



REPORT II

Brother's smothering embrace. Belarusian-Russian relations 2020-2021



Warsaw, June 2021

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Introduction

Presenting the first of the reports of the Analytical Group “Belarus in the region”, devoted to the situation in Belarus, we entitled it: “Perspective of change”. The question of “when?” and not “if?” the dictator of Belarus will have to share power with civil society seemed to us most urgent and, in a way, evident. I do not think we were overly optimistic. Alyaksandr Lukashenka remains a political zombie essentially doomed to failure. The question of when he will be forced to leave remains valid.

At the same time, however, the changes in the external environment and, above all, the incredible terror unleashed in the country by Lukashenka raise additional questions. The most important concerns regard the “brotherly embrace” in which Russia holds Belarus and Minsk's economic situation. It can be assumed that without the support of President Vladimir Putin, Lukashenka would not have been able to remain in power. The power structures of Belarus (Pavel Usov analyses this phenomenon in the Report) are closely linked to Russia. In many cases, one might even ask where their state loyalties lie. Had it not been for Moscow's unequivocal support for the dictator, at least some of the “siloviki” might have sided with the democratic forces.

The situation with the Belarusian economy is similar. It is dependent on Russia both in terms of supplies of energy resources and in the financial sphere. In view of China's slow withdrawal from investments in Belarus and sanctions from Western countries, Russia has become the only real lender for the weakened Belarusian economy. In our Report, the close economic ties between the two countries are analysed by Kacper Wańczyk, who notes the progressive peripheralisation of the Belarusian economy in relation to the globally peripheral economy of the Russian Federation. At the same time, our Report indicates that Russia is increasingly reluctant to allocate additional resources to support the Belarusian regime. “Russian-Belarusian economic relations are, in fact, the relations of a narrow group of Russian businessmen with President Lukashenka and his entourage. This is precisely the effect of the peripherality of the Belarusian economy and the specific institutional characteristics of the economies of Belarus and Russia,” notes Kacper Wańczyk.

The key elements of Russian policy towards Belarus revolve around three sets of issues. The first is the dependence of the entire military-strategic structure. Belarus is regarded as a key element in Russia's strategic depth. As Pavel Usov emphasises in his part of the Report, “It is in this military scope of integration that the greatest challenges to the security and independence of the Belarusian state and an obstacle to its democratisation and political transformation lie hidden”.

The factor that can be listed as the second most important in the hierarchy of Russian tools of domination is the broadly defined sphere of science, language and culture. Katarzyna Bieliakowa, analysing these issues, stressed that “the Russian language in the Soviet republics became a tool of colonial policy and is still used today as a geopolitical instrument by Russia”. Russia's neo-colonial policy in the fields of culture and the media, through the use of tools of domination in the spheres of science and culture, leads to a weakening of the national self-identification of Belarusians and Russia-led “brain drain” or even “soul drain”.

On the one hand, Belarus is also intended to be a model case in Russian regional policy, delineating ways of integration in the post-Soviet area and, on the other hand, a convenient place to test various political concepts. The democratic revolution in Belarus was considered a threat when it became apparent that the demonstrations in defence of Alexei Navalny were taking a form similar to that of the Belarusians. I write about the above phenomenon in the chapter on the political aspects of Russian influence in Belarus. In turn, Oleksandr Shevchenko, analysing the tools of Russian influence on post-Soviet states, notes that “the Russian Federation continues to maintain a strong influence in the post-Soviet space and seeks to play the role of a kind of conductor of political processes in the region”.

One of the most important tools of influence is the Kremlin's powerful propaganda machine. Its activities in and towards Belarus are discussed in the Report by Justyna Olędzka. As the author predicts, “It is likely that slogans of a new opening in Belarusian-Russian relations, a reset of integration and calls for a new model of integration combined with proposals for the transformation of power in Belarus will soon appear in the Russian and Belarusian media”.

Russia's influence on Belarus and its relations with the external environment is so overwhelming that we will return to this issue in the next Reports from our team. Above all, the problem of Belarusian society's change in moods and attitudes towards Russia in general and towards the prospect of integration with its eastern neighbour needs to be analysed. An issue that we have deliberately omitted from the Report is Russia's influence on Belarus's partners in the West and Asia. Using diplomatic tools, Moscow tries to promote the vision of Belarus as an exclusive zone of Russian interests. It seems that the acceptance of such a narrative is not universal in the West, which may be indicated by the fact that Belarusian issues were raised during the Biden-Putin summit. Finally, the Belarus-Russia-Baltic States triangle game will require a separate, detailed analysis.

It is now difficult to imagine a solution to the political and social crisis in Belarus without Russia or even against Russia. At the same time, however, it is difficult to speak of the modernisation

and democratisation of the Belarusian state while retaining the current model of Russian influence. Our Report is, therefore, an attempt to initially catalogue the problems of Minsk-Moscow relations. Viewing our work as an invitation to a debate on a key issue for our region of Europe, we invite criticism and discussion.

Jerzy Marek Nowakowski

King - President - Governor

Russian politics and Alyaksandr Lukashenka

The term the royal secret – *Le secret du roi* – refers to the secret of the true purpose of politics, which remained only in the mind of the ruler and his closest associates. Such a royal secret, a real and never revealed goal of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, was in the late 1990s of the last century the belief that he could succeed Boris Yeltsin as President of Russia, or rather of Russia and Belarus. In the Russian elite (though not all), this evoked laughter and was an impulse to tell jokes about the “kolkhoz king”. However, Lukashenka took this perspective seriously and adjusted the entire policy of the newly revived Belarusian state to this goal. Even then, his style of thinking about Belarus was limited to the fact that he treated his country as a tool for his personal aims and ambitions. Russia, in turn, was his dream destination and power he wanted to seize, not for the sake of Belarus, but his ambition.

Observing relations between Moscow and Minsk over the past year, one may get the impression that nothing has really changed. After 26 years of dictatorial rule, Lukashenka continues to view relations with his eastern neighbour through the prism of personal goals and interests. He did so throughout his reign. When he took offence at Moscow, there was the turn to the West, brief periods of the revival of the Belarusian language and so on. When he expected profits from the East, he immediately became a model Soviet man. All the time, however, it was a policy of lesser or greater *secret du roi* and, as time went on, lesser and lesser. Now he is no longer seeking the presidency but the confirmation of his status as Russian Governor-General of Belarus. Again, as a quarter of a century ago, it arouses a mixture of irritation and pity in the Russian power elite.

However, the political factor dominates relations between Belarus and Russia. In Russian strategic thinking, Belarus is a key state. It is less than 400 kilometres from the Belarusian border to Moscow. Moreover, it was through the so-called Smolensk Gate that all offensives coming from the West were directed towards Moscow. Control over Belarus is an absolutely indisputable issue in Russian strategic thinking. Indeed, it is more important than regaining influence in Ukraine¹. In other words, the Russian political elite are not even discussing the possibility of limiting its influence on Belarus. Russia's western neighbour is a key foreground for the Russian Federation's main strategic

¹Cf. *Russia scenarios 2030*, Free Russia Foundation 2019, e.g. p.46.

direction, both in defensive and offensive strategy. It should be noted that Russian strategic thinking, as Marek Budzisz rightly states in his latest work, is dominated by issues of military security and imperial expansion². Thus, the Kremlin perceives the Belarusian issue as one of the “red lines” identified by Putin as one whose crossing could trigger Russia's “asymmetric” response. The issue concerns both the control over the political system and - above all - the military system of Belarus.

The strategic objective of the Russian Federation is to deepen integration within the so-called Union State and to maintain control over Belarus while minimising the costs of such control. This is clearly visible in the perspective of changes in Russian policy towards Minsk between spring 2020 and spring 2021. During the election campaign, the Kremlin-dependent media (and Russian politicians) exercised considerable restraint in supporting Lukashenka. One could even get the impression that the Russian side is reluctant towards the Belarusian President. The democratic opposition circles were presented in the Russian media relatively objectively and even with a considerable amount of friendliness. In turn, Lukashenka appeared to his own citizens as a defender of sovereignty and multi-vector international policy. Apparently, at that time, the Kremlin seriously considered adopting the “Armenian” model, i.e. controlled democratisation of Belarus and the support of a candidate other than Lukashenka. The latter's repressive measures were directed above all against opponents to power who were considered acceptable by Moscow, above all Viktor Babaryka and Valery Tsepkalo. Both were barred from running for president. Babaryka, accused of financial embezzlement, was jailed on June 18, 2020 (with his son, who headed the electoral committee). It was significant that after Babaryka's arrest, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry invited EU ambassadors, presenting them with documentation of the alleged embezzlement and also suggesting that the accused coordinated his activities with Gazprom, which is one of the shareholders in Belgazprombank. In turn, the Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reacted to the arrest of Babaryka with a protest against Gazprom's “groundless” accusations.

Commenting on the refusal to register the strongest candidates and the repression of those protesting against the arrest of Babaryka, Kamil Kłysiński, an analyst at the Centre for Eastern Studies, wrote, “In the context of social discontent, it is worth highlighting that Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, a person lacking charisma and political experience, was registered. Tsikhanouskaya ran for president in connection with blocking the registration of her husband's (a popular blogger known for his radical criticism of President Lukashenka) campaign committee. It seems that allowing her to participate in the campaign is intended to dampen the mood of protest and criticism from the

²M. Budzisz, *Wszystko jest wojną. Szkice o rosyjskiej kulturze strategicznej*, Warszawa 2021.

West over the exclusion of Babaryka and Tsepkala. At the same time, the authorities assumed that after the arrest of her husband on May 29, as well as some of the most active members of his campaign committee, Tsikhanouskaya would not be able to conduct an expressive campaign and therefore might even resign from further participation in the elections”³.

In the summer of 2020, Russia's political elite thought very seriously about an alternative to Lukashenka. Employed frequently by the Kremlin to launch a “trial balloon”, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy said on August 4 in an interview with RIA-Novosti: “If Lukashenka declares his victory, Belarus will be able to disagree with it. And they will object. The situation will escalate. Military units or police may refuse to obey it. We did not know on February 14 how events would unfold on the night of the 15th (2014) in Kyiv. Everyone thought it would be peaceful, so many guarantors – France, Poland, Germany. But it turned out that everything collapsed in a few hours, and Yanukovych had to flee because they could kill him”⁴. Many experts close to the Kremlin spoke out along the same lines. Tsikhanouskaya herself, in a conversation with me, stressed that Russian propaganda towards her was at least neutral and relatively objective.

In contrast, Moscow prioritised deepening integration with Belarus and maintaining control over the Belarusian military space. Several nodal moments can be observed in the events of the summer and autumn of 2020. The first was the arrest of mercenaries from the so-called Wagner Group on July 29 in Belarus. There were announcements that the detainees would be handed over to Ukraine (the group included 9 Ukrainian citizens accused of participating in fighting in Donbas on the separatists' side). Sergey Lavrov's sharp reaction to such ideas indicated Moscow's growing irritation with the alleged “multi-vector” policy of Lukashenka's administration.

In turn, the decision, taken just after the elections and the first public protests (August 14), to send “Wagnerists” (TN: members of the Wagner Group) back to Moscow was a clear signal that the president, terrified of defeat, would be susceptible to Russian pressure.

Moscow's policy towards Belarus was outlined by Putin himself in an interview with Channel One Russia on August 27. The Russian President clearly stated that Belarus plays a key role in Russia's politics. He stressed that that country is the closest for ethnic, cultural, religious and economic reasons. Consequently, Russia cannot afford to leave Belarus. It was reminiscent of Leonid

³K. Kłysiński, *Białoruś: odmowa rejestracji kluczowych rywali Łukaszenki*, „Analizy OSW”, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2020-07-15/bialorus-odmowa-rejestracji-kluczowych-rywali-lukaszenki>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

⁴Жириновский не исключил волнений в Белоруссии в случае победы Лукашенко, <https://ria.ru/20200804/1575358682.html>, (accessed:21.06.21).

Brezhnev's famous statement from the time of the Solidarity revolution that the Soviets “will not leave Poland in poverty”. This interview was both a signal to the West not to get involved in Belarus because it is a territory of special interest for Moscow, but also to the Belarusians themselves not to seek support “outside”. The Russian President combined this with information about the preparation of a Russian contingent of law enforcement ready to come to brotherly help. At the same time, however, he emphasised the need to listen to citizens. And his advice to the democratic forces was to act within the law, i.e. to seek political change on the terms set by Lukashenka. Combined with the decision announced at the same time by the Russian Finance Ministry to refinance \$1bn of Belarusian debt, this was a clear signal that Russia considered the “Abkhazia on steroids” scenario. As outlined by Maksim Samorukov, the analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Centre, the first condition was fulfilled, “The West is excluded from the settlement of the Belarusian crisis, its participation in what is happening is reduced to statements of solidarity with the protesters. The Belarusian leader flatly refused any mediation and dialogue and instead opened a case against its potential participants about an attempt to seize power. To avoid unnecessary temptations, Minsk's contacts with the West now go through Moscow. When Merkel tried to convey her position to Lukashenka, she had to do it through the Kremlin, which knows better what and how should be passed on to the Belarusian leadership”⁵. Consequently, according to Samorukov, “The best option for the Kremlin would be to turn Belarus into something like Abkhazia on steroids. In Sukhumi, protests happen every other day; presidents often change and in unpredictable ways. Still, this excess of democracy does not bother the Kremlin because Abkhazian foreign and defence policy is controlled from Moscow”⁶.

On the day of Putin's interview, exasperated by the return of the Wagnerists to Russia, Ukraine announced that it was joining the personal European sanctions against Belarus (introduced on August 11) and declared that it does not recognise the election result. As a result, Lukashenka has remained completely isolated and subject to Russian pressure.

The Kremlin was undecided on how to respond to events in Belarus. Previous experiments with “controlled revolutions” (what I termed the “Armenian model” above) proved encouraging. As Budzisz noted, “[Russia] did not initiate revolutionary changes in all of them, but was certainly a democratising factor in the political system of Abkhazia and Moldova. Which, of course, did not

⁵М. Саморуков, *Абхазия на стероидах. Какая стратегия у Кремля в Белоруссии*, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82644>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

⁶Ibid.

prevent Russia from maintaining and even strengthening its geostrategic control over these state organisms and its political control over the elites ruling them.”⁷

In the case of Belarus, the stakes were higher. The Kremlin authorities were aware of the mistakes made during two successive Revolutions of Dignity in Ukraine. The brutal pressure of the Kremlin on the Ukrainian elite, later the policy of annexation of Crimea and the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine combined with a wave of ruthless anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Russia and outside, and the continuous narrative about “Banderites as fascists” led to what appears to be a permanent change of the sympathy of the Ukrainians. Until the first decade of the 21st century, they considered Russians a friendly (or at least close) nation, and after the aggression in 2014, they became, on a mass scale, one of the most anti-Russian communities. It is characteristic that during the strongest wave of anti-Lukashenka protests, Russian politicians were constantly commenting on the fact that the protesting Belarusian citizens were not anti-Russian. Over time, the theme of so-called foreign inspiration became more and more prevalent in these statements, with particular reference to Poland and Lithuania. In contrast, criticism of the civil movement (even of its leaders) was very moderate.

Surprised by the scale of the protests, the Russians probed various scenarios for the development of the situation in Belarus, trying not to close any of the options for the future. Another highlight in the repertoire of Russian reactions to the Belarusian freedom movement was the meeting between Putin with Lukashenka in Sochi on September 14, 2020. It was preceded by visits by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin to Minsk on September 3 with a group of economic ministers and numerous meetings at the working level of the military and representatives of secret services. The meeting in Sochi, which gave rise to the production of numerous Internet memes illustrating Lukashenka as a humble supplicant, did not bring a solution to Russian hesitations towards Belarus. There was no joint communication or the usual press conference after the meeting. Nor was there a clear declaration of support from Moscow for the Belarusian dictator. Based on subsequent statements and information, it can be assumed that Lukashenka received an ultimatum from Putin with two key elements. The first element was an urgent demand to pacify the protests and at least imitate the social dialogue. The second was to create the prospect of a transfer of power in a controlled manner but with the possibility of dialogue with society. The prospect of a constitutional change and new elections should not be more than a few months away.

⁷M. Budzisz, *Iluzja wolnej Białorusi. Jak walcząc o demokrację można utracić ojczyznę*, Warszawa 2021, pp. 312- 313.

As optimal from the Russian point of view, this scenario is evidenced by the fact that the first consequence of the talks was a visit to Minsk by the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoygu. It was no secret that Shoygu believed that Lukashenka should resign as soon as possible, handing over power to Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin, “who spent his entire youth in Russian garrisons in Siberia and is a man for whom *Russkiy Mir* (TN: Russian World) are not just empty words”⁸. Conversely, the prospect of a change of power prompted Moscow to urgently secure its interests in the military field, which has always been a priority in relations with Minsk. The meeting in Sochi probably also resulted in the decision to officially inaugurate Lukashenka's presidency, held almost in secret on September 23, in a different mode from previous ceremonies of this kind (in a closed circle of guests) and in the shadow of another wave of demonstrations.⁹

Between August and December 2020, the authorities of the Russian Federation constantly urged Lukashenka to find a solution to the political crisis. At the same time, the waning wave of demonstrations, combined with a steady increase in the scope of internal terror in Belarus, made the dictator a relatively convenient temporary solution. Another crisis occurred in early October. On the one hand, the authorities brutally attacked demonstrators in Minsk and, on the other, on October 10, Lukashenka met with a group of imprisoned opponents of the regime, including Babaryka. Three days earlier, the authorities in Minsk issued an international arrest warrant for Tsikhanouskaya. It was also immediately recognised by the investigative bodies of the Russian Federation. It can be assumed that the situation may be normalised only on Lukashenka's terms and that the Coordination Council was to be excluded from the process of potential political talks, especially the Vilnius group centred around Tsikhanouskaya, who is increasingly evidently oriented towards deepening cooperation with Western countries.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the authorities in Minsk adopted an entirely Russian vision of fighting the West and created a threat from NATO countries as a strategy to justify increasing repression.

Three factors were of key importance for expanding the scope of Russian support. The first and presumably most important occurred to be the internal situation in Russia: the attempted poisoning of Alexei Navalny, international sanctions and protests and, above all, his return to Russia

⁸Ibid, p.336; cf. also the text in the MON-related Russian magazine *Московский комсомолец*: <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/09/01/scenarii-razvitiya-belorusskogo-politicheskogo-krizisa.html>, (accessed 21.06.21).

⁹K. Kłysiński, *Białoruś: inauguration in the shadow of demonstrations*, „Analizy OSW”, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2020-09-28/bialorus-inauguracja-w-cieniu-demonstracji>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

¹⁰Cf. statement by Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun during a special briefing at the Brussels Center, source: US Embassy in Belarus (<https://www.usembassy.gov/>), (accessed 21.06.21).

on January 17, 2021. The arrest and subsequent conviction of Navalny in a trumped-up trial sparked mass street protests. The Kremlin noticed significant similarities between the structure of protests in Belarus and Russia (support of specific social groups, a model of organising social protests based on internet messaging, a reach beyond the traditionally most active capital centres). It can be assumed that the extent of Russian support for Lukashenka changed fundamentally after January 23, 2021, i.e. after the huge wave of demonstrations in Russia. It was unfortunate that this coincided with the convening by the dictator of Belarus of the so-called All-Belarusian People's Assembly (1-12 February 2021). According to Lukashenka's promises from the meeting in Sochi, a draft of a new constitution was to be adopted during this Assembly, significantly limiting presidential power and changing the model of governance in Minsk to a parliamentary-presidential one. Then, in April 2021, a constitutional referendum and new elections were to be held. Although the democratic circles did not recognise the political legitimacy of the Assembly and Lukashenka himself, the adoption of the electoral calendar would have already fostered the revival of social activity and, in any case, could have been a significant step towards democratisation.

Meanwhile, the Assembly became an opportunity to demonstrate a series of pro-Russian gestures. Even the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Uladzimir Makey, who is regarded as a supporter of a liberal course, said that in the current situation, Belarus should consider amending its constitution, but only in part concerning the status of a neutral state. The authorities once again used the manoeuvre of postponing the announced constitutional reforms, declaring to hold a referendum in January 2022 along with local elections. In his statements at the Assembly, Lukashenka added that the process of introducing the new constitution would be complicated and lengthy. However, in his many hours-long speeches opening the ABPA session, he focused on the alleged threat from the West and thanked Russia for its support for Belarus.

Lukashenka's speeches at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly were in fact, a preparation for his next meeting with Putin. During the hours of talks in Krasnaya Polyana near Sochi on February 22, 2021, the topics of economic integration were primarily discussed. Moscow's pressure on the rapid transfer of power significantly weakened – both due to the case of Navalny and the fact that Lukashenka managed to pacify social protests. As analysts of the Centre for Eastern Studies wrote in their note summarising the meeting, “Both the very fact of organising a direct meeting between the two presidents and its clearly positive propaganda dimension indicate the Kremlin's decision to support Lukashenka politically and economically at the price of the only minor (though important for its image) concessions by Minsk, such as redirecting some fuel exports to Russian ports. **In the**

foreseeable future, Moscow relies on Lukashenka, who is isolated in the West, as the only effective guarantor of Belarus in the domination of the Russian Federation. The weakening of pressure on Minsk regarding changes in the constitution and integration of both countries results from the Kremlin's belief that mass protests by Belarusians against the rigging of elections were initiated and supported by Western countries, especially the USA, as part of the policy of regime change in the post-Soviet area and as an element of pressure on Russia”¹¹.

The second element that made Russia stop urging Belarus to change power was the conviction, highlighted in the quote above, that the Belarusian dictator, who is up against the wall politically and economically, is the best implementer of Moscow's integration scenario. While in the years 2014-2020, Lukashenka attempted to pursue a “multi-sectoral” policy and tried to expand the field of independence from Russia, since last autumn, he has found himself in a situation of total dependence. It could even be argued that every day Lukashenka remains in power reduces Belarus' sovereignty over Russia. Analysing integration processes, *thinktank.by* analyst Viktor Belyaev wrote that “in March-April the high intensity of bilateral relations continued and even increased. The emphasis was placed on military cooperation. The topic of roadmaps and the building of the Union State occupied a prominent place on the agenda. On April 2, Belarus celebrated the Unity Day of Belarus and Russia. The sensational joint FSB (Federal Security Service) and KGB (Committee for State Security) operation to uncover preparations for the coup d'état and assassination of Lukashenka further reinforced the post-August 2020 trends in bilateral relations. Regular joint meetings of ministries, joint military exercises, Russia's 50% share in the foreign trade turnover of Belarus, the domination of the Russian agenda and the Russian way of thinking in the Belarusian media space filled the Treaty on the Union State with real content”¹².

In the Kremlin's regard, Lukashenka's retention of power is currently the best guarantee of Russia's interests. The deepening of dependence by implementing subsequent integration roadmaps and increasing the Russian domination in the information and cultural space is an investment for the future. Russia carefully monitors the public mood in Belarus and the fact that, despite the repressions of the regime it supports, there was no apparent shift in public sympathy towards the West (according to FSB analysts, support is distributed as follows: 1/3 for Lukashenka, 1/3 for democratic forces and

¹¹K. Chawryło, K. Kłysiński, *Skazani na współpracę. Spotkanie prezydentów Rosji i Białorusi w Soczi*, „Analizy OSW”, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2021-02-23/skazani-na-wspolprace-spotkanie-prezydentow-rosji-i-bialorusi-w-soczi>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

¹²В. Беляев, *Интеграционной интенсификации Минска и Москвы не ожидается*, <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2021/06/18/integratsionnoy-intensifikatsii-minska-i-moskvy-ne-ozhidaetsya.html>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

1/3 undecided), prompts it to keep the dictator in power. The key dates defining the usefulness of Lukashenka for Russia are the parliamentary elections in the Russian Federation and the Zapad-2021 manoeuvres. In the event of elections, Putin does not want to risk even a shadow of the success of the “colour revolution” in a neighbouring country so as not to create a basis for activating the forces, as he calls it, of the non-systemic opposition in Russia¹³. The “Zapad-2021” manoeuvres are to be the final stage of integration of the Belarusian armed forces with the Russian army and a test of the use of Belarusian territory as a strategic hinterland of the Russian Federation. The Russians also want to test the possibility of using Belarusian territory as an operational base for aggressive actions against the Baltic States and Ukraine. Depending on the results of the exercises, they will (or will not) intensify pressure to establish a full-scale military base on Belarusian territory.

A separate issue appears to be the Russian desire to take full control of the Belarusian special services. They have long been the basis of the system of power created by Lukashenka. The Belarusian special services represent the best paid and most frequently purged part of the state structure. It is worth remembering that the dictator made several personnel reshuffles in the services in the pre-election period. Moreover, by entangling them in a spiral of violence against society, he has gained an additional factor of loyalty control. In turn, if Moscow wants to retain full control over Lukashenka's actions, it might be necessary to build a sufficiently strong faction loyal to Russia within the special services. Two high-profile cases from April and May 2021 should be considered from this angle. The first is discovering an alleged plot on the dictator's life, involving conversations between the well-known Minsk intellectual Aleksandr Feduta and lawyer Yuri Zenkovich. They were arrested in Moscow on suspicion of plotting with the Belarusian military and preparing for a coup d'état according to the scenario of the assassination of Egyptian President Sadat, who was killed by a unit marching in front of him during a parade on the grandstand. It does not appear that Feduta and Zenkovich were capable of any conspiracy. It can be further assumed that their only fault was the intellectual entertainment of fantasising about removing Lukashenka. However, the most significant thing in the whole story is that their arrest was made in Moscow due to a joint operation between the Russian FSB and the Belarusian KGB. There is also no doubt that the Russian side was the leading force in operation. The second, much more serious operation was very similar. It was the forced landing in Minsk, and the *de facto* hijacking, of a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius, followed by

¹³Vladimir Pastukhov's analysis of the similarities between the social bases built by Putin and Lukashenka regimes is remarkably interesting. In this context, freezing the situation in Belarus appears logical in view of the elections. Cf. В. Пастухов, *Революция отходит с Белорусского вокзала. Стратегия мирного протеста серьезно дискредитирована в Минске*, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/09/14/87084-revolutsiya-othodit-s-belorusskogo-vokzala>, (accessed 21.06.21).

the arrest of the well-known independent journalist Raman Pratasevich and his fiancée Sofia Sapega (a citizen of the Russian Federation). Again, all available evidence indicates that Russia took a leading part in the whole operation¹⁴.

I have too much respect for Russia's secret services to think that they would believe Lukashenka's stories about a Western conspiracy or about the fact that a plane with an alleged bomb on board had to land in Minsk when it was 10 minutes from the destination airport. The arrest a few days after the Minsk incident in St Petersburg, where the taxiing of a LOT plane was demonstratively interrupted, and the Open Russia activist Andrei Pivovarov was hauled from the plane, evidently indicates a coordinated action, i.e. a Russian source for both provocations. Although Lukashenka proudly claimed that he commissioned both operations, and the whole world was clearly relieved to focus on accusing the Minsk dictator, there is no doubt that one of the goals of all these operations was to test the mechanisms of cooperation between the secret services of both countries. Including the political importance and real power of the FSB, it was not collaboration but the management of the Belarusian component from the Lubyanka level. It is difficult to agree with the conclusions of OSW (the Centre for Eastern Studies) analysts, Kamil Kłysiński and Piotr Żochowski, who stated, "The publicity of the interaction of the KGB and FSB on Russian territory should be considered a warning signal sent by the special services to those involved in the fight against the regime in Minsk. Moving to Russia was considered by some opposition representatives as a way to avoid detention in Belarus and possibly get to the West. The operation performed in Moscow is intended to discourage Belarusian activists from operating in Russia, as they will be under the surveillance of the FSB"¹⁵. Russia wants complete freedom of action with regard to the Belarusian democratic forces as well. However, further discrediting Lukashenka and cutting off his last channels of communication with the Western world is undoubtedly in the interest of both Russia and Russian "siloviki".

Without a detailed analysis of the tools of Russian domination over Belarus, it is worth asking what goals Russia wants to achieve in the short and medium-term. Apparently, Lukashenka at the helm of the Belarusian state is not a Russian dream scenario.

It is worth quoting an interview by the influential politician, Deputy Speaker of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Konstantin Kosachev. Asked about the

¹⁴Cf. My text: *Terroryści z Lubyanki*, Warsaw Enterprise Institute, <https://wei.org.pl/2021/blogi/panstwo/jerzy-marek-nowakowski/terrorysci-z-lubianki/>, (accessed 21.06.21).

¹⁵K. Kłysiński, P. Żochowski, *FSB ujawnia próbę „zamachu” na Łukaszenkę*, „Analizy OSW”, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2021-04-19/fsb-ujawnia-probe-zamachu-na-lukaszenke>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

prospects for the reunification of Russia and Belarus in October 2020, he said, “A union state in such a supranational form will be created only when the people of both countries accept this structure. Let us remember how Germany was united. At that point, it was absurd or not absurd to ask the question: will Bonn now make decisions for Berlin? If we had asked all these questions then, there would have been no German reunification. This is not important. The bottom line is that people in both countries at the time really wanted to live in one country. If Russians and Belarusians wish to live in one country in exactly the same way, they have the full right to create that country in the form of a Union State with all the attributes of that state. For now, this wish is there, but not yet in 100% form. Apparently, Russia and Belarus are cautious about the concept and phenomenon of national sovereignty in their countries. We have described it thoughtfully in our Constitution, which has just been drafted. (...) I would definitely not ask questions that are ahead of time and the state of affairs”¹⁶.

In addition, later in the interview, Kosachev quite clearly indicates the need to remove Lukashenka. Therefore, it can be assumed that a significant part of the Russian political elite is sceptical about the concept of full unification with Belarus. The political and economic costs of such a union would be too high. Since the adoption of the new Russian constitution, Belarus has ceased to be perceived as a convenient tool for resolving the succession crisis after Putin's second term in office. Currently, it is more about the colonial model, i.e. the political and economic status of a satellite fully integrated with the military field. Paradoxically, Lukashenka, who was a hindrance to integration earlier, defending his personal power and position, is now striving for closer ties with Russia, seeing them as his only chance to stay at the helm. One should fear that he is close to accepting the vision of “another Kadyrov”, a big government on its own territory, dependent in fact and form on the Kremlin.

What are the possible and welcome (also from the point of view of Polish interests) scenarios for the development of the situation in Belarus? It seems that there are at least four political scenarios for Poland's eastern neighbour at the moment: two very bad and two moderately optimistic.

The first of the dark scenarios is also the dream scenario of a large proportion of Polish commentators. Fortunately, its probability is very low. In this variant of the development of events, there is another wave of mass social protests directed against Lukashenka in Belarus. Some military and security forces join the demonstrators. Lukashenka flees the country; power is assumed by democrats returning from exile and who declare a desire to join the European Union and NATO.

¹⁶К. Косачев, *О перспективах интеграции РФ и Беларуси*, <http://svop.ru/main/34620/>, (accessed 21.06.21).

Great? Not necessarily. Such a course of events would almost certainly lead to open or, more likely, covert Russian intervention. The first possible reactions are suspension of the supply of raw materials, blockade of the border, and possibly the stoppage of the nuclear power plant in Astravets. Cold housing and gigantic queues for petrol resulted in an electoral victory in Lithuania in the early 1990s for the post-communists, who promised to improve relations with Russia. In Belarus, it would be the same phenomenon, only on a much larger scale. Moreover, Belarusians do not have an uncompromising anti-Russian attitude typical of Lithuania of that period. It would be a matter of weeks before groups demanding “brotherly assistance” from Moscow would emerge. It could end with the return of Lukashenka and the implementation of the second of the dark scenarios.

The latter is, unfortunately, very likely. Briefly, this can be described as the “Chechenisation” of Belarus. The dictator of Minsk, who is weakening and lacking real popular support, will give up the last elements of the sovereignty of the country he rules in exchange for more political and financial support from Moscow. Belarus will become part of the so-called Union State (which on paper has already existed for two decades), i.e. *de facto* annexed to Russia while retaining some elements of internal autonomy. An example of such a political structure (convenient for Moscow, used from time to time as a scarecrow for neighbours and citizens, and at the same time devoid of any real subjectivity) is Chechnya, ruled by Ramzan Kadyrov.

There are two relatively optimistic scenarios. Both must arise in dialogue with Moscow. Only Putin has the tools to remove Lukashenka from power, and this, in turn, is a necessary condition for any change. The best option, but with a low degree of probability, would be an agreement between the Kremlin and the democratic circles in Belarus. Such talks are, of course, possible, but establishing the terms of an agreement seems extremely difficult. Russia must demand that democratic circles dissociate themselves from the West and refrain from holding to account the people responsible for the regime's crimes. This scenario was possible before October last year. It also appeared to be the scenario preferred by the Russian side. It can be roughly described as the aforementioned vision of “Abkhazia on steroids”.

However, unless there is a clear shift in the sympathy of Belarusian citizens towards opponents of the regime, either as a result of overly repressive actions by the authorities or as a result of the deteriorating economic situation, Moscow will try to implement the fourth scenario – the 'Kazakh' scenario. It involves a controlled seizure of power by the people of the current regime and leaving Lukashenka as the 'patron' of power, i.e. as the Chairman of the Security Council or the People's

Assembly, or some other body. Certainly, this would no longer be a dictatorship, which, in turn, implies a gradual weakening of Lukashenka's influence and preventing the transfer of power to one of the sons (which appears to be the dictator's goal).

The transfer of power in such a scenario would occur through a decision of the existing political institutions at the time of the local elections (next January), and only after adequate preparation of the public and the state institutions would it be legalised through elections.

Certainly, the opposition and Russia's foreign partners should insist on holding new elections as soon as possible, and that international observers scrutinise them. Nevertheless, even this fourth (and in my view the most likely) scenario of events can be viewed as nearly optimistic. Any change in Belarus, if it is to gain relative popular support, must be founded on expanding the field of freedom – whether by allowing representatives of civil society to participate in the elections or broadening the scope of freedom of expression and abandoning the extremely repressive model that underpins the current regime. In turn, due to the political activation of Belarusian civil society, the appearance of gaps in the uniformly oppressive model of power would lead to its disintegration. Finally, considering the tendency to deepen the crisis of both the model of power and the economy in Russia, Belarus (as well as Ukraine and the countries of the South Caucasus) can expect a much better international situation in 7-10 years.

Therefore, it is extremely important and inconvenient for Russia to keep the Belarusian issue at the centre of the international agenda. The Belarusian situation was discussed both at the NATO summit and the meeting Joe Biden-Vladimir Putin in Geneva. The US and Russian Presidents appear to have crossed their “red lines” on the Belarus issue. Indeed, these red lines seem to lie somewhere between the Abkhazian and Kazakh scenarios. In September 2021, after the Russian elections and the “Zapad-2021” manoeuvres, it will probably become evident which political scenario Moscow prefers.

Regardless of the way the situation develops, it is necessary to call for the immediate release of political prisoners by Lukashenka and a halt to the devastation of the economy, especially in the non-state sector. In talks with Moscow, however, these two issues must be continually recalled, emphasising that it is also in the Kremlin's interest to resolve them.

Military strategic integration and cooperation between Belarus and Russia

Introduction

Military-strategic integration within the Union State is one of the top priorities in Russia's policy towards Belarus and one of the most advanced spheres of cooperation between these states.

During Lukashenka's long rule, Belarus became geopolitically heavily dependent on Russia. Moscow's strategic investment in Belarus is so eminent that Russia will not allow Belarus to withdraw from military cooperation. Therefore, Moscow will use any method to avoid losing control. It is also connected with the need to maintain the authoritarian rule in Belarus, as it creates the conditions for preserving and extending Russia's strategic influence.

As an expert from the Centre for Eastern Studies, Andrzej Wilk, rightly noted in his report *Rosyjska armia białoruska praktyczne aspekty integracji wojskowej Białorusi i Rosji* [Russian Belarusian Army: Practical Aspects of the Military Integration of Belarus and Russia], “In the 2010s, Minsk lost the remnants of its independent defence capabilities and completely ceded the initiative to Moscow in this regard, remaining content with the appearance of sovereignty”¹⁷. It should be emphasised that Wilk's report is a good study, analysing the directions of military cooperation between Belarus and Russia and the state of the defence system of the Republic of Belarus.

There is no doubt that, following the crisis in Belarus, the integration processes have been subjected to new political impulses. For example, in October 2020, during a meeting of the joint council of the Ministries of Defence of Belarus and Russia, plans for using a collective regional group of troops were updated due to changes in the military-political situation. At the time, it was also predicted that this group would expand by 2025¹⁸. The plans include modalities, mechanisms of action

¹⁷A. Wilk, *Rosyjska armia białoruska praktyczne aspekty integracji wojskowej Białorusi i Rosji*, OSW, Warszawa 2021.

¹⁸Военные Беларуси и России утвердили план сотрудничества на 2021 год, <https://cis.minsk.by/news/16786/voennye-belarusi-i-rossii-utverdili-plan-sotrudnichestva-na-2021-god>, (accessed 10.04.2021).

and regions of dislocation of units and military groupings of a regional group of troops. On December 10, 2020, Alyaksandr Lukashenka signed updated plans for the use of this formation¹⁹.

On March 3, 2021, for the first time in allied relations, Belarus and Russia signed the “Strategic Partnership Program between the Ministries of Defence of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation”, planned for the next five years. The programme is intended to improve strategic cooperation between the parties²⁰, and its signing took place on February 22, 2021, almost immediately after the Lukashenka-Putin meeting in Sochi. The content of this programme, like other documents, on military matters, remains secret.

Undoubtedly, this is also linked to the relatively aggressive declarations by the Belarusian authorities about threats from the West and Lukashenka's desire to demonstrate the importance and value to Moscow of maintaining his regime. It is also necessary to take into account the considerable involvement of Belarus in Russian geostrategic projects, which in one way or another would determine the dynamics of strategic cooperation. It is worth mentioning that Belarus is:

- an observer state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation;
- a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation;
- a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States Anti-Terrorism Center (CIS ATC, Center);
- a co-founder of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force;
- a part of a joint system of regional air defence and a regional grouping of forces with Russia.

A separate role is performed by the Republic of Belarus's membership of the Eurasian Union and the Union of Belarus and Russia. In addition, there are elements of the Russian military infrastructure on Belarusian territory:

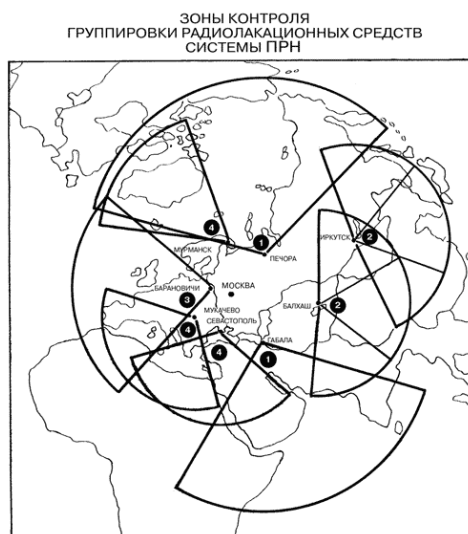
- the “Volga” type radar station in Hantsavichy near Baranovichi. It is part of a missile attack warning system (range 4,800. km). The ultra-long waves of “Volga” have a range of 10,000 kilometres. It can also track certain types of space objects. It is part of the Russian Unified

¹⁹ Лукашенко одобрил план применения региональной группировки войск Белоруссии и России, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/10218977>, (accessed 10.04.2021).

²⁰ Министерство Обороны Республики Беларусь, <https://t.me/modmilby/3858>, (accessed 10.04.2021).

Space Warfare Control System “Kupol” (*Единая Космическая Система обнаружения и боевого управления (ЕКС), „Купол”*).

Figure: 1. Russian missile attack warning system



Source: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2005/02/14/dnepr/>, (accessed:10.04.2021).

- 43rd Communications Center in Vileyka, Minsk Region, which supports Fleet Headquarters communications with Russian nuclear submarines around the world. It is staffed by 250 Russian soldiers and officers.

The 1995 agreement signed by the governments of Belarus and Russia for a 25-year lease of facilities in Hancevichi and Vileyka expires in 2021. However, there is no doubt that Lukashenka will sign documents extending the operation of these facilities on the territory of Belarus.

In this situation, the propaganda declarations by Uladzimir Makey (Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus) that Belarus should abandon the status of a state striving for neutrality ²¹(Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus) have no basis in reality. These words can only make sense if Belarus completely renounces its military autonomy and integrates into the Russian defence system, with Belarusian servicemen taking a direct part in Russian military operations. In fact, Belarus would have returned to the pre-1991 situation.

²¹Макей: закрепленное в Конституции стремление к нейтралитету не соответствует текущей ситуации, <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/makej-zakreplennoe-v-konstitutsii-stremlenie-k-nejtralitetu-ne-sootvetstvuet-tekuschej-situatsii-428284-2021/>, (accessed: 11.04.2021).

The presented article analyses the key directions of the military integration of Belarus and Russia and its legal structure.

I. Structure and elements of cooperation and military integration of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation

Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia and the directions of its development are coordinated and implemented based on a number of strategic plans and programmes. These include:

1. “Plan of International Military Cooperation”.
2. “Plan of cooperation between the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus and the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation”. This plan takes into account the schedule and structure of military exercises.
3. “Plan of joint activities for 2019- 2021 of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus and the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation to protect the Union State”. The plan includes preparations for the joint military exercise “Zapad- 2021”.
4. “Plan of joint actions to ensure the functioning of a regional group of troops of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation”.
5. “Strategic Partnership Programme of the Ministries of Defence of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation for 2021- 2026”.
6. “Programme of military and technical cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus for 2014-2020 (concerns cooperation [integration] of the two countries' armament complexes: for example, modernisation in 2019-2020 of the basic T-72B tank to the T-72B3 level and supply of Yak-130 training-combat aircraft (12 units) and SU-30CM fighters (12 units))”.

These programmes describe dates and plans for military exercises, meetings of defence ministers (joint meetings), forms of training Belarusian military personnel in Russia, costs of modernisation and development of military infrastructure. They also address cooperation in the area of the arms industry.

In addition to these documents, an updated version of the “Military Doctrine of the Union State” was adopted. It should be recalled that the Doctrine was first signed in 2001, while in 2017, a draft of a new “Military Doctrine of the Union State” was created, but President Lukashenka refused to sign it at the time. Today, ratification of the new Doctrine will mean further ideological and strategic subordination of Belarus to Russian interests.

It is also worth noting that the latest document, “Strategic Partnership Programme of the Ministries of Defence of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation for 2021- 2026”, was signed on March 3, 2021, i.e. practically immediately after the meeting between Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Sochi on February 22, 2021. This is the first such program that defines the long-term perspective of deepening military integration and the rapid development of Russian military infrastructure in Belarus. There is no doubt that this document is the result of concessions made by Lukashenka in exchange for support for his authoritarian regime. The content of this document and many others is not available to the public, but on March 16, 2021, the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus announced some of its details. They concern the establishment of three training centres:

- A joint combat training centre of the Air Force and Air-Defence Forces is planned to be established on the territory of the Republic of Belarus. Its main objective is joint training of Su- 30SM aircraft crews, training Belarusian specialists to work on modern anti-aircraft missile systems, which are equipped by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, and joint implementation of combat training tasks.
- A combat training centre is planned in the Russian Federation for the joint training of Land Forces. Its primary purpose is to train subunits of mechanised and armoured troops of both countries using modern techniques based on the combat experience of the Russian Armed Forces.
- A training centre is envisaged in the Kaliningrad Region on the basis of the Baltic Fleet and the Western Military District. This direction is due to the possibility of training units of the

Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus with the use of military units of the marines of the Russian Federation²².

The military education of Belarusian officers in the operation of Russian military universities is systemic. According to the Defence Ministry, around 400 Belarusian soldiers study at Russian universities every year²³. Thus, over the years of cooperation in the field of military education between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation, about 10,000 Belarusian officers and military specialists have received education at Russian military educational institutions (not including training at universities of the border troops, which are under the Federal Security Service of Russia).

This is important not only technically or militarily but also ideologically. It merges the ideological orientation of the Belarusian military with the Russian system of world view and promotes acceptance of the strategic model adopted by Russia, in which Belarus is part of the joint strategic space. It is worth noting that practically all representatives of the command of the Belarusian armed forces have graduated or received training at Russian military universities.

²²Министры обороны Беларуси и России договорились о создании трёх учебно-боевых центров, https://belnaviny.by/politika/ministry-oborony-belarusi-i-rossii-dogovorilis-o-sozdanii-tryox-uchebno-boevyx-centrov.html?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop, (accessed: 15.04.2021).

²³Военная академия Беларуси с 1995 года обучила более 1,5 тыс. иностранцев, <https://www.belta.by/special/society/view/voennaja-akademija-belarusi-s-1995-goda-obuchila-bolee-15-tys-inostrantsev-340001-2019/>, (accessed: 15.04.2021).

Name	Place of birth	Year of birth	Degree	Position	University in Russia	Year University graduations
Alexander Volfovich	Kazan, Russia (RSFSR)	1967	Lieutenant General	Secretary of the Council of the RB	Moscow Higher Military Command School Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation	1988 2008
Viktor Khrenin	Belarus (BSSR)	1971	Lieutenant General	Minister of the Defence of the RB	the Minsk Suvorov Military School Frunze Higher Combined Arms Command School	1988 1992
Andrey Zhuk	Belarus (BSSR)	1969	Major General	Deputy Minister of Defence of the RB	Moscow Higher Military Command School	1990
Sergei Simonenko	Belarus (BSSR)	1968	Major General	Deputy Minister of Defence for Armament	Moscow Higher Military Command School	1989

Andrei Burdyko	Belarus (BSSR)	1973	Major General	Deputy Minister of Defence for Logistics of the RB	the Volsk Higher School of the Military Academy of Logistics and Transport	1994	2003
Leonid Kasinsky	Belarus (BSSR)	1973	Major General	Head of the Main Directorate of Ideology	Yekaterinburg Force Command School of Artillery	1992	
Viktor Gulevich	Belarus (BSSR)	1969	Major General	Chief of the General Staff of the RB	Moscow Higher Military Command School	1990	
Igor Demidenko	Belarus (BSSR)	1971	Major General	Commander of the Western Operational Command	Leningrad Higher Combined Arms Command School	1992	
Vadim Denisenko	Hungary	1967	Major General	Commander of the Special Operations Forces	Leningrad Higher Combined Arms Command School	1988	

Source: own elaboration.

The creation of more training centres means that Russian specialists will take an active part in the training of Belarusian servicemen. Expanding training and preparation programmes will also deepen integration in the military zone. In the future, this may lead to Belarusian military personnel becoming involved in Russian military operations. It cannot be ruled out that there will be a high probability of a military merger to optimise the regional defence and security system. Either way, a revival of integration processes can be observed in the military sphere.

II. Development of the Regional Group of Forces (RGF). Situation in 2021

The Regional Group of Forces (RGF) of Belarus and Russia is a basic element of military and strategic integration. Within the framework of the group, processes of shaping a common strategic space and defence concept as well as modernising armaments (including on the Belarusian side) and military infrastructure in the Belarusian area are implemented.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the RGF has been considered a legal and political construct, allowing Lukashenka to receive permanent support for his rule. The RGF evolved into a serious political and strategic project that makes Belarus directly dependent on Russia and extends the latter's geopolitical influence.

Integration in the field of defence was initiated by the “Treaty on the Formation of the Community of Russia and Belarus” (1996), the “Treaty on the Union of Belarus and Russia”, as well as the “Charter of the Union of Belarus and Russia” (1997) and the “Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia” (1999)²⁴. The latter declared the creation of a regional grouping of forces²⁵.

The most important documents concerning the directions of development of military cooperation, including a regional group of troops (forces) were two treaties, “Contract between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on military cooperation” and “The agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on joint ensuring regional security in the military sphere”. They were signed in 1997, ratified in 1998 and entered into force in 1999.

These documents defined the strategic directions of military integration and created the legal basis for the creation of a regional group of troops, assuming:

²⁴The legal basis for the signing of the integration treaties became the 1995 referendum, in which one of the key questions was: Do you support the actions of the President of Belarus aimed at economic integration with the Russian Federation? (Votes “for” were cast by 83% of the voters). For formal reasons, it is worth noting that economic integration did not include political and military integration.

²⁵*Договор о создании Союзного государства*, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/901756243>, (accessed: 15.04.2021).

- creation of a regional group of troops (forces), planning its use and operational and material supply,
- unification of the system of directing a regional group of troops (forces),
- maintenance and use of the military infrastructure facilities of both countries, regarding the economic capabilities of the parties and the military-political situation,
- preparation of military personnel,
- and preparation of reserve and creation of material resources²⁶.

Following the concluded treaties, a regional group of troops consists of control bodies and troops of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, as well as other military formations of the parties, planned to be used according to one concept and plan. They are located in peacetime or deployed in a region during a period of emergency in order to repel possible aggression^{27, 28}.

It is worth noting that, as of today, all strategic objectives related to the functioning of a regional group of troops (forces) have been fulfilled. The military integration of the two states took place quite dynamically, sometimes even faster than the economic-political integration (regardless of the regular Belarusian-Russian gas, oil or information disputes). Therefore, the problems in economic relations between Minsk and Moscow have never affected military integration. The only limitation to this process is the reluctance of Lukashenka to create a full-scale Russian military base in Belarus.

It should be emphasised that Belarus is of primary geopolitical and only secondarily of economic importance to Russia. It is precisely military cooperation and integration that is the key instrument for keeping Belarus within the zone of Russian control. In other words, in relation to Belarus, Russia is operating a strategy of conquest that can be described as 'peaceful military occupation'.

II.I. Development of infrastructure

The development of infrastructure and the material and technical supply of a regional group of troops is implemented on the basis of a number of joint plans and programmes through which the military infrastructure in Belarus is modernised.

²⁶Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о военном сотрудничестве (с изменениями на 17 декабря 2018 года), <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/901796830>, (accessed:15.04.2021).

²⁷Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о совместном обеспечении региональной безопасности в военной сфере, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/901796828>, (accessed:15.04.2021).

²⁸Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о совместном обеспечении региональной безопасности в военной сфере, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/901796828>, (accessed:12.04.2021).

Since 2000, the “Plan of joint actions to ensure the functioning of a regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation” has been adopted annually (it refers to the financing of activities related to the functioning of the RGF mainly from the budget of the Union State). Meanwhile, in 2008-2022, the programme of the Union State “Improvement of infrastructure planned for joint use in the interests of a regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation” was also implemented and \$30 million was allocated for these purposes. Then, in 2018, another programme was adopted: “Improvement of military infrastructure facilities planned for joint use to supply a regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation for 2018- 2021”. For the purpose of their modernisation, \$20 million was allocated from the budget of the Union State. According to the assumptions of the document, the modernisation will concern:

- air force control and air defence systems;
- 7 aviation infrastructure facilities on the territory of Belarus (including two airports);
- and 28 military infrastructure facilities²⁹.

From 2016 to 2020, the programme “Development and improvement of a unified system of technical railway security in the region” was also implemented. This was to enhance the readiness and efficiency of the railway hubs for the operation of a regional grouping of forces. The programme had a budget of \$24 million³⁰.

The development of a unified RGF control and command is also an important element. Since 2011, every four years, the Supreme State Council of the Union State adopts strictly secret resolutions “On planning the use of a regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation³¹. This document defines the structure and nature of the operation of the RGF, as well as the structure and function of the United Command of the RGF, headed by the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus, General Oleg Belokonev (he held this position until 2019). Regular RGF United Command exercises have been held since 2015. The last such

²⁹Совершенствование и содержание объектов военной инфраструктуры, планируемых к совместному использованию в интересах обеспечения региональной группировки войск (сил) Республики Беларусь и Российской Федерации, <https://soyuz.by/projects/ldfklr/programma-sovershenstvovanie-obektov-voennoy-infrastruktura-planiruemih-k-sovmestnomu-ispolzovaniyu-v-interesah-obespecheniya-regionalnoy-gruppirovki-voysk-sil-respubliki-belarus-i-rossiyskoy-federacii-na-2018-2021-gg>, (accessed 20.04.2021).

³⁰Программа „Развитие и совершенствование единой системы технического прикрытия железных дорог региона” на 2016- 2020 гг., <https://soyuz.by/projects/ldfklr/programma-razvitie-i-sovershenstvovanie-edinoj-sistemy-tehnicheskogo-prikrytiya-zheleznih-dorog-regiona-na-2016-2020-gg>, (accessed: 20.04.2021).

³¹Постановление Высшего Государственного Совета Союзного государства от 25 февраля 2016 г. N 5 “О планировании применения региональной группировки войск (сил) Республики Беларусь и Российской Федерации”, <http://base.garant.ru/71356778/>, (accessed 20.04.2021).

exercise took place from 8 to 12 February 2021 in Minsk. It was a key preparatory element of the “Zapad- 2021” military exercise.

In 2011, the agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus “On the creation and functioning of a unified communications system of a regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation” of January 19, 2008, entered into force. The Agreement envisaged the creation of a joint communication system of a regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation (called joint communication system) to ensure the exchange of all kinds of information in the control system of a regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation.

The joint communication system is an organisational and technical combination of part of the forces and means of communication of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. It is intended for joint use by a regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation³².

A very important document that deepened the integration processes within the framework of the operation of the RGF was the “Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Belarus on joint technical support of a regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus” (ratified in 2017). To some extent, this agreement can be seen as compensation on the Belarusian side for not agreeing to the deployment of a Russian military base. According to the document, technical support to a regional grouping of troops (forces) is a set of activities aimed at:

- supplying a regional grouping of troops (forces) with armaments and military equipment, missiles and ammunition, military-technical property;
- organising operations and repairs of armaments, military equipment, missiles and ammunition and military-technical property;
- and providing technical and specialised training for personnel.

Special attention should be paid to Article 7 of this agreement, “In the period of a direct threat of aggression, the additional provision of weapons and military and other equipment intended for the Russian part of a regional grouping of troops (forces) may be transferred to the stationary material-technical base of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus”³³. According to the clarification, “The entry into force of the Agreement will reduce the time needed for the restoration of arms and military

³²*Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о создании и функционировании объединенной системы связи региональной группировки (сил) Республики Беларусь и Российской Федерации*, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/902121025>, (accessed:20.04.2021).

³³*Ibid*

equipment of units and formations of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus, which are part of a regional group of forces”³⁴.

This means that in a situation of increased tension in relations between Russia and the West, Russian troops may be deployed on Belarusian territory for the duration of the tension and the “aggressive behaviour” of Western countries. This can also be used directly by Moscow to interfere in the internal affairs of Belarus. In fact, it already happened during the political crisis, when Russia prepared a special “reserve of forces to support Belarus”³⁵.

In order to implement the tasks of controlling and functioning of the RGF, the “Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Belarus on mutual exchange of geospatial information between the armed forces of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus” was signed (agreement dated October 25, 2019, entered into force on July 14, 2020). On the basis of this agreement, the parties create a joint geospatial data bank (data on places and objects located on the ground, underground, in the atmosphere and in space around the Earth). One bank is to operate on the territory of Belarus, the other in Russia, but according to the agreement, the data banks are created based on unified technologies³⁶.

II.II. Structure and military exercises of the Regional Group of Troops

The tactical nucleus of the regional grouping of troops consists of military units of the North-Western Command of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and 20th Guards Combined Arms Army, part of the Western Military District of the Russian Federation.

Conducted under the RGF, military exercises are held every 2 to 3 years. Examples are the “Union Shield” drills, which take place on Russian territory, and the “Zapad” exercise, conducted on Belarusian territory. The first, relatively large exercise of the RGF – “Union Shield” – was held in 2006 in Belarus (with 8,000 soldiers participating), followed by 2011 (12,000 soldiers), 2015 (8,000 soldiers) and the last in 2019 (12,000 soldiers). Whereas manoeuvres „Zapad” were as follows: “Zapad- 2009” (12 thousand soldiers), “Zapad- 2013” (9 600 soldiers), “Zapad- 2017” (13 thousand

³⁴*Соглашение между Правительством Российской Федерации и Правительством Республики Беларусь о совместном техническом обеспечении региональной группировки войск (сил) Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь*, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/456039041>, (accessed 20.04.2021).

³⁵*Путин заявил о создании резерва силовиков для Белоруссии*, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/08/2020/5f478b809a7947e8079f1cb7>, (accessed 20.04.2021).

³⁶*Соглашение между Правительством Российской Федерации и Правительством Республики Беларусь о взаимном обмене геопрограмственной информации между вооруженными силами Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь от 25 октября 2019 года*, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202007170012?index=8&rangeSize=1>, (accessed: 20.04.2021).

soldiers) and “Zapad- 2021”. The details and schedule of this year's exercise “Zapad- 2021” are not yet known. Putin declared that “new approaches to the use of the RGF involving technology and equipment with elements of artificial intelligence will be refined”³⁷.

II.III. RGF exercises

Union Shield	2006	8 thousand people
Zapad	2009	12 thousand people
Union Shield	2011	12 thousand people
Zapad	2013	9 600 people
Union Shield	2015	8 thousand people
Zapad	2017	13 thousand people
Union Shield	2019	13 thousand people
Zapad	2021	n.a.

Source: own elaboration.

This year's exercise is planned for the RGF “Zapad- 2021”. The details and plan of this year's military exercises are not public, but it is assumed that the following tasks will be carried out:

- testing the functioning of the RGF joint air defence system and verify its effectiveness,
- evaluating the functionality and operational activities of the RGF Unified Command.

In recent years, military RGF exercises have become increasingly intense due to their nature, the number of military personnel and equipment. Their scenarios are overtly anti-Western in nature.

³⁷М. Ходаренок, *От “Кавказа” на “Запад”*: главные военные учения 2021 года, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2020/12/29/13420538.shtml>, (accessed: 20.04.2021).

This applies in particular to exercises “Zapad- 2017” and “Zapad- 2021”. The latter will take place in new political conditions and a highly charged geopolitical situation.

III. Joint Air Defence System

The Joint Air Defence System (JADS) represents another level of deepened integration in the military sphere. Initially, in the 1990s, the idea of creating JADS was pursued within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States as a general security system; however, at the beginning of the 21st century, Russia began to insist on creating a separate Belarusian-Russian system.

In 2009, the “ Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on joint protection of external border of the Union State in airspace and creation of the joint regional air defence system of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus” was signed³⁸.

The JADS was to include formations and military units of the parties located on the territory of the Republic of Belarus, the Kaliningrad Special Region and the western regions of the Russian Federation. The joint combat forces consisted of airborne units (5), anti-aircraft missile batteries (10), radio technical units (5) and a unit specialised in electronic warfare (1)³⁹. The JADS was to be headed in rotation by the commander of the Air Force and Air Defence of one of the parties, appointed by joint decree of the Presidents of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on the proposal of the defence ministers of both countries. Whereas, coordination of joint activities of formations and military units assigned to the air defence of the JADS should be directed from the central command post of the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Air Force. In times of emergency, a joint command within the regional command of the force grouping of the two countries is established to direct the air defence of the JADS. The JADS is to be headed in rotation by the commander of the Air Force and Air Defence of one of the parties, appointed by joint decree of the Presidents of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on the proposal of the defence ministers of both countries⁴⁰.

On February 13, 2012, Lukashenka approved by Decree No. 65 the “Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on joint protection of external border of the Union

³⁸*Соглашение между Российской Федерации и Республикой Беларусь о совместной охране внешней границы Союзного государства воздушном пространстве и создании Единой региональной системы противовоздушной обороны Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь от 3 февраля 2009 года (ратифицировано Федеральным законом от 27.12.2009 №369-ФЗ, вступило в силу 16 марта 2012 года), <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/902217225>, (accessed: 21.06.21).*

³⁹*ЕПС ПВО: старт, растянувшийся на годы, <https://www.belvpo.com/57695.html/>, (accessed:21. 04.2021).*

⁴⁰*А. Алесин, Москва разрешила Минску покомандовать единой системой ПВО, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/abroad/belorussia/moskva-razreshila-minsku-pokomandovat-edinoj-sistemoj-pvo.d?id=62328967>, (accessed 21.04.2021).*

State in airspace and creation of the joint regional air defence system of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus”. In 2013, the commander of the JADS was General Oleg Dvigalev, Commander of the Air Force and Air Defence Forces of the Republic of Belarus (2013- 2017). In 2017, General Igor Golub – commander of the Air Force and Air Defence Forces of the Republic of Belarus – assumed the post of the JADS commander.

In 2016, the JADS was officially recognised as operational, which translated into the implementation of joint: combat and operational duty and military training⁴¹. In 2017, the “Protocol on Amendments and Additions to the Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on the Joint Protection of the External Borders of the Union State in the Airspace and the Establishment of a Joint Regional Air Defence System of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus” of February 3, 2009, was ratified.

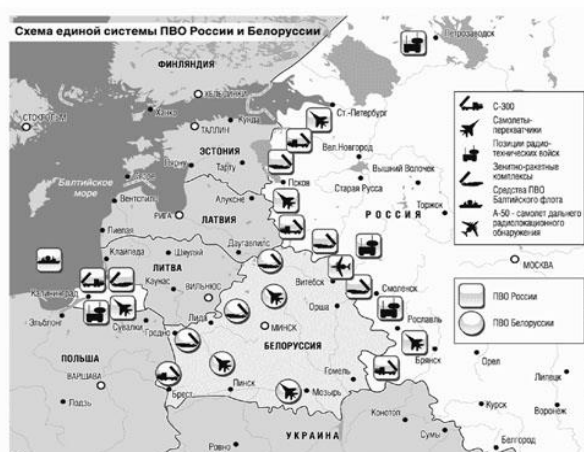


Рис. 4.2. Схема единой системы ПВО России и Белорусии

Figure 2. Diagram of the joint regional air defence system of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, source: <https://topwar.ru/110974-nachalas-sovmestnaya-shtabnaya-trenirovka-edinoy-sistemy-pvo-rossii-i-belorusii.html>), (accessed 21.04.2021).

The main content of the changes introduced in the 2009 Agreement is replacing the term “period of threat” with “period of imminent threat of aggression”. The latter term is interpreted as a military-political situation in which Russia and/or Belarus may be attacked by a foreign country or group of countries”⁴². As the document reads, “a period of emergency is a period of varying length that usually

⁴¹Ю. Зверев, *Зачем Белорусии и России единая система ПВО?*, <https://eurasia.expert/zachem-belarusi-i-rossii-edinaya-sistema-pvo/>, (accessed 21.04.2021).

⁴²*Соглашение между Российской Федерации и Республикой Беларусь о совместной охране внешней границы Союзного государства воздушном пространстве и создании Единой региональной системы противовоздушной обороны Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь (с изменениями на 2 ноября 2016 года)*, (accessed: 21.04.2021).

precedes the outbreak of war. It is characterised by an extreme deterioration of the international situation and antagonism between potential adversaries. The period of emergency serves to increase the combat readiness of the armed forces, their strategic deployment and the mobilisation of the economy to military needs”⁴³.

The changes introduced in this agreement expand the scope and possibilities of Russia's operations in the region, as is also evidenced by Part III of this document, which deals with the possibility for Russian air forces to operate in Belarusian airspace, “Officers of the air defence service of one of the Parties shall be taken to the air to perform combat tasks in the airspace of the other Party on the basis of an agreed decision of the duty officer of the Command Centre of the Air and Space Forces of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the duty officer of the Central Command Post of the Air and Space Forces of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus”⁴⁴. This means that in the event of a “threat” or “combat alert”, Russia can send its own air units without additional political authorisation from Belarus.

The first JADS command staff exercise took place in 2017 and the first JADS military exercise (“Regional Security- 2018”) in 2018. They covered the practical aspects of how the JADS operates in a combat situation⁴⁵.

During the political crisis in Belarus in 2020, the Ministries of Defence of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus signed in Minsk (in October 2020) the “Decree on joint protection of the external border of the Union State in the airspace with the Russian Federation”. The content of this document is not known, nor is its duration⁴⁶. However, it can be assumed with a high degree of probability that it concerns the deepening of integration within the JADS.

⁴³А. Лесин, *Единая система ПВО: старая песня о главном*, <https://www.belrynok.by/2017/08/14/edinaya-sistema-pvo-staraya-pesnya-o-glavnom/>, (accessed 21.04.2021).

⁴⁴„Подъем воздух дежурных по противовоздушной обороне экипажей одной Стороны для решения задач боевого дежурства в воздушном пространстве друго Стороны осуществляется по согласованному решению оперативного дежурного Центра управления Воздушно-космических сил Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации и оперативного дежурного центрального командного пункта Военно-воздушных сил и войск противовоздушной обороны Вооруженных Сил Республики Беларусь”, cited. from *Соглашение между Российской Федерации и Республикой Беларусь о совместной охране внешней границы Союзного государства воздушном пространстве и создании Единой региональной системы противовоздушной обороны Российской Федерации и Республики Беларусь от 3 февраля 2009 года (ратифицировано Федеральным законом от 27.12.2009 №369-ФЗ, вступило в силу 16 марта 2012 года)*.

⁴⁵В Минске прошло первое совместное учение Единой региональной системы ПВО Республики Беларусь и Российской Федерации, <http://mil.ru/et/news/more.htm?id=12191314@egNews>, (accessed 21.04.2021).

⁴⁶Минобороны Белоруссии сообщило о подписании постановления о совместной с РФ охране внешней границы Союзного государства в воздушном пространстве, <https://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=540673&lang=RU>, (accessed : 22.04.2021).

For the development of the JADS and its reinforcement, Russia provides regular deliveries of air defence systems: by 2016, Belarus received four squadrons of the S- 300 system (deployed in Grodno, Vitebsk and Brest regions). Whereas after 2011, Belarus received five Tor M2K sets, and the last delivery was in 2018 (Slutsk- 120 brigade, Borisov- 740 brigade).

Equipment	Quantity	Year	Location
S-300	4 squadrons	2016	Oblasts: Grodno, Vitebsk and Brest (regions)
Tor M2K	5 sets	2011- 2018	Slutsk (120. brigade) and Borisov (740. brigade)
“Protivnik - G”⁴⁷	1 pc.	2016	
Yak - 130	8 pc.	2019	
SU-30SM	4 pc.	2019	
SU-30SM	4 pc.	Planned: 2021	
“Protivnik- G” and “Vostok”.	1 pc.	Planned: 2021	

Source: own elaboration.

Since the beginning of the presidential election-related political crisis in Belarus, bilateral meetings on deepening military cooperation and military exercises have increased. On the one hand, this was to guarantee Russia's declared support for Lukashenka's regime; on the other hand, this intensification of relations demonstrates the growth of Moscow's strategic influence in Belarus.

Date	Place	Units, nature of exercises — the purpose of meetings
16 September 2020	Minsk, Belarus	Visit of RF Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu - discussion on deepening military cooperation
21-23 September 2020	Brestsky training ground, Belarus	Unit 76th Guards Air Assault Division of the Russian Air and Land Forces 38th Guards Air Assault Brigade (Belarus)

⁴⁷This radar has the capability to track up to 200 targets simultaneously at an altitude of up to 150 km, and a range of 450 km.

Scheduled drills “Slavic brotherhood-2020”

12-16 2020	October	Losvigo training ground, Belarus	Exercise of the CSTO Collective Peacekeeping Forces
“Indestructible Brotherhood- 2020”			
October 27 2020		Minsk, Belarus	Joint meeting (committee) of the Citizens' Militia, the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation
March 5 2021		Moscow, Russia	Meeting of the Defence Ministers of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation, “Strategic Partnership Programme between the Defence Ministries of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation for 2021- 2026”
9-25 2021	March	Mulino, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia	Complex exercises 11th Guards Mechanized Brigade, Slonim (Belarus); Motorised Troops of the Western Military District of the Russian Federation
16-19 2021	March	Polivno training ground, Ulyanovsk Russia	Airborne troops of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the Special Operations Forces of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus
14-27 2021	March	Osipovich training ground, Belarus	357th Separate Guards Airborne Regiment, the 103rd Vitebsk Guards Airborne Brigade of the Belarusian Armed Forces; the 234th Air Assault Regiment of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division of the Russian army
March 29- April 2 2021		Minsk, Belarus	Delegation of the Russian Federation Space Forces; preparation for exercise “Zapad- 2021” and cooperation to establish a training centre in Belarus
March 31 2021		Moscow, Russia	Meeting and negotiations of the leadership of the General Staff of Belarus and Russia on the organisation of exercises “Zapad-2021”, the establishment of military training centres

Source: own elaboration.

In 2016, Belarus received its first “Protivnik- G” radar from Russia. This radar has the capability to track up to 200 targets simultaneously at an altitude of up to 150 km and a range of 450 km. Meanwhile, Belarus received eight Yak- 130 training and combat aircraft in 2019, the same year the first batch of SU- 30SM was handed over (4 out of 12 aircraft). In autumn 2020, Belarus received

another four aircraft, and in January 2021, the Commander of the Air Force of the Republic of Belarus announced that this year Belarus would receive two more radars, “Protivnik- G” and “Vostok”.

Summary

Military cooperation and integration within the Union State are systemic and multidimensional: from training and military education to the creation of common military systems, such as the Regional Group of Forces and the Common Air Defence System. The greatest challenges to the security and independence of the Belarusian state, as well as the obstacle to its democratisation and political transformation, derive from the military dimension of integration. The treaties and agreements signed during the 27 years of Lukashenka's rule effectively form the legal basis for Russia's direct interference in Belarusian affairs.

It is also worth noting that similar processes concern the entire security system of the Republic of Belarus: the Border Guard, the Committee for State Security, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Customs Service. These structures are oriented towards close cooperation with Russia, which undermines their effectiveness in maintaining and safeguarding national interests. As its position weakened, the Lukashenka regime needed external support from Russia, which made the Belarusian military system even more dependent on the Russian one.

One example is the “Agreement on cooperation between the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus and the Federal National Guard Service of the Russian Federation”, signed in November 2020. Key in this agreement is point 1. Article 4, “*Cooperation under this Agreement shall be conducted on the basis of a request for assistance (hereinafter referred to as a request) from the Party concerned or on the initiative of the Party which envisages such assistance being of interest to the other Party*”⁴⁸. In fact, this means that in a crisis, the forces of the Russian National Guard can be used directly on Belarusian territory.

A separate, detailed analysis is required of the conditions in the sphere of cooperation, the interconnectedness of other power structures and Russian influence. However, it should be noted that close military cooperation at the unit and command level raises doubts about the readiness of the Belarusian army to defend the interests of the nation-state. It is worth highlighting that the integration processes in the military zone continued and even deepened also during the period of political tensions in Belarusian-Russian relations and the warming of relations with the West. Perhaps the only

⁴⁸Соглашение о сотрудничестве между Министерством внутренних дел Республики Беларусь и Федеральной службой войск национальной гвардии Российской Федерации, 19.11.2020, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=102000029&p1=1&p5=0>, (accessed: 22.04.2021).

exception is the resistance of the Belarusian authorities to the deployment of a Russian military base on Belarusian territory.

The ongoing political crisis in Belarus, Lukashenka's precarious position in the country and the latter's international isolation are opening up space for Russia to expand its influence and force Lukashenka to make further concessions. In this situation, the Belarusian society (democratic structures) and the international community must understand the current threats and develop a strategy (mechanisms) to prevent the moves of the Russian Federation. Catalogue of recommended actions is as follows:

- Undermining the legal basis of treaties related to the creation and functioning of the Union State and separate elements, including those related to military cooperation;

- Introducing of political and economic sanctions against economic and political actors of the Union State;

- Reinforcing patriotic and national messages to the Belarusian military (security services). It must balance the negative effects resulting from further political and military integration (unification) of the two systems;

- Promoting and popularising the idea of Belarus as a neutral state, strengthening this thread in the consciousness of Belarusian society;

- Establishing independent military training centres by independent structures – staffs of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and National Anti-Crisis Management (both to strengthen the informational impact and to prepare reforms);

- Developing strategies and mechanisms for freezing joint strategic projects agreed in the agreements and treaties mentioned above and defining the path of withdrawal from them.

Belarusian-Russian economic relations

Thanks to many years of functioning within the USSR, even after its collapse, Belarus still has strong economic ties with Russia. In some sectors, the two countries can even be considered complementary. This was, in fact, the intention of the Soviet planners – to create an economically coherent state.

The maintenance of these close ties three decades after the collapse of the USSR is also the result of a conscious policy of the rulers of both countries. Russian Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin sought to keep Belarus within the sphere of Russian influence. The Belarusian President, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, views Moscow's economic support as the guarantor of his political power.

The following text focuses on the main elements of these relations: bilateral trade, contacts in the energy sector, integration projects and financial ties. In addition, the author of the text will attempt to reflect on what characterises the relations of these two “brotherly” countries – as politicians from both of them often like to say.

Trade

Russia accounts for around 30-40% of Belarusian exports and around 50% of imports (cf. Table 1). For a very long time, the commodity structure of trade between the two countries did not change substantially (cf. Table 2 and 3). Belarus' main exports are dairy products, vehicles of various types and tractors. However, while the structure of commodity exchange remained constant, its hierarchy was changing. As Anatoly Pankovski highlights, in the last decade, dairy products have gained importance at the expense of industrial goods⁴⁹.

⁴⁹A. Pan'kovskij, *Biellarus-Rossiya: Dvadcat' Liet Regresivnoy Integracii*, [w:] „Belaruskiy Jezhegodnik– 2019”, <https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2019/index.html>, (accessed:21.06.21).

Table 1. Trade between Belarus and Russia 2010- 2020

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Exports - million USD	9 954	14 509	16 309	16 838	15 181	10 398	10 819	12 897	12 987	13 686	13 132
Share in total exports - %	39%	35%	35%	45%	42%	39%	46%	44%	38%	42%	45%
Imports - million USD	18 081	24 930	27 551	22 905	22 190	17 143	15 295	19 599	22 619	22 017	16 387
Share in total imports (%)	52%	55%	59%	53%	55%	57%	55%	57%	59%	56%	50%

Source: own elaboration based on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

The emergence of oil products in 2012 was a significant change in Belarusian exports. This tendency was due to the influence of the Russian side, which sought to increase the supply of higher quality oil products to its market than those produced by Russian refineries. Naturally, Minsk resisted since exports to EU countries or Ukraine (the main recipients of this commodity) were financially more advantageous.

The second change was the appearance of significant quantities of potash fertilisers in Belarusian exports to the Russian market in 2017. The situation is interesting in that Russia has Uralkali, its own world-leading producer of potash fertilisers. Belarus in 2017- 2020 exported approx. 150 thousand tonnes of potash fertilisers per year for approx. USD 35 million. This is a small part of total Belarusian exports – only about 1% of total potash fertilisers exports annually. Russia is not comparable with such merchants as China or India.

Imports from Russia have been stable for many years. The main imports from Russia are oil, gas, certain types of petroleum products, electricity, steel, steel pipes, car and tractor parts. Metallurgical products are, after oil and gas, among Russia's most important exports. Major suppliers include Novolipetsk Metallurgical Plant, Magnitogorsk Iron and Steel Works, Severstal, Oskolsk Metallurgical Combine, and “Miechel”.

Table 2. Main items of Belarusian exports to Russia in 2010-2020											
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Commodity 1	Large goods vehicles	Passenger cars	Large goods vehicles	Petroleum products other than crude	Petroleum products	Cheese and curd	Other cheeses	Other cheeses	Other cheeses	Other cheeses	Other cheeses
Value — USD million	611.00	1 447.00	1 259.00	885.00	1 064.00	629.00	568.44	625.17	610.16	755.86	755.86
Commodity 2	Cheese and curd	Large goods vehicles	Tractors and tractor units	Motor vehicles for the transport of goods	Cheese and curd	Condensed and powdered milk and cream,	Butter	Tippers designed for off-road use	Tippers designed for off-road use	Tippers designed for off-road use	Tippers designed for off-road use
Value — USD million	561.00	1 015.00	914.00	850.00	788.00	459.00	290.52	436.70	599.51	507.73	507.73
Commodity 3	Condensed and powdered milk and cream	Tractors and tractor units	Passenger cars	Condensed and powdered milk and cream,	Motor vehicles for the transport of goods	Motor vehicles for the transport of goods	Condensed and powdered milk and cream,	Butter	Other meat of bovine animals, bone-in, fresh or chilled	Butter	Butter
Value — USD million	413.00	871.00	722.00	779.30	654.00	434.00	269.69	348.13	300.52	348.96	348.96

Commodity 4	Tractors and tractor units	Cheese and curd	Cheese and curd	Tractors and trucks	Condensed and powdered milk and cream	Petroleum products other than crude	Other meat of bovine animals, bone-in, fresh or chilled	Other meat of bovine animals, bone-in, fresh or chilled	Other road freight vehicles weighing more than 20 tonnes	Other road freight vehicles weighing more than 20 tonnes	Other road freight vehicles weighing more than 20 tonnes
Value — USD million	403.00	595.00	604.00	664.00	616.00	372.00	269.06	293.91	264.58	214.44	214.44
Commodity 5	Fresh or frozen beef	Condensed and powdered milk and cream,	Condensed and powdered milk and cream	Cheese and curd	Tractors and trucks	Fresh or frozen beef	Tippers designed for off-road use	Other road freight vehicles weighing more than 20 tonnes	Butter	Young cheeses, including whey and albumin cheeses and curd	Young cheeses, including whey and albumin cheeses and curd
Value — USD million	268.00	399.00	482.00	628.00	473.00	341.00	253.37	280.74	208.62	187.03	187.03
Source: own elaboration based on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.											

Table 3. Main items of Belarusian imports from Russia in 2010-2020											
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Commodity 1	Crude oil	Crude oil	Crude oil	Crude oil	Crude oil	Crude oil	Crude oil and petroleum products	Crude oil and petroleum products	Crude oil and petroleum products	Crude oil and petroleum products	Crude oil and petroleum products
Value — USD million	5 629.00	7 434.00	8 362.00	8 318.00	7 621.00	5 660.00	3 958.25	5 316.98	6 822.68	6 580.82	6 580.82
Commodity 2	Natural gas	Natural gas	Petroleum products	Natural gas	Natural gas	Natural gas	Natural gas	Natural gas	Natural gas	Natural gas	Natural gas
Value — USD million	4 045.00	5 308.00	4 909.00	3 358.00	3 411.00	2 714.00	2 546.91	2 779.23	2 690.76	2 637.55	2 637.55
Commodity 3	Petroleum products	Petroleum products	Natural gas	Ferrous waste and scrap	Passenger cars	Passenger cars	Other distillates and petroleum products	Other distillates and petroleum products	Other distillates and petroleum products	Vehicles with an internal combustion engine with a cubic capacity between 1500 cm3 and 3000 cm3	Vehicles with an internal combustion engine with a cubic capacity between 1500 cm3 and 3000 cm3

Value – USD million	534.00	3 376.00	3 410.00	384.00	1 142.00	865.00	407.86	879.25	708.28	524.41	524.41
Commodity 4	Ferrous waste and scrap	Ferrous waste and scrap	Ferrous waste and scrap	Passenger cars	Ferrous waste and scrap	Petroleum products	Passenger cars	Ferrous waste and scrap	Vehicles with an internal combustion engine with a cubic capacity between 1500 cm3 and 3000 cm3	Passenger cars	Passenger cars
Value – USD million	472.00	570.00	439.00	232.00	371.00	468.00	295.47	320.07	452.77	262.15	262.15
Commodity 5	Hot rolled steel	Internal ignition engines	Internal ignition engines	Internal ignition engines	Petroleum products	Ferrous waste and scrap	Vehicles with an internal combustion engine with a cubic capacity between 1500 cm3 and 3000 cm3	Vehicles with an internal combustion engine with a cubic capacity between 1500 cm3 and 3000 cm3	Light distillates and products	Ferrous waste and scrap	Ferrous waste and scrap
Value – USD million	171.00	236.00	256.00	219.00	201.00	291.00	226.94	306.89	377.05	261.85	261.85
Source: own elaboration based on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.											

However, the importance of Belarusian-Russian trade relations goes beyond mere commodity exchange. The next section attempts to explain the specificities of trade relations in the area of oil and gas supply. It should be emphasised that an important element of trade cooperation is the import from the Russian Federation of parts used in Belarusian industrial plants.

In turn, Russia is a market for goods produced in Belarusian factories. This applies above all to heavy industry, which accounts for a significant proportion of GDP and provides employment for a large part of the population. Another important for the Belarusian economy group of commodities supplied to Russian consumers are food products. Considering the above conditions, the negative trade balance in favour of Russia is structural.

Natural gas

Russia is the only exporter of natural gas to Belarus. It is the most important single energy source: around 90% of electricity and heat is produced from gas (in other words, gas accounts for 60% of gross final energy use). Belarus imports around 20 bcm of natural gas annually (18.8 bcm in 2020). The main supplier was the state-owned Russian company Gazprom.

Since the beginning of Belarus independence, Russian-Belarusian relations have revolved around three problems. The first concerned the price of the supplied gas. The second referred to the problem of gas transit through Belarus. The third element was Gazprom's participation in the privatisation of Gazprom Transgaz Belarus, the national gas operator in Belarus.

Since the 1990s, the two sides have had an ongoing discussion about the level of gas prices. Moscow sought to increase the price of the supplied raw material, while Minsk tried to keep it as low as possible. The dispute, especially since the creation of the Union State, tended to revolve around the idea pursued by Belarus that, since the two countries are participating in a joint project of economic integration, gas prices should be at the level of internal Russian prices. Meanwhile, Russia pushed for prices close to the “European level” but has never explained what this means in financial terms. To sum up, gas prices remained higher than prices on the internal Russian market, but still the lowest among all Gazprom's post-Soviet customers and significantly lower than prices for EU countries (cf. Table 2).

Until 2007, gas prices for Belarus were set on an annual basis. Since 2007, Russia has sought to follow a structured (comprehensive) approach that would gradually increase prices. Agreements signed after that time introduced a system of monthly price adjustments based on world oil prices with an additional “integration” factor, which ensured a gradual rather than a sharp rise in prices.

However, Minsk regularly delayed paying for gas or paid the price it considered preferential for Belarus. Problems with gas payments led to Gazprom's suspension of supplies (among others) in 1993, 2002, 2004 and 2010. Each of these disputes ended with Moscow agreeing to certain price concessions to the Belarusian side. This preference can be seen when prices for Belarus and Germany are compared (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparison of average gas prices for Belarus and Germany in 2010-2020

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Belarus	185	265	165.6	166	170	142	132	130	129	127	127
Germany	270	379	353	366	323	240	170	197	269	156	170

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of M. M. Balmaceda, *High life in Minsk, 2014*; Centre for Eastern Studies; *Belarusian Yearbook*.

These concessions usually occurred just before or after Minsk agreed to participate in Russian-led integration bodies. After the 1993 gas agreement, Minsk consented to sign a friendship treaty with Russia, including the sale of shares in the Mozyr Oil Refinery and the free loan of military installations in Vileyka and Baranovichi. Similarly, after the 1996 gas agreement, Minsk joined the Community of Belarus and Russia and, following the settlement of gas issues agreed in 2011, Minsk became a member of the Common Economic Space. Currently, Moscow uses gas issues primarily in the context of deepening integration within the so-called “roadmaps”.

Belarus also serves as a transit route for Russian gas exports to Poland and Germany. The raw material is transported via the Yamal–Europe pipeline. President Lukashenka used this project as another tool in his relations with Russia. The stability of transit through Belarus served as a symbol of Belarus' credibility. This was particularly useful in the context of the deterioration of gas relations between Moscow and Kyiv in the 1990s. However, with the signing of the German-Russian agreement to build the Nord Stream, Belarus lost this advantage. For some time, Minsk raised the issue of building a second line as part of the Yamal project, which was envisaged in the original agreement, but after Gazprom officially withdrew from the extension of the Yamal project and began construction of NS2, this argument was abandoned.

Another issue was the problem of Gazprom buying shares in Beltransgaz (the state-owned gas operator). Energy sector analyst Margarita M. Balmaceda calls this long-lasting transaction a “dream sale”⁵⁰. Moscow made the first attempt to invest in a company under a gas contract in 1993. Although both sides agreed to the transaction, the Belarusian parliament voted against approving the agreement.

Since the 1990s, this issue was regularly negotiated until it was agreed in 2006 that Gazprom would buy 50% of the shares in Beltransgaz. The transfer of shares took place between 2007 and 2010 in four tranches and was closely timed with the transfer of money by Gazprom. However, the Russian side was not satisfied with the control it had over Beltransgaz and put further pressure on Belarus. The remaining half of the business was sold in one tranche in 2011. According to President Lukashenka, the sale of the remaining 50% of Beltransgaz guaranteed lower gas prices for Belarus.

In December 2014, another agreement was signed to regulate gas relations for 2015- 2017. It was based on the pricing formula of the 2011 Agreement – it should be at the level of USD 142 in 2016. In 2016, however, another crisis erupted. The merger of the oil and gas issues became a new feature of the Russian-Belarusian conflicts in this area. Moscow claimed that Minsk owed Gazprom USD 726m in gas payments at a price in the USD 80-107 range. Belarus, in turn, argued that as a member of the EEU (Eurasian Economic Union), it should be charged for gas like internal Russian customers.

Russia responded by reducing oil supplies, forcing Minsk to repay its debt. Lukashenka agreed to sign the EEU Common Tariff Code. At the same time, Moscow agreed to some concessions to its partner regarding the gas price, granted additional loans and guaranteed oil supplies until 2023. However, as described below, this did not prevent another hydrocarbon conflict.

Crude oil and petroleum products

Despite Minsk's attempts to diversify its supplies (e.g. deliveries from Venezuela in 2010-2012, imports from Azerbaijan in 2011), Russia remains the dominant oil supplier to Belarus. Russian companies supply approx. 16- 18 million tonnes of raw material per year. In 2020, due to another conflict over the supply of Russian oil and its effect on simulating diversification by Belarus, this import was a record low and amounted to 14.5 million tonnes.

The refining sector is one of the main sources of foreign currency for the Belarusian budget. In the last decade, Belarus exported petroleum products for an average of USD 5.2 billion a year. The

⁵⁰M. M. Balmaceda, *The politics of energy dependency. Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania between domestic oligarchs and Russian Pressure*, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto 2013, p.167.

year 2020 was a record low – exports amounted to USD 2.7 billion, which resulted from the conflict with Moscow described below.

For a relatively long time, the main buyers of this commodity were EU countries, especially the UK and the Netherlands. Naturally, these countries were not the final recipients of the products. There were registered companies that traded in petroleum products. Since 2012, a new but important market started to be Ukraine, whose share in Belarusian exports of this commodity group was growing: in 2020, Ukraine was their largest single customer.

It should also be noted that Russian companies do not cooperate with the Belarusian oil sector only out of the “goodness of their hearts” (a well-known trait of oil titans). The refineries in Mozyr and Novopolotsk are able to process oil deeper than the Russian refineries. This allows Russian companies to produce higher-value oil products and export them abroad. Moscow is also interested in diverting some high-octane fuel exports to the Russian market, which has been experiencing a shortage of these products for some time. As already mentioned, due to Russia's actions, Belarus has exported petroleum products to the Russian market since 2012.

Three major Russian oil companies are permanently involved in Belarus. Lukoil owns Lukoil-Belarusija, which processes oil at Belarusian refineries and has a network of petrol stations; LUK-Naftan produces fuel additives at the Novopolotsk-based Naftan refinery. Rosneft also processes crude oil in Belarusian refineries and has its own network of petrol stations and, through Slavneft, co-owns a refinery in Mozyr, while Transneft owns two oil pipelines on Belarusian territory. This company is responsible for transporting petroleum products from Russian and Belarusian refineries to Ukraine and Lithuania.

In addition to these three companies in the oil sector, a number of smaller and larger oil suppliers are involved in cooperation with Belarus. In December 2020, the following companies were on the list of oil suppliers for Q1 2021: Rosneft (2.1 million tonnes), Lukoil (0.72 million tonnes), Surgutneftegas (0.65 million tonnes), Gazprom Neft (0.3 million tonnes) and Tatneft (0.3 million tonnes). Smaller shares were received by: Slavneft (82.4 thousand tonnes), Bashneft (91 thousand tonnes), RussNeft (71 thousand tonnes), Zarubezhneft (35.2 thousand tonnes), Neftisa (74.5 thousand tonnes), Yalykskoye (5.9 thousand tonnes) and NK Yangpur (2.9 thousand tonnes).

Analysts and journalists called the additional income for the Belarusian authorities, derived from the difference between the prices of Russian oil and world prices of petroleum products, the “oil rent”. Minsk received the highest income from this source in 2004- 2007, and since 2007, due to

various actions of the Russian government (as well as fluctuations in oil prices on world markets), the size of this rent has been decreasing.

Russia's tool for changing the “oil rent” is a system of customs duties and tariffs. Initially, Minsk received oil on a duty-free basis, and all or most of the taxes collected on oil products were transferred to the Belarusian budget. However, in December 2006, Moscow introduced a tariff on oil exports. In response, Minsk began to illegally receive oil from the Druzhba pipeline, which led to a short-term blockade of oil supplies to Belarus by Russia's Transneft. At the beginning of 2007, an agreement was reached, which led to the introduction of taxes on oil exports to Belarus (excluding the quota for Belarusian “internal use”) and a system of division of taxes on oil products and crude oil exported from Belarus between the budgets of both countries, which gradually increased Moscow's revenues from this source.

In March 2010, Belarus filed a lawsuit in the Economic Court of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) against the oil taxes, claiming that they are incompatible with the Minsk-Moscow agreements. However, the court rejected the claim and suggested that the issue should be resolved bilaterally. In the course of the dispute, the Russian side stressed that the taxes could be abolished only if the Common Economic Space: Belarus-Kazakhstan-Russia, was created. Moscow kept its word. Following ratification by the Belarusian Parliament of the package of relevant documents in December 2010, the export tax on crude oil was removed. In return, it was agreed that 100% of the taxes on oil products exported from Belarus would be transferred to the Russian budget.

In order to avoid, at least partially, losses due to duties on petroleum products and to circumvent the “self-restrictions” introduced by the agreement from the end of 2011, the Belarusian side became involved in the so-called “solvents scheme” dispute. In 2012, a series of reports appeared that more and more Belarusian companies declared their goods as solvents or chemical thinners. The main customers were Latvia and the Netherlands, the main importers of Belarusian oil products. This led to the conclusion that to avoid duties on petroleum products, Minsk refers to them as solvents. As a result, the Russian side introduced restrictions on oil supplies, which led to a halt in the practice.

A similar situation occurred in 2014. Again, in an effort to maintain additional income, Belarusian companies began exporting large quantities of bitumen, antioxidants and inhibitors or lubricant additives to their main partners in the sector. Russia's next step to limit the “oil rent” was to start introducing the so-called “fiscal manoeuvre” in 2015. This change was introduced by an act of Russian internal law, not a Russian-Belarusian agreement.

The manoeuvre involves gradually reducing the export duty on Russian oil from 30% to 0% between 2019 and 2024. At the same time, the tax on mineral extraction was increased. In this way, Belarus was gradually losing that part of the customs duties that it could pay into its budget according to previous arrangements. At the same time, extraction taxes were increasing the hitherto preferential price of Russian oil for Belarus.

Since then, a constant element in Russian-Belarusian discussions has been the demand from the Belarusian side to introduce “compensation” for the fiscal manoeuvre. In turn, the Russian side began to make increasing use of these discussions to press for the redirection of Belarusian exports of petroleum products to Russian Baltic ports. The Belarusian side avoided agreeing to this change because the ports of the Baltic States are located closer and have better infrastructure. Even the reductions suggested by Russian Railways on transit for Belarus would not offset the overall costs Belarusian companies would have to bear.

Subsequent conflicts over oil supplies have followed a similar pattern. At the beginning of 2019, Belarus again raised the issue of the “fiscal manoeuvre” as not conforming to the principles of the EEU. The Belarusian authorities suggested that they would start looking for other oil suppliers. In April 2019, there was an alleged “accidental” pollution of Belarusian oil pipelines by the outflow of oil contaminated with organochlorine compounds from Russia, which led to damage to the equipment of the Mozyr refinery and the temporary suspension of oil supplies to Europe. Despite discussions in working groups, the parties did not agree on deliveries for 2020; therefore, Russian companies did not deliver crude oil after January 1, 2020. As a result, Minsk began taking crude oil from the Druzhba oil pipeline and started making several deliveries from the US, Norway and Azerbaijan, “in order to diversify oil supplies”. In April 2020, the two parties managed to reach an agreement. It provided for some compensation to Belarusian companies for additional payments for Russian oil supplies and in 2020, but, as mentioned at the beginning of the subsection, the dispute and Belarusian “diversification” measures resulted in only 14.5 million tonnes of Russian oil imports in 2020. The issue of compensation for the “fiscal manoeuvre” and for the pollution of Belarusian oil pipelines has not been resolved.

In mid-2020, the dispute over oil and gas supply issues resurfaced. Moscow demanded payment of another debt for gas supplies, suggesting problems with oil supplies in 2021. As before, Belarus continued to claim that the debt is lower than the USD 165 million suggested by the Russian side. Eventually, however, Minsk announced in October that the debt had been repaid. This was, among other things, the result of Moscow's agreement on another loan to its western neighbour. The

two sides agreed on a gas price of USD 127. Russian oil sector companies pledged that oil supplies for next year would be at 18 million tonnes. However, Belarus failed in negotiating any additional concessions⁵¹.

Nuclear power plant

A third important element of relations in the energy sphere is the project to build a nuclear power plant in the north of the country: in Astravets (on the Lithuanian border). From the very beginning, the idea of building a power plant was based on the export – mainly to the Baltic states – of energy that was to be produced there. After the closure of the Ignalina power plant in 2009, an energy gap was created in the region, which was to be filled by a Belarusian power plant.

Both countries discussed the idea for many years. The initial contract was signed in 2011 with Atomstroyexport, a subsidiary of Rosatom, appointed as the main contractor. The project was initially expected to cost USD 6 billion, but it was eventually agreed that the cost estimate would be USD 11 billion. It was decided that Moscow would provide Belarus with a government loan to cover 90% of the costs, with the Minsk authorities covering the remaining 10% themselves. Repayment of the Russian loan would begin in 2022 and last for 15 years.

At the end of 2011, the first earthworks began. The actual construction started in 2013; in December 2015, the reactor was delivered to the first block of the power plant, and a few weeks later, its assembly began. Six months later, it was reported that the reactor had fallen to the ground during assembly. Although Atomstroyexport initially denied the information, the Belarusian Energy Ministry (probably rightly concerned about public sentiment due to the still living negative legend of the Chernobyl disaster) immediately confirmed the information. Eventually, the Russian side agreed to replace the reactor with a new one.

On November 7, 2020, at the 103rd. Anniversary of the October Revolution, President Lukashenka officially opened the first unit of the power plant. The next day, during reactor start-up, a transformer malfunctioned, causing the reactor to shut down. After further tests and adjustments, the reactor was activated and reached 100% power in January 2021 (after another minor failure).

According to the assumptions, both units of the new power plant are to produce up to 18 TWh per year. This represents half of Belarus' internal annual energy consumption. Considering that Belarusian power stations cover these needs almost entirely, there could be a surplus of approx. 14-

⁵¹Cf. A. Dyner, *Rosyjsko-białoruskie porozumienia w sprawie cen węgłowodorów*, „Komentarze PISM”, 05/01/2021, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Rosyjskobialoruskie_porozumienia__w_sprawie_cen_weglowodorow, (accessed 23.04.2021).

15 TWh. It is unclear what the Belarusian authorities intend to do with it, as Poland is not interested in importing it, Lithuania actively criticises the entire project, and Ukraine protects its electricity market. Latvia had maintained its interest in buying some energy solely to stabilise its energy system. Recently, however, Latvian Prime Minister Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš declared that Riga would suspend energy cooperation with Belarus once the Astravets power plant was operational (Latvia is coordinating its position on this issue with Lithuania and Estonia)⁵². The only market would therefore be Russia. As OSW (Centre for Eastern Studies) analysts write, sales there would be below production costs⁵³.

The Belarusian authorities emphasise that the launch of the power plant would help diversify the structure of energy sources. According to their calculations, the full commissioning of the two power plant units would enable the supply of Russian gas (currently around 90% of the country's electricity is obtained from burning this resource) to be reduced by 4.5 billion m³ per year, i.e. by almost a quarter. However, it is difficult to call the launch of this power plant a “diversification” in the sense of reducing energy dependence on Russia. Apart from the loan issue, the fuel used in the power plant would be supplied by a Rosatom subsidiary.

Investments

Russian capital typically accounts for 50-60% of total foreign direct investment in Belarus. However, the share remained at 30% in 2018 and 2019. A reduction in this level may be the result of several factors:

- Firstly, significant dividend payments to Russian investors by large Russian companies in Belarus (primarily by Beltransgaz).
- Secondly, in 2018, some Russian retail investors (e.g. food chains) withdrew from Belarus.
- Thirdly, since 2017, the Belarusian National Bank has been reconciling the presented results on foreign investment with the Bank of Russia, which may have led to some realisation of the data.

It should also be mentioned that not all Russian investment flows directly from this country. Experts agree that a large part of the investments from Cyprus is actually activities of Russian

⁵²Łotwa *boi się importować energię z białoruskiej Elektrowni Ostrowiec*, <https://biznesalert.pl/lotwa-elektrownia-ostrowiec-import-energii-energetyka/>, (accessed 29.04.2021).

⁵³K. Kłyński, J. Hyndle-Hussein i S. Kardaś, *Inauguracja Białoruskiej Elektrowni Jądrowej w Ostrowcu*, „Komentarze OSW”, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2020-11-10/inauguracja-bialoruskiej-elektrowni-jadrowej-w-ostrowcu> (accessed 25.04.2021).

business. Furthermore, in 2019, UK Ambassador Fiona Gibb reported that the vast majority of investments listed as British come from the offices of Russian companies registered in the UK⁵⁴.

As of January 1, 2020, the value of Russian direct investment was USD 4.5 billion. Despite the aforementioned decline in the share in foreign direct investments, Russia remains the largest foreign investor in Belarus. However, significant Russian investment involvement in Belarus dates only since 2005. The increased interest was the result of the Kremlin's direct stimulus policy. A significant increase in Russian FDI (Foreign Direct Investments) occurred in 2007 with the purchase of 50% of Beltransgaz' shares by Gazprom. The Russian economist Vladislav Inozemtsev underlined that Russian investment involvement in Belarus could be divided into two periods⁵⁵. The first was dominated by Mikhail Gutseriev – the doyen of Russia's richest (or one of the richest) clans. Gutseriev has invested in Belarus since 2000 and is known for his good personal relations with the Belarusian President. The first field in which the Belarusian businessman became involved was the oil sector – he was the founder of Slavneft, which is, among other things, co-owner of the oil refinery in Mozyr (42.5% of shares). Currently, the company belongs to the consortium Rosneft and Gazprom Neft. Gutseriev is still active in the sector: two of his companies, RusNeft and Neftisa, supply oil to Belarus. It is a measure of the importance of the Belarusian oil sector to the Russian businessman that during another oil supply crisis in Belarus in 2020, these companies were the only suppliers of crude to ensure the functioning of Belarusian refineries. Proof of the confidence the Belarusian President has in the Russian businessman is the fact that he was allowed to invest in the strategic potash fertilisers sector. Owned by the Gutseriev family, Slavkaliy started mining potash salts in April 2020.

Gutseriev's companies are also involved in the construction sector. His companies built a number of complexes: the “Renaissance Minsk Hotel”, the business aviation terminal at Minsk airport and the “Krasnoselsky” resort complex in the Grodno region. With the growing importance of the IT sector in Belarus, Gutseriev became interested in this sphere as well. Together with his son Said, he opened the first cryptocurrency exchange in Belarus in 2019 in the CIS- currency.com. Gutseriev's partner in this project is one of the wealthiest private entrepreneurs in Belarus today, Viktor Prokopenya, active in venture capitalism and IT. Further, the Gutseriev family is also active in the financial services sphere. This presence was confirmed with an investment in the banking sector when Said Gutseriev bought Belarus' Paritetbank in early 2020. Traditional Russian investors who appeared

⁵⁴Иностранные инвестиции в Республике Беларусь в первом квартале 2020 г.,”Prime-Tass” , https://primepress.by/analitika/inostrannye_investitsii_v_respublike_belarus_v_pervom_kvartale_2020_g-20577/, (accessed: 21.06.21).

⁵⁵В. Иноземцев, *Либералы и диктатор. По какому пути пойдет экспансия российского бизнеса в Белоруссии*, <https://snob.ru/entry/197479/> (accessed 20.04.2021).

in Belarus at the same time as Gutseriev focused mainly on industry, energy and banking. An important sphere of activity for Russian investors is the oil sector. As already mentioned, Rosneft and Gazprom Neft (through the company Slavneft) are co-owners of a 42% stake in the Mozyr oil refinery. Lukoil-Belarus owns an extensive network of petrol stations, and the Alliance Group is part of BelRosAlians, while Tatneft registered its subsidiary Tatneft-Resource Nefteprodukt in Belarus. There is also a group of smaller companies with Russian capital in the oil sector. Meanwhile, Gazprom is not only the owner of Beltransgaz and co-owner of the refinery. The Russian gas giant's investments are also located in the oil sector – the company owns the Gazprom Neft-Belnefteprodukt petrol station chain. Gazprom also controls its own Belgazprombank.

In addition to BPS-Sberbank, Russian investments in the banking sector include Belvnesheconombank, Belgazprombank, Vneshtorgbank Bank (Belarus), AKB Belrosbank and Alfa-Bank, among others. Three of these banks (BPS-Sberbank, Belvnesheconombank and Belgazprombank) belong to the “systemic banks” group, controlling 87.9% of assets in the market. Apart from Belrosbank and Alfa-Bank, all these entities are controlled by the Russian government. Apart from banks in the broader financial sector, there are also investment and insurance groups such as RESO Garantia and Ingosstrakh.

Russian investors are also active in telecommunications and high technology. Mobile network operator MTS was one of the first large investors in Belarus. The Belarusian operator's company is 51% owned by Beltelecom, as the Belarusian authorities traditionally insist on maintaining their dominance over companies in this sector. Businessman Vladimir Yevtushenkov, the main shareholder of MTS, owns two more companies active in Belarus: Technoservu (responsible for computerisation of state and private companies) and Detsky Mir chain (toys and children's goods). Golden Telecom, owned by Alfa Group, holds a 49.9% stake in the Evroset mobile network.

Distribution representative offices of Russian steel holdings such as NLMK and Severstal also operate in Belarus, and building materials producers Technonicol Metal Profile built factories in Belarus.

As Vladislav Inozemtsev writes, with the gradual nationalisation of the Russian economy, one of the most important figures in the Russian political economy began to play an increasingly important role⁵⁶. It was Herman Gref, Chairman of the Russian state bank, Sberbank of Russia. Sberbank's investment is an interesting example of Russia's economic policy towards Belarus. It

⁵⁶W. Иноземцев, *Либералы и диктатор. По какому пути пойдет экспансия российского бизнеса в Белоруссии*, <https://snob.ru/entry/197479/>, (accessed: 20.04.2021).

shows how transactions (both political and economic) are often interconnected in Russian-Belarusian relations. The possibility of Russian investment in the banking sector was discussed in 2009. In the second half of the year, it became clear that one of the largest Belarusian banks – BPS – was likely to be privatised. In late December 2009, Belarus received a syndicated loan of approximately USD 201 million from four Russian banks: Sberbank, Vnesheconombank, Gazprombank and Alpha- Bank Securities (i.e. institutions with branches in Belarus). Sberbank was the agent of this loan. A few weeks after the funds came into the Belarusian budget, Lukashenka approved the transaction for the purchase of BPS by Sberbank. Initially, Sberbank, headed by Gref, focused on issues of economic cooperation with the Belarusian authorities. Gradually, however, it became an ally of private Russian investors in Belarus. Inozemtsev seems to write about this with surprise. In comparison, the intermingling of state and private economic interests in Russian economic relations with Belarus is rather the norm. This is likely to be a feature of the Russian economic system, described as “crony capitalism”. An example of this connection is the fact that Sberbank is now Gutseriev's family largest single lender – it has provided it with 5.1 billion of its 15 billion loans.

Table 5. Cumulative Russian investments in Belarus in 2015- 2020

	2015			2016			2017			2018			2019			2020		
	Direct	Portfoli o	Other	Direct	Portfoli o	Other	Direct	Portfoli o	Other	Direct	Portfoli o	Other	Direct	Portfoli o	Other	Direct	Portfoli o	Other
Cumulative — USD million	1 586,9	3.9	2 341,4	2 012,2	4.8	1 670,1	2 150,5	5.9	1 761,4	2 379,8	6.5	1 208	2 617,7	9.8	1 548,9	2 367,4	9.8	1 325,2
Share in total investment	25%	23%	33%	30%	26%	27%	29%	22%	26%	30%	18%	19%	30%	24%	23%	28%	19%	19%

Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus

Table 6. The inflow of direct investments from Russia into Belarus in 2010-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Net inflow — USD million	2 697	173.9	591.9	367.2	471.7	364.4	303.7	502.5	263.6	307.3
Percentage share in total net FDI	68%	13%	28%	20%	29%	28%	24%	31%	20%	22%

Source: own elaboration based on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

“New wave” of Russian investments in Belarus after 2010 was also characterised by a change in spheres of interest. Wholesale and retail chains and representatives of the IT sector dominate among the new investors. At the beginning of 2010, the following companies opened distribution centres in Belarus: the metallurgical sector Mieczel, the pharmaceutical Karten and Alidi (a logistics company specialising in FMCG).

Gradually, large Russian retail companies began to appear in Belarus: Fix Price and Svetofor (discount chains), WildBerries (Russia's largest online shop for footwear, clothing and home furnishings), Svyaznoy (IT, electronics) and Sportmaster (clothing and sports equipment).

With the development of IT in Belarus, more and more Russian companies started to appear in this sector. Entities such as Yandex, Mail.ru, Lanit, 1C-Birtiks, Kaspersky Lab and Softline opened their development centres and game design studios. As the owner of Service Desk, a company providing IT services in the financial sphere, Sberbank is also involved in the IT sector. Similarly, VEB became associated with IT through VEB Technologie and DFS (both primarily engaged in providing financial services).

After 2010, new companies from traditional sectors appeared on the Belarusian market. In 2007 HMS, a manufacturer of a compressor and related systems, bought the Promburvod factory in Minsk, and in 2011 a controlling interest in the Bobruisk factory. August Co., a long-standing supplier of plant protection products, has had a factory in Druzhnom since 2010. The Sodrugestvo Group (producer of farmed feed) built a production and logistics centre for feed production in Smarhoń (the company belongs to a Belarusian couple). Meanwhile, Oasis Group owns a bottling plant for juices and nectars (brand name “Sochny”), a beer factory in Babruysk and a logistics centre in Rečyca. Finally, the construction holding Etalon (owned by a Belarusian) from St Petersburg implements a project in Minsk.

The Russian-Belarusian Entrepreneurship Council has been operating since 2012. It includes representatives of, among others, Rostech (in connection with the involvement of Rosoboronexport), Sberbank, VTB and Lukoil. Since 2018, the chairman of the Council has been Dmitry Mazepin, owner of Uralchem and owner of a controlling interest in Uralkali – a former ally and now a competitor of Belarus' Belaruskali. During the Belarusian protests, Mazepin published a letter in which he called on the Belarusian President to enter into dialogue with the protesters. At the same time, the intelligentsia, business people and politicians were urged to form a National Salvation Committee that would represent Belarusian society in dialogue with the authorities.

At various stages of cooperation, the Kremlin pressured the Belarusian authorities to allow Russian companies to participate in the privatisation process. This usually involved discussion of other economic issues – e.g. credit concerning gas and oil supply. In 2011, Russia tried to structure negotiations on this issue. It was agreed that one of the conditions for granting a loan to Belarus from the Moscow-controlled Eurasian Fund for Stabilisation and Development (EFSD) (see below) would be a commitment to privatise USD 7.5 billion worth of enterprises. However, in the end, this plan was not realised.

Loans

Around 80% of Belarus' foreign debt is owed to Russia. At the end of March 2021, the total Belarusian debt to Russia amounted to USD 8.1 billion. Russia provides loans to its Belarusian partner both for current needs (e.g. to cover gas obligations), as well as to maintain macroeconomic stability. For a long time, Russia provided credit mainly through bank loans, and the main agent for such support was usually Sberbank. Russian financial institutions also assisted in the deployment of Belarusian credit facilities on the world markets.

A new tool introduced in 2011 was the stabilisation loans of the Eurasian Fund for Stabilisation and Development (EFSD). The EFSD is officially an independent financial institution styled as the International Monetary Fund, but in reality, it is a Russian subsidiary machine. The first loan of this type was just granted in 2011 in the amount of USD 3 billion. The loan was disbursed in a number of tranches, but – probably due to another “integration” conflict – the last tranche was not transferred. Minsk was granted another USD 2bn EFSD loan in 2017 as part of an agreement reached after the 2016/2017 energy dispute. This one was not paid out completely – also, the last instalment did not reach the Belarusian accounts. The Kremlin combined support from the Fund with bilateral loans. As part of the same agreement (2016/2017), Moscow agreed to provide Minsk with another USD 1bn state loan.

The latest example of combining the “the Eurasian branch of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)” facility with state loans was the support provided by President Putin to Lukashenka in 2020. In October, Putin announced Russia's plans to provide a loan of US USD 1.5 billion. As it turned out, Minsk was to receive 500 million from the EFSD, with the Russian government paying the rest. A representative of the Russian Federation later announced that part of the loan was to be used to pay Minsk's debt to Gazprom (see above).

Russian-Belarusian economic integration

The Russian Federation tries to make economic integration in the former USSR similar to the European one. Belarus remains the partner with which the integration processes are most advanced. Nevertheless, there is still tension between theoretically very far-reaching formal integration and informal manipulation of economic policy by both sides.

Since the early 1990s, both countries have gradually removed official obstacles to trade relations. In 1992, a free trade agreement was signed which stipulated that both signatories could restrict imports from the other partner in “special situations”. This disclaimer has been used repeatedly by both parties to justify the introduction of trade locks⁵⁷.

The next step towards trade integration was a common customs union established with Kazakhstan in 1995. In 2000, the Union State of Belarus and Russia was established, which envisaged profound economic coordination in areas such as industrial policy and trade in energy raw materials. Ultimately, however, the coordination of industrial policies was not formalised, and the issue of trade in energy resources remained a problem regularly negotiated by both sides.

Further economic integration in the post-Soviet area continued in the Belarus-Kazakhstan-Russia triangle. The three countries formed the Customs Union in 2010, followed by the Common Economic Space in 2011 and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2014. Again, formally, as members of the EEU, Minsk and Moscow operate within the common market. There are, therefore, no restrictions on trade between the two countries. However, both Minsk and Moscow prefer informal activities and usually do not feel bound by treaty obligations. Hence, at different stages of bilateral cooperation, the two countries used different instruments to block trade from the partner country or to subsidise their own exports.

Belarusian companies benefit from the lack of control at the common border to send various goods (from other countries) to Russia that would otherwise be subject to customs duties (e.g. alcohol, tobacco or sugar). This practice was particularly visible after Russia introduced retaliatory sanctions in response to EU restrictions following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Belarusian companies, in turn, used this opportunity to expand on the Russian market by relabelling and re-exporting products from the EU and Ukraine to Russia. This mainly concerns food products. Minsk also used import quotas or import licenses to limit imports from Russia. Another important instrument was the artificial maintenance of lower BYN (Belarusian rouble) rates by the Belarusian National

⁵⁷A. Eberhardt, *Gra pozorów. Stosunki Rosyjsko-Białoruskie 1991-2008*, Warszawa, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych 2008, p. 86.

Bank, which improved the situation of Belarusian exporters. In turn, Moscow has made changes to customs tariffs without Minsk's consent, thus affecting the interests of Belarusian exporters. One example of this practice was the imposition of tariffs on used cars, which was supposed to protect the Russian car industry (by limiting imports of these cars from the EU) but significantly reduced Minsk's budget revenues. At the same time, Moscow maintained lower tariffs on goods competing with Belarusian ones (e.g. food products, textiles) to meet the growing demand for better quality products on the Russian market. However, bilateral trade's biggest and recurring issue is the exports of Belarusian dairy products to Russia. Thanks to government subsidies, products from Belarus are competitively priced on the Russian market. That is why the dairy lobby in Russia periodically presses the government to block Belarusian trade in these goods. These frequent blockages are known as the “milk wars” or “cheese wars”.

Minsk has long opposed the introduction of a common tariff code for the Eurasian Union. President Lukashenko did not sign the draft agreed in December 2016, claiming that the document did not adequately protect the interests of Belarus⁵⁸. However, after resolving the 2016/2017 energy dispute, the Belarusian president agreed to approve the document, which came into force on January 1, 2018.

Due to this prevalence of informal relations, participation in the EEU did not fundamentally change the results of economic cooperation between the two countries. As the trade data show (see Tables 1- 3), Belarusian imports from Russia did not change – neither in quantitative nor in qualitative terms – after the formation of the EEU or even the entry into force of the Common Customs Tariff. However, there is a noticeable increase in Belarusian exports to Russia and (as indicated above) a certain change in the commodity structure – an increase in the share of dairy products. Nevertheless, this is probably only partially the effect of export creation observed when creating integration groups. The main elements that may have contributed to this change include the removal of blockades on the Russian market for Belarusian dairy products and the aforementioned practice of using Belarusian territory by some companies to circumvent Russian sanctions.

Belarusian foreign trade participation in the EEU was influenced rather in relations with other countries (i.e. not with the Russian Federation). On the one hand, there was a reduction in the import of certain commodity groups from EU countries (a clear example was the abovementioned drastic drop in imports of used cars), and on the other, the creation of an exchange with Kazakhstan and

⁵⁸*Lukashenko objaśnił, pochemu nie podpisał Tamożennyj kodeks EAES*, BELTA, 3/02/2017, www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-objasnil-pochemu-ne-podpisal-tamozhennyj-kodeks-eaes-231443-2017, (accessed 20.04.2021).

Armenia. In terms of investments, the integration of the EEU did not introduce any fundamental differences. Strategic investments depend on political agreements between the Belarusian and Russian authorities. The success of private business involvement depends on good relations between Russian business people and the Belarusian Presidential Administration.

Minsk tries to use the EEU platform in negotiations on the prices of energy resources. Belarusian negotiators stress that, given the existence of a free market within this structure, Belarus should pay the same for gas and oil as Russian consumers. Part of these activities is the attempt to formalise relations within the EEU in the field of energy. In view of the resistance from the Russian side, Belarusian actions were not successful. As can be seen from the description of the continuing disputes in the sphere of oil and gas supplies, these issues are still part of the permanent Belarusian-Russian negotiations.

The fact that the economies of both these countries were significantly integrated before 2014 did not have a significant impact on the Belarusian-Russian economic relations. The second factor influencing this situation is the preference for informal relations by both capitals (Moscow and Minsk). Formalised structures are only of apparent importance to both countries.

In recent years, Moscow has increased its emphasis on deeper integration (including economic integration) with Belarus as part of a package set of so-called roadmaps for deeper integration. A working group was created to prepare a plan for the implementation of these integration goals. The only visible result of this work was the initiation of a roadmap implementation plan in October 2019 (if Lukashenka is to be believed, there are 33 of them⁵⁹).

In the economic sphere, the roadmaps are intended, among other things, to harmonise the industrial and tax policies of the two countries. It is not clear what the relation of these documents will be to the integration progress within the EEU. It is also unclear what specific provisions are planned. Certainly, the outcome of these negotiations will be the result of continued tension in Belarusian-Russian economic relations, vacillating between Moscow's desire to increase its control over Minsk's economic policy and the Belarusian president's delay in increasing that control. Minsk tries to use the negotiations on this issue to gain preferences on oil prices. In particular, it is about compensation for the so-called fiscal manoeuvre.

⁵⁹Белоруссии и России осталось доработать шесть-семь дорожных интеграционных карт из 33, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/10760445>, (accessed 26.04.2021).

Belarusian labour migration to Russia

The migration of Belarusians to Russia in search of work is also a topic worth briefly mentioning. Traditionally, the Russian Federation was the main destination of labour migration of residents of Belarus. This was naturally facilitated by the linguistic and cultural proximity as well as the lack of legal restrictions on the employment of Belarusians in Russia. Moreover, Russian companies had a policy of supporting this migration. In particular, companies operating in the western regions of Russia implemented programmes offering Belarusian employees training and accommodation in addition to salaries.

As shown in Table 7, Russia has long been the destination of more than 80% of Belarusian labour migrants. Individual transfers from Russia accounted for more than half of Belarus' individual foreign inflows. However, since 2016 there has been a decline in labour migration to Russia: last year it was the destination of 31% of Belarusian labour migration. There was also a decrease in the number of (money) transfers from Russia to Belarus. This phenomenon is related to the increase in the number of labour migrants going to Poland and Lithuania. This is probably due to the deteriorating economic situation in Russia and the introduction of facilitations in some EU countries for labour migrants from Belarus.

As emphasised by Irina Vasilevskaya,⁶⁰ the largest group in labour migration were women between 20 and 24 years old. The second group consisted of much more experienced people aged 40-44 years, and the third group included people aged 25-29 years. In the last two groups and the entire labour migration, men constituted the majority. In the analysed period, more than half of the migrants were various types of specialists. It is also noticeable that most contracts were short-term (less than six months). In fact, the above figures only partially reflect reality, as economic migration is either unrecorded or recorded incompletely. Furthermore, the Belarusian Interior Ministry statistics include only those who went to Russia for work with the support of some organisation. People who left to look for a job on their own were not included in the statistics. The same applies to money sent by Belarusian workers – it is likely that part of the exchange was in cash and therefore not fully accounted for in the official data.

⁶⁰И. В. Василевская, *Трудовая миграция из Беларуси в Россию в условиях развития межгосударственных интеграционных отношений*, „Philosophy. Sociology. ArtStudies”, 2019/1.

Table 7. Labour migration of Belarusians to Russia in 2011-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Labour migration to Russia (persons)	4237	5369	4916	4784	5359	4772	6160	4978	4173	1452
Share in total labour migration	77%	82%	86%	88%	85%	64%	58%	45%	46%	31%

Source: own elaboration based on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

Table 8. Transfers of natural persons from Russia to Belarus in 2011-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Cross-border transfers of natural persons from Russia to Belarus (USD million)	260.80	309.80	399.00	378.00	230.00	262.81	313.84	280.96	272.09	236.89
Transfers using transfer systems	151.40	199.00	249.00	244.00	143.00	114.67	143.54	116.41	83.62	76.31
Total	412.20	508.80	648.00	622.00	373.00	377.48	457.37	397.37	355.71	313.20
Percentage of total foreign receipts from natural persons to RB.	51%	54%	59%	56%	44%	43%	41%	37%	34%	43%

Source: own elaboration based on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

Estimates of the size of Russian support for Belarus

An issue that regularly appears in the media space of Belarusian-Russian economic relations is the valuation of Russian support for Belarus. How much is the “subsidy for Minsk”? Different enumeration methods are used depending on the context in which the problem is discussed.

This problem is most often raised in the context of reoccurring Belarusian-Russian economic disputes. Usually, therefore, journalists or Russian analysts present the highest possible valuations for this support. An example is an article from *Sputnik.by* portal from 2019, the author of which sums up all the funds that flowed from Russia to Belarus and presents them as Russian support for that country⁶¹. The author of the text estimates that 45% of the investments Belarus made in 2019, as part of the 2018- 2035 socio-economic development programme, were financed by Russia. She applies a certain simplification, stating that the programme envisaged an increase in the inflow of foreign investment into Belarus, and it was 45% of the investment from Russia. However, the author stresses that the most important support for the Belarusian economy was the opening of the Russian market for Belarusian products and the fact that 80% of Belarusian foreign exchange depends on Russian raw materials. In addition, Belarus buys petroleum products, gas and steel from Russia at preferential prices. Analysing oil prices, she highlights that Belarus saves USD 13 per barrel by buying oil at USD 27 per barrel since the cost of Russian oil on world markets averages USD 40 per barrel. Finally, the Sputnik journalist draws attention to Russian loans to Belarus, which amounted to USD 8 billion in 2020.

The article from August 2020, published in *Novaya Gazeta*, can be read in a similar vein⁶². In the context of the political and economic crisis in Belarus in 2020, the author states that only Russian economic support prevents the Belarusian leader from collapsing. He writes that after 2012, Moscow's support for its western neighbour amounted to approximately USD 50 billion and that this amount included both energy subsidies and Russian loans for Belarus and the costs of interbank cooperation.

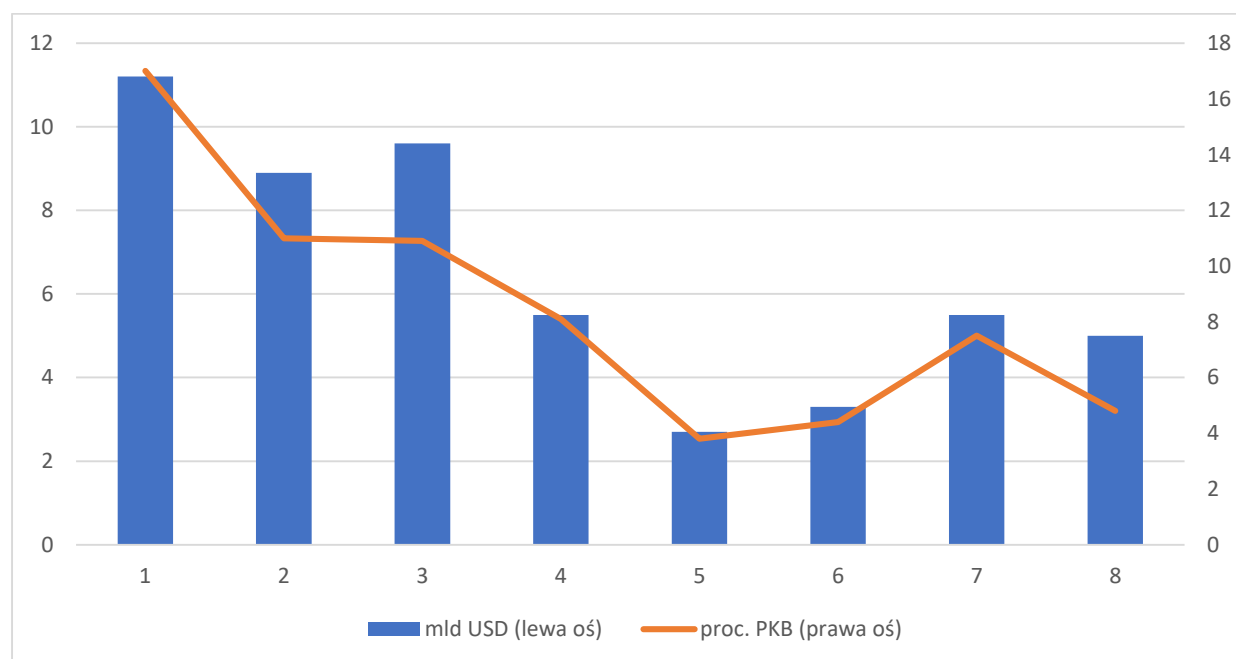
⁶¹Д.Курманова, *Одна за всех: как Россия поддерживает экономику Беларуси*, <https://sputnik.by/economy/20200819/1045508248/Odna-za-vsekh-kak-Rossiya-podderzhivaet-ekonomiku-Belarusi.html>, (accessed: 5.04.2021).

⁶²*Диктатор на миллиард*, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/08/29/86879-diktator-na-milliard>, (accessed 21.04.2021).

However, calculations of this type are not supported by a solid methodology. Their task is to pressure the Belarusian authorities and present the “sacrifice” that the Russian side suffers. The declarations by representatives of the Russian authorities appearing from time to time are similar. In 2019, Mikhail Babich, the Russian ambassador to Minsk, said that between 2000 and 2010, Russian support amounted to USD 2-3 billion, rising to USD 5-6 billion in 2019. Slightly newer and more analytical data can be found in the analysis of the Russian Forbes from the middle of last year. The author of the analysis also stresses the importance of Russian debt and direct investment. However, she focuses on energy subsidies. According to the calculations presented in the text, these amounted to USD 45 billion between 2012 and 2019, or about USD 6.5 billion per year.

As shown in the Chart 1 prepared based on the data presented in the text, the level of Russian energy subsidies for the Belarusian economy was systematically declining. This is particularly evident in the dynamics of the ratio of this support to Belarusian GDP.

Chart 1. Assessment of Russian support for Belarus in 2012- 2019 by Forbes Russia

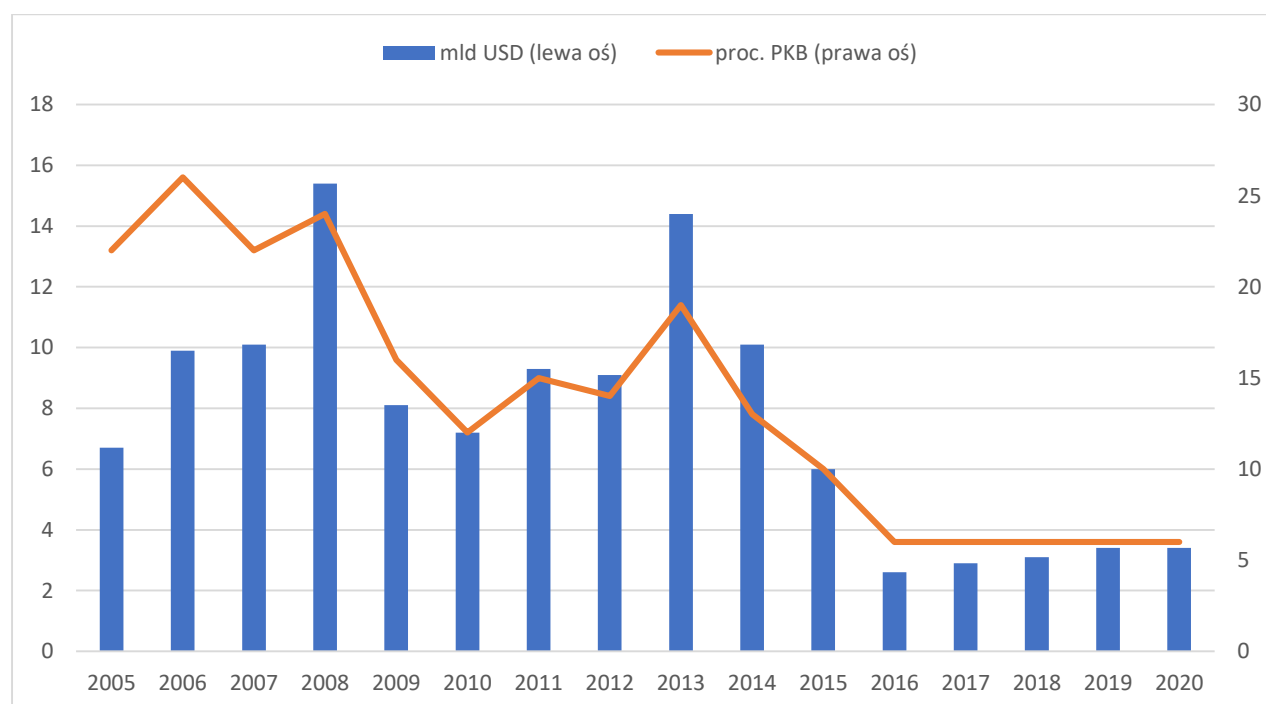


Own elaboration based on: <https://www.forbes.ru/finansy-i-investicii/407435-skolko-rossiya-zaplatila-zadruzhbu-s-lukashenko-za-poslednie-10-let>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

The most reliable assessments, prepared by experts, seem to be those of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Unfortunately, the assessment dates from four years ago. The September 2016 IMF report was the latest in which the Fund presented an assessment of

net support to the Belarusian economy in 2005- 2015. The analysis was based on data on energy subsidies (preferential oil and gas prices, reduced in 2011- 2015 by Belarusian export duties on petroleum products, transferred to the Russian budget) and balance of payments analysis (support in the form of loans – direct and provided by the Eurasian Anti-Crisis Fund and investment inflows). Based on this report, Russian news agency RBK provided a dollar valuation of the support and a forecast for 2017- 2020. The IMF analysis, as mentioned, included financial transfers but covered a shorter period. Hence subsidies for the period in question amounted to USD 10.89 billion/year. According to RBK, energy subsidies accounted for approx. 60% of this support and amounted to approx. USD 6.25 billion/year (cf. Chart 2).

Chart 2. IMF assessment of Russian support to Belarus 2005- 2020

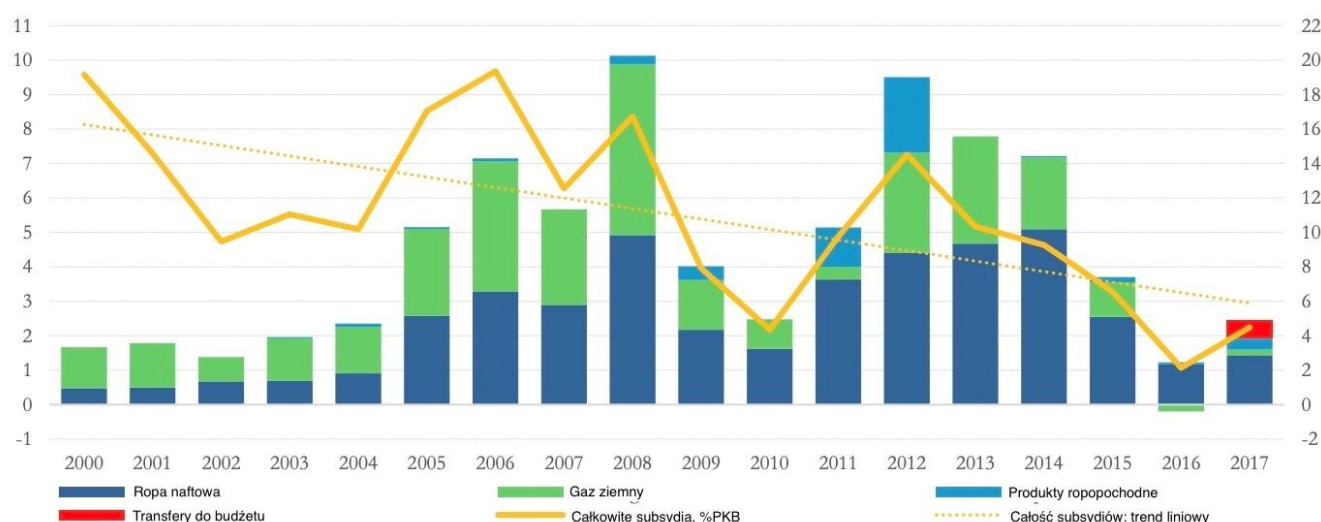


Source: own elaboration based on IMF and RBK data.

Two years after the above IMF and RBK assessment, the Belarusian Analytical Centre of the Institute of Privatisation and Management (IPM is an independent research institution) prepared an assessment of the value of Russian support, focusing on the valuation of energy subsidies (Chart 3). IPM analysts highlight that the size and composition of these subsidies varied over time. Until 2008, preferential gas prices were key to this support. Later, the importance of oil supply reductions increased. Finally, since 2017, a new element has appeared

– the settlements for duties on petroleum products, mentioned in the subsection on relations in the oil sector, which are transferred to the Belarusian budget. According to analysts, the size of the subsidies varied over time. In the 2000s, they were equivalent to around USD 1-2 billion, while in 2008 or 2012, they were around USD 10 billion. The authors of the study also stressed that subsidies are gradually being reduced. At its peak – in 2000 and 2006 – subsidies were around 20% of GDP, falling to 4.4% in 2010, during one of the most acute crises in bilateral relations. Despite fluctuations, the determined linear trend clearly indicates a decrease in Russian support in the energy sphere for Belarus.

Chart 3. Assessment of Russian energy subsidies to Belarus in 2000- 2017 according to the Institute for Privatisation and Management



Source: IPM Research Center: *Macroeconomic Update: How big is the Russian energy subsidy to Belarus No.2* (17) March 2018, <http://eng.research.by/webroot/delivery/files/english/BMF/mu2018e1.pdf>. (accessed:21.06.21).

As mentioned above, various assessments of the extent of Russian support for Belarus appear in a political context – usually in connection with disputes between Moscow and Minsk. The only relatively objective assessment (based on a known and reliable methodology) is the IMF report. Therefore, the conclusions presented in it can be considered as well-founded. However, it is not clear to what extent the issue of subsidies for energy resources was realistically assessed. Trade relations in gas, oil and petroleum products between the two countries are non-transparent. This can be seen most clearly in the gas issue. Both sides regularly contest its prices, and it is not plain (apart from official communications) how much

Belarus paid for gas in any given month. In the case of oil, the matter is even more complicated. Russia sells crude oil at a preferential price (however, it is gradually trying to eliminate these preferences using fiscal methods), but these preferential prices are also used by Russian companies that process crude oil in Belarusian refineries and Russian co-owners of the Mozyr refinery.

It is evident that the Russian Federation grants many preferences to its Belarusian ally, President Lukashenka. Based on the data presented above, it can be very cautiously stated that in 2010-2017 energy subsidies totalled between USD 34 billion and USD 77 billion. The presented data also suggest that the scale of this support (relative and absolute) gradually decreases. However, it is difficult to claim with certainty whether the estimates presented fully reflect reality.

However, it might be impossible to completely define this support without having reliable data to which only the highest authorities of both countries have access. Russia is undoubtedly Belarus' key partner in virtually all spheres. It is equally certain that Lukashenka does not take any real action to break these close ties with Russia.

Conclusions

Russian-Belarusian economic relations can be viewed through the prism of two models. One is the world-systems theory, derived from the thought of Immanuel Wallerstein⁶³. The second is the notion of new institutionalism and the concepts of a diversity of reform and power-ownership derived from it⁶⁴.

Wallerstein sees the world as a system of dominant but declining capitalism. This system is divided into core, semi-periphery and periphery countries. The core countries are the economies of the so-called Global North, the “developed” capitalist systems that dominate the rest of the world. The core produces highly processed goods which it sells in semi-peripheral and peripheral countries, dominating them by the power of its capital. At the same time, it

⁶³I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, ed. Berkeley 2011, vol I- IV.

⁶⁴M. Myant, J. Drahokoupil, *Transition Economies. Political Economy in Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia*, Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., a 2011 and R. Nureev, *Rossiia: osobennosti institucional'nogorazvitija*, Izdat. Norma, Moscow 2009, pp.

prompts the periphery economies to supply the unprocessed raw materials necessary for the functioning of the core economies.

In the classic world-systems approach, the entire region of the former USSR is classified as a periphery. However, Russia can be viewed as a core state within a particular periphery. In this approach, Belarus is dependent on its eastern neighbour, but opposite to the classic centre-periphery relations. For it is Russia that supplies Belarus with the raw materials necessary for its economy to function. At the same time, however, the bilateral relations are similar to classic core-periphery ones in terms of financial relations. Russia dominates Belarus in terms of capital: it is an investor present in key elements of the Belarusian economy and the most important lender.

New institutionalism draws attention to other aspects of the functioning of both economies. This approach focuses on formal and informal institutions that determine the development of various types of economic systems. Applied initially to various versions of capitalism in Western countries, it has recently also been used to describe the Russian economy.

The Russian variant of this approach involves the concept of “power-ownership”. This theory implies a close link between political power and property in countries of the former USSR. As a result, ownership in these countries is not formed “from the bottom up” as in the countries of classical capitalism but is tied to the person of the political leader of a given country.

This assumption allows concluding that Belarus and Russia operate in similar “worlds” of economic concepts. Economic relations between the two countries are not based on formal structures (as in the countries of classical capitalism) but operate within an informal framework, based on the concept of “power-ownership”. The juxtaposition of these models points to another important thing. Russian-Belarusian economic relations are, in fact, the relations of a narrow group of Russian businessmen with President Lukashenka and his entourage. This is precisely the effect of the peripherality of the Belarusian economy and the specific institutional characteristics of the economies of Belarus and Russia. On the one hand, therefore, there is a genuine desire to maximise profit on all those involved in these relations. On the other hand, there is also the political aspect. In these correlations, the Russian state strives to achieve the goals of a small group of wealthy Russian politicians. In turn, the Belarusian state is supposed to implement the objectives of the Belarusian President. Thus,

when there is a reference to Russian support, it is support for Lukashenka. When it comes to defending economic sovereignty, it is the economic sovereignty of the President of Belarus.

Does Belarusian culture speak Russian?

Belarus is one of 55 officially bilingual or multilingual countries and one of three post-Soviet countries (including Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) in which the Russian language has official status. The territory of Belarus was annexed to the Russian Empire in the late 18th century. Belarusian became the only (official) state language in Belarus as late as 1990⁶⁵, which was also enshrined in the 1994 Constitution (Article 17.). At that time, Russian acquired the status of the language of international communication⁶⁶. According to Article 28 of the Law on Language in the Republic of Belarus, the language used in the sphere of culture was to be Belarusian (at the same time, the state guaranteed the preservation and development of the culture of representatives of other nations that live in Belarus)⁶⁷.

From the point of view of Belarusian historian Aleh Trusau, the years 1990-1995 were exceptional. Many more Belarusian language books were published during this period than in the last five hundred years⁶⁸. This situation changed rapidly after the 1995 referendum, which, in addition to notable changes in the system of the highest state authorities, introduced a seemingly insignificant change: Russian became the second official language of Belarus⁶⁹. But are these languages really equal? What language is spoken in Belarusian culture?

⁶⁵Закон (3094-XI) Аб мовах у Рэспубліцы Беларусь от 26 января 1990 г. Ведамасці Нацыянальнага сходу Рэспублікі Беларусь”, 1998 г., no. 28, p.461 (first ed.).

⁶⁶Канстытуцыя Рэспублікі Беларусь, <https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/pomniki-gistoryi-prava-belarusi/kanstytutsyy-nae-prava-belarusi/kanstytutsyi-belarusi/kanstytutsyya-1994-goda/>, (accessed: 29.04.2021).

⁶⁷Закон (3094-XI) Аб мовах у Рэспубліцы Беларусь от 26 января 1990 г. Ведамасці Нацыянальнага сходу Рэспублікі Беларусь”, 1998 г., no. 28, p.461 (first ed.).

⁶⁸<https://naviny.belsat.eu/ru/news/kali-ne-gety-zakon-byli-b-uzho-u-skladze-rasei-27-gadou-tamu-belaruskuyu-movu-zrabili-adzinaj-dzyarzhaunaj/>, (accessed 28.04.2021).

⁶⁹Канстытуцыя Рэспублікі Беларусь са змяненнямі і дапаўненнямі, прынятымі на рэспубліканскіх рэферэндумах 24 лістапада 1996 г. and 17 кастрычніка 2004 г., <https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/pomniki-gistoryi-prava-belarusi/kanstytutsyy-nae-prava-belarusi/kanstytutsyi-belarusi/kanstytutsyya-1994-goda-sa-zmyanennyami-i-dapa-nennyami-/#1>, (accessed 20.04.2021).

Legal conditions

In accordance with Article 50. of the Constitution of Belarus “(...) Everyone shall have the right to use his native language and to choose the language of communication. In accordance with the law, the State shall guarantee the freedom to choose the language of upbringing and instruction”⁷⁰ (<https://president.gov.by/en/gosudarstvo/constitution>). Article 54. of the Constitution states that it is the duty of every citizen to “preserve the historical, cultural and spiritual heritage and other national treasures”⁷¹. In accordance with Article 26. of the Law on languages (as amended, as of April 2021), the languages used in the sphere of culture are Belarusian and/or Russian⁷².

Acts of legislation of Belarus (pursuant to Article 54. Law of 2018 On Normative Legal Acts) shall be issued “by an authorised body (official) in Belarusian and (or) Russian”⁷³. However, it is interesting that the National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus www.pravo.by operates in two languages: Russian and English. Whereas the internet portal, which is the official source of legal acts of Belarus – www.etalonline.by – already has the function of switching to the Belarusian language, but with the application of... Google Translate.

Significantly, the first (and only) code initially written and published in Belarusian is the 2016 Culture Code ⁷⁴ (by April 2021, out of 26 codes, only eight had been officially translated into Belarusian)⁷⁵. Article 1. of this Code contains definitions of terms. “Culture” has been defined as “a set of cultural goods and cultural activities” and “cultural value” as “a tangible and intangible object created (transformed) by man or closely related to his/her activity, a manifestation of human creativity of historical, artistic, scientific or other significance”. Whereas, Article 2, among the principles regulating the sphere of culture,

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Кодэкс (413-3) Рэспублікі Беларусь аб культуры от 20 ліпеня 2016 г., <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=hk1600413> (accessed 20.04.2021).

⁷²Закон Аб мовах у Рэспубліцы Беларусь, (as of 4 January 2021), (accessed 20.04.2021).

⁷³Закон (130-3) Рэспублікі Беларусь от 17 июля 2018 г., <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=H11800130>, (accessed 20.04.2021).

⁷⁴Кодэкс (413-3) Рэспублікі Беларусь аб культуры от 20 ліпеня 2016 г., <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=hk1600413>, (accessed 20.04.2021).

⁷⁵<https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/normativnye-dokumenty/kodeksy-respubliki-belarus/>, (accessed 20.04.2021).

mentions “priority of development of Belarusian national culture and recognition of the Belarusian language as one of the factors shaping national mentality”.

The directions present in public policy, following Article 8, include “the preservation, development, distribution and (or) popularisation of the Belarusian national culture and language”, “encouraging the publication of works of literature relevant to the preservation, development, distribution and (or) popularisation of Belarusian national culture and language” (works of national literature, including literature for children and youth)⁷⁶.

A list of state cultural institutions “of particular importance for the preservation, development, distribution and/or popularisation of Belarusian national culture, the reorganisation and liquidation of which shall be conducted with the consent of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus” was also created at the central level⁷⁷. The list includes museums (National Art Museum, National Historical Museum), National Library of Belarus, educational institutions (Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts, Belarusian State Academy of Music), theatres (National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre, Yanka Kupala National Academic Theatre, National Academic Drama Theatre Named After Yakub Kolas, National Academic Drama Theatre named after Gorky), National Academic Folk Choir of the Republic of Belarus named after G.I.Tsitovich and Belarusian State Philharmonic.

On the one hand, the state officially guarantees the preservation, development, and protection of Belarusian culture, including the Belarusian language as one of its most important values. Still, on the other hand, the Russian language is equal in status to the Belarusian language.

The actual language situation

1. Education and science

⁷⁶Кодэк (413-3) Рэспублікі Беларусь аб культуры от 20 ліпеня 2016 г., <https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=hk1600413>, (accessed 21.06.21).

⁷⁷Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь от 13 января 2017 г. О некоторых мерах по реализации Кодекса Республики Беларусь о культуре,

Statistics on Belarusian-speaking schools are significant. In 2018, there were 2,813 schools in Belarus, of which 1,220 were in cities, and 1,593 were in rural areas. There were 1,282 schools with Belarusian as the language of instruction (according to the Belarusian Ministry of Education), of which 1,207 were located in rural areas and only 75 in cities. This means that in reality, the situation remains relatively the same as during the USSR, with the only difference that now in Belarus, almost five times more students study in municipal schools than in rural schools⁷⁸.

This trend is no longer so much alarming as disastrous: from 2012 to 2018, 615 schools were closed in Belarus. There were 1,660 schools with the Russian language of instruction in 2012 and 1,527 in 2018. By contrast, there were 1764 schools with the Belarusian language in 2012 and 1282 remained in 2018. This means that 482 Belarusian-language schools were closed during the same period. In Vitebsk Region, at the beginning of the 2017/2018 school year, there were two municipal schools with the Belarusian language – one remained today. In the Gomel region, at the beginning of the 2018/2019 school year, there remained three Belarusian-language municipal schools with a total number of 115 students⁷⁹.

As of 2017, only 13.3% of children were taught in Belarusian in schools, but by comparison, there was no Belarusian-language school in the regional cities, so even Belarusian history and geography were taught in Russian in schools⁸⁰. The number of children studying in the Belarusian language almost doubled between 2006 and 2017. Thus, in the 2006- 2007 school year, 898,600 students studied in Russian (78.5% of the total number of students) and 245,900 students studied in Belarusian (21.5%), compared to 838,400 (86.6%) and 128,600 (13.3%), respectively in the 2016/2017 school year⁸¹. This difference in the number of students

⁷⁸ <https://euroradio.fm/ru/faktchek-v-belarusi-deystvitelno-455-belorusskoyazychnyh-shkol>, (accessed 22.04.2021).

⁷⁹ <https://euroradio.fm/ru/faktchek-v-belarusi-deystvitelno-455-belorusskoyazychnyh-shkol>, (accessed: 21.04.2021).

⁸⁰І. Студзінская, *Вучыцца на роднай мове. 8 фактаў пра беларускія школы*, 21 люты (accessed: 21.04.2021).

⁸¹ <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2017/05/31/za-10-let-chislennost-belorusskoyazychnyh-shkolnikov-sokratilas-v-dva-raza.html>, (accessed 23.04.2021).

is due to the fact that schools teaching in Belarusian are overwhelmingly located in rural areas and have very few students⁸².

Since the Soviet times, the school curriculum has followed the rule that approximately the same number of hours is spent on studying Russian and Belarusian literature (the subjects are called “Russian Literature” and “Belarusian Literature”, respectively). Although books by foreign authors are also included in the school reading canon, the number of these works is not comparable to the number of works by Russian authors⁸³. Equally telling is the list of tasks on Russian literature, including books recommended for the summer reading. Books in Belarusian are recommended for first, second and third graders, i.e. primary school students⁸⁴.

Therefore, students read foreign literature mainly on their own initiative. At the same time, many pupils of the 5th grade of primary school (aged about 10-11) admit that it is difficult for them to understand Belarusian poetry, which is in the curricula because there is a lot of unfamiliar vocabulary⁸⁵.

⁸² Можно ли выучить белорусский язык в школах Беларуси, <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%B2%D1%8B%D1%83%D1%87%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%8C-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D1%8F%D0%B7%D1%8B%D0%BA-%D0%B2-%D1%88%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%85-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D0%BF%D0%BE-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B5>

⁸³ Учебная программа по русской литературе V-XI классы, Министерство образования Республики Беларусь, https://www.adu.by/wp-content/uploads/2014/umodos/урп/рус_lit.pdf, (accessed 27.04.2021).

⁸⁴ Список программных произведений по русской литературе. Список литературы, рекомендуемой для чтения летом, <https://sch10.minskedu.gov.by/%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B0/%D1%83%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%89%D0%B8%D0%BC%D1%81%D1%8F/%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BC%D0%BD%D1%8B%D1%85-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D0%BF%D0%BE-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B5>, (accessed: 27.04.2021).

⁸⁵ О. Пасияк, С. Рыжов, Что читают наши дети? <https://rg.ru/2017/01/25/soiuz-sravnil-shkolnye-programmy-po-literature-v-belorussii-i-rossii.html>, (accessed 27.04.2021).

The views discriminating against Belarusian-language education in secondary schools are also not new to the management of the Ministry of Education. In 2016, Minister Sergey Maskevich said that Belarusian youth “want to study in a language that will give them a great perspective in life. For us today, the Russian language offers significant prospects, so learning natural sciences in it is obvious”⁸⁶.

Even if a student chooses Belarusian as his/her main language of instruction at school, at university, he/she will have practically no place to use Belarusian-language terms from mathematical, physical, chemical, etc. fields. At universities, despite the statutory right to choose the language of instruction, the vast majority of classes are conducted only in Russian. Even students determined to learn Belarusian at most universities do not have a choice in the vast majority of fields because there is no suitable offer. It is possible to study in the Belarusian language at universities only at Belarusian philology and culture faculties. At other faculties, this is rather an exception.

Therefore, universities that are supposed to influence the preservation of Belarusian culture mainly use the Russian language. The Belarusian State University of Culture and Art provides recipients with the most information about its activities in Russian, and in Belarusian about the Chair of Ethnology and Folklore⁸⁷ and the Department of Information and Documentary Communication⁸⁸. The website of the Belarusian State Academy of Music is presented in four language versions (English, Belarusian, Russian and Chinese)⁸⁹. As for the cultural research at this university, out of 21 research directions within the scientific path “World and native culture,” only one – “Historical stages and features of the development of Belarusian culture” is directly related to the culture of Belarus⁹⁰.

As far as scientific research is concerned, the Belarusian language does not compete with Russian for the time being (it is worth visiting the website of the Higher Attestation

⁸⁶*Образование на белорусском языке остается на глубокой периферии*, Красавік 27/2016, <https://belarusinfofocus.info/by/regiiony/obrazovanie-na-beloruskom-yazyke-ostaetsya-na-glubokoy-periferii> (accessed 23.04.2021).

⁸⁷<http://www.buk.by/process/fakultet%202/Folklore/>, (accessed 21.04.2021).

⁸⁸<http://www.buk.by/>, (accessed 21.04.2021).

⁸⁹<https://www.bgam.by/billboard/>, (accessed 21.04.2021).

⁹⁰http://www.buk.by/Science/Scientific_schools/World_and_national_culture/index.php, (accessed 21.04.2021).

Commission of the Republic of Belarus, which publishes self-reports required as part of the application procedure for doctoral and candidate degrees of sciences in all fields of science)⁹¹.

The National Academy of Sciences (NAN) of Belarus signed more than 150 major cooperation agreements with scientific and research centres and scientific management bodies from 63 countries, and within the framework of international contracts, there is an exchange of scientists from 20 countries. As for the commercialisation of research results on foreign markets, 38 international research centres currently operate based on NAN of Belarus, cooperating mainly with organisations in the Russian Federation, People's Republic of China, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Republic of Korea, Japan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Italy and Sweden. The top ten countries working with NAN (as of the end of 2018) include Russia, Saudi Arabia, China, Kazakhstan, the USA, Turkmenistan, Germany, Belgium, Czech Republic and Ukraine⁹².

As far as scientific literature is concerned, the state programmes do not translate foreign scientific studies into Belarusian. According to the programme “Education and youth policy” for 2016-2020, funds were allocated from the state budget for the translation into Russian publications by foreign authors used for teaching and scientific purposes (textbooks, teaching aids, scientific and technical literature) on nuclear energy. At the same time, the very programme provides state support for English language learning for staff of higher education institutions⁹³.

Although the development of the internationalisation of science is calculated to expand cooperation from a global perspective, for the time being, Russia remains the primary recipient of exports of the product of scientific research, but also scientific personnel. The reasons for this situation may be, in my opinion, as follows:

⁹¹Библиотека авторефератов Высшей Аттестационной Комиссии Республики Беларусь. <https://vak.gov.by/library>, (accessed 25.04.2021).

⁹²Знешнеэканамічная дзейнасць, <https://nasb.gov.by/bel/activity/mezhdunarodnye-svyazi/>, (accessed 25.04.2021).

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Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь от 28 марта 2016 г. Об утверждении Государственной программы „Образование и молодежная политика” на 2016- 2020 годы, Национальный правовой Интернет-портал Республики Беларусь, https://www.pravo.by/upload/docs/op/C21600250_1460494800.pdf, (accessed: 26.04.2021). 77

- 1) Common scientific past – most of the large scientific centres in the former USSR were located in Russia, and research was conducted in Russian (this applies to the sciences, humanities and social sciences);
- 2) Belarus is still not a full participant in the Bologna Process; as a result, there are still problems with the recognition of diplomas in other countries (complicated nostrification procedure). In Russia, the situation for people with a Belarusian diploma is more favourable both in terms of mutual recognition of diplomas and employment prospects;
- 3) The Russian language skills can also be an important argument in building the career of a young specialist since little time is devoted to foreign language study at Belarusian universities and their level of teaching is often quite low, Russia is often the first choice of an emigration country;
- 4) For a long time, the prevailing belief among Belarusians was that abroad “nobody waits for them” and that the Russians are brothers who cannot be hostile to the Belarusian people.

Certainly, the situation in various fields has been changing in recent years, such as programmers leaving Belarus. Similarly, European universities quite often become the first choice of students from Belarus (in this case, it is no longer the language that is the main reason for the choice, but the career opportunities for young people).

Officially, the development of science in Belarus, even under the conditions of the so-called “structural transformation of the science sphere in the post-Soviet countries”, is perceived by the authorities as “a unique opportunity to become the largest regional centre of science and innovation, a leader in many areas of scientific and technical activity within the single economic area (in the perspective of the Eurasian Economic Union) of the CIS, to gain the image of a State that focuses on scientific progress, supporting science and scientists”⁹⁴. However, the abovementioned directions of activity indicate a high probability of preserving the Russian language as the main one in science and research.

⁹⁴Постановление НАН Республики Беларусь и Государственного комитета по науке и технологиям Республики Беларусь об утверждении Программы совершенствования научной сферы Республики Беларусь, <https://nasb.gov.by/reference/razvitie/programma.pdf>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

A perfect example of the presence of the Belarusian language in the public sphere is the statistics of the National Book Chamber of Belarus: in 2020, most books were published in Russian⁹⁵ – 79.3%, in contrast, in Belarusian – 12.7% and other languages – 8.6%. These indicators did not change significantly over the last five years (in this period, the share of books in Belarusian in total was 12-13%), and the years 2019-2020 were characterised by a decrease in the number of Belarusian-language titles (by 20.9%) and the circulation of Belarusian-language books (by 27.9%). In 2020, 1046 books were published in Belarusian, with a total circulation of 3.7 million copies, accounting for 12.7% of the total number of titles published and 14.7% of the total circulation. Compared to 2019, the decrease in the number of Belarusian-language books published was 17.7% (decrease in circulation – 16.2%). The main share of books in Belarusian belongs to the group of publications with a circulation of up to 1,000 copies – 65.7%, the group of Belarusian-language publications with a circulation of 1,001 to 5,000 copies accounted for 26.7%.

Is there state support for the publication of Belarusian-language books? The facts are disappointing: between 1994 and 2002, the taxable income was reduced by the profit made by publishing houses and printing works from the publication of literature, newspapers and magazines in the Belarusian language, but as early as 2002, this provision was abolished⁹⁶. Since 2017, state support has been implemented by subsidising only state-owned publishing

⁹⁶Е.К. Лабоха , *Нормативная документация Беларуси в сфере книгоиздания на рубеже XX-XXI веков*, Труды БГТУ 2016. no. 9, pp. 101.

houses and publishing so-called socially relevant publications (subsidised “to reduce their price to the consumer”)⁹⁷.

According to the state program “Culture of Belarus”, for 2016-2020, the amount of 61 thousand dollars was allocated to filling libraries operating with Belarusian diaspora organisations with Belarusian books and to the publication of books on the Belarusian diaspora. In 2015, 30 of the so-called Belarusian Libraries were given to diasporas living in Russia, in 2017 – to diasporas from Lithuania, France, the Czech Republic, Poland, Kazakhstan or Serbia⁹⁸. The plan of publishing publications of social importance for 2021 is also not promising. For example, the publishing house “Belarusian Science” lists only 65 books in Belarusian out of 145 titles⁹⁹.

There is also a lack of a programme to translate books into Belarusian; in recent years, all translations of popular foreign literature were financed mainly by community collections. This is, in my opinion, an indicator of the attitude of state bodies, and not of Belarusians, to the Belarusian language. A perfect example is a fact that less than three weeks after the Belarusian translation of the book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* appeared on sale, it broke all sales records in Belarusian and Russian, and so many copies were purchased on the first day that the publishing house immediately announced an additional print run¹⁰⁰.

3. High culture and mass culture

The previously mentioned public cultural institutions provided an interesting analysis of the choice of language in which information about their activities is published on the official websites. Thus, the National Historical Museum of the Republic of Belarus has a Russian, and a Belarusian language version of its website and both versions contain identical information¹⁰¹.

⁹⁷Е.С. Павлова, *Отрасль печати Республики Беларусь: векторы развития*, 2017, http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:rRg36iIuzDMJ:sirp.by/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Doklad_Pechatnyj-rynok-Respubliki-Belarus.doc+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pl, (accessed 14.04.2021).

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Тэматычны план выпуску сацыяльна значных выданняў у 2021 годзе, <http://www.belnauka.by/katalog-izdaniy/plan-vypuska-sotsialno-znachimyk-izdaniy-v-2021-g.html>, (accessed 23.04.2021).

¹⁰⁰Я. Полешук, *Читайте на мове: мировая литература на белорусском*, <https://www.nlb.by/content/news/avtorskiy-vzglyad/chitayte-na-move-mirovaya-literatura-na-beloruskom/>, (accessed 18.04.2021).

¹⁰¹<http://histmuseum.by/by/news/>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

Regarding theatres, the Yanka Kupala National Academic Theatre presents performances in Belarusian. Moreover, its official website features playbills in Belarusian and English¹⁰²(with most of the troupe leaving after August 2020, the repertoire narrowed considerably). The Yakub Kolas National Academic Drama Theatre in Vitebsk stages performances in Belarusian (plays by Belarusian and foreign authors translated into Belarusian) as well as in Russian – the relevant information on the website is often written in Russian and Belarusian¹⁰³.

The M. Gorky National Academic Drama Theatre stages performances in Russian, and its website *www.rustheatre.by* also contains information in Polish¹⁰⁴. As for the National Academic Grand Opera and Ballet Theatre of the Republic of Belarus, its repertoire naturally includes mainly works written in foreign languages and presented in the original. However, the subtitles during performances of operas in a foreign language (a common practice in contemporary operas) are in Russian, but never in Belarusian (as the theatre website informs)¹⁰⁵.

The official website of the Republic of Belarus in the section Belarusian culture contains information in Belarusian, Russian, English and Chinese¹⁰⁶. The website contains information about the Day of Belarusian Written Language (first celebrated in 2014), held once a year in different cities of Belarus (more often in regional centres). Belarus hosts various types of festivals, most of them international, representing different languages. The Belarusian language is most often used for historical and folk events (e.g. the National Festival of Belarusian Song and Poetry “Molodechno”, the Republican Folklore Festival “Bereginya”, the Ethnographic Festival “Visit to Radzimich”)¹⁰⁷.

A review of concert and film posters also shows the predominance of the Russian language with a little presence of performers of Belarusian-language songs and extremely rare Belarusian dubbing of famous films¹⁰⁸. The Belarusian authorities also present their

¹⁰²<https://kupalauski.by/performances/>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

¹⁰³<http://kolastheatre.by/be/novosti>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

¹⁰⁴<https://www.rustheatre.by/>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

¹⁰⁵<https://bolshoibelarus.by/rus/repertuar/opera-repertuar.html>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

¹⁰⁶<https://www.belarus.by/by/about-belarus/culture>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

¹⁰⁷<https://www.belarus.by/by/about-belarus/culture/festivals-in-belarus>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

¹⁰⁸<https://afisha.tut.by/concert/>, <https://www.kvitki.by/rus/bileti/muzyka/>, <http://kinakong.by/>, <https://afisha.tut.by/news/aneews/718981.html>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

discriminatory position in this case: for example, according to the state program “Culture of Belarus” for the years 2021-2025, the planned share of film screenings with Belarusian films is from 4% in 2021 to 10% in 2025 of the total number of film screenings (in 2020 it was only 2%)¹⁰⁹. In 2018, 185 screenings of films in the Belarusian language were held in the cinemas of “Kinowideoprospekt”, which accounted for 0.34% of the total number of film screenings. Belarusian legislation does not contain provisions on compulsory dubbing or subtitling in the Belarusian language¹¹⁰.

Belarusian popular culture has for a very long time been increasingly based on the Russian language. There were very few exceptions to this rule: the groups “Pesniary” and “Syabry” made Belarusian-language songs known throughout the USSR, but the same examples can be found among performers from other union republics. Songs in the languages of the titular nations (incorporated into the USSR) were perceived as something special, a kind of exoticism. Still, in reality, the USSR's stage, theatre, and cinema were based on the Russian language.

In the 1990s and early 2000s., Russian popular culture was perceived by Belarusians as “theirs” because the memory of the USSR was alive during this period. Also, Moscow was perceived not only as the capital of the Great State but also as the centre of culture, which most artists tried to reach: singers, musicians, actors. The International Art Festival “Slavianski Bazaar” in Vitebsk and the tradition of watching Russian-language Christmas TV programmes broadcast on New Year's Eve are examples of preserving such traditions. Most of the popular guests at the “Slavianski Bazaar” represent Russian pop culture, and almost every Belarusian family on New Year's Eve watches a New Year's TV show on one of the Russian TV channels.

After the collapse of the USSR, the financial motive of also intensified. Being present on the Russian stage and in cinema was a guarantee of good earnings, as it meant many tours not only in the Russian Federation but also in the former republics of the USSR. The Russian language as the performance language guarantees many possibilities: Russian-speaking

¹⁰⁹Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь от 29 января 2021 г. о Государственной программе „Культура Беларуси” на 2021– 2025 годы, Национальный правовой Интернет-портал Республики Беларусь, https://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/C22100053_1612558800.pdf (accessed : 24.04.2021).

¹¹⁰А.Ю. Кадурын [и др.], *Об обязательном озвучивании (субтитровании) на белорусский язык фильмов при их показах в кинотеатрах Беларуси*, http://lawgroup.by/about_mandatory_dubbing_of_films_into_belarusian_language_in_belarus_cinemas, (accessed 23.04.2021).

viewers are unlikely to go to the concert of a performer singing in the national language (TN: here Belarusian).

There are Belarusian-language music groups and performers, but they are mostly bands performing rock, ethno-rock and ethnic music. Further, singers perform specific 'nomenclature' tasks at official events or international music competitions, representing Belarus (but not always performing in Belarusian). Aleh Trusau said in 2009 that the language of the Belarusian so-called “popsy” (pop culture) is “bad Russian” or “*Trasianka*” – a mixture of Belarusian and Russian languages¹¹¹.

Although more and more world-class artists gradually appear on posters, Russian performers continue to dominate the Belarusian concert scene. After 2010, the number of Belarusian-speaking bands and singers is increasing, but only slightly. Nevertheless, the Belarusian language is increasingly present in songs, and in 2020 some of them became symbols of protest (e.g. the song “Try Čarapachi” [Three Turtles] by the Belarusian rock band N.R.M., the translated anthem of the Polish Solidarity movement, i.e. “Mury” [Walls] by Jacek Kaczmarski).

The media situation is also the cause of the dominance of Russian-language popular culture. Official information on television and print media in Belarus illustrates vividly the situation of two state languages: about 3,000 foreign print media are distributed, of which more than 80% are Russian¹¹². Out of 10 state TV programs, 0 are broadcast in Belarusian¹¹³. One of the requirements imposed on television media editorial offices by the Law on the Media of the Republic of Belarus of 17 July 2008 is to ensure that the monthly number of television programmes, audiovisual works, other announcements and/or materials of Belarusian (national) production is no less than 30%¹¹⁴. In reality, this requirement is not implemented.

¹¹¹М. Ноцунь, А. Бжэзецкі *Зрабаваны народ: размовы з беларускімі інтэлектуаламі*, Гародня 2009, р.99.

¹¹²Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь от 29 января 2021 г. о Государственной программе „Массовая информация и книгоиздание” на 2021– 2025 годы, https://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/C22100021_1611176400.pdf, (accessed: 19.04.2021). <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/471/471b4693ab545e3c40d206338ff4ec9e.pdf>, (accessed: 27.03.2021).

¹¹³А. Чайчыц, *Дзяржаўная тэлевізія павінна мець прынамсі адзін беларускамоўны тэлеканал*, „Газета Arche”, <https://gazeta.arche.by/article/220.html>, (accessed: 19.04.2021).

¹¹⁴Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь от 29 января 2021 г. о Государственной программе „Массовая информация и книгоиздание” на 2021– 2025 годы, https://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/C22100021_1611176400.pdf, (accessed: 20.04.2021).

A conscious choice or a necessity?

Popular opinions state that the reason for the peculiar language situation in Belarus is that Belarusians prefer to speak Russian and have no need to communicate in the Belarusian language. According to the 2019 census, of the 7,990,719 Belarusians, 4,893,139 consider themselves of Belarusian nationality, and 3,044,850 Belarusians consider Russian their mother tongue¹¹⁵.

The entire history of the Belarusian language is quite complicated and related to the history of the state. In the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it was the state language and dominated the country's political, economic and cultural life until the 17th century. The period from the 17th century to 1917 was a time of Polonisation (after the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) and then Russification after the partitions and when the territory of Belarus became part of the Russian Empire. However, while Polonisation was not rapid (Polish was used in public offices and institutions), Russification was utterly different: restrictions were placed on the use of Belarusian, and later the use of the words “Belarus” and “Belarusian” was banned by decree of Tsar Nicholas of 18 July 1840. After the 1861- 1863 uprising, the Tsarist government banned the printing of Belarusian books and periodicals.

After the revolution, a very brief period of national and cultural revival began, with the Soviet authorities creating conditions for using the Belarusian language in various areas of social life. However, after the death of Vladimir Lenin, the Soviet state's policy on the language issue changed significantly¹¹⁶. As Kuryłowicz rightly observes, while “in Central Asia dependence on Moscow brought the region out of economic and political stagnation, and a modern national identity began to take shape”, for the peoples of the so-called western borderlands “the sovereignty of Russia or the USSR was perceived as a form of occupation and

¹¹⁵<https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/471/471b4693ab545e3c40d206338ff4ec9e.pdf>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

¹¹⁶See А.Ю. Кадурын [и др.], *Об обязательном озвучивании (субтитровании) на белорусский язык фильмов при их показах в кинотеатрах Беларуси*, http://lawgroup.by/about_mandatory_dubbing_of_films_into_belarusian_language_in_belarus_cinemas, (accessed: 21.04.2021), Г. И. Барышев *Театрально-декорационное искусство Белоруссии в период 1905— 1917 гг. (Общая характеристика)*, [in:] „Белорусское искусство: сборник статей и материалов” Изд-во Академии наук Белорусской ССР. Институт искусствоведения, этнографии и фольклора, Минск 1957, pp. 63–78; Н.Б. Мечковская, *Белорусский язык: социолингвистические очерки*, Мюнхен 2003.

civilisational regression”¹¹⁷ (however, in my opinion, the same could be said of Georgia and Armenia, whose cultures are much older than Russia's).

In the Soviet republics, the Russian language became an instrument of colonial policy and is used as a geopolitical instrument by Russia to this day¹¹⁸ (this is confirmed by the observation of the effects of the so-called defence of the rights of the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Crimea and the adoption of a Russian law that recognises Belarusians and Ukrainians as “native speakers” of the Russian language)¹¹⁹. For decades of the USSR's existence, Belarusian was considered the language of rural, the language of kolkhozniks (TN: members of kolkhoz), and the language of instruction only in rural schools.

The period from 1990 to 1995 was too short to provide the necessary basis for restoring respect for the mother tongue and preparing teachers to teach in that language. Additionally, while retaining its economic and political influence, Russia considers itself the successor of the USSR and, in matters of relations with “brotherly” nations, continues its post-colonial policy also at the level of cultural interaction, albeit in a slightly different form. This manifests itself in different spheres and different forms: legislation (recognition of Belarusians and Ukrainians as “native speakers” of Russian), the cooperation programme within the CIS (and concerning Belarus – within the Union State, which can be observed in the scientific sphere), distribution of Russian media, Russian cinema, etc¹²⁰.

Despite the abovementioned linguistic situation in Belarus, it should be emphasised that the self-identification of Belarusians as a nation is not typical. Although most Belarusians speak Russian, the same majority also identify themselves as representatives of another nation – perhaps brotherly to the Russians, but separate. Although Belarusians often consider

¹¹⁷M. Kuryłowicz. *Tarcza czy miecz? O dwuznacznej roli języka rosyjskiego w radzieckiej Azji Centralnej*, [in:] „Idea i komunikacja w języku i kulturze rosyjskiej”, ed. A. Dudka, Jagiellonian University Publishing House, Kraków 2010, p.273.

¹¹⁸See e.g. J. Olędzka, *Russian Language as a Tool of Geopolitical Influence*, “Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe”, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2017, pp. 135-163; M. Kuryłowicz. *Tarcza czy miecz? O dwuznacznej roli języka rosyjskiego w radzieckiej Azji Centralnej*, [in:] „Idea i komunikacja w języku i kulturze rosyjskiej”, ed. A. Dudka, Jagiellonian University Publishing House, Kraków 2010, pp. 273-280.

¹¹⁹*Вступил в силу закон о признании украинцев и белорусов носителями русского языка*, 17.06.20206 <https://vz.ru/news/2020/6/17/1045373.html>, (accessed 19.04.2021).

¹²⁰J. Olędzka, *Russian Language as a Tool of Geopolitical Influence*, “Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe”, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2017, p.153.

representatives of Russian culture (both high and mass) as “theirs”, they are proud of Belarusian writers, poets, cheer on their representatives taking part in various popular Russian contests, music and entertainment programmes. Thus, one can agree with Andrei Vardamatsky that a type of identity defined as territorial-state has developed in Belarus (traditionally, the community of history, culture, language, territorial community and socio-psychological similarities of the behaviour of people with a specific national identity are distinguished)¹²¹.

Further, the results of the research on attitudes towards the Belarusian language on Belarusian internet forums, conducted by Alena Lankiewicz, are very interesting. The attitude to the Belarusian language varies from extremely positive to extremely negative. It is a relatively stable indicator of a person's mental condition, depending on such factors as the state's language policy, attitude to the language used in the family and among peers, etc. There were also some problems with the mass understanding of the concept of bilingualism. However, the most surprising finding of this study is that the use of Russian is not a sign of a negative attitude towards the Belarusian language. Very often in discussions, the most involved “defenders” of the Belarusian language were Russian speakers, not Belarusians (who, in turn, often only declared their opinion, without justifying it and not trying to convince their opponents)¹²². This indicates that a Russian-speaking Belarusian is nevertheless a Belarusian and not a Russian.

The peculiarity of self-identification of Belarusians manifests itself most often in moments of crisis, which can be observed especially in 2020-2021¹²³. On the one hand, the

¹²¹Е. Данейко, *Особенности белорусской идентичности*, <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8/a-37674267>, (accessed: 20.04.2021).

¹²²А. Лянкевич, *Стаўленне да беларускай мовы ў інтэрнэт-камунікацыі (на матэрыяле дыскурсу-аналізу каментарыяў на інтэрнэт-орумах)*, „Acta Albaruthenica”, Volume 13, Warsaw 2013, p.151, http://www.albaruthenica.uw.edu.pl/pl/userfiles/downloads/AA_09_Zmiest.pdf, (accessed 20.04.2021).

¹²³Е. Данейко, *Белорусский язык в Беларуси – государственный статус или декорация?* <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D1%8F%D0%B7%D1%8B%D0%BA-%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%83%D1%81-%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8->

authorities try to prove their loyalty to Moscow, while on the other, the Belarusian people return to their 'Belarusianness' at the same time rejecting the delegitimised power. In 2021 in Belarus, it is possible to be arrested for a flashmob performing the act of reading Belarusian-language books on public transport. The Belarusian language becomes a symbol of opposition to the authorities.

The Belarusian Culture Solidarity Foundation was created to support repressed cultural activists, inform about their activities in their mother tongue¹²⁴, support Belarusian language projects (e.g. *Fairy tales with Malovanych*¹²⁵ – actor and former presenter of the programme for the youngest children on state television *Калыханка [Lullaby]*, Alyaksandr Zhdanovich “Malovanych”. The actor was dismissed from his job over the fact that he participated in a peaceful protest against the violence of the government towards citizens after the 2020 elections). The Foundation also organises broadcasts of Belarusian-language performances, etc¹²⁶.

Conclusions

(1) As an officially bilingual state, Belarus has not yet ensured the equality of the Belarusian and Russian languages laid down in legislation. In practically all areas of social life (education, science, culture, everyday life), the Russian language prevails, and the state only uses measures to support the Belarusian language in an overtly passive and rather decorative policy towards it. No top-ranking official speaks Belarusian, and the head of state publicly expressed a negative attitude towards the language of the titular nation.

(2) The predominance of the Russian language is due to the historical, colonial policy of first the Russian Empire, then the USSR, and today Russia towards the Belarusian lands and the Belarusian people. Restrictions and bans on the use of the Belarusian language, the attitude to Belarusian countries as Western Russian and the Belarusian nation as “younger brother”, the

%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F/a-19056419, (accessed: 22.04.2021).

¹²⁴Беларускі Фонд Культурнай Салідарнасці, <https://byculture.org/>, (accessed : 24.04.2021).

¹²⁵https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FuPyl_t4hQ&ab_channel=%D0%91%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BA%D1%96%D0%A4%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B4%D0%9A%D1%83%D0%BB%D1%8C%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%A1%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%96%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%86%D1%96, (accessed: 13.04.2021).

¹²⁶Монаспектакль “На Беларусі Бог жыве”, <https://youtu.be/G52Z8yiOCDE>, (accessed: 29.04.2021).

failure to recognise the independence of the Belarusian nation Belarusian language (or the attitude to it as a dialect of Russian) have led to the suppression of the Belarusian language from education and its preservation mainly in rural areas. This, in turn, has shaped a specific attitude to the Belarusian language among many Belarusians, who consider the Belarusian language to be rural.

3. Russia's influence in the field of culture, science, education is manifested through various joint state programmes within the CIS and the Union State, Russian media, publishing houses, film production (which have become increasingly propaganda-oriented in recent years). The lack of language barriers, combined with the privileged (compared to citizens of other countries) legal situation of Belarusian specialists in the Russian Federation, opens up employment opportunities for many young people.

4. Despite the unquestionable advantage of the Russian language in Belarusian society, Belarusians still consider the Belarusian language their mother tongue, however to a lesser extent than, for example, ten years ago. Especially during the 2020 political crisis, the mother tongue became a symbol of non-recognition of authority that the majority considers illegitimate. Fewer and fewer Belarusians support the creation of a single state with Russia¹²⁷.

The change of power may lead to a change in the state's language policy. In this case, it seems optimal to consolidate the status of Belarusian as the only official language with the establishment of a transitional period. Undoubtedly, it is now almost impossible to replace the Russian language completely. Latvia, for example, has still not finalised its educational reform (it is planned to switch to teaching in schools only in Latvian before 2022, and the whole reform has been going on for almost 14 years¹²⁸). However, the situation of the Russian language has never been similar to that of Belarus in this republic. It is worth mentioning that in Czechia, it took at least 100 years for the native language to be revived¹²⁹ after centuries of German rule. Therefore, it is necessary to provide balanced state support for the restoration of the role of the Belarusian language, using the positive experiences of other post-Soviet countries. Armenia

¹²⁷<https://www.forbes.ru/obshchestvo/406615-velikaya-strana-ot-bresta-do-chukotki-hotyat-li-belorusy-obedinyatsya-s-rossiey>, (accessed 26.04.2021).

¹²⁸O. Nikers. *Latvia Defends Its Language Despite Massive Russian Pressure*, Eurasia Daily Monitor April 4, 2018. <https://jamestown.org/program/latvia-defends-its-language-law-despite-massive-russian-pressure/>, (accessed 25.04.2021).

¹²⁹Закон Литовской Республики О государственном языке от 31 января 1995 г. №1-779, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.58647> (accessed 27.04.2021).

and Lithuania have introduced compulsory education in their state languages in schools, compulsory universal use in all areas of life, compulsory subtitles for foreign films, etc¹³⁰. Moreover, as Trusov claim, the Belarusian language must necessarily return to higher educational institutions, and also it is crucial to break the psychological barrier. One should start speaking Belarusian, even if it is *Trasianka* at first¹³¹.

¹³⁰*Language Education Policy Profile. Country Report– Armenia*, Yerevan, 2007, https://www.academia.edu/6901131/LANGUAGE_POLICY_PROFILE_ARMENIA_country_report_2009(accessed 27.04.2021).

¹³¹М. Ноцунь, А. Бжэзецкі *Зрабаваны народ: размовы з беларускімі інтэлектуаламі*, Гародня 2009, с. 99-102.

Russian influence on the stance of the post-Soviet countries towards events in Belarus

The Belarusian protests of August 2020 affected not only the relations of the Belarusian state with its closest partners but also the way the Russian Federation tries to play its own political game in the post-Soviet space. Russia had to adapt to the new political conditions, try to minimise its losses and use the situation to its advantage. Threats and opportunities for Russia emerged on several levels. Firstly, the image risk should be mentioned. The Belarusian protests have become an example of the degradation of the authoritarian system in a country that until recently seemed to be one of Russia's most stable allies. As examples from recent history show, anti-government protests in one country can trigger protests across the region. The most striking example is the events of the Arab Spring. Similarly, that situation is partly analogous because six months after the protests began in Belarus, protests erupted in Russia. Alyaksandr Lukashenka sees these protests as "links of a single chain"¹³². This kind of evaluation of the protests gives Russia a reason to reinforce anti-Western sentiments not only internally but also externally and as a pretext to promote the narrative among its allies. This is evidenced by Lukashenka's numerous statements about external influences on the domestic political situation in Belarus after the presidential election. This claim was promoted not only by Russian propagandists¹³³ but also by Vladimir Putin¹³⁴.

The threats and opportunities for Russian external policy in the political and economic context are also worth mentioning. EU sanctions imposed on Belarus after the brutal repression of protesters could economically weaken Belarus and thus the entire Eurasian Customs Union. This is apparently a serious blow against the regime, as the voices of dissent against the authorities grow even stronger in the economically weakened state. In addition,

¹³² Лукашенко назвал отличие белорусских протестов от акций в России, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/28/01/2021/6012b59e9a7947de47fb3b01>, (accessed: 04.03.2021).

¹³³ ¹³³ „Классическая цветная революция”: события в Беларуси в интерпретации российского ТВ, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53726186>, (accessed: 04.03.2021).

¹³⁴ Путин заявил об обеспокоенности ситуацией в Белоруссии, <https://ria.ru/20201202/putin-1587327694.html>, (accessed: 04.03.2021).

the sudden deterioration of relations with the European Union deprives Lukashenka of the chance to pursue a kind of “multipolarity” policy, which was strongly noticeable in recent years before the protests. Restricting the possibility of continuing such a policy makes the Belarusian dictator completely dependent (both economically and politically) on the Russian Federation. The Putin regime is thus exploiting the whole situation conveniently. In such a situation, Russia’s most important task is therefore to try to maximise the number of possible benefits.

For years, the Russian Federation has been heavily involved not only in bilateral relations with the states of the post-Soviet space but also in controlling the situation at the level of supra-state organisations and interfering in relations between the states of the region. By acting in this way, Russia seeks to be a kind of mentor for all processes of international relations in the post-Soviet space. This Russian involvement occurs on many levels and with a large number of foreign policy instruments. The influence is usually included in inter-state agreements concluded at the official level. An example is the Agreement on the Union State, according to which Belarus must coordinate its every step on the international arena with Russia¹³⁵.

In practical terms, this works through trade wars, energy market manipulation, military training, supra-state commitments and various “soft power” instruments. It is precisely the tools of soft power that are particularly important in the attempts of the Russian Federation to influence the stance of the states of the post-Soviet space towards the situation in Belarus after the beginning of the anti-presidential protests in August 2020. How the media and politicians of post-Soviet countries who are sympathetic to Moscow explain the situation in Belarus makes it clear what argumentation is used for each country to discourage them from supporting democratic forces and stimulate strengthening relations with the Lukashenka regime. Familiarisation with such argumentation provides an opportunity to effectively wage “information wars” against the democratic societies of the countries in the region. Further, the adaptation of these arguments provides greater opportunities to take diplomatic steps against states that unconditionally support democratic forces in Belarus (above all, Poland and Lithuania). Awareness of the impediments that prevent the countries of the post-Soviet

¹³⁵ Договоросоздании Союзного государства, <https://soyuz.by/dogovor-o-sozdanii-soyuznogo-gosudarstva>, (accessed: 06.03.2021).

space from supporting the democratic forces of Belarus enables a better understanding of the opposing arguments and propose to these countries an alternative solution. The solution in which they will not suffer losses (or at least minimise them) by deciding to support the democratic protests in Belarus. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to identify and present to the reader the arguments employed by Russia, which influences each of the states in the post-Soviet space to varying degrees.

Ukraine

Although after 2014, Russian influence on Belarusian-Ukrainian relations was still observed, it did not immediately impede the development and deepening of bilateral relations between Ukraine and Belarus. At the beginning of this period, Russia attempted to engage Belarus in a trade war with Ukraine (in the summer of 2014)¹³⁶, but this proved unsuccessful.

This influence was particularly felt in Ukraine during the joint military exercise, “Zapad” in 2017, which took place on the territory of Belarus, near the border with Ukraine. In the context of both warming of relations and the intensification of multidimensional Ukrainian-Belarusian cooperation, holding these exercises was a step that could have impeded the process. However, the complete dependence of the Belarusian regime on Russia was a kind of “justification” for such a step, or at least a factor that allowed the Ukrainian authorities to turn a blind eye to a *de facto* hostile action on the part of Belarus. It should be noted that the development of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations has always occurred only within a framework that was possible under the conditions of the Lukashenka regime’s dependence on Russia. Therefore, this warming of bilateral ties can even be viewed as a deliberate gesture directed by Moscow. Consequently, it is not surprising that after the protests in Belarus began and the first adverse reactions of Ukraine to Lukashenka’s regime appeared, Minsk’s official rhetoric towards this country changed abruptly (however, Minsk’s first step towards cooling relations with Ukraine can be seen as the release of the so-called “Wagnerists” [Russian mercenaries] to the Russian Federation in August 2020). Lukashenka then suddenly changed his attitude towards Ukraine. From being “the most important

¹³⁶ Лукашенко між двох вогнів, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2014/08/26/7025316/>, (accessed: 06.03.2021).

neighbour” and a country that had “always supported Belarus”¹³⁷, Ukraine became a country from which “terrorists carry tons of weapons”¹³⁸. Such a change in the character of the Belarusian dictator’s messages is expected and fits into the broader context of the sudden cooling of his relations with European countries. The reaction of Ukraine was surprising. Kyiv’s official stance towards the violent actions of the Belarusian authorities against the protesters in August 2020 was always delayed compared to its western neighbours. Over time, the Ukrainian government, without hiding it, chose the direction of continuing economic cooperation with Belarus. This was despite the criticism coming from the Verkhovna Rada and its decision to “join the EU sanctions”. In view of the above, the rhetoric promoted by pro-Russian forces at this stage proved popular not only among the Ukrainian political elite but prevailed even in political practice. Since the beginning of the protests, a clear division has emerged on the Ukrainian political scene regarding the attitude to the Belarusian situation. The “Voice”, “Batkivshchyna” and “European Solidarity” parties immediately expressed their support for the people of Belarus who want to elect the authorities democratically and criticised the use of force by the Lukashenko authorities. In the ruling Servant of the People party, the division was along the lines of moderate reaction. One side called for tolerance and dialogue (President Volodymyr Zelensky also took this position) and the other for a more decisive reaction, which could be seen in the statement by some party members calling on the Belarusian authorities to end the unacceptable violation of human rights and urging them to enforce the fundamental rights and freedoms of Belarusian citizens¹³⁹. However, one of the MPs adopted a different position and supported the regime of Lukashenko. It was Yevhen Shevchenko, a former entrepreneur from Zaporizhia, who on August 17, 2020, called on the Belarusian people to “forgive Lukashenko for his sins and thievery, because if they do not forgive him, later they will not forgive themselves that they cannot turn back the clock”¹⁴⁰. On February 11, 2021, the same MP participated in the All-

¹³⁷ Лукашенко об отношениях Беларуси с Украиной: они зависят только от нас самих, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/vstrecha-prezidenta-belarusi-aleksandra-lukashenko-s-predstaviteljami-ukrainskih-smi-obnovljaetsja-363467-2019/>, (accessed: 06.03.2021).

¹³⁸ Лукашенко заявил о ввозе в страну террористами “тонн оружия” из Украины, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/25/12/2020/5fe5e93f9a7947ed1fa4dc77>, (accessed: 06.03.2021).

¹³⁹ Часть Слуги Народа призвала Лукашенко не нарушать право людей на мирный протест, <https://news.liga.net/politics/news/vybory-v-belarusi-ukrainskie-nardepy-vystupili-s-zayavleniem>, (accessed: 06.02.2021)

¹⁴⁰ Депутат „Слуги Народу” просит белорусів пробачити Лукашенку скоєні ним злочини, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2020/08/17/7113281/>, (accessed: 06.02.2021).

Belarusian People's Assembly, which Lukashenka initiated in Minsk¹⁴¹. No party sanctions were applied to the MP Yevchenko. The Servant of the People's only reaction was a statement informing that Shevchenko participated in the assembly as a private person and not as a party representative¹⁴². Then, in April 2021, in Minsk, Shevchenko met with Lukashenka and became the first representative of the Ukrainian authorities to meet with the Belarusian dictator after the suspension of political contacts between Ukraine and Belarus¹⁴³.

However, the opinion of Ukraine's largest pro-Russian party, the Opposition Platform — For Life (OPZZh), was the most distinctive. The chairman of this party, Viktor Medvedchuk, has a family relationship with Vladimir Putin (Putin is a godfather of Medvedchuk's daughter). Meanwhile, the party itself (which in practice is a reincarnation of the Party of Regions) has for years pursued pro-Russian policies, promoting the Russian narrative in Ukrainian political life. Hence, the actions of this party concerning the Belarus issue can be perceived as an indicator of Russian influence and an interpretation of the arguments Russia applies to Ukraine. Shortly after the election, a congratulatory letter from Medvedchuk to Lukashenka appeared on the OPZZh website. The letter said, inter alia, "The citizens of the Republic of Belarus confirmed that you remain the undisputed leader in your country. As someone who has known you for many years and treated you with great respect, I believe that this leadership is based on phenomenal hard work, responsibility and a desire to protect your country and its citizens. Regardless of how your opponents think about it, this is a truly consistent and manly position. Your contribution to the resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine is invaluable, and I am confident that you will continue to do everything to bring peace to Donbas and further develop Belarusian-Ukrainian relations"¹⁴⁴. These few sentences also confirm what position of Ukraine towards the events in Belarus Moscow would like to see. It is evidence of an ignorant attitude towards the protests in Belarus and an emphasis on Lukashenka's role in the negotiations on Donbas. It turns out that it was

¹⁴¹ Facebook J.Szewczeni, <https://www.facebook.com/e.shevchenko76/posts/3762629107148135>, (accessed: 06.02.2021).

¹⁴² „Служі Народу” кажуть, що їхній нардеп був на зборах Лукашенка як проста людина, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/02/12/7283281/>, (accessed: 06.02.2021).

¹⁴³ *Ukraiński poseł spotkał się z Łukaszenką*, https://bialorus2020studium.pl/ukrainski-posel-spotkal-sie-z-lukaszenka/?fbclid=IwAR3FHkCIYNutDPbxQ20ENVxdV15AsxqC5IDImC_Egz006IEvlnQhuTRqERU, (accessed: 24.04.2021).

¹⁴⁴ *Обращение к Александру Лукашенко от Виктора Медведчука*, https://zagittya.com.ua/news/novosti/obraschenie_k_aleksandru_lukashenko_ot_viktora_medvedchu_ka.html, (accessed: 06.03.2021).

primarily Minsk's role as a negotiating post of the Tripartite Contact Group (TCG) that provided the main argument for Ukraine not to react too harshly to the repression of protesters in Belarus.

A few days after the publication of Medvedchuk's letter, another member of the OPZZh, Illa Kywa, repeated the same argument in a much stronger form, "Minsk was probably the only platform that enabled at least some start of the negotiation process to achieve peace. And today, these political "losers" (Ukrainian politicians who judged the repression of protesters in Belarus – author's note) invalidate our ability to conduct normal economic, political and negotiating processes with a country that yesterday extended the hand of friendship to us"¹⁴⁵. However, this topic very quickly became irrelevant. Soon the chairman of the Ukrainian delegation in the TCG, Leonid Kravchuk, said that Belarus was not participating in the TCG, so there was no point in changing the negotiating post¹⁴⁶. Further, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, TCG meetings were held under an online regime; thus, the issue of Minsk as a negotiating post was not topical. However, Kravchuk's position on the issue changed within six months. In February 2021, the former Ukrainian President said that "it is impossible to conduct negotiations in a country that is 100% dependent on Russia. In a country where power is in the hands of a dictator. It is not clear how a structure that seeks peace can operate under such conditions. This is nonsense. We have to choose (another – author's note) place to negotiate"¹⁴⁷. This thesis can also be found in the analytical note prepared after the meeting of the Belarusian-Ukrainian expert forum in November 2020. The Ukrainian side informed that the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs believed that further TCG negotiations could not continue in Minsk and proposed Vienna as a negotiating post¹⁴⁸. However, it should be understood that when the restrictions related to the pandemic are lifted, the issue of Minsk as a negotiating post will return and may become an effective instrument for manipulation by Russia, as representatives of the so-called DPR (Donetsk People's Republic) and LPR (Luhansk People's Republic) are entirely dependent on the

¹⁴⁵ *Илья Кива: Заявления Порошенко и его соратников направлены на разрушение Минской переговорной площадки*, https://zagittya.com.ua/news/novosti/ilja_kiva_zajavlenija_poroshenko_i_ego_soratnikov_po_belaru_si_napravleny_na_razrushenie_minskoj_peregovornoj_ploschadki.html, (accessed: 07.03.2021).

¹⁴⁶ *Кравчук не вважас, що Мінську вже треба шукати заміну для зустрічей ТГК*, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2020/08/13/7262799/>, (accessed: 07.03.2021).

¹⁴⁷ *Экс-президент Кравчук о войне в Донбассе, Медведчуке и словах Байдена*, <https://www.dw.com/ru/jeks-prezident-kravchuk-o-vojne-v-donbasse-medvedchuke-i-slovah-bajdena/a-56704279>, (accessed: 06.03.2021).

¹⁴⁸ *Аналитическая записка „Белорусско-украинские отношения в контексте внутривосточного кризиса в Беларуси” по итогам белорусско-украинского экспертного форума 2020, с. 8.*

Kremlin. If they do not agree to change the negotiating post, it could lead to a serious crisis in the whole negotiating process, and Moscow's condition in such a situation may be a change in Ukraine's stance on the situation in Belarus. For now, it is a hidden but still existing threat.

Whereas, after realising that in August 2020, the issue of Minsk as a negotiating post was not valid, the representatives of the pro-Russian OPZZh opted for a different line of argumentation, which proved to be much more effective. It is a question of economic cooperation between Ukraine and Belarus. This topic was raised by Medvedchuk in the Verkhovna Rada in September 2020, before the vote on the resolution not to recognise the results of the presidential election in Belarus. Certainly, Medvedchuk strongly opposed the resolution, but this time his argumentation was related to economic cooperation. He argued: "Belarus is our neighbour, the last neighbour with whom we had more or less normal relations, including economic ones. Belarus is Ukraine's energy partner. In the first half of 2020, 31% (think!) of oil products came to Ukraine from Belarus. I can quote the results of previous years: it is about 24-28% of the diesel fuel supplied annually to Ukraine from Belarus, 24-26% of the liquefied gas and 45% of all petrol. You should think about how important, economically important energy partner Belarus is for us. And the border between Belarus and Ukraine is 1084 kilometres long. I emphasise once again that this is our last neighbour with whom we break all relations with such declarations, spoiling them, even though our nation's opinion is completely different. So everything that happens in Belarus is an internal Belarus' affair. Ukraine should not be allowed to behave in the manner specified in the statement of the Verkhovna Rada"¹⁴⁹.

This kind of argument proved to be the most effective. Soon it was repeated even by the milieu of political experts who were not associated with pro-Moscow forces. Similar arguments could also be heard from representatives of the Ukrainian authorities. In October 2020, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Dmytro Kuleba said that trade and economic cooperation with Belarus continued despite Ukraine joining the EU sanctions. He said, "We have intense and developed trade with Belarus. In some respects, our trade is of key importance to the Belarusian or Ukrainian economy and security. We have very serious cooperation in the military-technical sphere. I am therefore in favour of maintaining trade

¹⁴⁹ Медведчук: „Голосование за заявление о Беларуси направлено против интересов Украины,https://zagittya.com.ua/news/novosti/medvedchuk_golosovanie_za_zajavlenie_po_belarusi_napravlen_o_protiv_interesov_ukrainy.html, (accessed: 06.03.2021).

and economic cooperation – with one exception. If we see that in a Belarusian enterprise, the control of Russia and Russian secret services is increasing, and this enterprise is important for Ukraine, then in each case, we must assess the risk that occurs for Ukraine (...). Now we have the question of joining the EU sanctions list, which does not include Alyaksandr Lukashenka. I do not support the idea of sectoral sanctions, that is my personal position as a minister. In fact, no one is introducing them now, and we are not considering such a possibility ourselves. However, we believe that those who have committed violence against protesters should be punished by imposing sanctions on them. It is also a question of policy integrity and synergies between the EU and Ukraine”¹⁵⁰.

A similar position may be found in the abovementioned analytical note of the recommendations after the Belarusian-Ukrainian expert forum meeting held in November 2020. Ukrainian and Belarusian experts agreed that the main objective was to avoid critical political and economic losses for each side. In their joint recommendations after the forum meeting, they wrote as follows, “To avoid systemic gaps in practical cooperation that would prevent a return to normality in bilateral relations, the following aspects are important:

- weakening negative rhetoric towards each other at all formal and informal levels;
- creating a permanently closed and trusted communication channel at the highest possible political level (a kind of “emergency telephone line”), through which one could immediately signal to each other the inadmissibility of given actions, warn about possible responses, explain one’s own logic of behaviour, and conduct any other communication the parties consider necessary;
- not publishing of information on decisions taken in bilateral relations and no public statements (at least at the level of senior government officials) until there is at least an initial exchange of positions through a trusted communication channel;
- trying to continue mutually beneficial cooperation in the ordinary course, in all areas and projects not directly affected by political and diplomatic contradictions “¹⁵¹.

¹⁵⁰ *Торгівля та економічне співробітництво між Україною та Білоруссю мають зберегтися – Кулеба*, <https://zn.ua/ukr/POLITICS/torhivlja-ta-ekonomichne-spivrobitnistvo-mizh-ukrajinoju-i-bilorussju-majut-zberehtisja-kuleba.html>, (accessed: 06.03.2021).

¹⁵¹ Аналитическая записка “Белорусско-украинские отношения в контексте внутривосточного кризиса в Беларуси” по итогам белорусско-украинского экспертного форума 2020, с. 19

In practice, such recommendations mean that any efforts on the part of Ukraine to preserve the rights and freedoms of Belarusian citizens are nullified or reduced to a formal level. It would be natural if similar recommendations were made by Belarusian government experts, but in this case they are joint recommendations, which means that they are also signed by Ukrainian experts. In this way, the rhetoric of Medwedczuk in September 2020 echoed in the statements of Ukrainian experts as early as December 2020. Shortly after the publication of this document, Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that imposing economic sanctions on Belarus was impractical. Since the beginning of 2021, Ukraine began to buy electricity from the Belarusian nuclear power plant¹⁵².

Briefly summarising, it can be stressed that in Ukraine, the Russian narrative promoting a passive attitude towards the situation in Belarus works very effectively. Its three basic arguments are:

- The need to continue economic cooperation – and this can be heard not only from pro-Russian politicians but also at the expert level, from the Ukrainian authorities, and this trend can be seen in practice. Instead of looking for an alternative to economic cooperation with Belarus in the West, Ukraine tries to minimise the economic losses resulting from sharp political rhetoric towards Lukashenka. It thus actually reduces this rhetoric to a formal level.
- Maintaining a passive attitude towards the protests in Belarus and the repression of protesters. Although it is not entirely achievable, Ukraine must support the rhetoric of the European Union at the political level. However, in official rhetoric, these topics are marginalised. This is a natural condition for maintaining economic cooperation with Belarus. This can also explain that Ukraine is the only neighbour of Belarus, apart from Russia, which still has not invited Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to visit, and President Zelensky is the only President of a neighbouring country (except for Putin) who has not met with Tsikhanouskaya yet.
- The issue of Minsk as a negotiating agency – this is a hidden threat that may reveal itself shortly after the end of epidemiological restrictions and may be an instrument of

¹⁵² *Україна почала импорт електроенергії з Белорусської АЕС Лукашенко*, <https://glavcom.ua/ru/news/ukraina-nachala-import-elektroenergii-s-belorusskoy-aes-lukashenko-728603.html>, (accessed: 06.03.2021).

manipulation and influence on the Ukrainian side in terms of policy towards Belarus, and even recognition of the results of the 2020 election.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is one of Belarus' key partners in the post-Soviet space. Over the past decades, these states have integrated with each other as much as possible: they are members or co-founders of numerous international organisations in the Eurasian space (CIS, CSTO, EEU). In some cases, the fact that these countries together could counteract the total domination of the Russian Federation within these organisations and the entire region gave particular importance to the Kazakh-Belarusian partnership. This is illustrated by the simultaneous opposition of Kazakhstan and Belarus to Russia's attempt to politicise the Eurasian Economic Union. In 2013, the then presidents Alyaksandr Lukashenka¹⁵³ and Nursultan Nazarbayev¹⁵⁴ spoke about the issue at almost the same time. By contrast, last year, it was Kazakhstan's vote that became decisive in abandoning the proposed EEU 2020- 2025 strategy. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev thus supported Lukashenka's criticism of the EEU¹⁵⁵. This way, the presidents could sustain a certain balance in the region, maintaining development directions convenient for both countries. Even earlier, Kazakhstan acted as an intermediary during the crisis in Belarusian-Russian relations in 2009-2010¹⁵⁶. Therefore, Kazakhstan's reaction to the Belarusian protests in 2020 and the future of Belarusian-Kazakhstan relations is crucial for both Belarus and Russia. After all, the prospects and potential threats to the existing balance of power in the region and joint organisations depend on it. In addition, Kazakhstan plays a significant role in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, being the largest and, together with Belarus, the most closely integrated country with Russia in the so-called "near abroad". The maintenance of this concept of spheres of influence and Russia's significant impact on these states guarantee the continuation of

¹⁵³ Лукашенко не видит необходимости в единой валюте и политической надстройке ЕЭС, <https://tengrinews.kz/sng/lukashenko-vidit-neobhodimosti-edinoy-valyute-politicheskoy-242805/>, (accessed 08.03.2021).

¹⁵⁴ Назарбаев: политизация Евразийского Экономического Союза недопустима, <https://ria.ru/20131224/986144056.html>, (accessed 08.03.2021).

¹⁵⁵ Токаев пытается продемонстрировать, что у него есть собственный голос", <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-dossym-satpayev-interview-eurasian-union-strategy-tokayev/30623760.html>, (accessed 08.03.2021).

¹⁵⁶ А.В.Тихомиров, *Белорусско- казахстанские отношения в условиях углубления евразийской интеграции*, „Актуальные проблемы международных отношений и глобального развития: сборник научных статей”, сост. Е. А. Достанко, Центр международных исследований ФМО БГУ, Вып. 4, Минск 2016, с. 186.

Russian “strategic depth”. Therefore, the Russian Federation had a special purpose in how the Belarusian events in Kazakhstan were perceived. President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was one of the first foreign leaders to congratulate Lukashenka on “winning” the 2020 presidential election. A congratulatory letter was already sent on 10 August¹⁵⁷. On the same day, Nursultan Nazarbayev congratulated Lukashenka¹⁵⁸. The government media in Kazakhstan presented the events in Belarus rather one-sidedly, not paying much attention to the protests. This is how the reaction of the government media is described by the Kazakh editorial office of *Radio Azattyk* [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty]: “On the website of the national TV channel “Қазақстан” [Kazakhstan], we found only one news report about the events in the Eastern European country with the headline “Lukashenka leads the presidential election in Belarus”. The “Хабар” [Khabar] TV channel also did not pay much attention to the events in Belarus. Still, it did publish the information that the EU did not recognise the results of the presidential election in that country.

The official newspaper *Егемен Қазақстан* [Yegemen Kazakhstan] writes that the data announced by the Central Election Commission coincide with the results of the previously published government exit polls, which showed that Lukashenka won 79.7 per cent of the vote. The publication mentions that there are those who disagree with the election results in the country. It is significant, however, that *Егемен Қазақстан* [Yegemen Kazakhstan] uses terms such as “mass riot” and “unsanctioned mass action” in its reviews of the protests in Belarus. The publication draws attention to the fact that there was no access to the Internet during the protests and state media websites were not working but does not specify the reason for this”¹⁵⁹.

In turn, as journalists of *Radio Azattyk* write, the media associated with the largest party in Kazakhstan, Nur Otan (the party’s leader is former President Nursultan Nazarbayev), expressed their opinion more slowly, called the events in Belarus “a fight for freedom” and allowed for the publication of various opinion on these events.

¹⁵⁷ Токаев одним из первых направил Лукашенко телеграмму с поздравлениями, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/30775579.html>, (accessed: 08.03.2021).

¹⁵⁸ Нурсултан Назарбаев поздравил Александра Лукашенко с переизбранием на пост Президента Беларуси, https://www.inform.kz/ru/nursultan-nazarbaev-pozdravil-aleksandra-lukashenko-s-pereizbraniem-na-post-prezidenta-belarusi_a3681770, (accessed: 08.03.2021).

¹⁵⁹ „Массовые беспорядки”. Как казахстанские СМИ освещают протесты в Беларуси, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-media-about-crisis-in-belarus/30791384.html>, (accessed: 08.03.2021).

Later, however, Nazarbayev spoke very harshly about the events in Belarus, accusing the US in November 2020 of applying “double standards”, since at the same time as the protests in Belarus, “the same thing was happening in Bulgaria, but for some reason, we did not hear about it anywhere”¹⁶⁰.

The support for Lukashenka in this situation can be explained not only by the long-standing contacts with Nazarbayev but also by the parliamentary elections held in Kazakhstan in January 2021. The Kazakh authorities, fearing for internal security after the elections in their own country, could not allow information about the protests to spread before the elections. According to Yelena Shvetsova, director of the independent foundation “Еркіндік қанаты” [Erkindik Kanaty], a representative who observed the parliamentary elections in 2021, the events in Belarus became a kind of “lesson” for the Kazakh authorities, after which they did everything to prevent a similar scenario. Shevtsova stated, “The authorities of Kazakhstan are frightened by the protests in Belarus and the next revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2020. Therefore, they did their best to limit the ability of civil society in our country to repeat such a scenario”¹⁶¹.

In this situation, Russia may have an objective interest in worsening the favourable balance resulting from Belarusian-Kazakh cooperation in the framework of joint international initiatives. Still threatened, Lukashenka can now rely solely on Russia, and under such conditions, he will not oppose key Russian initiatives for the further development of Eurasian organisations. Without an ally in Belarus, Kazakhstan will have to resist processes such as the politicisation of the EEU or increasing Russian influence in this organisation individually.

Secondly, it will be in Russia’s interest to slow down the processes of Kazakhstan’s democratisation, which, although developing very slowly, began to be visible after the soft handover of some power to Tokayev. Any sign of democratisation in Kazakhstan threatens Russia that Kazakhstan could leave the Russian sphere of influence. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that, in the context of the intensification of the anti-Western rhetoric of Russia and Belarus, the Kazakh authorities will be persuaded in various ways actually to freeze the emerging democratic changes. At the same time, Russia may convince Kazakhstan to return

¹⁶⁰ „Не пустили ОБСЕ”, “Долбили Беларусь”. Назарбаев перед выборами хвалит себя и критикует США, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/30968248.html>, (accessed: 08.03.2021).

¹⁶¹ Страна „в тени одного человека” и „мстительный авторитаризм”, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/press-review-kazakhstan-political-system-in-the-shadow-of-one-man/31077180.html>, (accessed: 08.03.2021).

to an orientation mainly towards that one country in foreign policy, as the newly adopted concept of Kazakhstan's foreign policy pays much attention to multilateral foreign cooperation¹⁶². From the Russian point of view, the example of Belarus shows that any deviation from the Russian orientation risks a colour revolution financed from the West. This argument can also be used in dialogue with Kazakhstan.

Moldova

In Moldova, Belarusian events were observed through the prism of its upcoming presidential election scheduled for December 2020. Former president Igor Dodon never concealed his pro-Russian attitude, and throughout his term of office, he intensively developed cooperation not only with Putin but also with Lukashenka. Therefore, it is not surprising that right after the end of the election in Belarus, on August 10, 2020, Dodon immediately congratulated Lukashenka¹⁶³. This was met with a strong wave of criticism from the public and many representatives of the Moldovan political elite¹⁶⁴. Within a few days, Dodon even had to explain the gesture. Addressing the gesture above, the Moldovan President stressed that it was a matter of protocol and that he “does not like the clashes that are taking place in Belarus”. He also added, “We have friendly relations, a normal partnership. Even the former President of Moldova (Nicolae Timofti, author's note) awarded Lukashenka the Order of the Republic. He has helped our country. We have many joint ventures. And the CEC (Central Election Commission) of Belarus has officially recognised the election as valid. What should the leader of a country that has good relations with Belarus do? – Congratulate, of course. And what happens in their country is their internal affair (...) To be honest, comparing our countries, I feel sorry for Moldova and our citizens. Belarusians appear much better against our background (similar rhetoric was uttered by Dodon also in 2018, when at

¹⁶² О Концепции внешней политики Республики Казахстан 2020-2030, https://www.akorda.kz/ru/legal_acts/o-koncepcii-vneshnei-politiki-respubliki-kazahstan-na-2020-2030-gody, (accessed: 08.03.2021).

¹⁶³ „От имени молдавского народа и от себя лично”. Додон поздравил Лукашенко с победой на выборах, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/ot-imeni-moldavskogo-naroda-i-ot-sebya-lichno-dodon-pozdravil-lukashenko-s-pobedoy-na-vyborah/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁶⁴ Как в соцсетях обсудили поздравление Лукашенко от президента Молдовы, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/vot-nahrena-takoe-delat-g-n-dodon-kak-v-sotssetyah-obsudili-pozdravlenie-lukashenko-ot-prezidenta-moldovy>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

a meeting with Lukashenka he said that “Moldovans envy Belarusians¹⁶⁵ – author’s note). I am not talking about Lukashenka. I remember Belarus and its excellent roads, large farms, working businesses and factories, swimming pools in every school. I want it to be the same in Moldova”¹⁶⁶. At the end of his speech, Dodon compared the events in Belarus with the riots in Moldova after the 2009 parliamentary elections.

The opposite position to the President was taken by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova, which published a statement on August 15, 2020 expressing solidarity with the people of Belarus¹⁶⁷. This difference in positions can be explained by the fact that Moldova’s foreign minister at the time was a representative of the Democratic Party of Moldova, Oleg Tulea.

An interesting (and applicable for Moldova in the times of Dodon) thought can be found in a text by Moldavian political scientist Ruslan Shevchenko, who in October 2020, analysing the Belarusian protests, wrote, “Today, the world community must pay attention, not to the Lukashenka regime, but to Putin, who with his enslaving “credits” and cheap gas strengthened this regime (Lukashenka’s – author’s note) in every possible way”¹⁶⁸.

The candidate of the pro-European Action and Solidarity party, Maia Sandu, won the presidential election in Moldova in November. Both Lukashenka¹⁶⁹ and Tsikhanouskaya¹⁷⁰ almost immediately congratulated her. At the press conference after the second round of voting, Sandu briefly mentioned the situation in Belarus, saying that the violence should stop and that “the will of the people must be respected”, and added that she would give an official

¹⁶⁵ „Вы будете жить здесь не хуже, чем в Белоруссии”. Что рассказали Додон и Лукашенко о кукурузе, диктатуре и “своём пути” молдаван, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/vy-budete-zhit-zdes-ne-huzhe-chem-v-belorussii-cto-rasskazali-dodon-i-lukashenko-36994/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁶⁶ „Белорусы на нашем фоне выглядят намного лучше”. Додон объяснил, почему поздравил Лукашенко после выборов, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/belorusy-na-nashem-fone-vyglyadyat-namnogo-luchshe-dodon-obyasnil-pochemu-pozdravil-lukashenko-posle-vyborov/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁶⁷ „Выражаем солидарность с народом Беларуси”. МИДЕИ о протестах и насилии в Минске, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/vyrazhaem-solidarnost-s-narodom-belarusi-midei-o-protestah-i-nasilii-v-minske/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁶⁸ Как Путин пытается превратить Беларусь в „непотопляемый авианосец” России, <https://ava.md/2020/10/21/kak-putin-pytaetsya-prevratit-belarus/>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

¹⁶⁹ Лукашенко поздравил Санду с победой на выборах президента, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/lukashenko-pozdravil-sandu-s-pobedoy-na-vyborah-prezidenta/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁷⁰ У Молдовы есть всё для благополучного развития”. Тихановская и Навальный поздравили Санду с победой, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/u-moldovy-est-vse-dlya-blagopoluchnogo-razvitiya-navalnyi-i-tihanovskaya-pozdravili-sandu-s-pobedoy/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

position on Belarus after taking up the presidential office¹⁷¹. However, after the inauguration, there was still no statement on Belarus. Sandu's cautious position on this issue may be explained by the upcoming early parliamentary elections, which are expected to take place in 2021 as a result of another parliamentary crisis in Moldova¹⁷². Considering the continued popularity of the pro-Russian forces in Moldova (in the parliamentary elections in 2019, the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova received the highest percentage of the votes, and in the presidential election in 2020, Dodon received over 42% of the votes in the second round) it can be assumed that Lukashenka is also very popular among Moldovans. Naturally, this may temporarily stop Sandu from harshly criticising the situation in Belarus. Russian interests in Moldova and the possibility of using the Belarusian theme to further these interests should also be seen through the prism of the upcoming parliamentary elections. Certainly, Russia will try to prevent the formation of a strong and long-lasting coalition of pro-Western forces. For this reason, the Belarusian theme can be heavily used by pro-Russian forces for propaganda purposes. This was partially confirmed when Lukashenka awarded Dodon the 75th Victory Anniversary Medal of the Great Patriotic War for his "significant contribution to the heroic and patriotic education of citizens, preservation of the memory of the dead and organisation of events dedicated to the anniversary of the Victory"¹⁷³. It was not a diplomatic step, as Dodon was awarded the medal after losing the election (although even before Sandu's inauguration, Dodon was still the incumbent President). Such gestures are easy to use for propaganda purposes. After all, Dodon will run in the parliamentary elections as the head of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova. It seems that the Belarusian topic may be raised mainly by him and his entourage as pro-European forces will rather avoid the subject.

The situation may change after the elections. If the democratic forces succeed in forming a strong coalition and government, the rhetoric towards the Lukashenka regime may become more radical, but if, in order to form a government, it will again be necessary to seek

¹⁷¹ Майя Санду о ситуации в Беларуси: „Нужно уважать волю народа”, <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2020/12/2/402598>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁷² Президент Молдовы объявила дату роспуска парламента, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2021/03/2/7120402/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁷³ За что Игорь Додон получил медаль от Президента Беларуси Александра Лукашенко?, <https://nokta.md/za-chto-igor-dodon-poluchil-medal-ot-prezidenta-belarusi-aleksandra-lukashenko/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

compromises with pro-Russian forces, it is not worth expecting more activity from Moldova in the Belarusian direction.

However, if pro-Russian forces in Moldova succeed in suspending preparations for parliamentary elections (this could happen after the Moldovan parliament dismissed the head of the Constitutional Court, Domnica Manole, in April 2021 and appointed a former prosecutor loyal to the Party of Socialists, Boris Lupascu, in her place; the US and the EU¹⁷⁴ criticised this decision, and Sandu said that it was an “unprecedented attack on the Constitutional Court”¹⁷⁵.) then the issue of democracy in Belarus may remain on the sidelines of Moldovan politics for a long time.

Caucasus countries

The last six months in the Caucasus have proved to be very intense. Against the background of all the events that occurred in the region, the subject of Belarus has become rather secondary. Nevertheless, the reactions of the Caucasian states to the Belarusian events indicate interesting trends. They further allow reaching the conclusions regarding Russian interests in the Caucasus.

The Georgian authorities had remained silent on this issue for quite a long time since the beginning of the protests in Belarus. There was even action in Tbilisi by Belarusians living in Georgia to call on the Georgian authorities not to recognise the election results and support Belarusian society¹⁷⁶. For the first time, President Salome Zourabichvili did not react to the Belarusian events until a week after the elections. “We hope that the ongoing processes will end in such a way that they do not harm the democratic and European future of Belarus. We are against all violence. We believe that Belarus and the Belarusian people will be able to democratically determine their future”, said Zourabichvili in her statement. The rather neutral and passive position of the Georgian authorities can be explained – as Moldova’s – by the upcoming parliamentary elections held in Georgia in October 2020. Moreover, despite

¹⁷⁴ *Переворот Додона: чим завершиться проросійський заколот у сусідів України*, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2021/04/25/7122556/>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

¹⁷⁵ *Атака на Конституционный суд: Санду требует расследовать действия партии Додона в парламенте*, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2021/04/23/7122537/>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

¹⁷⁶ *Белорусы Тбилиси просят президента Грузии не поздравлять Лукашенко с переизбранием*, https://interfax.by/news/policy/vneshnyaya_politika/1280858/, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

Russian influence, Belarus has not recognised the Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

With the onset of the permanent political crisis that followed the parliamentary elections in Georgia, the subject of Belarus returned to a greater extent in the statements of opposition politicians, who began to compare the situation in Georgia to the actions of the Belarusian dictatorial regime. Mikheil Saakashvili repeatedly spoke about Georgia taking the Belarusian direction¹⁷⁷. After the arrest of Nika Melia, Georgia was compared to Belarus by a member of the European Georgia party, David Bakradze¹⁷⁸. The objective of the authorities in Georgia and Belarus today is quite similar – to calm the situation as much as possible and not to allow an uncontrolled change of power. This implies that the Belarusian topic in Georgia will only be spoken by the opposition for the time being. The government will rather remain silent, as the public would not understand the warming contact with Lukashenka. In turn, strong criticism of violence against protesters in Belarus would be uncomfortable for Georgian domestic politics.

It was a surprise for many political observers that the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, was one of the first to congratulate Lukashenka on “winning” the election¹⁷⁹. Next, the President of Armenia, Armen Sargsyan¹⁸⁰, and the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, congratulated Lukashenka¹⁸¹. Such unanimity of the leaders of these states can be explained by the fact that at one point, Lukashenka was perceived as a potential intermediary in negotiations on the future of Nagorno-Karabakh. The above point can be evidenced by the recording of a conversation between Lukashenka and former Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan during a CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) meeting in 2016. In this conversation, the then Belarusian President proposed

¹⁷⁷ Саакашвили о политическом конфликте в Грузии: белорусам эта ситуация очень знакома, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/01-03-2021-mihail-saakashvili-o-politicheskom-konflikte-v-gruzii-belorusam-eta-situatsiya-ochen-znakoma/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁷⁸ Задержание Ники Мелия комментируют политики, <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/400445>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁷⁹ Пашинян поздравил Лукашенко с переизбранием на пост президента, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/721136>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁸⁰ Президент Армении Саркисян в телефонном разговоре поздравил Лукашенко с победой на выборах, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/prezident-armenii-sarkisjan-v-telefonnom-razgovore-pozdravil-lukashenko-s-pobedoj-na-vyborah-402476-2020/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁸¹ Алиев по телефону поздравил Лукашенко с победой на президентских выборах, <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/aliev-po-telefonu-pozdravil-lukashenko-s-pobedoj-na-prezidentskih-vyborah-402297-2020/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

to Sargsyan to actually “sell” seven Karabakh regions to Azerbaijan for five billion dollars. Later, the office of Sargsyan confirmed the authenticity of the recording¹⁸². In addition, Lukashenka’s role as a kind of informal intermediary in the Karabakh issue was also confirmed after the start of fighting at the end of September 2020, when Pashinyan and Aliyev had a telephone conversation with the Belarusian dictator¹⁸³. Therefore, any doubts about Lukashenka’s legitimacy could immediately reflect on the most significant topic for both countries. The situation is unlikely to change even after signing the November ceasefire agreement, as both countries do not need the loss of a strategic partner, who is still the Belarusian dictator. This state of affairs also suits Russian interests.

On October 1, 2020, Pashinyan had a telephone conversation with Lukashenka¹⁸⁴. Then, on October 4, Armenian President Sargsyan spoke to Lukashenka by telephone. During this conversation, Lukashenka assured Sargsyan that Belarus had not sold any weapons to Azerbaijan¹⁸⁵. In turn, a meeting of heads of government of the Eurasian Economic Union was held in Yerevan on October 9, including Prime Minister of Belarus Roman Golovchenko¹⁸⁶. These contacts in just ten days became an indicator of Armenia’s full recognition of the Belarusian authorities after the 2020 election.

The Belarusian events were not so unambiguously received at the journalistic level in Armenia. For example, the Armenian political scientist Ruben Mehrabyan wrote that the events in Belarus were a continuation of the ongoing process of dying of the Soviet Union. He assessed, “Because *sovok* (Soviet Union – author’s note) died thirty years ago, but was not buried, this toxic carrion will poison many more brains until it is buried. This burial took place in part in Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova; however, the “top burial” is awaiting its implementation in Russia(...). I do not congratulate Lukashenka, I refuse my share in the congratulations of the official Yerevan. And I congratulate the freedom-loving citizens of

¹⁸² В Армении подтвердили подлинность записи разговора Лукашенко и Саргсяна, <https://sputnik.by/politics/20201208/1046340287/V-set-slili-razgovor-Lukashenko-s-byvshim-prezidentom-Armenii-Sargsyanom.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁸³ Лукашенко обсудил с Алиевым и Пашиняном ситуацию в Нагорном Карабахе, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2020/10/01/841804-lukashenko-obsudil-s-alievim-i-pashinyanom-situatsiyu-v-nagornom-karabahe>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁸⁴ Никол Пашинян провёл телефонный разговор с Александром Лукашенко, <https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/30868347.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁸⁵ По словам Лукашенко, за последние полгода Беларусь Азербайджану военных грузов не поставляла, <https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/30874645.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁸⁶ В Ереване стартовало заседание межправсовета ЕАЭС, <https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/30884190.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

Belarus on the occasion of the already won brilliant victory over fear, apathy and despair, which opens the way to the most important victory”¹⁸⁷. The publicist Voskan Yerevantsi evaluated the events in Belarus in a similar way, “Analysts believe that the overthrow of Lukashenka will put an end to Soviet rule and Soviet thinking in Belarus. The most realistic and far-sighted belief is that revolutionary events in Belarus and the political end of Lukashenka will be immediately followed by revolutionary events in Russia. This is because events against Putin are brewing in Russia as well. In short, the end of Lukashenka’s rule is the end of Soviet ideology and Soviet thinking in Belarus. Interestingly, Soviet thinking and Soviet ideology are coming to an end in one of the most Soviet republics – Belarus”¹⁸⁸. In this context, the fact worth emphasising is that even analysts critical of Lukashenka did not criticise Pashinyan for his congratulations to the Belarusian dictator. The abovementioned Ruben Mehrabyan wrote in another article, “After the publication of the preliminary ‘results’ by the CEC of Belarus, the official Yerevan, together with leaders of other countries, sent formal congratulations to Lukashenka, who ‘wins’ for the sixth time. The decision was made on the basis of a realistic calculation of risks and, undoubtedly, taking into account our tasks, and this is not the issue with which Yerevan should have attracted attention”¹⁸⁹. This can be explained by the fact that by supporting the process of the Soviet Union’s departure, Armenian politicians and publicists understand that Lukashenka in the short term can play a beneficial role as a politician who maintains good relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan and can act as an intermediary in negotiations between the two countries. From this point of view, Pashinyan’s meeting with the new Belarusian ambassador Alexander Koniuk in Yerevan seems significant. At this meeting, the Armenian prime minister stressed the importance of Minsk’s balanced position after the Nagorno-Karabakh war¹⁹⁰.

Similar rhetoric resounded during Lukashenka’s visit to Baku in April 2021. The visit was important for Lukashenka because of his will to demonstrate the legitimacy of his presidency in international relations and the role of Belarus in easing the situation after the Nagorno-Karabakh war. This topic was taken up by Ilham Aliyev, who said, “Of course, Belarus is our friend, a trusted partner, we count on its active participation not only in the

¹⁸⁷ *Погребение „совка” в Беларуси*, <https://www.aravot-ru.am/2020/08/11/333884/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁸⁸ *Песенка Лукашенко спета*, <https://www.aravot-ru.am/2020/08/31/335172/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁸⁹ *Ереван не обязан повторять ошибки Кремля*, <https://www.aravot-ru.am/2020/08/19/334454/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁹⁰ *Армения придаёт важность развитию политического и экономического сотрудничества с Беларусью - Пашинян*, <https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/31063829.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

reconstruction of the liberated territories (Nagorno-Karabakh – author’s note). I am, of course, sure that Belarus as a partner of Armenia, which, together with Armenia, is a member of the Eurasian Economic Community and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and a country that is a close friend of Azerbaijan and has authority in the world, it can play an important role in the future establishment of contacts between Armenia and Azerbaijan”¹⁹¹. Belarus has already agreed to help Azerbaijan rebuild the cities of Nagorno-Karabakh¹⁹². The role of Belarus as an intermediary between Azerbaijan and Armenia was also stressed by Chairperson of the Standing Commission of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus on International Affairs Andrei Savinych, “Belarus as a country with a peaceful foreign policy, building relations with partners on the principles of good neighbourliness and mutual understanding, can indeed make a significant contribution to the development of contacts between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which will eventually become the basis for lasting peace in the South Caucasus”¹⁹³.

As long as Lukashenka continues to play this role, and there is no other effective (from the point of view of the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments) intermediary between the parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it is difficult to expect active support for the Belarusian democratic movement from the countries in the region.

Central Asian countries

Central Asian countries have traditionally remained neutral towards European events. Nevertheless, noteworthy features emerge in the reaction of these countries. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, the President of Turkmenistan was the only leader of the CIS countries who delayed congratulations to Lukashenka. Journalist Arkady Dubnov wrote that this way, the President of Turkmenistan recalled Lukashenka’s debt of 1.2 billion dollars. The debt arose due to Belarus’ failure to comply with a contract to build a mining and processing plant to produce potash fertiliser in eastern Turkmenistan¹⁹⁴. Berdimuhamedow congratulated

¹⁹¹ *Президент Ильхам Алиев: Беларусь – наш друг, проверенный партнёр*, <https://news.day.az/politics/1334190.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁹² *Беларусь готова помочь Азербайджану восстанавливать Карабах*, <https://news.day.az/economy/1334287.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁹³ „В ближайшее время мы увидим активное развитие взаимодействия Азербайджана и Беларуси по всем направлениям” – Андрей Савиных, <https://news.day.az/politics/1334564.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁹⁴ *Между нами, деспотами: Почему Пашинян и Жээнбеков поздравили Лукашенко, а Бердымухаммедов – нет* - <https://theins.ru/politika/mezhdu-nami-despotami-kak-arkadag-batku-ne-pozdravil>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

Lukashenka only after the “inauguration” in September 2020¹⁹⁵. The countries then exchanged several other diplomatic gestures. Lukashenka congratulated Turkmenistan on the occasion of Independence Day and the 25th anniversary of Neutrality Day. It can therefore be concluded that the protests in Belarus did not affect relations with this country. This conclusion also applies to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The presidents of both countries recognised the outcome of the 2020 election almost immediately. The leaders sent letters of congratulations to Lukashenka, and later there were a few warm and favourable gestures at the diplomatic level.

Analysts at the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR) declare that events in Belarus have not generated much public interest in Uzbekistan either. The Russian media heavily influence society in this country, and the authorities have rather been ignoring the Belarusian protests. This topic hardly exists in the Uzbek media, both those loyal to the government and the opposition¹⁹⁶.

Contrary to Uzbekistan, government representatives in Tajikistan comment on the events in Belarus in a very unambiguous and negative manner. A member of Tajikistan’s parliament and head of the Democratic Party, loyal to the authorities, Saidjafar Usminzoda, said that “Such mass protests can arise [in any country] if the policies do not correspond to the geopolitical interests of other countries”. He concluded that the Tajik government “should combat the import of alien ideology and the influence of some powers and large companies operating in Tajikistan”¹⁹⁷. The Belarusian protests are reported in a similar way in Tajik government media. Meanwhile, a member of the opposition Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (which has no representatives in parliament), Shokirjon Khakimov, stated that the authorities of this country are afraid of similar events because they have a lot in common with Lukashenka’s regime, “Especially corruption, rigged elections, unwillingness to part with power, etc.”¹⁹⁸. However, such opinions (as well as the entire opposition in Tajikistan) are relegated to the margins of the country’s political life.

¹⁹⁵ Бердымухамедов единственный в СНГ поздравил Лукашенко, тайно вступившего в должность „президента” Беларуси <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30855805.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁹⁶ События в Беларуси– взгляд из Узбекистана, <https://cabar.asia/ru/sobytiya-v-belarusi-vzglyad-iz-uzbekistana>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁹⁷ Взгляд из Таджикистана на события в Беларуси, <https://cabar.asia/ru/vzglyad-iz-tadzhikistana-na-sobytiya-v-belarusi>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

A slightly different situation can be observed in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Like other leaders of Central Asian countries, the then President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbay Jeenbekov congratulated Lukashenka on August 10, 2020, thus recognising the official election results. However, on the same day, a photo of Lukashenka was published next to the former prime minister of Kyrgyzstan (in 2009-2010), Danijar Usenov, who is currently wanted and hiding in Belarus under the name of Daniil Uricki¹⁹⁹. As early as August 11, the Belarusian ambassador was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic. However, there was no further development of the diplomatic scandal. Apart from Usenov, the former President of Kyrgyzstan (from 2005 to 2010), Kurmanbek Bakiyev also lives in Belarus, and this forms an obvious basis for bilateral tensions. The topic soon became obsolete and was replaced by riots in Bishkek, during which Lukashenka asked not to compare the situation in Kyrgyzstan to the Belarusian protests²⁰⁰. However, in January 2021, Lukashenka sent a congratulatory letter to the new President of Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Zhaparov²⁰¹.

Comparing the protests in Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, Tashkent-based political scientist Ildar Yakubov wrote that Moscow's attitude was not the same, "Russia's response to the protests in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan differed sharply. Moscow openly supported Lukashenka. This support was manifested not only through soft power, that is, diplomacy, information and propaganda support, personal meetings of the President, Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, heads of Russian regions, but also in the form of "hard power", through the provision of 1.5 billion credit and military support – according to opposition reports, Russian law enforcement agencies took part in the suppression of the protests.

On the issue of the legitimacy of the Belarusian leader, Russia has taken a tough stance in relations with the West, along with Minsk, introducing countersanctions and putting on the wanted list of the opposition presidential candidate Tsikhanouskaya.

¹⁹⁹ Поздравление и протест от Бишкека Минску - <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/30780145.html>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

²⁰⁰ Лукашенко попросил не сравнивать ситуации в Беларуси и Киргизии - <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5f8057ce9a794722aa16250e>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

²⁰¹ Лукашенко поздравил Садыра Жапарова с победой на президентских выборах в Кыргызстане - <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-pozdravil-sadyra-zhaparova-s-pobedoj-na-prezidentskih-vyborah-v-kyrgyzstane-423715-2021/>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

Russia, probably, played a decisive role in “saving” Lukashenka, compensating for a whole series of strategic mistakes of the latter with its support(...). In the case of Kyrgyzstan, Moscow is extremely passive. This position of the Russian Federation is already becoming traditional there. The coups in the Kyrgyz Republic are not accompanied by an increase in the influence of the Russian factor and do not entail the direct intervention of the Russian Federation or China. It can hardly be expected that current events will intensify Russian policy in Kyrgyzstan or Central Asia in general.

The reasons for the differences in Russia’s position are the geopolitical locations of Belarus and Kyrgyzstan. Belarus is located between Russia and the European Union, which attracts increased attention from Moscow and European capitals(...). Kyrgyzstan is also strategically important for Russia. At the same time, the Kyrgyz Republic and Central Asia as a whole do not feel such Western influence as it can be observed in Ukraine or Belarus(...). However, Moscow’s passivity does not mean its indifference. The Kremlin’s policy can be traced to the belief that no matter who comes to power and no matter how the internal political balance of power is formed, Moscow, like Beijing, will be able to preserve and secure its interests”²⁰².

In practice, the Belarusian events reverberated least in the Central Asian region of all the countries of the post-Soviet space. Naturally, political or image-related events do not significantly affect countries located in such remote geopolitical regions. Cooperation in such cases focuses on economic issues that are not very dependent on the political situation. In conclusion, the events in Belarus did not change Moscow’s interests in the Central Asia region, and Russian influence on shaping the desired interpretation of the Belarusian situation was minimal.

²⁰² Протесты в Кыргызстане и Беларуси: почему у одних „получается”, а у других “нет”, <https://cabar.asia/ru/protesty-v-kyrgyzstane-i-belarusi-pochemu-u-odnih-poluchaetsya-a-u-drugih-net>, (accessed: 09.03.2021).

Summary

The Russian Federation still maintains a strong influence in the post-Soviet space and tries to play the role of a kind of “conductor” of political processes in the region. It further has many instruments to exert such influence. Hence the analysis of Russian impact on the position of the post-Soviet states towards the Belarusian protests provides notable characteristic similarities. However, each country has a specific situation to which Russia must adapt. The most apparent common feature of these countries is the existence of strong pro-Russian forces promoting support for Lukashenka and ignoring the Belarusian protests. In Ukraine, it is the OPZZh and the MP of the Servant of the Nation Yevhen Shevchenko; in Moldova, Igor Dodon and his entourage, in the CentralAsian states (except Kyrgyzstan after the change of power), it is the ruling forces. Since the beginning of the Belarusian protests, power has changed in two post-Soviet space countries – Moldova and Kyrgyzstan. In both these cases, it was unfortunate news for Lukashenka, as the previous heads of these countries (Igor Dodon and Sooronbay Jeenbekov) quickly recognised the election results and congratulated the Belarusian dictator. However, the new Presidents of Moldova (Maia Sandu) and Kyrgyzstan (Sadyr Zhaparov) remain rather neutral about the Belarusian events.

The common problem forces Azerbaijan and Armenia to react passively to the Belarusian protests. The key issues are Nagorno-Karabakh and especially the role of Lukashenka as an intermediary in the negotiations between the two states. While the authoritarian government of Ilham Aliyev’s was rather unlikely to support the democratic protest in Belarus, Nikol Pashinyan, who became prime minister as a result of anti-government protests, could have expressed his support for similar protests in Belarus. However, it is precisely the fear of losing an essential intermediary in negotiations with Azerbaijan that leads Pashinyan to continue to develop good relations with Lukashenka, ignoring the protests in Belarus.

There are internal political crises in several countries, which affect the perception of Belarusian events in different ways. For example, in Moldova, President Sandu runs for early parliamentary elections. According to the polls, her party is likely to get a majority of the votes to form a government. However, the pro-Russian former President Igor Dodon, through

changes to the Constitutional Court, tries to block the elections. Against this background, the question of Belarusian events becomes firmly secondary for Moldovan society, and Sandu tries not to comment on these events due to the possible sympathy of Moldovans for Lukashenka.

Georgia is another country that experiences an internal political crisis, but the situation there is different from that in Moldova. The Georgian authorities remain relatively neutral towards events in Belarus. At the same time, the opposition (whose leader Nika Melia is imprisoned) openly compares its own authorities with the Lukashenka regime and speaks of Georgia following in Belarusian footsteps. In this country, too, the Belarusian subject is rather convenient for the opposition, and, should the United National Movement come to power, it can be expected that the Belarusian democracy movement will have an ally in the Caucasus.

Political changes may also occur in Armenia (however, it is not worth discussing the crisis yet), where the current government led by Pashinyan resigned. However, the topic of Belarus is not expected to be widely discussed during the elections (due to the above-described role of Lukashenka as an intermediary in the dialogue with Azerbaijan).

Regardless of the specifics of each country, Russian interests have one common denominator – an unwillingness to pay attention to the massive and brutal political repression of protesters and a search for reasons to develop relations with the Belarusian dictator Lukashenka further.

A friend is in trouble

Russian propaganda is a multi-faceted, multi-level²⁰³ and multi-directional structure. Today, it is one of the basic tools used in the infosphere, which is a field of ideological and geopolitical confrontation (“information confrontation”²⁰⁴). It has a wide range of mutually reinforcing instruments used by numerous institutions established to create and distribute it internally and internationally. The aim of Russian propaganda is to obtain the image of the world, opinions and views desired by the Kremlin, which in practice may translate into a modification of the behaviour of states, institutions, groups or individuals.

Contrary to propaganda, disinformation is the deliberate, systematic and professional use of false information reproduced by mass media and social media. In the case of Russia, it is characteristic that propaganda and disinformation complement each other, creating a symbiotic ecosystem of so-called “active measures”²⁰⁵. The main channels of communication that build this Russian ecosystem are created by:

- official government communications,
- cultivation of proxy sources,
- state-funded global messaging (*RT*, *Sputnik* or *RIA Novosti*),
- cyber-enabled disinformation: bots, fake accounts, hackers, trolls)²⁰⁶.

The message is reinforced not only by multiplication (e.g. retweeting or sharing content using algorithms) in various media (including social media) but also duplicated and spread by authorities and personalities from the sphere of politics or culture, related to various forms of socio-political activity: politicians, scientists, publicists, influencers or celebrities. It is

²⁰³ Micro- (local) level, meso- (regional) level, macro- (global) level.

²⁰⁴ P. Daniluk, *Współczesne wymiary konfrontacji informacyjnej*, „Rocznik Bezpieczeństwa Międzynarodowego” 2014, vol. 8, nr 2, p.49.

²⁰⁵ J. Darczewska, P. Żochowski, Środki aktywne. Rosyjski towar eksportowy, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/punkt-widzenia/2017-05-30/srodki-aktywne>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

²⁰⁶ GEC Special Report: Russia’s Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda, <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

characteristic that these are not always Russians or Russian-speaking people (see authors at <https://ru.journal-neo.org/avtory/>)²⁰⁷.

Such a strategy of building a propaganda narrative allows Russia to simultaneously introduce into the circulation of the infosphere many complementary variants of the message, strengthening their reach and enabling it to be more effectively adapted to specific addressees. Other advantages of multifocal, cross-border, networked propaganda include a reduced need for message coherence, facilitated and purposeful management of information chaos, and a wide range of possible responses from the Kremlin – which can cut itself off from propaganda messages whose sources are unofficial without consequence. In this Russian narrative ecosystem, anonymity and flexibility play a key role, allowing for individual initiatives and entire, large-scale propaganda and disinformation operations, forming a multifocal chain with global reach²⁰⁸.

An analysis of the main vectors of the Russian narrative indicates that its target areas are: Russia, Belarus, the post-Soviet area and the West. Why should Russia direct part of the propaganda stream devoted to the Belarusian problem into the domestic policy space? Russia will hold parliamentary elections in 2021, and Russian society is tired of both the fight against the pandemic and the financial crisis. Even before these two factors occurred, Russian public opinion was not very enthusiastic about the cost-intensive process of intensifying Russian-Belarusian integration. According to Valery Fedorov, head of the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), the percentage of Russian citizens who want Belarus to be transformed into the Western Federal District of the Russian Federation is very small. This statement is in line with the results of a survey conducted by the Levada Centre (when asked: “On 7 December, talks were held between Vladimir Putin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka. What do you think relations between Russia and Belarus should be like?” only 10% of respondents answered that Belarus should become part of the Russian Federation). Most Russians favour maintaining the *status quo*, in which Belarus is a Russian ally and economic partner but retains sovereignty²⁰⁹. Also, in another poll conducted on 25-30 September 2020 on a representative

²⁰⁷ Фонд Стратегической Культуры (<https://www.fondsk.ru/>), News Front (<https://news-front.info/>), New Eastern Outlook (<https://ru.journal-neo.org/>), Katehon (<https://katehon.com/ru>) i sztandarowy portal Geopolitica.ru (<https://www.geopolitica.ru/>).

²⁰⁸ So-called disinformation storms.

²⁰⁹ *Настроения по осени считают. Глава ВЦИОМ— о коронакризисе и протестах*, <https://wciom.ru/sobytie/nastroenija-po-oseni-schitajut-glava-vciom-o-koronakrizise-i-protestakh>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

sample of residents of the Russian Federation, 43% of respondents sympathised with Lukashenka, but 36% could not clearly identify themselves on one side of the political conflict in Belarus, and 45% were rather against or absolutely against Russia providing economic aid to Belarus²¹⁰.

Propaganda messages targeting some post-Soviet states that are of interest to Russian integration projects serve a completely different purpose. The main task of the propaganda messages is to popularise the Kremlin's initiatives and present the project of Russian-Belarusian integration as devoid of alternatives and as a model. In turn, the Russian message on Belarus intended for the West, the Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine is saturated with confrontational content, mainly conveying visions of the invisible hand of the West, which, in order to achieve its own interests, is ready to manipulate Belarusian society and, in the long term, to induce chaos in the entire post-Soviet area.

Table 1. Russian propaganda message

Target group	Examples of messages	Objective
	Belarusians and Russians are part of one nation²¹¹	Deepening of integration
	There is no alternative to the integration of Russia and Belarus	

²¹⁰ <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/10/22/protests-in-belarus-2/>, (accessed: 20.06.21).

²¹¹ *Один ли народ русские, украинцы и белорусы?*, <https://zen.yandex.ru/media/slaviarus/odin-li-narod-russkie-ukraincy-i-belorusy-5d49b26435ca3100ac149ce2>, (accessed: 15.06.21).

Belarusian society	Belarusian language is an artificial linguistic creation	Hindering of the development of belarusization [TN: promotion of Belarusian identity]
	The West treats Belarusian citizens as second-class human beings	Hindering of the development of pro-Western sentiment in the Belarusian society
	A shared past is the basis for a common future	Building a positive image of Russia
	Without Russia, Belarus will fall into ruin and internal conflict	The Kremlin's integration projects are a guarantee of security and economic stability
	The West plans to use Belarus as a tool to advance its interests	Undermining trust in Western states and institutions
Post-Soviet countries of interest to Russian integration projects (excluding Ukraine)	Russia as the only guarantor of stability and peace in the post-Soviet region	Popularising Kremlin initiatives and presenting the project of Russian-Belarusian integration as a model.
	The West seeks to destabilise the post-Soviet region (following the scenario of Donbas in the case of Belarus)	Building a negative image of Western integration structures
	The dissolution of the USSR was a mistake	Promotion of the Kremlin's reintegration projects
Baltic States and Poland, Ukraine	Ukraine is a failed state	Weakening of Ukraine's position in international relations
	The conflict in eastern Ukraine is an internal Ukrainian problem	Ukraine is not a reliable and stable partner in international relations
	Ukraine provokes Russia to war	Destabilisation of the internal situation in Ukraine

	The Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine have agreed to limit their sovereignty by the EU, NATO and the US	Negating trust in the democratic institutions of Western democracies
Western European countries and the USA	The West applies political and ethical double standards	Discrediting democratic values and institutions
	By using specific methods (secret services, agents of influence, ‘puppet opposition’, financial support), the West wants to bring about a new wave of colour revolutions	Weakening the credibility of selected actors in international relations or creating false information about them

Source: own elaboration.

“We are rather brothers than friends”²¹²

Russian propaganda message ahead of the presidential elections in Belarus

The above words of President spokesman Dmitry Peskov reflect the atmosphere of Belarusian-Russian relations in which cultural, historical, political and economic ties, which in the propaganda message made Russia and Belarus a community of brothers, were not synonymous with a genuine partnership. The older brother constantly watched over the younger one, and although they usually sat together at the table, under the table, they usually kicked each other's ankles. Belarusian and Russian declarations of good cooperation and convergence of interests were accompanied by numerous mischiefs, such as the appointment of Mikhail Babich as ambassador in Minsk, which did not arouse enthusiasm among the Belarusian authorities. There were also more significant gestures, such as the detention of the former deputy secretary of the Belarusian Security Council and former head of President Lukashenka's security, Colonel Andrei Vtyurin, officially recognised as a person “discrediting

²¹² В Кремле перечислили друзей России, <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/03/30/friends/>, (accessed: 10.05.21).

the dignity of the military rank” and unofficially suspected of having too close contacts with Russian services²¹³.

For many years, one of the Russian negotiating tactics aimed at speeding up the implementation of the Minsk-Moscow integration project was to systematically weaken Lukashenka’s position, for example, by ridiculing him in the media publishing compromising materials and questioning his leadership competence. In 2010, a kind of information war broke out between Minsk and the Kremlin. Apart from anti-Russian propaganda in the Belarusian media and anti-Belarusian propaganda in the Russian media, this warfare was accentuated by Lukashenka’s letter to the editor of *Pravda*. In the letter, the Belarusian President criticised the “unfriendly policy” of lies and slander used by the Russian authorities against Belarus. The apogee of criticism was, however, the broadcast by Gazprom’s television NTV of the series *Kriestnyj bat`ka [the Godfather]*, which compared Lukashenka to Hitler, accused him of commissioning political assassinations, informed about the details of the Belarusian President’s private life and questioned his mental stability. At the time, the Russian opinion media also highlighted the unclear motives for Lukashenka’s support for Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who had fled Kyrgyzstan, strange friendship with the openly anti-Russian Mikheil Saakashvili and highly ambiguous cooperation with Boris Berezovsky.

When, in order to strengthen the processes of legitimising his leadership, Lukashenka started to use “soft belarusization” tools [TN: aimed at promoting Belarusian identity] and partly to approve the white-red-white symbolism in the public space²¹⁴, the Russian media (e.g. Piervyj Kanal, life.ru or vesti.ru) began to portray the Belarusian president as a nationalist, a traitor who chose the West over Russia and steered Belarus towards the so-called “Ukrainian way” (“Stepan Bandera-style nationalisation of Belarus”). As a retaliatory measure, in December 2016, unprecedented detention was conducted against Belarusian citizens Yuriy Pavlovets, Sergey Shiptenko and Dmitry Alimkin, who published their texts under pseudonyms on the portals *Regnum* (<https://regnum.ru/>), *Lenta.ru* (<https://lenta.ru/>) and *Eadaily* (<https://eadaily.com/ru/>). They were charged with inciting racial, national, religious and social hostility and hatred, which was to be expressed in spreading hatred against the Belarusian

²¹³ T. Melnichuk, *Deputy head of the Security Council of Belarus Utyurin is accused of bribery. What is known about him?*, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-48160916>, (accessed: 10.05.21).

²¹⁴ Лукашенко подарил Мирзиёеву белорусскую вышиванку, а тот ему – статую хоккеиста <https://podrobno.uz/cat/politic/lukashenko-podaril-mirziyeevu-beloru/>; (accessed: 10.05.21).

people and language. In fact, it involved spreading openly pro-Russian propaganda in Belarus, often offering a message that competes with Belarusian propaganda.

The following years were full of narratives belittling the Belarusian President, who, in turn, did not mind public declarations that Russians and Belarusians are nations “cut from the same cloth” and that Russia is a guardian angel for Belarus just as Belarus is a guardian angel for Russia²¹⁵. At the same time, Belarusian opinion-forming centres, loyal to Lukashenka, tried to strengthen the leader’s position in this asymmetric propaganda rivalry.

In 2018, Lukashenka even made a public appeal to Belarusian media, asking them to avoid the methods used by Russian media. Before the 2020 presidential election, there were claims in the Belarusian media that some of the Belarusian opposition candidates were Kremlin puppets promoted by Russian propaganda.

“A friend is in trouble, and I say that sincerely”²¹⁶

**A change in the Russian propaganda message about the Belarusian regime
after the 2020 presidential election**

The propaganda and disinformation system is reactive and adapts to current challenges. Analysis of the changes in the Kremlin’s message on Belarus allows identifying distinctive moments of its corrections as derivatives of the turn in Russian-Belarusian bilateral relations. Placing the narrative’s chronology on a timeline makes it possible to identify the point at which a fundamental change in the Kremlin’s propaganda message was widely expected. It was a period of dynamic events, triggered by the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, but – to the surprise of many politicians and commentators – the correction of the Russian propaganda message was neither automatic nor too imminent. On the contrary, it proceeded cautiously and

²¹⁵ Лукашенко: Беларусь и Россия друг для друга являются ангелом-хранителем, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belarus-i-rossija-drug-dlja-druga-javlajutsja-angelom-hranitelem-315388-2018/>, (accessed: 06.06.21).

²¹⁶ Russia to lend Belarus \$1.5bn as Lukashenko tells Putin 'a friend is in trouble', <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/14/alexander-lukashenko-vladimir-putin-sochi-belarus-russia>, (accessed:25.05.21).

was largely reactive both to developments in Belarus and to voices coming from the international environment.

Initially, it could be assumed that the tactic of “sincerity in exchange for sincerity” would be a new formula, giving a framework for Russian-Belarusian relations after 2020. On the one hand, Moscow tried to exercise restraint in the face of the Belarusian protests, and its stance on declaring Lukashenka the winner of the election was an expression of unenthusiastic approval rather than euphoria. Vladimir Putin was not the first leader to congratulate Lukashenka after the election: the first congratulations came from China, Kazakhstan and close ally Ramzan Kadyrov. Although the Kremlin sent its customary congratulatory message after the official announcement of the August election results, during the presidents’ telephone conversation on August 16, 2020, Putin limited the possibility of providing support for Lukashenka’s regime to instruments offered by the legislation of the Union State and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (a Belarusian request for assistance would then have to be approved by all members of the organisation). In revenge, the Belarusian leader made a painful self-criticism, saying, “Yes, perhaps, I’ve sat [in the presidential chair] for a bit too long, maybe”²¹⁷. Thus, the Russian President did not give the fraternal support that Lukashenka so publicly expected. It is also symptomatic that the first post-election meeting between Putin with Lukashenka, which took place on 14 September 2020, was not summed up by a customary joint press conference.

Despite the deficit of trust in the Belarusian leader, which had been accumulating for years, Russia clearly modified its message about Lukashenka last autumn, fearing that manifestations of uncontrolled instability would spread. The Kremlin partially reduced its criticism of Lukashenka, calling for the election results to be recognised and for anti-regime speeches to be limited. However, the support of the Russian propaganda apparatus continued to be extremely scanty, especially against the expectations of Lukashenka, but also to the surprise of world public opinion.

At the same time, there was a preliminary examination of which of the possible variants of the situation in Belarus could prove most advantageous and effective for Russia. One of the considered scenarios, which can be regarded as a controlled leak, was made public on, *Insider*

²¹⁷ Большое интервью Лукашенко российским журналистам, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_eWbQAk5R4 (accessed: 20.05.21).

(<https://theins.ru/>)²¹⁸. It presents a project for reshuffling the Belarusian party scene, creating a new pro-Russian leader and, as a result, removing Lukashenka from power. This was a clear signal that Moscow does not plan to strengthen the position of the Belarusian leader unduly, and pro-Lukashenka activity in the Russian infosphere is dictated mainly by the need to achieve Russian goals.

There was no shortage of discussion in the Russian and Russian-language media about the Kremlin's negotiations with Lukashenka, evaluating the terms of possible support for the Belarusian President. His position as a perpetual supplicant and his complete lack of arguments that could provide him with even a minimum margin of independence were repeatedly highlighted. The Russian media signalled that a breakthrough in Belarus is highly possible. It would be built on the following pillars: constitutional reform, the abandonment of the President's hegemony in the political system, targeted decentralisation of power centres and Russian control over the correctness of the political changes.

At the same time, there was no shortage of speculation in the Russian state media about the date and conditions of Lukashenka's resignation. A possible unexpected scenario of a Kremlin-controlled transition of power also appeared. There were extremely critical voices. Belarusian leader was called a dictator, accused of electoral fraud and double standards towards Russia. Known for his unconventional public behaviour, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who often acted as a propaganda mouthpiece for the Kremlin²¹⁹, openly and repeatedly criticised and ridiculed Lukashenka. After the elections, he called on the Belarusian President to relinquish power²²⁰. The Russian message also emphasised the anti-Lukashenka and not anti-Russian nature of the events in Belarus and the fact that the protests are allocated only to large cities, so they do not represent the entire electorate but the metropolitan elite. The aspect raised was a significant difference compared to the protests in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004 and 2014, which mobilised broad sections of society and had a clearly anti-Russian orientation.

However, the Kremlin's restraint towards Lukashenka was put to the test relatively quickly. The determinant of the change was the case of Alexei Navalny. In the face of image problems

²¹⁸ План Б. Кремль создает в Белоруссии свою партию: против Лукашенко, но за интеграцию с РФ, <https://theins.ru/politika/237945>, (accessed: 20.05.21).

²¹⁹ Honoured by the Russian President Vladimir Putin on his 75th birthday with the Order of Merit for the Fatherland.

²²⁰ Жириновский жестко высказался о политике Александра Лукашенко- Россия 24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJI9a2BBhXk>; (accessed: 31.05.21).

resulting from the failed attempt to poison the oppositionist, and then internal difficulties related to Navalny's return to the country, Moscow chose the strategy of hibernating Lukashenka and buying time to prepare and implement the scenario which, in the perspective of profits and losses, would be the most beneficial for Russia. However, two of Moscow's main objectives remained unchanged, and today it is evident that they have been achieved: the level of uncertainty associated with the possibility of uncontrolled rotation of power in Belarus was reduced, and the viability of the project to integrate the two countries was maintained. In the current situation, when tension related to the protests in Belarus eased, and their number and frequency decreased, the Kremlin decided to connect Lukashenka's regime to a financial drip in the amount of \$1.5 billion. However, there have been reports in the media, denied by Lukashenka, that the amount of support will be even twice as high and will reach over \$3 billion²²¹. According to *Kommersant*, Moscow was to express its readiness to provide Minsk with up to \$3.5 billion on the condition that the integration process would be intensified and Lukashenka would initiate constitutional reforms²²². However, the scale of the declared aid shows that no decision has been made to strengthen Lukashenka's position in the long term, but that the process of controlled transit of power will be finalised only after the integration project is successful.

To leave in order to stay, or the geopolitical Russian-Belarusian monologue

Despite differences in the assessment of events in Belarus and the future of the Belarusian leader and the entire regime, the propaganda apparatus in Minsk and Moscow synchronised²²³ and unified the message. It proclaimed that the West was conducting a special operation in Belarus aimed at removing Lukashenka from power, limiting Russian influence on the territory of this brotherly state, and exerting pressure on Belarusian society, which (apart from a relatively small group of Western-manipulated provocateurs) was in fact pro-Russian. The

²²¹ Лукашенко собрался в Россию за кредитом на 3 миллиарда долларов, <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/02/11/money/>, (accessed: 01.06.21).

²²² Александр Лукашенко ведет страну к деньгократии, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4683642>, (accessed: 15.06.21).

²²³ Initially, the FSB gave a different date for the planned assassination than Lukashenka publicly presented.

common position was conveyed by Minister Sergey Lavrov, who, during a visit to Minsk on November 26, 2020, accused the West of meddling in Belarusian affairs.

The axis of the joined narrative was thus built around a message consistently promoted in the public space that both Belarus and Russia do not agree to interference by foreign states in the internal situation in Belarus. The geopolitical role of the Belarusian protests is consistently emphasised. Their spontaneous character is questioned, and they are described as part of a series of Western-inspired events destabilising the post-Soviet space, such as the colour revolutions or Euromaidan²²⁴. Russian Deputy Interior Minister Aleksandr V. Gorovoy stated that identical political techniques were used in Belarus as in Kyrgyzstan²²⁵. There were also repeated accusations against the West of cynicism, hypocrisy and double standards. As proof, it was emphasised that the pacification of demonstrations in Belarus was only an example of the fight against extremism, which was no different from the actions taken during the suppression of the yellow vest protests in France²²⁶.

Mykola Azarov, the former Prime Minister of Ukraine, claimed that the protests in Belarus resemble the Ukrainian Maidan²²⁷, Gennady Zyuganov described the events in Belarus as a coup d'état that could threaten the stability of Russia²²⁸, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published an article about an attempt to establish an alternative state apparatus in Belarus. Questions about the sources of funding for the protests were also continually raised, and the leaders of demonstrations were discredited. Initially, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was not radically discredited in the Russian media. It resulted from calculations that she might be interested in entering into a dialogue with Moscow in the future. However, as the situation developed, the joint Russian and Belarusian negative narrative concentrated on her. The turning point was certainly the Vilnius meeting between Tsikhanouskaya and US Deputy Secretary of State

²²⁴ *Кукловодство к действию. Николай Патрушев – о методах «цветных революций»*, https://aif.ru/society/safety/kuklovodstvo_k_deystviyu_nikolay_patrushev_o_metodah_cvetnyh_revolyuciy, (accessed: 21.06.21).

²²⁵ *В РФ не исключают попыток дестабилизации обстановки в стране как в Беларуси и Кыргызстане*, https://interfax.by/news/policy/v_mire/1290254/, (accessed: 21.06.21).

²²⁶ *Захарова оценила заявление Макрона по ситуации в Белоруссии*, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/774527-zaharova-makron-belorussiya>, (accessed: 15.06.21).

²²⁷ *Азаров: события в Беларуси очень напоминают подготовку первого майдана в Украине*, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/azarov-sobytiya-v-belarusi-ochen-napominajut-podgotovku-pervogo-majdana-v-ukraine-404485-2020/>, (accessed: 21.05.21).

²²⁸ *Зюганов: те, кто обещает Беларуси демократию, просто хотят захватить ее собственность*, <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/zjuganov-te-kto-obeschaet-belarusi-demokratiyu-prosto-hotjat-zahapat-ee-sobstvennost-405418-2020/>, (accessed: 22.05.21).

Stephen Biegun. Since then, the Russian media have become unequivocally critical of her. In particular, they paid much attention to the shortcomings of experience, independence and political programme. Further, they promoted the opinion that the activity of this oppositionist outside Belarus does not arouse any interest in the West and that her main goal is to obtain as much financial support as possible. The editor-in-chief of the Russian media service RT Margarita Simonyan, during an appearance on the Russian TV channel *Piervyj Kanal* [Channel One Russia], said that Tsikhanouskaya's IQ is only "slightly higher than that of an orangutan"²²⁹.

A similarly unified message describes the activities of the Polish minority in Belarus as hostile to the Belarusian state, propagating Nazism and aiming at aggressive revisionism. For example, according to *Sputnik*, Poland implements its own *Drang nach Osten* plan and, to this end, destabilises the political situation in Belarus²³⁰.

It should also be noted that the creation of a joint Russian-Belarusian narrative is not only proof of the enforced conciliatory nature of Minsk-Moscow relations in the sphere of communication, but it is also a pragmatic acceptance of reality by Lukashenka. The propaganda of the Belarusian regime definitely cannot stand the competition with the Russian propaganda. It is slower, less sophisticated and has significantly fewer financial resources at its disposal. According to Igor Yakovenko, leader of the Mediaphrenia group [orig: Медиафрения], Russian propagandists are "information invaders", who dictate the conditions in the Russian-Belarusian media space, and the disproportion in the number of resources allocated to propaganda is obviously translated into the quality and number of channels of communication²³¹. The expenditure on Belarusian media is twenty times smaller than on Russian media. However, in a crisis, Russia did not fail. On August 18, 2020, the Kremlin sent its propaganda specialists to help Lukashenka regain control of the Belarusian infosphere and conduct a propaganda and disinformation operation. This brotherly help came when some

²²⁹ Ю. Бершидский, *Фейк Маргариты Симоньян: IQ Тихановской «чуть выше, чем у орангутана»*, <https://theins.ru/antifake/234112>, (accessed: 26.05.21).

²³⁰ Лукашенко: нам удалось сорвать масштабный план дестабилизации Беларуси, <https://sputnik.by/politics/20200619/1044968439/Lukashenko-nam-udalos-sorvat-masshtabnyy-plan-destabilizatsii-Belarusi.html>, (accessed: 05.06.21).

²³¹ <http://www.ej.ru/?a=author&id=276>, (accessed: 21.06.21).

Belarusian journalists and media technicians announced a strike. Lukashenka publicly thanked for this gesture of support, appreciating the brotherly assistance²³².

Interestingly, Belarusian propaganda prepared for internal use often fails to meet the criterion of effectiveness and attractiveness. Many Belarusians are more susceptible to Russian propaganda than to Belarusian propaganda because the Russian one reaches them faster and comes from sources considered in Belarus to be more opinion-forming and credible than domestic ones. The pro-Russian portal, *Политринг* (<https://politring.com/>) openly recruits Belarusian journalists for cooperation, offering financial support, e.g. for publishing materials on the concept of the “Russian world”. Similar pro-integration content can be found on pro-Russian websites, which are completely beyond the control of the Belarusian propaganda apparatus (<https://vitebskcity.net>, <https://sozh.info/>, <https://4esnok.by/>)²³³.

An interesting example of the failure of the propaganda operation was the public declaration of Lukashenka, who announced before the presidential election that 33 Russian mercenaries belonging to the Wagner group had been detained on the territory of Belarus. At that time, however, Belarusians preferred a different source of information on this event – a statement by Dmitry Peskov, who denied these revelations, seemed much more credible to them²³⁴. As a result, reports about the Wagnerists in Belarus became the object of mockery and jokes. It is also worth remembering that, after the February meeting between President Putin and Lukashenka in Sochi, the eyes of public opinion turned to Moscow, not Minsk. It was from Russia that a binding and credible message was expected.

Another proof of the effectiveness of the Russian propaganda message is the Kremlin’s vision of events in Ukraine: the annexation of Crimea (initially Lukashenka tried to nuance a bit the narrative on Ukrainian issues, but his efforts were fruitless and ended with the united

²³² Лукашенко поблагодарил сотрудников RT за помощь белорусскому телевидению, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4475479>, (accessed: 10.06.21).

²³³ Как „русский мир” вербует белорусских журналистов, <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80-%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B1%D1%83%D0%B5%D1%82-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%85-%D0%B6%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2/a-39799111>, (accessed: 15.06.21).

²³⁴ Песков назвал «инсинуациями» обвинения Беларуси в подготовке провокаций задержанными «вагнеровцами», <https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2020/07/30/163392-peskov-nazval-insinuatsiyami-obvineniya-belarusi-v-podgotovke-provokatsiy-zaderzhannymi-vagnerovtsami>, (accessed: 05.06.21).

voice of Minsk and Moscow), the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh or the inviolability of the Belarusian-Russian-Ukrainian community, which, according to Russian propaganda, was accepted by a significant part of Belarusian society²³⁵. It perpetuates the creation of Russia as the sole guarantor of regional stability, the guardian of post-Soviet “homeostasis” and the best mediator in conflicts in the area.

A new element in the joint narrative was the subject of the alleged assassination attempt on Lukashenka and his sons. According to the Belarusian leader, American services and Belarusian oppositionists were involved in preparing the attack, “150 off-road vehicles would have entered Belarus through the Lithuanian border”²³⁶ to Minsk. The assassins “planned to kidnap the dictator’s sons and put them in a cellar near Gomel”²³⁷. These actions aimed to be a coup d’état, accompanied by a large-scale cyberattack on the Belarusian power grid, and the Belarusian leader estimated the cost of the coup at \$10 million²³⁸.

According to announcements issued by Minsk and Moscow, three people involved in the preparation of these actions were detained: opposition political scientist Aleksandr Fiaduta, Belarusian Popular Front leader Ryhor Kastusiu and lawyer Yuras Zyankovich. Interestingly, however, there are many inaccuracies in this propaganda narrative. It was announced that the detainees planned a coup for June (the action was to be code-named “Tiszina” [Silence]) and that the aim was a military coup. Subsequently, the Federal Security Service FSB issued a communiqué that the aim of the assassins was not only to liquidate Lukashenka but also to carry out a military coup by Belarusian and Ukrainian nationalists (according to the scenario of the colour revolutions), and this was planned for 9 May, Victory Day. Before taking action, the assassins were to hold consultations in the US and Poland. Then, in order to eliminate the contradictions and inaccuracies that had appeared, Lukashenka publicly confessed that there were three scenarios for an assassination attempt on him: one planned during the parade on 9

²³⁵ *Вся история белорусов— путь борьбы за свою русскость: интервью,* <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3045294.html>, (accessed: 05.06.21).

²³⁶ *Лукашенко заявил о готовившемся на него и сыновей покушении,* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52sKZ-Q2IhM>, (accessed: 10.06.21).

²³⁷ Ю.Князев, Александр Лукашенко заявил о задержании группы, планировавшей покушение на него и его детей по приказу высшего руководства США, <https://theins.ru/news/241186?fbclid=IwAR28XKnkkm8snrtb2oPppIj8K3FF7KTue0nOPWg0BfzRJEQQAAb9z6BH7Jw>, (accessed: 05.06.21).

²³⁸ Ibid.

May, another involving an attack on the presidential motorcade and a third on the presidential suburban residence.

The Russian and Belarusian media broadcast numerous materials on the subject. However, the broader context of this propaganda campaign should not be forgotten, as at the same time, Russia intensified its operations on the border with Ukraine, and the West – according to Moscow - tried to disguise the attack on Lukashenka by expelling Russian diplomats from the Czech Republic²³⁹. On this occasion, spokeswoman of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, described Prague’s actions as “grotesque” and regarded the Czech Republic as a “vassal of the 21st century”, which, like Warsaw, serves the United States²⁴⁰.

“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change”²⁴¹

The return to doublespeak in messages from Minsk and Moscow would mark the end of Russia’s short-term project to keep Lukashenka in power. Thus, any changes in the Russian propaganda message aimed at gradual delegitimisation of Lukashenka’s position would signal that the Kremlin launches a long-term scenario for the transit of the Belarusian leadership. It, however, would be implemented granting two key determinants: the mood of the Belarusian society and skilful inhibition of a possible transformation of anti-Lukashenka sentiments into anti-Russian ones.

Having learnt from the Ukrainian experience, Russia is aware that too violent attempts to promote solutions in the area of power transfer may prove counterproductive. In addition, they carry a high risk of triggering violent social changes, the intensity of which may result in disturbing the delicate homeostasis of pro-Russian and pro-Western orientations of Belarusians. The Russian plan for Belarus is thus calculated to gradually overcome successive barriers and minimise the effects of its actions.

²³⁹ *МИД связал высылку дипломатов из Чехии с раскрытием заговора в Белоруссии*, <https://ria.ru/20210419/zagovor-1728928052.html>, (accessed: 06.06.21).

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ “The Leopard” Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

Based on an analysis of Russia's current narrative, distributed for propaganda purposes, it can be concluded that the Kremlin's projected trajectory of subsequent initiatives is:

- 1/destabilisation of the situation in Ukraine,
- 2/ intensification of the integration process with Belarus,
- 3/ implementation of changes to constitutional legislation in Belarus,
- 4/ a Kremlin-controlled transition of leadership in Belarus, possibly combined with changes in the Belarusian party scene.

Intensive and spectacular humiliation of Lukashenka could undermine him excessively, which would, on the one hand, stimulate the anti-Lukashenka movements and, on the other, strengthen the regime's violent actions and further destabilise the internal situation in Belarus. It is likely that slogans of a new opening in Belarusian-Russian relations, a reset of integration and calls for a new model of integration combined with proposals for the transformation of power in Belarus will soon appear in the Russian and Belarusian media. On the one hand, Russia has not criticised the revision of the September agreements, which originally envisaged a period of 12 to 18 months for changes in Belarus, but was extended by Lukashenka until 2025. On the other hand, the postponement of changes is only an apparent success of Lukashenka and was significantly influenced by the case of Navalny. However, the narrative about Lukashenka as the guarantor of Belarus' independence, which for many years allowed for the construction of an opinion about the selective independence of this leader and his attempts to diversify foreign policy in order to defend the sovereignty of Belarus, definitely exhausted its potential.

After an in-depth analysis of the consequences of the Russian oppositionist's return to his homeland, it seems increasingly legitimate to conclude that it was too hasty to draw parallels between the protests in Belarus and those in Russia. Considering the completely different motivations of these events and the different goals of the protesters, slogans such as Yesterday Kyiv – Today Minsk – Tomorrow Moscow or Minsk 2020 – Moscow 2024 seem to remain in the realm of political utopia rather than a realistic scenario of events. However, it is highly probable that the Kremlin has already made a decision as to the fate of Lukashenka. Popular columnist of *Kommersant* Dmitry Drize asked, "Will Lukashenka lead Russia by the nose again?". The answer seems obvious – he will try, but there is not much time to do so.

Conclusions:

- The key topics for Russian propaganda, which include Belarusian issues, are those related to the future of Lukashenka's leadership and the prospects for the implementation of the integration project between Belarus and the Russian Federation.
- Russia has succeeded in preventing undesirable developments, minimising the risk of uncontrolled political upheaval, and bringing Belarus into a phase of transition monitored by the Kremlin.
- Therefore, the Russian propaganda apparatus will continue to be activated or inhibited in response to the need of implementing a policy of balance, which makes it possible to control the scope and intensity of support for the Belarusian regime.
- Such a strategy aims to avoid excessive strengthening or weakening of Lukashenka's position during the transition period.

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