 percent of the Belarusian population, or almost 288,000 people.<sup>73</sup> The minority is represented by the Union of Poles in Belarus, which Minsk sought to control. In 2005, the organization's leader, loyal to the regime, lost reelection and tried to regain control with the support of Belarusian security forces.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, the Union of Poles in Belarus split into two organizations: one loyal to Minsk and the other cooperating with the Belarusian democratic opposition. The latter, banned by Lukashenko, is the only one now recognized by the Polish government.

Conversely, Minsk saw Warsaw's support for the delegalized union as foreign interference and a threat to its security.<sup>75</sup> As a result, Belarus has consistently opposed any support that Poland provided to Belarusian civil

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<sup>71</sup> This idea was first formulated in the 1970s by Jerzy Giedroyc and Juliusz Mieroszewski, who were Polish émigrés in France. Known as the *Giedroyc Doctrine*, it called for acceptance of borders imposed on Poland by the post-World War II order, thus abandoning any territorial claims against Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states. In many ways, the Giedroyc Doctrine has underpinned Polish Eastern policy for the past 30 years. See Jakub A. Bartoszewski and Michael Martin Richter, "Eastern Europe's Melting Pot: How Warsaw Became the Conduit for Spreading Western Values in the Post-Soviet World," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 2022.

<sup>72</sup> "Belarusians on Poland, Russia and Themselves," *OSW Commentary*, No. 373, January 29, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> "National Composition of the Population of the Republic of Belarus," BelTA, October 12, 2020.

<sup>74</sup> Jan Maksymiuk, "Poland/Belarus: Warsaw Seems to Be Losing Duel with Minsk over Ethnic Organization," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 12, 2005.

<sup>75</sup> Ian Traynor and Kamil Tchorek, "Poland Gets Tough with Europe's Last Dictator in Minsk," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2005.

society. For example, Warsaw in 2007 partially funded Belsat, a Belarusian-language independent satellite TV channel, and has hosted it since then. Lukashenko called the idea “stupid, clueless, and unfriendly.”<sup>76</sup> The Belarusian authorities refused to register the station and have repeatedly prosecuted its journalists and contributors.<sup>77</sup> The crackdown on Polish activists caused a major crisis in bilateral relations, including the expulsions of diplomats.<sup>78</sup> Since then, the treatment of the Polish minority in general and the prosecution of its activists in particular have become indicators of the state of bilateral relations.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, prior to the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, diplomatic relations would periodically intensify. There was disapproval from Warsaw over Minsk’s rejection of democratic standards, which kept the relationship tense (though functioning). There was a brief revival of high-level ministerial visits from 2008 to 2010 and from 2016 to 2019 that encouraged dialogue, marked by periodic tensions as Poland criticized Belarus’s violation of civil rights.<sup>80</sup> In a 2019 interview, the head of Poland’s National Security Bureau drew attention to Belarus’s readiness for dialogue and emphasized the importance of continuing this effort.<sup>81</sup> He also highlighted the two countries’ common history, and his concerns over Belarus’s dependence on Moscow were not as severe as they would become later. Although diplomatic ties were limited, there was an effort to maintain economic cooperation

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<sup>76</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, “*Ekonomicheskomu vozrozhdeniyu territorii, postradayshikh ot avarii na ChAES, udelyaetsya osoboe vnimanie*” [“Special Attention Is Paid to the Economic Revival of the Territories Affected by the Chernobyl Accident”], April 26, 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Belsat, “Governmental Pressure,” webpage, undated.

<sup>78</sup> Maksymiuk, 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Hanna Vasilevich, “Belarus-Poland Relations: Minorities Caught In-Between,” *The Loop* blog, undated.

<sup>80</sup> Agnieszka Miarka, “Social Mobilization in Belarus—The Polish Perspective,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, December 19, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Jakub Borowski, “Head of the National Security Bureau: We Continue Dialogue with Belarus Without Giving Up Our Principles,” National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, November 5, 2019.

and dialogue through 2020.<sup>82</sup> Trade cooperation also remained consistent through 2020, sustained by regular business engagements.<sup>83</sup>

Since 2020, Poland's concerns regarding Belarus and the Belarus-Russia relationship have been similar to those of its Baltic allies. Specifically, the relationship was tainted by three major events. The 2020 protests in Belarus were the tipping point for Minsk's relations with Warsaw, and Poland has voiced support for the Belarusian opposition in exile. The migration crisis of 2021, viewed in Poland as Lukashenko's hybrid war against Poland, further exacerbated existing tensions.<sup>84</sup> Finally, Belarus's role in the 2022 war in Ukraine catapulted Poland and Belarus into a diplomatic deadlock.

Poland did not recognize the results of the 2020 election and welcomed emigrating members of the Belarusian opposition. It hosted the headquarters of the Association of Security Forces of Belarus (also known as BYPOL), a unique organization that unites former members of Belarusian security forces devoted to countering Lukashenko's regime.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, bilateral relations froze, and Poland's support for the Belarusian opposition made it a target for attack. Belarusian-Russian disinformation efforts painted Poland as an enemy, and constructive dialogue came to a halt.<sup>86</sup> Belarus again targeted the Polish minority, arresting activists and members of Polish educational institutions.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Miarka, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> Ministry of Economic Development and Technology of the Republic of Poland, "Polsko-białoruskie rozmowy gospodarcze" ["Polish-Belarusian Economic Talks"], February 12, 2019.

<sup>84</sup> National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, "Szef BBN o wyzwaniach dla bezpieczeństwa w 2022 r" ["Head of the National Security Bureau on Security Challenges in 2022"], January 2, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Joanna Kakissis and Dawid Krawczyk, "These Belarusians Join the Fight Against Russia, Defying Their Moscow-Backed Regime," NPR, May 31, 2022.

<sup>86</sup> Spokesman for Poland's Minister-Special Services Coordinator, "Media Attacks on Poland Amid Protests in Belarus," undated.

<sup>87</sup> Republic of Poland, "Sytuacja mniejszości polskiej na Białorusi" ["Situation of Polish Minority in Belarus"], March 29, 2021; Kamil Kłysiński, "Eradicating Polishness. Lukashenko on the Polish National Minority Schools in Belarus," *OSW Commentary*, No. 391, April 22, 2021a.

The 2021–2022 migration crisis is viewed as an example of Russia using Belarus as a proxy to destabilize Poland. According to Polish experts we interviewed, this was a joint operation to create pressure on the Polish border.<sup>88</sup> Without Russia's support and its security infrastructure, this crisis would not have been possible, according to interviewees. This event put additional strain on an already difficult relationship with Belarus. By exerting migration pressure on Poland, Belarus assumed it could politically destabilize Poland.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, Polish experts view the migration crisis as Minsk and Moscow testing NATO's reaction.<sup>90</sup> As the head of Poland's National Security Bureau stated, the migration crisis is a test of such hybrid actions not only on Belarus's direct neighbors but also on the EU and NATO.<sup>91</sup>

The border crisis has reshaped Polish security, and Warsaw has begun to “rethink the issue of securing the border not only in terms of critical infrastructure, but also the organization of border guards, police, [and] cooperation with local administration.”<sup>92</sup> Polish experts view the migration crisis as a threat that came close to the red line threshold, and the risk of further escalation and provocation by Belarus is seen as high.<sup>93</sup> Border security and the flow of migrants from Belarus will continue to challenge the Polish security apparatus as the Belarus-Russia relationship evolves. As a result, the Polish government has begun building up its border resilience—seemingly learning from its structural weaknesses during the crisis—and drafting legislation to expand the ability to coordinate actions at the state level.<sup>94</sup> In

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<sup>88</sup> Polish Senior Fellow at the Centre for Eastern Studies, interview with the authors, November 16, 2022; Senior Fellows at the Centre for Eastern Studies, interview with the authors, December 8, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Żochowski, 2021c.

<sup>90</sup> National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, “Szef BBN: Sankcje UE wobec Białorusi są dla nas i państw sąsiednich niewystarczające” [“Head of the BBN: EU Sanctions Against Belarus Are Insufficient for Us and Neighboring Countries”], November 13, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, 2022.

<sup>92</sup> National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, 2022.

<sup>93</sup> National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, 2021.

<sup>94</sup> National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, 2022.

November 2022, Poland also launched the construction of an updated barrier on its border with Kaliningrad.<sup>95</sup>

Belarus's support for Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 has led to a rupture in relations with Poland. Poland has provided significant support to Ukraine since 2022. For example, Poland is sheltering 8 million displaced Ukrainian persons as of January 2023. Poland's national budget is already under strain from higher energy prices, and resources for displaced Ukrainians have at times stretched resources for Polish citizens who are struggling to provide for themselves.<sup>96</sup>

Polish experts believe that Lukashenko is carrying out policy completely in line with the Kremlin's interests, especially as it relates to the war in Ukraine.<sup>97</sup> Shelling of Ukraine from Belarus and entry into Ukraine of Russian units staged in Belarus is an indication of Minsk's submission to Moscow, according to these experts. The presence of Russian troops on Belarusian territory near the Polish border is perceived as a serious security threat because it expands Russia's ability to launch a surprise attack on Poland.

As the war progresses, NATO's presence in Poland is also strengthening. Poland hosts one of NATO's eight battlegroups in the eastern flank as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence. During the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid, Allies agreed that the battlegroup would be upgraded from a battalion to a brigade.<sup>98</sup> The May 2023 NATO exercise GRIFFIN SHOCK exercised how to expand the battlegroup to a brigade.<sup>99</sup> Recognizing the threat of a retaliatory

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<sup>95</sup> Tristan Fiedler, "Poland to Build Fence on Russian Border over Fears of New Migrant Influx," *Politico*, November 2, 2022.

<sup>96</sup> Romain Chauvet, "Poland's Support for Ukrainian Refugees Put to the Test as Winter Sets in," *CBC News*, January 3, 2023.

<sup>97</sup> Institute of Central Europe, "Trudna sztuka balansowania. Reżim Łukaszenki wobec rosyjskiej agresji na Ukrainę" ["A Difficult Art of Balancing: Lukashenko's Regime and Russian Aggression Against Ukraine"], July 5, 2022b; Institute of Central Europe, "Zaangażowanie Białorusi w rosyjską inwazję na Ukrainę" ["The Involvement of Belarus in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine"], February 25, 2022a; Kamil Kłysiński, "Lukashenko's Political Manoeuvres: Belarus and the War," *Centre for Eastern Studies*, March 1, 2022b.

<sup>98</sup> NATO, "NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance," December 21, 2022b.

<sup>99</sup> U.S. Army Europe and Africa, "News Release: U.S. and NATO Troops Execute Combined Exercises to Expand Battle Group in Poland," May 11, 2023.

strike, the United States deployed Patriot systems in March 2022 to protect Rzeszów-Jasionka airport, which became the main hub for military support to Ukraine.<sup>100</sup> Polish experts say that, because of Poland's proximity to Russia and Belarus and its providing assistance to Ukraine, the greatest threat to security as of late 2022 stems from border concerns—specifically, the migrant crisis and Russian troops along the border with Belarus and Poland.<sup>101</sup>

Additionally, there is concern that Poland's support to Ukraine since 2022 could prompt Russia to launch a nonkinetic attack of some sort, such as crippling sabotage or cyberattacks inside Poland. As of March 2023, this had not happened at scale, although some limited cyberattacks had occurred. There is also a concern that Russia could spread panic inside Poland and attempt to raise resentment of Ukrainian refugees via disinformation campaigns.<sup>102</sup>

Poland's continued desire to align Belarus with the West has encouraged a twofold strategy with Minsk in the past: dialogue and sanctions.<sup>103</sup> Dialogue has been ineffective in recent years, so Warsaw has resorted to authorizing tough sanctions against the regime, supporting civil society, and offering shelter to political emigrants.<sup>104</sup> But as the war in Ukraine progresses and Belarus becomes more dependent on Russia, Polish strategic interests are increasingly at risk as any semblance of an independent or semi-independent buffer zone erode.

The Polish government is increasing its investment in its national security apparatus and participating in work aimed at increasing European

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<sup>100</sup> Abraham Mahshie, "US Patriot Air Defense Systems in Poland Protect Aircraft Delivering Supplies for Ukraine," *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, April 14, 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Senior Fellow at the Centre for Eastern Studies, interview with the authors, November 16, 2022.

<sup>102</sup> "Why Poland Has Become NATO's Linchpin in the War in Ukraine," *The Economist*, March 12, 2022.

<sup>103</sup> National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, 2021; National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, "Szef BBN: kontynuujemy dialog z Białorusią, nie rezygnując z naszych zasad" ["Head of the National Security Bureau: We Continue the Dialogue with Belarus Without Giving Up Our Principles"], November 5, 2019.

<sup>104</sup> Kamil Kłysiński, "The Anti-Western Narrative in Belarus's Historical Policy Becomes Harsher," Centre for Eastern Studies, January 14, 2022a.

independence in defense.<sup>105</sup> Although Poland has been strongly affected by Russian and Belarusian aggression, it has been proactive in countering these threats. Despite policy tensions between Warsaw and Brussels on domestic policy issues in recent years, the Polish government has worked closely with the international community to tackle the Belarus-Russia challenge together with NATO and the EU.

## Ukraine

There have been three major events in the Ukraine-Belarus relationship that have dramatically shaped their bilateral ties in recent years: Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the Lukashenko government's response to protests in 2020, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. After Russia's invasion in 2014, Belarus expressed its opposition to the Kremlin's decision, siding with Ukraine, and the Belarusian-Ukrainian relationship remained stable. Although the protests in 2020 created friction between Belarus and Ukraine, the real breaking point came in 2022, when Russian forces invaded Ukraine and Belarus allowed Russian forces to use Belarusian territory to launch the invasion.

Prior to the recent collapse of their relationship, Belarus and Ukraine had strong security and economic cooperation, largely fueled by a mutual interest to maintain friendly relations with Russia and with each other. Sharing a border of more than 1,000 km further encouraged security cooperation, including a regular exchange of intelligence.<sup>106</sup> The two countries have also signed more than 200 bilateral treaties since 1991 and have been important trading partners to each other.<sup>107</sup>

In 2014, Belarus voted against Ukrainian territorial integrity at the UN, yet it never formally recognized Crimea as part of the Russian Federation. The Lukashenko government also tried to position itself as a neutral or third-

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<sup>105</sup> National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland, 2022.

<sup>106</sup> Vladislav Davidzon, "Difficult Neighbors: How the Belarus Crisis Has Strained Ties Between Minsk and Kyiv," Atlantic Council, March 3, 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, "Belarus and Ukraine," webpage, undated-c.

party mediator in the dispute,<sup>108</sup> hosting cease-fire talks that would become known as the Minsk I and Minsk II agreements. In 2020, the bilateral relationship became strained when Ukraine did not recognize the results of the presidential election in Belarus and supported dissidents and the Belarusian opposition. Economically, before the invasion, Belarus served as a corridor for Russia to bypass some sanctions. Now that Belarus is also sanctioned, these sanction-evasion opportunities for Russia have become more restricted and have in some ways reversed: Russia is able to import sanctioned goods via Central Asian countries and supply them to Belarus.<sup>109</sup>

For a decade, Ukrainian experts who study Belarus have watched as the Union State changed from an obscure concept in the 2010s, backed only by documents and meetings, to a relationship that now influences Belarusian foreign and military policies in tangible ways.<sup>110</sup> In the view of one Ukrainian expert, Belarusian domestic policy is still largely under Lukashenko's control. Russian media and official information are also integrated and aligned, particularly after 2020.

Intelligence operations and threats are growing in severity as Belarus becomes more unified with Russia. This is a serious concern to Ukraine because the Russian FSB and Foreign Intelligence Service are officially embedded in the Belarusian KGB directorate.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, according to this expert, Russia provides all secure communications equipment to Belarus, implying that Russia could potentially eavesdrop on intelligence activities from Belarus.<sup>112</sup> Ukrainian experts on Belarus have expressed concerns that Belarus will expand intelligence cooperation with Russia; the countries' intelligence organizations already collaborate on collection and disinformation, creating chaos in Ukraine and sowing distrust in the gov-

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<sup>108</sup> Ukrainian expert on Belarus, interview with the authors, January 26, 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 26, 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 26, 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

<sup>112</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

ernment. Kyiv feels that keeping the intelligence threat from Minsk under control needs to be prioritized, given Belarus's joint ties with Russia.

Ukraine's security is dramatically affected by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the role Belarus has been playing throughout the war. Belarus has supported Russia's war effort by allowing use of its territory to launch the invasion, as well as use of its hospitals, road and rail networks, training ranges, and military vehicle repair facilities. In the view of one expert, important Belarusian revenue streams depend on Lukashenko supporting Russia's war.<sup>113</sup>

Maintaining some degree of diplomatic engagement despite the war prevents the complete collapse of diplomatic communication, which would have negative security implications for both countries. Ultimately, the greatest threats to Ukrainian security are Belarusian involvement in the war in Ukraine on the side of Russia, the resulting border security implications, and the increased threat of joint Belarusian-Russian espionage operations.

Nevertheless, neither the government in Minsk nor the Belarusian people want to commit troops to the war in Ukraine. Multiple polls conducted in 2022 and 2023 suggest that around one-third of Belarusian citizens are supportive of Moscow's invasion in a passive sense, but when asked if Belarus should commit troops to the war in Ukraine, the population is overwhelmingly unsupportive. Polls by the Andrei Vardomatski Analytical Laboratory in mid-2022 suggested that only 5–8 percent of respondents thought Belarus should send its own troops into Ukraine. Polls conducted by Chatham House in 2022 also found that only 3–5 percent of respondents said that Belarus should take part in the conflict on Russia's side.<sup>114</sup> The two groups found that Belarusian society was more split when expressing support for Russia's war effort; 33–39 percent of the respondents from the Vardomatski Analytical Laboratory supported Russia's "special military operation"; in

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<sup>113</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 26, 2023.

<sup>114</sup> Statista, "What Should Belarus Do in the Context of the Conflict Between Russia And Ukraine Today?" webpage, August 2022; Kamil Kłysiński, "Belarusian Citizens Ambivalent About Russian Aggression Against Ukraine" Centre for Eastern Studies, August 1, 2022c.

Chatham House's polling, support was at 30–35 percent.<sup>115</sup> One Ukrainian expert noted that there were rumors that Putin pressured Lukashenko several times to commit forces to the war. It was the view of this expert that the reason Lukashenko did not was because Belarusian Armed Forces are not motivated to fight and have little combat capability, and Belarusian citizens are against direct participation in the war.<sup>116</sup>

As a Ukrainian expert told us, the Ukrainian government now views Belarus as an imminent threat.<sup>117</sup> The border relationship is a driver of this perception. The border between Belarus and Ukraine has become hostile, from Kyiv's perspective, and efforts to secure the border have increased. The Ukrainian government is concerned about Belarusian troops crossing the border and joining the war.<sup>118</sup> Beyond shattering hopes of future relations with Belarus, this would all but encircle Ukraine and diminish its war-time progress. These security threats have prompted Ukraine to fortify its northern border with new units and mines.<sup>119</sup> However, efforts to safeguard the border come at a cost: distracting Ukrainian troops and taking Ukrainian Air Force resources away from efforts elsewhere.<sup>120</sup> Balancing border security with Belarus while focusing on the front lines has been a challenge for the Ukrainian government. In 2023, Belarus created a new command called Operational Command South, nominally responsible for defending against threats emanating from its southern neighbor, Ukraine. Despite the

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<sup>115</sup> Statista, 2022; Kłysiński, 2022c.

<sup>116</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 26, 2023.

<sup>117</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

<sup>118</sup> Hennadiy Maksak, "New Hybrid Threats from Lukashenko: How Should the West React?" *Globsec*, July 19, 2022.

<sup>119</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

<sup>120</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

announcement of its creation, it does not seem that the new command drastically altered Belarus's force posture or location of units.<sup>121</sup>

Since the war, Ukraine and Belarus no longer have an official trade relationship. However there are some gray market methods—for example, to disguise origin of petroleum products—according to one expert we interviewed. The defense industrial relationship has also been scaled back: Prior to the war, there was cooperation between the two defense industries regarding spare parts and some automotive equipment.<sup>122</sup>

Although the overall relationship between Belarus and Ukraine has rapidly deteriorated, there remains a basic level of state-to-state diplomacy. As of 2022, Ukraine still maintains an embassy and ambassador with a small team in Belarus.<sup>123</sup> Although Minsk publicly criticizes the Ukrainian ambassador in Minsk, he is allowed to continue his job.<sup>124</sup> Belarus wants to keep ties open with Ukraine and continue some degree of diplomacy, although our interviewees suggested that the Ukrainian government does not feel the same way and collaborates to achieve specific actions, such as the return of Ukrainian citizens forcibly deported to Russia in violation of international humanitarian law.<sup>125</sup> Ukrainian officials have also accused Belarus of facilitating the forced deportations to Russia of more than 2,000 children as of May 2023.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, “Belarusian Army to Create Southern Operational Command,” May 26, 2022. Although estimates of the number of Belarusian troops along the border vary, it is assumed that more than 30,000 are being prepared, alongside Russian reinforcements. See Norma Costello, “Belarus Is Inching Toward Invading Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, December 19, 2022.

<sup>122</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 26, 2023.

<sup>123</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023; Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 26, 2023.

<sup>124</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

<sup>125</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

<sup>126</sup> This number comes from Ukraine's ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, quoted in “Ombudsman: Ukrainian POWs, Abducted Children Transferred Through Belarus,” *Kyiv Independent*, May 31, 2023.

Belarus also has been serving as an intermediary that facilitates the return of kidnapped Ukrainians who have been wrongfully sent to Russia. These Ukrainian citizens are returned through Belarus to eastern Europe to Ukraine, according to our interviewees. Ukraine and Russia have no official diplomatic ties because of the war; this remaining communication channel with Belarus as the intermediary is all that remains.

Ukraine remains officially supportive of the Belarusian opposition movement in general. According to the views of the Ukrainian experts we interviewed, the government in Kyiv does not appear to warmly embrace Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as the head of the Belarusian opposition movement because of her previous views on Crimea and her incarcerated husband's ties to Russia, and the Zelensky government has not agreed to meetings. According to one interviewee who has led research on attitudes of Belarusians in Ukraine to the opposition movement, EU countries and the United States tend to single out Tsikhanouskaya and her cabinet as a transition government to democracy, but there is a belief in Ukraine that the Belarusian opposition movement is broader and has not coalesced in such a way around a single person.<sup>127</sup>

## Implications for NATO

Although we focus on the threats that the Belarus-Russia relationship holds for the regional security of Belarus's neighbors, we also provide a brief description of larger security implications for the NATO alliance. In June 2021, the North Atlantic Council issued a communiqué outlining its concerns with several actions taken by the Lukashenko government, such as arrests of political dissidents and its diversion of a civilian aircraft in Belarusian airspace to arrest a journalist onboard.<sup>128</sup> The NATO Strategic Con-

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<sup>127</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 26, 2023.

<sup>128</sup> NATO, "Brussels Summit Communiqué," "Brussels Summit Communiqué," Press Release (2021) 086, June 14, 2021. Paragraph 54 states

Allies remain deeply concerned about developments in Belarus since August 2020. The policies and actions of Belarus have implications for regional stability and have violated the principles which underpin our partnership. NATO will remain vigilant

cept arising from the 2022 NATO Summit stated directly that “Moscow’s military build-up . . . along with its military integration with Belarus, challenge our security and interests.”<sup>129</sup> The EU has also issued stark language about its perceptions of Belarus:

Through this . . . de facto control over Belarus . . . the Russian government is actively aiming to establish so-called spheres of influence. These aggressive and revisionist actions for which the Russian government, together with its accomplice Belarus, is entirely responsible, severely and directly threaten the European security order and the security of European citizens. Authoritarianism in Belarus is translated into violent repression at home, active military support to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the change of its nuclear-free status and hybrid tactics against the EU.<sup>130</sup>

Not only will the growing Belarusian-Russian integration affect Belarus’s immediate neighbors, the evolving relationship will affect NATO capability development, force posture, and planning assumptions, particularly for such plans as the Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Family of Plans.<sup>131</sup> Russia’s 2023 basing of nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Belarus

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of and monitor the implications for the security of the Alliance. The unacceptable diversion of a civilian aircraft in May 2021 and the subsequent arrest of a journalist and his partner travelling on board endangered the safety of civilians and was a grave affront to political dissent and freedom of the press. We support the independent investigations, including by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). We support measures taken by Allies individually and collectively in response to this incident. We call on Belarus to abide by international law, respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners, including those belonging to the Union of Poles in Belarus. A democratic, sovereign, and stable Belarus is in all of our interests. Allies stand ready for a mutually beneficial NATO-Belarus partnership, taking into account political and security conditions. We will follow the scale, scope, and aftermath of the Zapad-2021 exercise, and continue to call on Russia and Belarus to act in a predictable, transparent way in compliance with their international obligations and OSCE commitments.

<sup>129</sup> NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, June 29, 2022a.

<sup>130</sup> European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, undated.

<sup>131</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “SACEUR Provides Update on Deterrence, Defense of Euro-Atlantic Area,” May 10, 2023.

and Belarusian cyberespionage activity in recent years has deterrence and planning implications for all of NATO.<sup>132</sup>

## Future Outlook: Regional Perspectives on Belarus-Russia Relationship and Prospects to 2030

We asked regional experts to reflect on what the future might hold for the Belarus-Russia relationship and how the West might factor in. We did this as a way to capture the insights of those neighboring countries with unique insights into the Belarus-Russia relationship. The scenarios below are derived from responses we gathered while interviewing regional experts from the Baltics, Poland, and Ukraine. The responses fell into four outcomes; we present them below in the order of most likely to least likely based on the collection of expert opinions. Scenarios 1 through 3 assume Putin remains in power through 2030, and Scenario 4 assumes regime change in Russia before 2030. We also present signposts of change for each scenario.

### Scenario 1: Weakened Russia Determined to Retain Influence in Belarus

We asked regional experts what might happen inside Russia if there was unexpected regime change in Belarus, either as a result of a democratic movement overtaking the government or Moscow pushing Lukashenko out and installing a puppet government.<sup>133</sup> In the view of these experts, these cases would prompt or directly involve Russian intervention, respectively, because Russia would want to be in control of any potential regime change in Belarus.<sup>134</sup> But Moscow might not like either scenario in the end; each would also elicit some level of international response, especially from the West and NATO—from denunciation to sanctions to arming the opposition

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<sup>132</sup> Mandiant, “Cyber Espionage Targeting Most Closely Aligns with Belarusian Government Interests,” November 16, 2021.

<sup>133</sup> Atlantic Council Fellow, interview with the authors, October 26, 2022.

<sup>134</sup> Finnish Institute expert, interview with the authors, December 15, 2022.

in Belarus.<sup>135</sup> Even the second scenario would not calm Moscow because of lingering uncertainty over whether the new leader would be capable of retaining control of Belarus, militarily or economically.<sup>136</sup> Overall, Russia appears to favor maintaining control over the regime in Belarus rather than looking for an alternative.<sup>137</sup> The Union State framework and Russia's intervention in Belarus's 2020 election serve as examples of Moscow's desire to maintain the status quo in Minsk.

What might happen if Russia loses a prolonged war in Ukraine but is still determined to hold onto Belarus? If Russian military power is diminished and its economy is under significant strain, Russia will not have the power to fully absorb Belarus or provide it the same degree of economic assistance in a crisis. This would have a negative impact on Belarus, according to expert interviews, because Belarus is dependent on Russia now for economic and military support. Lukashenko will continue to look to Russia for financial, energy, and security support as he clings to power.

In this scenario, Russia would prefer to have an unreliable and dependent Lukashenko in power than to change the system and face uncertainty during Russia's already weakened state.<sup>138</sup> With a weakened Russia, Lukashenko also might have a bit more leverage to explore Western partnerships.<sup>139</sup> Knowing that Russia would support him and not try to replace him, Lukashenko may feel emboldened to explore external economic opportunities. However, many countries still do not recognize Lukashenko as the official leader of Belarus, so there would have to be a series of negotiations with Poland, the Baltics, and other NATO partners to determine what cooperation would entail.<sup>140</sup> According to expert interviews, Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland are open to working with Belarus to decrease its dependence on

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<sup>135</sup> Atlantic Council Fellow, interview with the authors, October 26, 2022.

<sup>136</sup> Expert on Lithuania, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022; East European Policy Studies expert, interview with the authors, November 3, 2022.

<sup>137</sup> Expert on Russia and Eurasia, interview with the authors, November 2, 2022.

<sup>138</sup> Professor at Vilnius University, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

<sup>139</sup> Anatoly Kurmanaev, Andrew E. Kramer, and Michael Levenson, "Putin Visits Belarus, Stirring New Concern on Future of Ukraine War," *New York Times*, December 19, 2022.

<sup>140</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

Russia. However, this scenario does not assume integration into Western structures. Lukashenko's establishment of contacts with the West would be minimal at first in such a scenario, to avoid upsetting Russia. This could be done in coordination with Belarusian expansion into new markets in Asia and the Pacific region and justified as essential to maintaining Belarusian sovereignty and economic security.<sup>141</sup> Belarus could also begin rebuilding connections with the markets in Ukraine and exploring an open line of communication with NATO.

In addition to the pursuit of economic opportunities, some diplomatic and cultural ties could begin to develop with the West, including cultural exchanges and visa-free travel.<sup>142</sup> Lukashenko's appointment of Sergei Aleinik as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in December 2022 could be perceived as an effort to maintain some contact with the West and create openings for future engagements. Aleinik is a diplomat and someone who sought cooperation with Western countries, has been educated abroad, and spent time in Ireland and the United States.<sup>143</sup> Aleinik is not a pro-Russia nomination, which speaks to plans for long-term Belarusian policy and to Lukashenko's preparations for a scenario in which Ukraine wins the war. However, this scenario does not imply independence from Russia. With the current degree of military and energy integration, Belarusian and Russian objectives will continue to align into 2030.

### Signposts of Scenario 1 Change

The state of Russia after the war in Ukraine will be a significant indicator of how its relationship with Belarus will evolve. If the war destabilizes Russia internally and Moscow does not have the time, resources, or attention to support or manage the end of the Lukashenko regime, Belarus may realize greater independence, perhaps leading with economic opportuni-

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<sup>141</sup> Independent defense analyst in Poland focusing on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, December 14, 2022.

<sup>142</sup> Belarusian opposition member living in Vilnius, interview with the authors, December 7, 2022.

<sup>143</sup> Independent defense analyst in Poland focusing on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, December 14, 2022.

ties.<sup>144</sup> It is difficult to see why Russians would voluntarily leave military bases in Belarus, but signposts of change could involve a reduction of forces to manage expenses. The type of political appointments being made within the Belarusian government are also signposts of change. If Russia loses the war, the West should track the leanings of those in Lukashenko's inner circle.<sup>145</sup> If a larger number of Western-leaning officials are appointed to positions within the Belarusian government, there would be reason to assume that Minsk is slowly reorienting itself.

## Scenario 2: Belarus Integrated into the Russian Federation

A second possible outcome assumes that Russia wins the war in Ukraine and can fully absorb Belarus into Russia. This absorption would not be instantaneous but would likely play out over a decade. In an interview discussing the 28-point union framework, Lukashenko noted that the integration process of Belarus and Russia will be progressive, possibly extending into 2030 and beyond.<sup>146</sup> If Russia does win in Ukraine (*win* being defined as holding four illegally annexed Ukrainian oblasts and Crimea), the West will likely impose additional sanctions on Moscow and Minsk, making it impossible for Lukashenko to survive without Russian assistance. Additionally, these sanctions could elicit pity for Russians among Belarusians. Historically, Belarusians have had a close relationship with Russia, and although they oppose any active Belarusian participation in the war in Ukraine, they do not oppose Russia.<sup>147</sup> If Russia wins, Moscow would likely continue to control the news outlets in Belarus, painting the West as a menace to Russia or the Union State. It would be very difficult for regional neighbors to engage with

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<sup>144</sup> Researcher at the Latvian Institute of Foreign Affairs, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>145</sup> Independent defense analyst in Poland focusing on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, December 14, 2022.

<sup>146</sup> "Russia-Belarus 28 Union Programs to be Implemented Across Five Years," TASS, December 13, 2021.

<sup>147</sup> Belarusian opposition member living in Vilnius, interview with the authors, December 7, 2022.

Belarusians in such a controlled environment. Additionally, Russian victory in Ukraine would strengthen military ties between Russia and Belarus, with more Russian troops in Belarus and an increase in joint military exercises. As their joint trainings and military propaganda increase, borders could soften over time, and it might become more difficult to distinguish Russian troops from Russia-trained troops in Belarus.<sup>148</sup> Eventually, Belarusian military units may receive Russian commanders instead and Belarusian officers could be integrated into Russian units as lines blur. In accordance with the Union State agreement, Russia will also move quickly to develop common financial and energy markets, permanently tying Belarus to Russia's economy. Although Russia is financially weakened, Belarus is its closest ally, and its ability to support Belarus would be only minimally affected. With nonexistent Western alternatives for Lukashenko in this scenario, Putin would secure control over Belarus. However, Moscow would likely experience a degree of pushback from Lukashenko, who has prided himself on promoting Belarusian sovereignty. This would create a roadblock for Putin. Initially, Putin could apply pressure to ensure key individuals are installed in leadership positions within the Belarusian government.<sup>149</sup> Afterward, Putin could move to replace Lukashenko. This would likely be one of the final decisions preceding Russian absorption of Belarus, according to some of our interviewees.

Replacing Lukashenko earlier could lead to domestic instability, something Russia would not have the resources to address immediately after a war. However, the installation of a leader who is more supportive of Russia would be possible once both countries are all but integrated—and the *nomenklatura* is already more aligned with the Kremlin than Lukashenko. This scenario would be most concerning to the region because it would expand Russian territory and provide more opportunities to stage hybrid attacks on the border with Poland and Lithuania. Ultimately, by 2030, Belarusian leadership in this scenario would become even more pliant than Lukashenko.

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<sup>148</sup> Senior Research Fellow at Finnish Institute of International Affairs, interview with the authors, December 15, 2022.

<sup>149</sup> Researcher at the Latvian Institute of Foreign Affairs, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

## Signposts of Scenario 2 Change

In this scenario, the most obvious signpost to watch would be whether Russia wins the war in Ukraine. A short-term indicator of the evolving relationship between Belarus and Russia would be the direct involvement in the Ukraine war by the Belarus Armed Forces along with Russian units under Russian command.<sup>150</sup> Additional engagement with the Russian military, such as trainings and exercises, indicates a strengthening relationship. Observing how closely the militaries are integrating operations, personnel, and protocols will suggest movement toward increased operational unity. Given Putin's shaky relationship with Lukashenko, the fate of Lukashenko and the appointment of pro-Russia individuals to key government positions are also signposts to watch if Russia wins the war in Ukraine.<sup>151</sup>

## Scenario 3: A Weakened Russia That Can No Longer Sustain Support to Belarus

The third scenario again assumes that Russia loses a prolonged war in Ukraine and is determined to hold onto Belarus but lacks financial resources. In this scenario, Lukashenko holds on to power but does not receive the same level of economic and security support from Putin, and the Belarusian population is becoming increasingly upset. To calm the population and economically stabilize Belarus, Lukashenko may look to the West for assistance. In exchange for cooperation, the West would expect Lukashenko to ease internet and news restrictions and to release political prisoners. If Lukashenko concedes and opens certain channels, Belarusian people will be exposed to Western news and culture.<sup>152</sup>

For the first few years, Lukashenko could hold onto power and balance his relationship with Russia and the West; however, exposure and increased engagement with the EU might eventually rekindle resentment from the

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<sup>150</sup> Researcher at the Latvian Institute of Foreign Affairs, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>151</sup> Researcher at the Latvian Institute of Foreign Affairs, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>152</sup> Belarusian opposition member living in Vilnius, interview with the authors, December 7, 2022.

2020 election or previous unfair elections. The opposition in Belarus would notice if Lukashenko's popularity were to fall dramatically and could work out a compromise with part of the *nomenklatura*.<sup>153</sup> Realizing that Lukashenko may no longer be able to maintain his grip on power, that Russia is not able to provide as much support, and that their interests are at stake, the *nomenklatura* could begin to coordinate with the opposition. Belarusian people, though not political, could be driven by economic needs and their new exposure to Western opportunities. Similarly, as in 2020, a democratic revolt could arise in Belarus, but this one would likely be larger and more organized. There could be widespread support for a new election that could coalesce around an opposition candidate.<sup>154</sup>

Noticing the development of a democratic uprising, Putin would try to intervene to preserve his security interests in Belarus. However, the opposition will be larger this time and include members of the government. Additionally, Lukashenko's military apparatus would be disengaged with his leadership after being exposed to European militaries, and it might no longer feel compelled to follow his orders. Russian attempts to silence protests via economic and security support could prove unsuccessful, and when Russian troops show up in Belarus, people may have a flashback to Ukraine and refuse to stand down.

The severity of this conflict would depend on how much effort Russia is willing to exert to fight the protests, the status of Russian power projection capabilities (which as of 2023 are fairly depleted), and whether the West intervenes in support of Belarus. This scenario could end in two ways. One way would be for Russia to brutally silence the protests. Putin sees Lukashenko is incapable of managing the country and appoints a new pro-Russia leader, and Belarus is absorbed into Russia. The other way would be for the Belarusian opposition to hold its ground and Lukashenko to realize that his time in office is expiring. Seeking to escape or risk being killed by Moscow, Lukashenko could request for European skies to be opened and flee the

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<sup>153</sup> Belarusian opposition member living in Vilnius, interview with the authors, December 7, 2022.

<sup>154</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

country.<sup>155</sup> The opposition, which could now have support of former government officials and part of the military, could hold a democratic election. However, even a pro-democratic leader in Belarus would need to manage a relationship with Russia, especially within the economic sector. The newly elected leader would work out a compromise with Russia in which their relationship is not permanently severed.<sup>156</sup> Already losing and now viewed as a pariah among Belarusians, Russia would agree to continue engaging with a more democratic Belarus as long as it does not seek to join NATO or the EU. This scenario has Belarus entering a new era in 2030 in which its democracy is fragile but progressing.

### Signposts of Scenario 3 Change

An obvious signpost for this scenario would be the fate of Lukashenko. Whether he stays in power will determine Belarusian prospects for a democratic future and how soon changes could occur. His ability to stay in power would be affected by economic stability in Belarus. Observing trends in the economy and how average citizens are affected will inform sentiments toward the regime. Lukashenko's inability to sustain a healthy economy without Russian support would anger the population, potentially leading them to demand change. Another indicator is Belarusian society. Traditionally, most Belarusians have been apolitical, besides a small group of opposition groups.<sup>157</sup> Even during the war in Ukraine, people have hesitated to criticize Russia. However, demands for open web channels, increased demand for engagement with the West, and greater political expression would indicate that Belarusian society wants change.

### Scenario 4: Regime Change in Russia Affects Belarus

The fourth scenario that our regional experts considered is based on regime change in Russia. In this potential future, Ukraine has likely won the war

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<sup>155</sup> Belarusian opposition member living in Vilnius, interview with the authors, December 7, 2022.

<sup>156</sup> Professor at Vilnius University, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022.

<sup>157</sup> Belarusian opposition member living in Vilnius, interview with the authors, December 7, 2022.

(defined as liberating all occupied territory), and Putin is forced out of power. His exit from the Kremlin could be driven by internal revolts, angry Russian elites, and a collapse of his credibility.

It remains an open question how the Lukashenko regime would respond to a political transition in Russia. On the one hand, a weakened Russia would likely exert less pressure on Belarus, which would increase the Lukashenko regime's freedom of maneuver.<sup>158</sup> In the event of the collapse of the Putin regime, Lukashenko would likely "make attempts to improve [Belarus's] relationship with the West," potentially including integration into some Western organizational structures. Even in that scenario, however, Belarus might alternatively seek to continue and maintain its cooperative relationship with Russia.<sup>159</sup> This would likely depend on Lukashenko's perceptions of whether he can forge a productive and cooperative relationship with the new leaders of Russia. One expert suggested that if there were a regime transition in Russia, making Russia more "inwardly focused," this would provide an opening for a near-simultaneous regime transition in Belarus.<sup>160</sup>

As Polish, Latvian, and Lithuanian experts pointed out, Lukashenko's power is dependent on Russian support. According to a Polish expert, changes in Belarus are not possible without changes in Russia.<sup>161</sup> If Putin is no longer in power, then changes in Belarus can become reality. With the collapse of Putinism, the opposition within Belarus would feel more emboldened. Additionally, Lukashenko would be hard pressed to find alternatives to the support provided by Putin. If the new Russian regime does not prioritize propping up Lukashenko, it would be more difficult to silence the opposition. However, the transition of power in Belarus is unlikely to be peaceful.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Expert on Lithuania, interview with the authors, August 4, 2022. The cited expert characterized a "weakened Russia" as "good for Belarus."

<sup>159</sup> Lithuanian Embassy official, interview with the authors, November 4, 2022.

<sup>160</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

<sup>161</sup> Polish Senior Fellow at the Centre for Eastern Studies, interview with the authors, November 16, 2022.

<sup>162</sup> Independent defense analyst in Poland focusing on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, December 14, 2022.

As tensions in Belarus grow and democratic movements are propped up, Lukashenko could extend the resources he has left to destroy and intimidate the opposition. Even if there is a confrontation, Lukashenko would be able to withstand the pressure for only so long without Putin's support. In the end, this scenario may result in roundtable negotiations about the transition of power. Opposition leaders and Lukashenko could realize that the future of an independent Belarus depends on their ability to compromise—for example, if Lukashenko could maintain power or public support and the opposition could not take power independently. These negotiations could lead to a more democratic and open Belarus in 2030 and beyond. Under these conditions, regional partners would be willing to engage with Belarus and assist with its political transition.

#### Signposts of Scenario 4 Change

The two main signposts of this scenario would be Russia's loss in the war in Ukraine and Putin's fall from power. Beyond these two obvious factors, monitoring sentiments of the Russian population immediately after the war would be key. Citizen access to social media and use of social networks to express anger or war weariness could indicate Moscow's inability to silence and punish opposition. A struggling Russian economy could be another signpost to track. If Putin is unable to stabilize the economy quickly, the Russian people could grow impatient. Although the West has very limited tools to affect what is happening in Belarus or shape its relationship with Russia, Belarusian diplomatic decisions and subtle outreaches are signposts to watch. Putin's inability to punish Lukashenko for forging closer ties with the West would indicate his grip on power is declining, likely emboldening Lukashenko to pursue relationships with European partners.

## Conclusions

Ukraine appears to be permanently slipping away from Russia's influence after the full-scale Russian invasion launched in 2022, and Moscow will likely cling tighter to Belarus as its last remaining strategic buffer in Europe. In the past, Belarus has sought to balance its economic dependence on Russia. However, when third-party investment or loans were coupled with anti-corruption requirements or requests for domestic reforms, Belarus—specifically, Lukashenko—has chosen regime preservation over needed investments. This preference has led Belarus to be increasingly dependent on Moscow economically, politically, and militarily; it has also led Belarus to become increasingly isolated from its neighbors in Europe. The Belarusian military remains in poor shape compared with the pre-2022 Russian military. Belarus is still useful to Moscow as one of the last strategic buffers against NATO, and Russian military presence will likely increase in Belarus because of heightened tensions with NATO and Belarus's inability to push back on Russian requests.

Still, there are reasons to believe that the Belarus-Russia relationship might not continue on this course. Both regimes are highly personalist, and Putin and Lukashenko will not be in power forever. The Union State project should perhaps be viewed as a long-term project to codify this relationship and stabilize it over time as a mechanism to keep bilateral relations on a stable path through the 2030s. Permanent Russian military presence in Belarus could also be viewed from this lens. Although Russian leaders have broached the idea of full integration of Belarus into the Russian Federation, Belarus remains cool to this idea. It remains to be seen how the countries will manage their respective political transitions in the late 2020s or 2030s, or if internal events will effect changes sooner.

Overall, Belarus and Russia are aligned in many respects: There is a great deal of cultural affinity, and there are political, economic, defense industrial,

and military ties that are codified in multiple agreements and treaties. Both countries' threat perceptions of the West overall have been similar in the post-Soviet period over the past 30 years, and alignment has increased in recent years. However, significant differences remain on the question of Belarus's sovereignty. The Russian government, which views Belarus through its own great-power prism, sees Belarus as a "brotherly nation" that defers to Moscow in all important matters. The Belarusian government, opposition, and people see themselves differently and attempt to demonstrate they are a sovereign country—even if these demonstrations are symbolic or are suppressed.

Prior to 2020, Belarus sought to carve out a role for itself as a mediator of sorts between Russia and the West, particularly in regard to conflict in Ukraine. Those diplomatic opportunities have mostly been curtailed, but Minsk is still able to use its diplomatic relationships with Europe—a Ukrainian interviewee for this study mentioned the example of facilitating the return of Ukrainian citizens forcibly deported to Russia in violation of international humanitarian law.<sup>1</sup> Ukrainian officials have also accused Belarus of facilitating the forced deportation of more than 2,000 children to Russia as of May 2023.<sup>2</sup>

Both countries have a long-standing defense industrial cooperation colored by their mutual Soviet legacy. The Belarusian defense sector is almost totally dependent on contracts with Moscow. This intertwining is partially a legacy of the Soviet era but also stems from Belarus losing international investment in recent years. Russia prefers to contract components rather than final military products, which limits Belarus's industry from growing beyond a certain point. As one Russian military expert noted, Russia still treats Belarus as the "assembly shop of the Soviet Union" rather than an innovator its own right. This may be another structural method for Russia to use its power as the main customer to mold Belarusian industry according to its needs and keep Belarus firmly in a junior partner status.

Three events since 2020 have been watershed moments in Belarus's relationship with Russia and its European neighbors: the crackdowns against

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<sup>1</sup> Ukrainian expert on Russia and Belarus, interview with the authors, January 19, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Dmytro Lubinets, quoted in "Ombudsman: Ukrainian POWs, Abducted Children Transferred Through Belarus," 2023.

the 2020 presidential election protests, the 2021 migrant border crisis, and Minsk's support for Moscow's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These events have isolated Belarus from Europe generally and from its neighbors specifically, and it has increased Belarus's dependence on Moscow.

Although Belarus is dependent on Russia in all spheres (a process that has accelerated since 2020), our analysis finds that the government in Minsk attempts to assert the appearance of sovereign choice even as its ability to do so is rapidly shrinking. The Minsk leadership's limited means to push back against some Russian requests over the years include postponing implementation of agreements, issuing public criticisms, and delaying responses to the Kremlin's requests.

As Belarus's economic dependence on Russia grows, the Lukashenko government loses its ability to push back on Russian political and military demands. The codification of the Union State, a legal strategic partnership with Russia, is likely to consolidate Minsk's dependence on Russia and will likely lead to increased Russian military presence in Belarus. Russia and Belarus are moving forward with Union State integration, which will result in closer military integration, Russian military forward stationing in Belarus, a joint military doctrine, and more-integrated responses to deal with crises and conflicts with regional neighbors or with NATO more broadly.

Finally, the evolution of Belarus-Russia relations has significant implications for regional security. Belarus's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine has damaged Minsk's relations with Kyiv. Militarily, Belarus's forces remain small, weak, unable to resist Russian intervention, and unlikely to be an effective fighting force inside Ukraine; the majority of the Belarusian Army is made up of conscripts. The ongoing war in Ukraine offers Belarus a temporary measure of protection from the threat of Russian intervention; the Russian military had sustained severe damage as of early 2023. On the other hand, the conflict has led Russia to seek to leverage its military-to-military ties with Belarus to a greater degree. Increasing convergence between Belarus and Russia has led to heightened threat perceptions in those countries that border Belarus. Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland are concerned that diminishing Belarusian autonomy means that the Russian military will be able to operate at their Belarusian borders with little impediment, reducing warning times in a crisis or conflict. All three countries remain concerned that their borders with Belarus will be increasingly hostile and unstable over time.



## External Debt of the Republic of Belarus by Lender: 2006–2020

Table A.1. presents the external debt of the Republic of Belarus by lender since 2006 (and it corresponds with data in Figure 5.8). As the table demonstrates, Belarus has gradually become more dependent on borrowing from Russia, China, and the Russia-backed EFSD and less dependent on financing from European countries and Western institutions, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), IMF, and IBRD.

**TABLE A.1**  
**External Debt Balance of Belarus: 2006 to Mid-2020**

Lender	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
IMF	—	—	—	2,861	3,181	3,501	3,031	1,369	79	—	—	—	—	—	—
IBRD	49	41	42	256	287	318	424	557	590	642	725	822	905	923	908
EBRD	15	10	8	6	4	1	—	—	—	—	2	67	81	108	110
EFSD	—	—	—	—	—	1,240	1,680	2,560	2,295	1,942	2,389	2,836	2,683	2,330	2,241
Russia	315	1,746	2,675	3,104	3,052	3,000	3,091	3,816	5,177	6,188	6,609	7,602	7,905	8,111	7,925
Germany	127	123	82	73	37	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
United States	63	59	56	52	48	45	41	37	34	30	26	23	19	15	15
Japan	12	6	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
China	125	216	265	785	1,023	1,260	1,619	2,079	2,490	2,844	3,095	3,177	3,302	3,483	3,310
Venezuela	—	—	500	500	457	414	322	222	115	—	—	—	—	—	—
Bonds	132	135	92	255	1,137	2,019	1,800	1,800	1,800	800	800	2,000	2,000	17,133	16,634
Total	838	2,337	3,719	7,891	9,225	11,798	12,008	12,441	12,580	12,447	13,645	16,727	16,894	17,133	16,634
% GDP	2.2	5.0	5.9	15.5	16.1	19.2	18.3	16.5	16.0	22.1	28.6	30.6	28.2	26.6	27.1

NOTE: Numbers represent millions of dollars, not adjusted for inflation. — = no debt balance.

# Abbreviations

C4ISR	command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
CES	Common Economic Space
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CST	Collective Security Treaty
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EFSD	Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development
EU	European Union
FSB	Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti [Federal Security Service]
GDP	gross domestic product
GLONASS	GLObalnaya NAVigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema [Global Navigation Satellite System]
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IT	information technology
KGB	Belarusian Kamitet dziaržaunaj biaspieki Respubliki Belarus [State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus]
KSOR	Kollektivnoye Sily Operativono Reagriovanniya [Collective Rapid Reaction Forces]
LSM	Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji [Public Broadcasting of Latvia]
MBT	Main Battle Tank
MLRS	multiple-launch rocket system
MZKT	Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SAB	Satversmes Aizsardzibas Birojs [Constitution Protection Bureau of the Republic of Latvia]

SAM	surface-to-air missile
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SME	subject-matter expert
SOE	state-owned enterprise
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UGV	unmanned ground vehicle
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organization

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*To support conventions for alphabetizing, bibliographic details in Russian are introduced with and organized according to their transliteration into the Latin alphabet. English translations appear in brackets after the transliteration.*

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The relationship between Belarus and Russia is unique and complex. At first glance, their similarities are numerous. Their ties are based on a shared history and language, a deep cultural affinity, legal agreements that codify a strategic partnership, intertwined economies, and shared threat perceptions of the West in general and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in particular. The two governments are led by highly personalist regimes that have decades of experience managing the partnership and share a similar and nostalgic view of the Soviet Union. There is a great deal of convergence across many policies.

However, this relationship is not one between equals, nor is it entirely harmonious. The watershed year in the relationship was 2020, when Belarus's ability to offset Russian demands diminished. Through a combination of violent crackdowns on protests that year, alarming its neighbors via a migrant crisis in 2021, and allowing its territory to be used to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Belarus has found itself increasingly isolated and unable to push back on most Russian requests. For Belarus's neighbors, managing the relationship with Minsk is now a challenge as ties (and mutual dependence) between Minsk and Moscow grow stronger.

In this report, the authors outline areas of convergence and divergence in the Belarus-Russia relationship. They also consider the regional perspectives of Belarus's neighbors—Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine—and how the Belarus-Russia relationship poses an evolving threat to those neighbors' security.

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