

REPORT

MAPPING RESEARCH:

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN BELARUS



EUROPEAN VALUES

Protecting Freedom

2021



EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY

European Values Center for Security Policy is a non-governmental, non-partisan institute defending freedom and sovereignty. We protect liberal democracy, the rule of law, and the transatlantic alliance of the Czech Republic. We help defend Europe especially from the malign influences of Russia, China, and Islamic extremists.

We envision a free, safe, and prosperous Czechia within a vibrant Central Europe that is an integral part of the transatlantic community and is based on a firm alliance with the USA.

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Internews Ukraine (IUA) is one of the biggest agencies in Ukraine’s non-governmental sector. Established in 1996, it has been working tirelessly to implement projects that strengthen the professional capacities of media organizations, increase media literacy, support social journalism, new media, and media rights. One of the key directions of the organization’s work is in the sphere of communications, specifically implementation of informational campaigns on social issues, media production, PR and communications support, trainings and consulting. IUA’s mission lies in strengthening European values in Ukraine through developing its media sector.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
SUMMARY	4
DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL SITUATION: RUSSIA’S ROLE.....	7
ECONOMY, ENERGY AND FINANCIAL ASPECTS.....	9
Introduction	9
Mutual trade	9
Investments	10
Economic integration	11
Eurasian economic integration	11
Debts and loans	13
Subsidies	13
Banking.....	14
Oil, gas, potassium	14
Enterprises	15
Conclusion	17
LAW-ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES AND MILITARY	19
Introduction	19
Cooperation and fallout between the two countries’ security services	19
Cooperation between Russia and Belarus in the military sphere.....	20
Regional Group of Forces.....	21
Military exercises.....	21
Military objects on Belarusian territory.....	22
Belarusian military-industrial complex	22
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND INSTITUTIONS	24
Belarusian Orthodox Church after the elections on August 9, 2020	28
Evolution of the Belarusian Orthodox Church	30
CIVIL SOCIETY	31
Political parties.....	33
MEDIA.....	34
State television as a conductor of the “Russkiy Mir”	34
Changes in media consumption of Belarusians.....	34
War for the minds of Belarusians on the Internet and social networks	35
How Belarusian propaganda turned into an offshoot of the pro-Kremlin one.....	36
Russian propagandа messages aimed at the Belarusian audience.....	37
INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF RUSSIAN AND BELARUSIAN RELATIONS.....	40
CONCLUSION.....	42

INTRODUCTION

The pro-democracy civic protests in Belarus are still going on since the falsified presidential elections in August 2020. They have not only inspired and impressed democratic societies across the world but have also openly challenged both the authoritarian ruler of Belarus, President Lukashenka, as well as its Russian closest ally, President Putin.

Belarus, a country long considered the most closely interconnected with Russia in the post-Soviet space, now appears to be drifting away from the Kremlin's orbit. Should Belarus eventually join other post-Soviet countries like Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova in their struggle for democracy, the current political legitimacy of the Russian regime would be further significantly undermined.

Therefore, Russia has been exploiting all means to keep Belarus as closely attached to it - in a "brotherly" embrace - as possible. The policy mix that Russia could use is very wide given the track record of tight and extensive cooperation (if not even integration) between these two countries. In all sectors of social, economic and political fields, the presence and dominance of Russia have been unprecedented.

This study aims to analyze this Russian presence in, and influence upon, Belarus. It looks at various sectors and tries to describe the current status quo, strategies, means and instruments that the Russian Federation has been applying in Belarus.

The ambition of the international team of contributors and authors of this study was to provide both the expert community and the interested public with the most comprehensive overview. This paper thus could serve the purpose of being a certain baseline study for further research and analyses of Russia's presence and activity in its Western neighboring country.

Next to this baseline study, which offers its readers a more static than dynamic picture, every fortnight the team of authors will publish an overview and analysis of the latest news and developments in this area. This newsletter will be publicly accessible one can subscribe to it at [this link](#).

PS: When this publication was being prepared Belarusian authorities have blocked access to the websites of tut.by. Therefore, some of the links mentioned here in the footnotes might not work properly.

SUMMARY

The protests in Belarus which began in August 2020 have exposed the way in which the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka relies on Russia's support. Russian influence can be traced in all spheres of societal life in Belarus, including politics, economy, healthcare, public administration and civil society institutions. Tracing and highlighting this influence have been the exact purpose of this mapping exercise.

In the political sphere, Russia seeks to capitalize on the ongoing political crisis in Belarus. While the Kremlin has been supporting Lukashenka by having recognized the presidential election results, it aims to maintain exclusive contact with him and thus has been undermining the efforts of the Western leaders to initiate the mediation between the regime and democratic forces under the OSCE umbrella. At the same time, Moscow supports the constitutional reform which would give the parliament more weight. Meanwhile, the Kremlin aims to consolidate pro-Russian political groups in Belarus by setting them up for participation in the upcoming parliamentary election.

Russia also has significant influence over Belarusian military and law enforcement agencies. Many Belarusian military officers and law-enforcement agents have been trained in Russia and support the Union State, which is a constant source of fear for Lukashenka who is afraid of insurgency. Meanwhile, for the Kremlin, Belarus serves as a buffer between Russia and NATO and could play a significant strategic role in case of a military

conflict; hence, the Russian military objects on Belarus' soil, mass-scale joint military exercises and strong connections between the military-industrial complexes of the two countries.

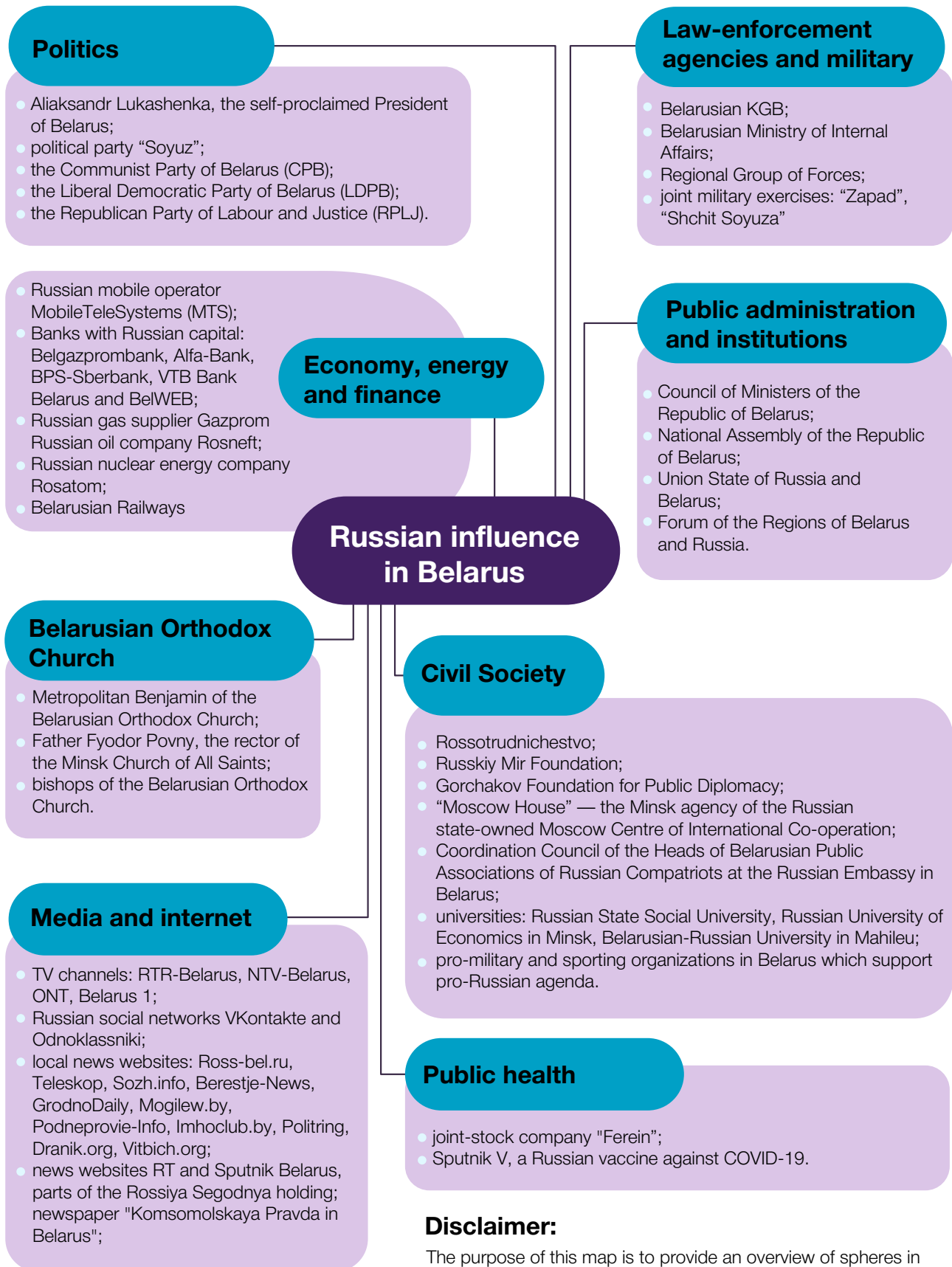
Russia is actively using its economic leverage over Belarus to secure its own economic interests, but also to further control Lukashenka's regime. For instance, Russian oligarchs with ties to the Kremlin are supporting the protests to push many of Belarus' prominent state-owned industries to the brink of collapse which would result in easy takeover opportunities. The Russian capital is already the largest source of foreign direct investment in Belarus. A further increase of its share in the Belarusian economy would further strengthen Minsk's economic dependence on Moscow.

When it comes to public administration, the Kremlin has numerous levers to influence Belarus, including the official ones provided through the Union State of Russia and Belarus. The political structures of the Union State create space for cooperation and communication between Belarusian and Russian officials. In addition to that, links between the Belarusian officials and their colleagues in Russia are also established via different initiatives and platforms, from the high-profile annual forums to meetings, working visits and minor projects of transborder cooperation at the local level. However, formal and informal institutional interconnections are easily left behind when there is a threat to the authoritarian system of Lukashenka.

Given that in Belarus the Church issue is of great importance in the formation of a worldview, political values and orientations, Russian control over the Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is worrying. In particular, Moscow appoints all Belarusian bishops, which gives the Kremlin direct control over the clergy in Belarus. The Orthodox Church constitutes one of the key elements of the idea of the "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World). In recent years, it has become a mechanism for promoting Moscow's foreign policy interests.

Russia is also actively trying to influence public opinion in Belarus to win sympathy at the grassroots level. The Kremlin's strategic aim is to promote the idea of further integration in the political and economic spheres within the project of the Union State. In order to achieve this goal, the Kremlin sponsors various agencies, foundations, as well as cultural and educational organizations to disseminate Russophile ideas in Belarus.

The Belarusian information field is also significantly influenced by Russia. On the one hand, Russian media is the main supplier of propaganda content, as Russian federal TV channels, news agencies and dozens of pro-Kremlin websites are relatively popular in Belarus. On the other hand, Belarusian media often use Russian TV production and broadcast systems, thereby spreading pro-Russian narratives. The main goal of the Kremlin's propagandists is to "split" the Belarusian society into two opposing camps and thus prolong the ongoing political crisis.



Disclaimer:

The purpose of this map is to provide an overview of spheres in which Russian influence in Belarus is present. At the same time, Russian influence goes beyond the personalities and entities mentioned in this map.

DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL SITUATION: RUSSIA'S ROLE

Lukashenka's regime relies on Russian support, particularly in the context of estranged relations with the West due to the crackdown on the protest and subsequent sanctions. Against this backdrop, Russia seeks to play a decisive role in the Belarusian crisis. At the rhetorical level, the Kremlin supports current Belarusian leadership, having recognized the election results and avoided criticizing the state violence against the opposition. Moscow also endorses the idea of the constitutional reform suggested by Lukashenka which would imply the redistribution of powers from the president towards the parliament and government. However, Russia seeks to capitalize on the situation on its own terms.

Thus, the Kremlin does not support calls from Western leaders to initiate the mediation between the regime and democratic forces under the auspices of the OSCE¹. Rather, Moscow seeks to maintain exclusive contact with Alyaksandr Lukashenka. In September 2020 and February 2021 Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin met in Sochi. Both meetings were held behind closed doors, which invited speculation about the conversations, particularly whether the parties discussed the transfer of power as a solution to the post-electoral crisis².

Expert assessments conclude that Moscow does not necessarily support the figure of Alyaksandr Lukashenka: for the Kremlin, Lukashenka is a toxic ally who has lost legitimacy in the eyes of the Belarusian people, and the personal relations between Putin and Lukashenka are rather tense^{3 4}. Therefore, the current turmoil provides an opportunity for Russia to support the change of the Belarusian leadership. In such a context, constitutional reform seems like an optimal solution, which offers a gradual transformation within the existing legal parameters, rather than explicit win of the democratic protest. The latter seems to be unacceptable for Moscow, due to concerns of spillover effects of the anti-autocratic protest and to diminish the risk that new leadership prioritizes a pro-Western foreign policy vector.

In the case of constitutional reform and subsequent elections, it is expected that the parliament would gain more weight in the political system and by that time Russia would consolidate pro-Russian political groups in Belarus that become established at the parliamentary elections and through which it would aim to influence the future political situation in the country. In December 2020, Russian media "The Insider" published a working paper on Belarus that was allegedly leaked from the Directorate for Inter-Regional Relations and Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries at the Administration of the President of Russian Federation⁵. According to journalist investigations, this division was created to counter the "color revolutions" in Russia's neighborhood and promote Russia's soft power⁶. The working paper on Belarus composed in September 2020 stated that in order to preserve the influence in Belarus, Russia should facilitate constitutional reform and provide political representation for pro-Russian forces⁷.

1 Liechtenstein, Stephanie (2020). "Will the OSCE mediate in Belarus?" Security and human rights monitor. Available at <https://www.shrmonitor.org/will-the-osce-mediate-in-belarus>

2 Belta.by (2021). Lukashenka shared the details of the negotiations with Putin and reacted to the speculation. Available at: <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-o-podrobnostjakh-peregovorov-s-putinyem-i-otreagiroval-na-domysly-430898-2021>

3 Slunkin, Pavel. Lukashenka besieged: Russia's plans for Belarus. European Council on Foreign Affairs. Available at <https://ecfr.eu/article/lukashenka-besieged-russias-plans-for-belarus>

4 Shmatsina, Katsiaryna. At the end of their tether. Why Belarusians are determined to oust their President's regime — and what could happen next". Kulturaustausch. Available at <https://www.zeitschrift-kulturaustausch.de/en/archiv/online-exklusive/am-ende-der-fahnenstange> (accessed 1.03.2021).

5 The Insider (2020). Plan B. Kremlin creates its own party in Belarus: against Lukashenka but for the integration with the Russian Federation. Available at <https://theins.ru/politika/237945>

6 Dossier center (2021). How the Kremlin meddles into the domestic politics of the neighboring countries. Part one: elections in Georgia. Available at <https://dossier.center/georgia> (accessed 5.03.2021)

7 The Insider (2020). Plan B. Kremlin creates its own party in Belarus: against Lukashenka but for the integration with the Russian Federation. Available at <https://theins.ru/politika/237945>

On March 6, 2021, the founding convention of the political party “Soyuz” took place. The founder, Siarhei Luszcz, underlined that “Soyuz” stands for the deepened integration of Belarus and Russia. Among the Russian guests invited to the convention, there was a member of the State Duma from Crimea, Dmitry Belik, who drew parallels between the return of Crimea to Russia through the referendum on March 6, 2014, and the party convention⁸. “Soyuz” still must undergo the registration process and obtain the approval of the Ministry of Justice. With Belarus devoid of rule of law, this likely means that the decision on the registration would be politically motivated. At this point, it is unclear whether the regime approves the creation of a new political force. Assessments of the rationale behind the creation of “Soyuz” vary, from the version that this is the first step of the Kremlin’s plan to introduce pro-Russian groups into the Belarusian parliament, to the hypothesis that the party is a creation of the Belarusian KGB aimed at deceiving Moscow⁹¹⁰. It is noteworthy that the video material about the creation of “Soyuz” appeared on the Belarusian state TV channel “ONT” in October 2020, which stated that the new party could be registered by the end of the year¹¹. Such media coverage on state TV means that the news was approved by the censorship, thus not contradicting the interests of the regime.

The Kremlin does not recognize the role of the Belarusian democratic opposition. In November 2020 press-secretary Dmitry Peskov claimed that Vladimir Putin does not plan to meet with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, underlining that Ms. Tsikhanouskaya does not have a substantial connection to Belarus due to her residency abroad in Lithuania¹². In a similar vein, Russian ambassador to Belarus Dmitry Mezentsev commented on why the embassy denied the request of the Coordination Council to host a meeting in March 2021, claiming that the Coordination Council “is the creation of the West” and does not represent the Belarusian people¹³. The West-East division is quite evident in the statements made by Russian officials with regard to Belarus. Mezentsev also expressed concern that one can spot “EU billboards” in Minsk that inform of the EU’s projects for Belarus, but the Belarusians and Russians are not aware of the benefits of the Union State integration project and suggested developing Union State symbols.

8 Deutsche Welle (2021). Pro-Russian party “Soyuz” was created in Belarus. Available at <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-belarusi-sozdana-prorossijskaja-partija-sojuz/a-56794564>

9 Ibid.

10 Express.by (2021). Russian political scientist: Creation of pro-Russian party in Belarus is impossible. Party “Soyuz” is a project of the Belarusian KGB. Available at <https://ex-press.by/rubrics/politika/2021/03/07/rossijskij-politolog-sozdanie-prorossijskoj-partii-v-belarusi-nevozmozhno-partiya-soyuz-iznachalno-yavlyaetsya-filialom-belorusskogo-kgb>

11 ONT.by (2020). New political party “Soyuz” might be created in Belarus by the end of the year. Available at <https://ont.by/news/novaya-politicheskaya-partiya-soyuz-mozhet-poyavitsya-v-belarusi-do-konca-goda>

12 TASS (2020). Peskov stated that there is no plan for the contact between Putin and Tsikhanouskaya. Available at <https://tass.ru/politika/9652157>

13 Tut.by (2021). Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Belarus told about the meeting invite from the opposition and compared the opposition with the society of book amateurs. Available at <https://news.tut.by/economics/721705.html?c>

ECONOMY, ENERGY AND FINANCIAL ASPECTS

Introduction

Taking advantage of the current position of the Belarusian leadership, the Kremlin is trying to advance its interests in Belarus:

- guarantees of stability of Russian transit through Belarus;
- convergence of Belarusian economic practices with Russian ones, including the protection of private property rights to promote the oligarchic interests of those close to the Kremlin - this is necessary both to reduce direct support for the Belarusian economy from Russia and to expand the opportunities of Russian companies¹⁴.

Mutual trade

The Russian Federation is Belarus' main trading partner. In 2020, trade between Belarus and Russia amounted to \$29.519 billion. Russia accounted for 47.9% of the total trade turnover of Belarus, including 45.2% of exports (up from 41.5% in 2019) and 50.2% of imports (down from 55.8% in 2019).

The European Union is Belarus' second largest trade partner, accounting for a fifth of its foreign trade. Key importing countries of Belarusian products to the EU: Poland, Lithuania, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Latvia, Denmark, Belgium and Norway¹⁵. These countries represent 18.1% of the country's overall trade in goods, which reached almost €11 billion in 2019. Belarus' exports to the EU are mainly wood, mineral fuels and base metals. The EU exports mainly machinery, transport equipment and chemicals to Belarus¹⁶.

In 2020, the export of Belarusian goods to the Russian market amounted to \$13.132 billion¹⁷.

The main commodity items of Belarusian exports in 2020:

- cheeses and cottage cheese - 7.6% of all Belarusian exports to Russia;
- butter - 2.7%;
- trucks - 2.6%;
- tractors and truck tractors - 2.4%;
- condensed and dry milk and cream - 2.4%;
- parts and accessories for cars and tractors - 1.9%;
- passenger cars - 1.7%;
- plastic containers - 1.6%;
- medicines - 1.6%;
- furniture - 1.6%;
- fresh or chilled beef - 1.4%¹⁸.

14 Kostriugova, Valeria (2020). Russia's role in stabilization of the situation in Belarus. Nashe Mnenie. Available at <https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/7274.html>

15 Export.by (2021). About Belarus. Available at https://export.by/en/about_belarus

16 European Commission (2021). Countries and regions/Belarus. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/belarus/>

17 Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to Russia (2020). Trade relations. Available at <http://embassybel.ru/trade-relations>

18 Ibid.

Agricultural products account for 25% of Belarusian exports to the Russian Federation. In 2020, 23 new commodity items in the amount of \$1.9 million appeared in the export structure, for which no deliveries to Russia were made in 2019. Imports of goods from Russia in 2020 amounted to \$16.387 billion. The import structure was dominated by:

- crude oil, including gas condensate - 21% of all imports of goods from Russia to Belarus;
- petroleum gases and other gaseous hydrocarbons - 15.4%;
- passenger cars - 3.5%;
- waste and scrap of ferrous metals - 1.8% of all imports from Russia¹⁹.

The balance of mutual trade in goods in 2020 for Belarus was negative in the amount of \$3.255 billion. In 2020, the export of services to Russia amounted to \$2.414 billion, while the import of services from Russia was \$1.444 billion. The balance of trade in services with Russia in 2020 for Belarus was positive and amounted to \$969.9 million²⁰.

Investments

According to the Moody's investment climate international rating, Belarus holds a middle position in the CIS, and a higher position than even some European countries (such as Greece)²¹. In 2019 foreign investors poured \$10 billion into the real sector of the Belarusian economy (except for banks). The main investors were partners from Russia, the United Kingdom, Cyprus, Poland, Austria, Ukraine, Lithuania, China, Germany and the Netherlands²².

At the end of 2020, the inflow of foreign investments in the economy of the Republic of Belarus amounted to \$8.68 billion, of which \$6 billion (69.2%) were foreign direct investment, \$4.8 billion (0.06%) portfolio investments, and \$2.67 (30.74%) - others. The Russian Federation accounted for 21.7% of all FDI inflows to the republic for direct investments on a net basis of \$307.3 million²³.

Russian capital is the largest source of foreign direct investment in Belarus. According to the Russian Central Bank, investors from Russia invested \$ 0.65 billion in the Belarusian economy in 2018-2019. By the beginning of 2020, the volume of accumulated investments from Russia in Belarus totaled \$4.26 billion. However, these indicators underestimate the true volumes of Russian-origin investment in Belarus. The Bank of Russia considers only direct investments in Belarus, while investments in transit through other countries (for example, Cyprus) are not counted. According to the National Statistical Committee of Belarus and the Ministry of Finance, the country received \$2.87 billion in direct investment from Russia, or almost 40% of the total (\$7.2 billion) in 2019 alone²⁴.

However, most of the direct investment in 2019 - \$3.6 billion (88.5%) - was a share in the capital of joint and purely Russian enterprises in Belarus, the rest corresponded to debt instruments²⁵.

As for private Russian investments in Belarus, today they are not very tangible and are concentrated in oil refining, telecommunications and the banking system. Since most of the Belarusian economy remains state-owned, Russia has no other opportunity to influence Belarus apart from through interstate relations. An increase in private Russian investment in various sectors is possible, but Russian companies need to make

19 Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to Russia (2020). Trade relations. Available at <http://embassybel.ru/trade-relations>

20 Ibid.

21 Moody's (2021). Available at <https://www.moody.com/>

22 Export.by (2021). About Belarus. Available at https://export.by/en/about_belarus

23 Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus (2021). Available at: <http://www.economy.gov.by/ru/pezzultat-ru/>

24 Kuzmina, Elena (2019). Arithmetic of integration: how much does Russia invest in Belarus. Eurasia Expert. Available at <https://eurasia.expert/arifmetika-integratsii-skolko-rossiya-investiruet-v-belarus/>

25 Ibid.

efforts to be involved in privatization in Belarus²⁶.

One of the largest investors in the Belarusian economy is the Russian mobile operator Mobile TeleSystems. It is represented on the Belarusian market by the company of the same name, of which it owns 49%. The controlling stake in MTS JLLC belongs to Beltelecom. This partnership offers MTS 5.6 million subscribers, which is the highest number among all mobile operators. The main shareholder of the Russian MTS is the Russian billionaire Vladimir Yevtushenkov²⁷.

Economic integration

The Union State programs in various fields (space, information technology, microelectronics, agriculture, border security, Chernobyl relief, etc.) are funded from the Union State budget. Since 2000, over RUB50 billion has been allocated to these. In 2019, the Union State carried out 12 programs in space, military-technical, agricultural, medical, microelectronics and hydrometeorology sectors²⁸.

Single currency is one of the key issues of the Union state programs. Alyaksandr Lukashenka first announced the prospects of introducing a single currency on January 1, 2004. But the plans were soon postponed by a year. However, neither in 2005 nor in 2006 did a single currency appear. On February 2, 2006, at a press conference in Minsk, Director of the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus Pyotr Prokopovich announced the expected introduction of a single currency from 2007, which also did not happen. The main reason for these delays is the significant disagreement between the two countries over the details of the proposed currency reform. Belarus insists on significant compensation for the abandonment of the national currency - the Belarusian ruble - and on the preservation of Minsk's right to issue rubles. The Russian side rejects these proposals. In February 2019, Lukashenka again spoke about a single currency, suggesting that it should be the ruble, but not Russian or Belarusian. However, no further steps were taken in this direction²⁹.

Eurasian economic integration

The strategic directions of development of Eurasian economic integration for the period till 2025 were approved by the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council on 11 December 2020. The document contains 330 measures and mechanisms meant to advance cooperation in the Eurasian Economic Union space. The document has become something of a roadmap towards tighter integration. It stipulates mechanisms of cooperation in economy, education, science, tourism, sport, and healthcare³⁰. According to Article 63 of the Treaty on the EAEU, the member states of the Union form an economic policy within the framework of the following quantitative values of macroeconomic indicators that determine the sustainability of economic development: the annual deficit of the consolidated budget of the general government sector should not exceed 3% of GDP; general government debt should not exceed 50% of GDP; the inflation rate (consumer price index) in annual terms (December to December of the previous year, in percent) must not exceed by

26 Tut.by (2020). Experts: problems in the financial sector could strengthen the dependency on Russia. Available at <https://news.tut.by/economics/709886.html>

27 EJ.by (2019). 30 leading Russian businesses in Belarus. Available at <https://ej.by/news/companies/2019/12/27/30-rossiyskih-biznesov-lidiruyuschih-v-belarusi.html>

28 President of the Republic of Belarus (2021). Union State. Available at <https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/economics/economic-integration/union-state>

29 Yandex News (2021). Lukashenka supported the creation of a single currency in the Union State. Available at https://yandex.ru/news/story/V_Kremlje_otreagirovali_na_slova_Lukashenko_o_edinoj_valyute_s_Rossiej--bbc9b42768f17afd5b2948600bc752a3

30 The Official Website of the Republic of Belarus (2021). Strategy to guide development of Eurasian economic integration till 2025 published. Available at https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/strategy-to-guide-development-of-eurasian-economic-integration-till-2025-published_i_123949.html

more than 5% of the inflation rate in the member state in which this indicator has the lowest value³¹. All EAEU countries, except Belarus, exceeded the quantitative values of macroeconomic indicators that determined the sustainability of economic development in 2020³².

*Foreign and mutual trade in goods of the Eurasian Economic Union. Export to countries outside the union (million dollars)*³³

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Belarus	15 653,9	12 154,9	15 592,3	19 979,3	18 391,1	15 037,4
Russia	315 055,3	260 779,3	325 199,9	412 758,1	387 474,9	304 703,9

*Export to the countries of the union (mutual trade)*³⁴

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Belarus	11 007,8	11 384,8	13 651,0	13 932,2	14 569,7	14 008,7
Russia	28 821,2	26 804,3	34 685,6	38 953,4	39 247,2	34 061,8

The data in the tables above show that almost half of Belarus' exports are directed to the countries of the Eurasian Union, in contrast to the share of the Russian Federation (10%).

*Imports from countries outside the union (million dollars)*³⁵

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Belarus	13 088,6	12 234,7	14 525,9	15 689,1	17 280,5	16 101,2
Russia	168 784,9	168 822,1	210 249,9	221 198,7	226 615,4	213 725,5

*Imports from the countries of the union*³⁶

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Belarus	17 207,6	15 381,2	19 715,8	22 760,5	22 205,9	16 527,8
Russia	14 181,1	14 493,9	18 400,7	19 272,5	20 550,0	19 157,5

*For the period from the final quarter of 2019 to the third quarter of 2020, the largest inflow of mutual direct investments was observed in Belarus (\$562 million) and Kazakhstan (\$367 million). The main investor of mutual direct investments in the EAEU was Russia (\$872 million)*³⁷.

Under the pretext of "protecting the internal market", the government of Belarus is taking additional

31 Belta.by (2021). Belarus is the only country in the Eurasian Economic Union which did not exceed budget and debt limits amid the pandemic. Available at <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/v-eaes-tolko-belarus-v-uslovijah-pandemii-ne-prevysila-predelnyh-znachenij-bjudzhetnyh-i-dolgovyh-433996-2021/>

32 Ibid.

33 Eurasian Economic Commission (2021). External and mutual trade in the Eurasian Economic Union. Available at http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/act/integr_i_makroec/dep_stat/tradestat/time_series/Pages/default.aspx

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Eurasian Economic Commission (2021). Mutual investments between the members of the Eurasian Economic Union. Available at http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/act/integr_i_makroec/dep_stat/fin_stat/express_information/Documents/mutual_investments/express_mi_3Q2020.pdf

measures to restrict imports from Russia and other EAEU member countries. A special working group was created “to develop and take measures to protect the internal market, including within the EAEU” (Order of the Chairman of the Belarusian Council of Ministers Roman Golovchenko March 4, 2021 No. 47)³⁸.

According to the Minister for Integration and Macroeconomics of the Eurasian Economic Commission Sergei Glazyev, the Belarusian economy has been a locomotive in the EAEU for a long time. It is “tied” to Russian partners, and the share of mutual trade in the Belarusian trade turnover is the highest among the countries of the Union, accounting for almost 50 percent³⁹.

Debts and loans

Russia has spent almost \$120 billion supporting Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime⁴⁰.

Russia is the main source of external borrowing for the Belarusian government: according to the Ministry of Finance, Russian loans account for about 48% of the republic’s external public debt (as of the end of the first quarter of 2020), or \$7.92 billion. This indicator includes intergovernmental loans and loans from the state corporation bank VEB.RF, and all loans are denominated in foreign currency. In second place is China, which provided loans to the Belarusian state amounting to \$3.3 billion. Since 2008, the Russian government and VEB have provided Belarus with at least eight loans to RBC. At the end of March 2020, Minsk owed about \$7.5 billion to the Russian government and another \$0.44 billion to VEB (from a loan for the construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant). Since 2018, Russia has changed its approach to lending to Belarus, for the first time publicly refusing to refinance Belarusian debt. After that, Belarus placed bonds in Russian rubles on the Russian exchange market. Alyaksandr Lukashenka said in February 2020 that Minsk pays Russia about \$1 billion a year for using previously taken loans and does not ask Moscow for new money⁴¹.

Out of the \$500 million Belarus received in the previous tranche, at least \$400 million was immediately used to pay gas debts. All the support that Belarus receives from Russia is used to repay existing debt. This debt will evidently continue to grow. And this kind of dependence is doubly dangerous since the Russian economy is not growing today⁴².

Subsidies

From 2005 to 2015, the main foreign trade partner of Belarus, the Russian Federation, poured about \$106 billion into the Belarusian economy. For instance, according to the Central Bank of Russia, direct Russian investments in Belarus in 2007-2019, totaled more than \$12 billion. Oil should be allocated as a separate large “subsidy” - until 2020 Belarus bought oil at world prices, and then the difference from the special domestic price was compensated for by the Russian Federation⁴³.

38 Regnum.ru (2021). The government of Belarus increases import discrimination. Available at <https://regnum.ru/news/economy/3212694.html>

39 Sputnik.vy (2021). What slows the Belarusian economy in the Eurasian Economic Union down and what can be done with it. Available at https://sputnik.by/press_center/20210401/1047279775/Chto-tormozit-belorusskuyu-ekonomiku-v-EEAS-i-chno-delat.html

40 Terentiev, Ihor (2020). How Russia has lost almost \$120 billion supporting the regime of Lukashenka. Open Media. Available at <https://openmedia.io/investigation/kak-rossiya-poteryala-na-podderzhke-rezhima-aleksandra-lukashenko-pochti-120-mlrd/>

41 Rbc.ru (2020). How the economies of Russia and Belarus are linked. What you should know. Available at <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/19/08/2020/5f3bcfd09a7947dbc3afb76b>

42 IPM Business School (2020). Kateryna Borkunova, an economist: Will Russia help us? About the economic assistance and economic interests of our key partner. Available at <https://www.ipm.by/media/publications/prensa/ekonomist-katerina-bornukova-rossiya-nam-pomozhet-ob-ekonomicheskoy-pomoshchi-i-interesakh-nashego-g/>

43 Liga.net (2020). The economy of Belarus and its dependence on Russian Federation. Available at <https://finance.liga.net/ekonomika/article/na-neftyanyoy-igle-rf-chno-takoe-ekonomika-belarusi-v-sravnenii-s-ukrainskoy-7-grafikov>

Subsidies for Belarus can be broken down into:

- the preferential cost of natural gas compared to the average export price to other countries. From 2012 to 2019, Belarus received \$17.4 billion from this subsidy. In some years, gas prices for Belarus were half that of other countries'. For example, in 2012 the price of gas for Belarus was \$168.4 per thousand cubic meters, and for other buying countries it was \$368.8, Kondratyev notes.
- subsidies means zero export duties on oil. In the period under review, this amounted to \$24.9 billion.
- duty-free import of oil products from Russia, which gave the Belarusian economy \$2.7 billion⁴⁴.

Over the years, support for Russia has ranged from 11% to 27% of the Belarusian GDP. From 2011–2016 Belarus received \$48.4 billion from Russia through duty-free oil sales and discounts on gas. In 2018, the Russian Federation compensated Belarus \$4.3 billion, about 8% of the country's GDP⁴⁵.

In recent years it has become clear that economic support from the Russian side has significantly decreased. Previously, Belarus received oil and gas at prices significantly lower than world prices and made good money on this. These subsidies reached 10% of Belarusian GDP. By 2020, this support had disappeared altogether. Belarus paid (and continues to pay) a high price for gas, and one might even say that Belarus is more likely to subsidize Russia for oil. Due to the tax maneuver, Belarus paid a price that did not differ significantly from the market price, and the fixed price for gas, which was agreed on in December 2019, turned out to be higher than the world average in 2020⁴⁶.

Banking

Banks with Russian capital account for 25% of the republic's banking market. According to the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus, there are 24 banks operating in the country. Five of them use Russian capital: Belgazprombank, Alfa-Bank, BPS-Sberbank, VTB Bank Belarus and BelWEB. They are among the top ten banks in Belarus with the largest assets. Three of them are state-owned. In addition, the role of banks with Russian participation is also important in the lending sector. In the first nine months of 2019, Belarusian banks issued loans to customers totaling 43.8 billion rubles. 24.9% of this amount was provided by banks with Russian participation: Belgazprombank - 6.6%, BelVEB - 6.8%, BPS Sberbank - 5.7%, Alfa-Bank - 3.7%, VTB Belarus - 2.1 %⁴⁷.

Oil, gas, potassium

Russian oil is important for Belarus, which does not have large oil reserves. The country has only a small oil field, Rechitskoye, where in recent years no more than 1.7 million tons have been produced. All this oil is sent for export. Russian oil is the main raw material for Belarusian refineries, which then sell oil products abroad. At the end of 2019, Belarus ranked fourth in terms of the volume of oil supplied from Russia (18 million tons, or 6.7% of total exports), after China (70.6 million tons), the Netherlands (46.2 million tons) and Germany (18.9 million tons). The three largest oil suppliers to the country are Rosneft, Lukoil and Surgutneftegas⁴⁸.

44 Titova, Yulia (2020). How much has Russia paid for its friendship with Lukashenka in the last 10 years. Forbes Russia. Available at <https://www.forbes.ru/finansy-i-investicii/407435-skolko-rossiya-zaplatila-za-druzhbu-s-lukashenko-za-poslednie-10-let>

45 Liga.net (2020). The economy of Belarus and its dependence on Russian Federation. Available at <https://finance.liga.net/ekonomika/article/na-neftyanoy-igle-rf-cto-takoe-ekonomika-belarusi-v-sravnenii-s-ukrainskoy-7-grafikov>

46 IPM Business School (2020). Kateryna Borkunova, an economist: Will Russia help us? About the economic assistance and economic interests of our key partner. Available at <https://www.ipm.by/media/publications/prensa/ekonomist-katerina-bornukova-rossiya-nam-pomozhet-ob-ekonomicheskoy-pomoshchi-i-interesakh-nashego-g/>

47 Sputnik.by (2020). Without Russian capital, Belarusian bank system cannot survive, experts say. Available at <https://sputnik.by/economy/20200623/1044979746/Bez-kapitala-RF-bankovskaya-sistema-Belarusi-nezhiznesposobna--eksperty.html>

48 Titova, Yulia (2020). How much has Russia paid for its friendship with Lukashenka in the last 10 years. Forbes Russia. Available at <https://www.forbes.ru/finansy-i-investicii/407435-skolko-rossiya-zaplatila-za-druzhbu-s-lukashenko-za-poslednie-10-let>

Belarus refines Russian oil at its refineries and then exports oil products. This is the basis of Belarusian exports - their total volume over the past year has reached \$7 billion from all exports⁴⁹.

In addition, Belarus is the second consumer of Russian gas after Germany. According to the Russian Federal Customs Service, in 2019, Russian gas was sold to Belarus for \$2.7 billion, ahead of it in this indicator were only Germany (\$10.6 billion) and Austria (\$ 3.2 billion). Gas is supplied by Gazprom, and Belarus is one of the largest consumers for the gas monopoly. In total, in 2019, Gazprom supplied 271.1 billion cubic meters to non-CIS countries and the former Soviet Union, out of which 7.3% fell on Belarus⁵⁰.

Despite the significant amount of subsidies, oil and gas issues have regularly become a source of tension in relations between Moscow and Minsk in recent years.

Transshipment transit of Belarusian oil products through Russian ports⁵¹ is politically motivated, but economically unprofitable. The signing of an agreement on transshipment of goods through terminals in the Leningrad Region is beneficial primarily for Russia and has an important image value. It is not a fact that the route will subsequently be rebuilt for all cargo. In February, an intergovernmental agreement was signed according to which, during 2021-2023, Belarusian enterprises will be able to transship their oil products with a total volume of 9.8 million tons through Russian ports for subsequent delivery to third countries instead of using the cheaper option through Lithuanian ports (Klaipeda). There are no capacities for transshipment of potash fertilizers in Russia. The Russian side does not hide that it is unlikely to build a terminal for transshipment of fertilizers soon. Lithuania has a special bulk cargo terminal that handles almost 10 million tons of Belaruskali fertilizers, which will not expand⁵².

Some state-owned enterprises in Belarus could be of interest to Russia (for example, the same “Belaruskali”). But at the same time, the Russians understand that risks are associated with all assets physically located on Belarusian soil. Property rights in Belarus are very poorly protected. This also applies to the property rights of Russian oligarchs. Nevertheless, Belarus was economically dependent on Russia; and this dependence has grown even more⁵³.

Enterprises

The monopoly supplier of gas is Gazprom, which in 2011 bought the Belarusian gas transmission transit system for \$5 billion. Gazprom’s Transgaz Belarus not only brings dividends to Russia but is also the main contributing taxpayer to the state budget in Belarus.

The Russian group of companies (Gazprom Transgaz Belarus), through its structural units owns a network of filling complexes (Gazpromneft-Belnefteprodukt) and Belgazprombank, and is also building a large business complex in Minsk. Gazprom Neft, through the Slavneft company, owns a 42,58% stake in the Mozyr Oil Refinery⁵⁴. The Belarusian business of the large private Russian company Lukoil consists of the enterprises Lukoil-Belorussia and LLK-Naftan. The first of them is engaged in oil refining at Belarusian refineries and operates a large network of filling stations in the country, the second produces fuel additives based on the Novopolotsk “Naftan”.

49 Liga.net (2020). The economy of Belarus and its dependence on Russian Federation. Available at <https://finance.liga.net/ekonomika/article/na-neftyanyoy-igle-rf-cto-takoe-ekonomika-belarusi-v-sravnennii-s-ukrainskoy-7-grafikov>

50 Ibid.

51 Now only potassium goes through Lithuanian ports.

52 Sigareva, Vera (2021). Going East. Which risks Belarus regarding its new oil products export route. Naviny.by. Available at <https://naviny.online/article/20210222/1613997397-idem-na-vostok-chem-riskuet-belarus-na-novom-marshrute-eksporta>

53 IPM Business School (2020). Kateryna Borkunova, an economist: Will Russia help us? About the economic assistance and economic interests of our key partner. Available at <https://www.ipm.by/media/publications/prensa/ekonomist-katerina-bornukova-rossiya-nam-pomozhet-ob-ekonomicheskoy-pomoshchi-i-interesakh-nashego-g/>

54 Joint Stock Company Mozyr Oil Refinery (2021). Shareholders and investors. Available at <https://mnpz.by/investors/>

The large state-owned company Rosneft also supplies oil for refining to Belarus and sells part of its oil products through its own network of filling stations. The local wholesale and retail business is managed by one of the largest taxpayers in the Minsk region, RN-Zapad. Rosneft also owns a stake in the Mozyr Oil Refinery through Slavneft.

The Russian state monopoly Transneft owns two oil product pipelines in Belarus. They are managed from Mozyr by the West-Transnefteprodukt company. The company transports light oil products from Russian and Belarusian refineries for export, in the direction of Ukraine and Latvia.

Metallurgy: metals take the third place in the import of goods from Russia to Belarus after oil and gas. Russian metallurgists meet the needs of the Belarusian mechanical engineering, construction, and other industries in metal products. In 2018, Belarus imported \$2 billion worth of ferrous metals and products from them.

Rosatom is building a nuclear power plant in Belarus. The commissioning of the second power unit is scheduled for 2022. The general contractor is Atomstroyexport; other subsidiaries of the state nuclear corporation are also employed at the facility. For the construction of a nuclear power plant in Ostrovets, Moscow has opened a credit line up to \$10 billion.

Rosoboronexport (part of the Russian state corporation Rostec) accounts for the lion's share of Russian arms and military equipment exports. Belarusian companies work closely with the Russian special exporter when it comes to working on projects in the interests of third countries in the production, repair and modernization of aviation, armored vehicles, and air defense systems. As of May 2019, the volume of cooperation between Rosoboronexport and Belarusian military-industrial complex organizations since 2001 has exceeded \$1 billion.

Sberbank of Russia is developing in Belarus IT-direction (Service Desk) and insurance (TASK), in addition to being a co-owner of two large unfinished hotel complexes in Minsk (non-Kempinski and Hyatt).

The car market in Belarus is now dominated by Russian-assembled cars.

About three-quarters of the transport work of the Belarusian Railways is in one way or another connected with the activities of Russian Railways.

Probably none of the diversified businesses of the Russian billionaire Mikhail Gutseriev can be called dominant in Belarus so far. But thanks to friendly relations with the President of Belarus, Gutseriev significantly expanded his business in the country and became one of the key players. Previously, his activities were limited to oil refining at Belarusian factories and the sale of fuel for export. Over time, the Russian businessman built the Renaissance hotel, a terminal for business aviation at the capital's airport, rebuilt the recreation center of the Krasnoselskoye Presidential Administration into an estate with a house, invested in other real estate together with his son Said, and invested in Belarusian IT projects. Most significantly, he gained access to Belarusian mineral resources. Gutseriev's company is now building a potash plant in the Lyuban region⁵⁵.

The largest projects in the territory of Belarus, in which Russian companies take part, include a carbon black plant in the Mogilev Free Economic Zone. BPS-Sberbank actively participates in the sale of domestic equipment to Russia under export programs: BelAZ - trucks and tractors, and Bank BelVEB, through which "huge resources go to finance the construction of a nuclear power plant"⁵⁶.

Russia is a major partner of Belarus in the trade of weapons and military equipment, as well as in the repair and modernization of weapons and military hardware. At present, more than 250 organizations of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation carry out mutual deliveries of components, individual types

55 EJ.by (2019). 30 leading Russian businesses in Belarus. Available at <https://ej.by/news/companies/2019/12/27/30-rossiyskih-biznesov-lidiruyuschih-v-belarusi.html>

56 Sputnik.by (2020). Without Russian capital, Belarusian bank system cannot survive, experts say. Available at <https://sputnik.by/economy/20200623/1044979746/Bez-kapitala-RF-bankovskaya-sistema-Belarusi-nezhiznesposobna--eksperty.html>

of weapons and military equipment⁵⁷.

Russia-Belarus relations in this sphere are regulated by the Treaty between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on the development of military-technical cooperation. About 50 contracts have been concluded within the framework of the Agreement⁵⁸.

Minsk is much more interested in the Russian market than Moscow in the Belarusian one. More than 98% of the weapons in the Belarusian army are Soviet and Russian-made. Although almost all supplied weaponry repairs and services are performed by local Belarusian enterprises, the latter must obtain permission from Russian producers⁵⁹.

Enterprises of the military-industrial complex of Belarus provide 15% of the Russian state weaponry production. Annual turnover in military-technical cooperation between Russia and Belarus is \$500-600 million. 99 Belarusian enterprises supply about 1900 products to 255 enterprises of the Russian military-industrial complex⁶⁰.

Russia does not buy new and, allegedly, competitive products from the Belarusian defense industry. For instance, in 2011-2012, Russia curtailed orders for optics in Belarus, and now the Belarusian Optical and Mechanical Association (BelOMO) is suffering losses⁶¹.

In 2018, negotiations on the purchase of Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT) by the Russian company KamAZ, which had lasted for three years, failed. Belarus set a price of \$3 billion, while, according to Russian experts, a new plant could be built for \$2 billion. In 2012, Roskosmos had planned to buy the state share (48.9% of shares) of Peleng company, but this deal did not take place either. The project of merging of “Russian Electronics”, part of the state corporation “Rostech”, with the Minsk-based “Integral” was not implemented either⁶².

Conclusion

Moscow, one of Lukashenka’s last allies, has assured Minsk of continued political and financial support. Such support is rarely without commitment. Some suggest that business interests close to the Kremlin are already taking steps to acquire an increased stake in important state-owned enterprises in Belarus.

Russian energy giants own strategically important pipelines that pass through Belarus to deliver Russian gas to Poland and Germany, and Russia owns 42.5% of the Belarusian giant oil refinery in Mozyr through Slavneft, which is currently controlled by Rosneft and Gazpromneft.

Months of strikes, along with pro-democracy protests, have pushed many of the country’s most prominent state-owned industries to the brink of collapse. To create an economic environment that will ease the takeover of large Belarusian companies, several Russian oligarchs with ties to the Kremlin are supporting the protests, waiting for a chance to take control. In the fertilizer industry, a Belarusian-born Russian oligarch Dmitry Mazepin is poised to become the owner of the state-owned fertilizer producer Belaruskali.

57 State Authority for Military Industry of the Republic of Belarus (2021). About State Authority for Military Industry. Available at <https://www.vpk.gov.by/activity/cooperation/>

58 Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to Russia (2020). Belarus-Russia relations. Available at <http://embassybel.ru/belarus-russia-relations/military/#science>

59 Daineko, Elena (2017). Belarus-Russia cooperation in military-industrial complex: partners or competitors? Deutsche Welle. Available at tinyurl.com/2rttwz88

60 Zahorskaya, Olesya (2020). Belarus-Russia cooperation in military-industrial complex. New Defence Order Strategy. Available at <https://dfnc.ru/arhiv-zhurnalov/2020-6-65/voenno-tehnicheskoe-sotrudnichestvo-rossii-i-belorusii/>

61 Daineko, Elena (2017). Belarus-Russia cooperation in military-industrial complex: partners or competitors? Deutsche Welle. Available at tinyurl.com/2rttwz88

62 Zverev, Yuriy (2017). Military-industrial cooperation between Russia and Belarus: perspectives and risks. Eurasia Expert. Available at <https://eurasia.expert/voenno-tehnicheskoe-sotrudnichestvo-rossii-i-belarusi-perspektivy-i-riski/>

With Russian oligarchs lining up to cash in on sanctions against Belarus's corporate interests, closed privatization and economic despair, there is little hope that Lukashenka's departure will lead to democracy and a market economy in the country⁶³.

⁶³ Eureporter.co (2021). Russia targets Belarus' crumbling companies to grow its influence in the country. Available at <https://www.eureporter.co/frontpage/2021/01/18/russia-targets-belaruss-crumbling-companies-to-grow-its-influence-in-the-country/>

LAW-ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES AND MILITARY

Introduction

Military, security forces, and police have long been three main pillars of Lukashenka's regime. Public officials with a relevant background have always played a significant role in Belarusian policymaking. Many of those received an education in Russia⁶⁴ or the USSR⁶⁵ and have corresponding views on the nature of Belarusian statehood and the future of Belarus, openly opposing any political changes⁶⁶, and declaring support for the Union State. Hence, cooperation between Russia and Belarus in the sphere of security forces and the military has been not only perceived as a strategic dimension by Russia but was also used to further deepen Belarus' dependence⁶⁷. While there is hardly a feeling of mutual trust between Belarusian and Russian colleagues from law-enforcement agencies (especially after the notorious arrest of Wagner mercenaries⁶⁸), they are both likely to recall the Soviet time with nostalgia, as it is the official ideological line both in Belarus and Russia.

Cooperation and fallout between the two countries' security services

The Belarusian KGB is known to have solid ties with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Relations between Russian and Belarusian security services worsened at the beginning of the 2000s, when Lukashenka ousted many officers⁶⁹, fearing a possible insurgency⁷⁰. This was due to the fact that many high-ranking Belarusian military officers and law-enforcement agents have been trained in Russia, hence the fears that their ideological views could be formed and influenced by Russian propaganda⁷¹. In the 2010s these purges became even more severe. Also, before the 2020 presidential elections, Lukashenka famously distanced himself from Russia, claiming that the Eastern neighbor was trying to influence the situation in Belarus ahead of the presidential elections. One of the steps to enhance this rhetoric was the arrest of 33 Wagner (Russian private military company) mercenaries, who were allegedly trying to destabilize the situation in the country⁷². Even though this situation was simply theatre designed to threaten the electorate and convince the citizens to vote for the president, these arrests led to a deeper

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- 64 Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (2021). The Belarus Military District — Military Cooperation between Russia and Belarus. In International Security and Estonia. Available at https://valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport/2021-ENG.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0PYZ6CiyXKPpLXKO_IDQoXbWuk3imYUmH91EXfTyBj3IRBnxFiz_SN14k (accessed 5.03.2021).
- 65 For example, former Chairman of State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus (November 2012 - September 2020) and ex-Secretary of the State Security Council of the Republic of Belarus (September - October 2020), current Assistant to the President of the Republic of Belarus as Inspector for the Brest Region Valery Vakulchik completed the USSR KGB military intelligence courses, while former head of Committee of Public Accounts and the current Chairman of the State Security Committee (KGB) Ivan Tertel – completed Ryazan air-force command academy.
- 66 BDG Delovaya Gazeta (2021). Novyj sliv ot BYPOL: predpolozhitel'no Karaev rezko o belorusah i Chechne. Available at <http://bdg.by/news/society/novyy-sliv-ot-bypol-predpolozhitelno-karaev-rezko-o-belorusah-i-chechne> (accessed 5.03.2021).
- 67 Navumau, Vasil, Shmatsina, Katsiaryna, Ilyina, Anastasia. (2019). The Stalemate of Deepened Integration: Analysis of the Russian Anti-Belarus Disinformation Campaign in 2019. Available at <https://www.weasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Stalemate-of-Deepened-Integration-Analysis-of-the-Russian-Anti-Belarus-Disinformation-Campaign-in-2019-by-Vasil-Navumau-Anastasiya-Ilyina-and-Katsiaryna-Shmatsina.pdf> (accessed 5.24.2021).
- 68 Shraibman, Arsiom. (2020). Lukashenko i mundiry. Kak siloviki transformirujut belorusskij rezhim. Available at <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83193> (accessed 5.03.2021).
- 69 This is a regular policy for Lukashenka, who often reshuffles the hierarchy of the KGB, Investigative Committee and army.
- 70 Kłysiński, Kamil, & Zochowski, Piotr. (2016). The End Of The Myth of a brotherly Belarus? Russian soft power in Belarus after 2014: the background and its manifestations. OSW STUDIES 58, November 2016.
- 71 Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (2021). The Belarus Military District — Military Cooperation between Russia and Belarus. In International Security and Estonia. Available at https://valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport/2021-ENG.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0PYZ6CiyXKPpLXKO_IDQoXbWuk3imYUmH91EXfTyBj3IRBnxFiz_SN14k (accessed 5.03.2021).
- 72 Felgenhauer, Pavel. (2020). Russian Wagner Mercenaries Arrested in Belarus. In Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 112. Available at <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-wagner-mercenaries-arrested-in-belarus/> (accessed 5.03.2021)

conflict between the security services of both countries⁷³.

As some analysts suggest⁷⁴, before the presidential elections, Lukashenka began enhancing the structures of power by putting into the most important posts his trustees with a background in the military or special forces. In 2019, former KGB officer Ihar Sergeenka became the head of administration of president, with the former chair of the state military-industrial complex Raman Halovchenka becoming the prime minister instead of Siarhei Rumas (who had an economic background). The closest circle of trustees (including the ill-famous Sheiman) participating in the decision-making processes, largely determines the agenda and defines the internal policy. Hence, Lukashenka was not going to seek compromises and preferred using brutal force against the protesters in August 2020. To decrease the possibility of clan emergence, Lukashenka constantly rotates the elites, raising the competition among them and not allowing them to form the networks. One example of this could be the reshuffling of elites in October, when former Minister of Internal Affairs Kubrakov became the deputy mayor at Hrodna region, while the former head of KGB Valery Vakulchik took the position of deputy mayor at the Brest region. Yelisseyev mentioned that such a move was meant to enhance the executive power structure in the regions with high protest activity and also remove Vakulchik, who is said to be prone to Moscow's influence⁷⁵. In this regard, Tertel, who took the position of KGB head, was perceived as more trustful.

The cooperation between law-enforcement agencies in the two countries has become the topic on everyone's lips since August 2020, because in the eyes of the public, it was Russia who remained the main donor and supporter of Lukashenka's regime on a political level. Hence, it is hardly surprising that there were rumors about the direct involvement of Russia in the brutal repression of the protest. For example, the NEXTA Telegram channel published unchecked information on the participation of "green men" in the beatings of demonstrators, and about activists closely monitoring the flights of the personal planes belonging to Russian high-ranked security officers, etc.⁷⁶ Still, probably the loudest outcry was caused by Putin's acknowledgment that Russia deployed a reserve of law-enforcement agents near the Belarusian border, prepared to suppress the peaceful Belarusian protest against the rigged election and police brutality⁷⁷. Although Putin announced that the reserve would only be used if the situation went out of the president's control, naming peaceful protesters "extremists", along with the Russian financial support to the Belarusian regime amid the political and economic turmoil was perceived as Russia's recognition of Lukashenka's legitimacy and an attempt to reinforce his position within the country. Another step in this direction has been the signing of the cooperation agreement between the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Russian National Guard⁷⁸.

Moscow's support for Lukashenka denotes a very clear strategic objective. This is a step the Kremlin needs for keeping control over the Belarusian government and promoting the pro-Kremlin political agenda in Belarus.

Cooperation between Russia and Belarus in the military sphere

On a rhetorical level, Belarus has been a committed Russian ally in the military sphere. Due to its geographical

73 Boulègue, Matthew (2020). Russia's Assets and Liabilities in Belarus. CEPA. Available at <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:wPDz8pEv6l0J:https://cepa.org/russias-assets-and-liabilities-in-belarus/+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=lt> (accessed March 5, 2021).

74 Shraibman, Arsiom. (2020). Lukashenka i mundiry. Kak siloviki transformirujut belorusskij rezhim. Available at <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83193> (accessed 5.03.2021).

75 Kalinina, Nadezhda. (2020). Generaly idut v usilenie chinovnikam v podavlenii protestov. Chto oznachaet ocherednaja rokirovka sredi silovikov. Tut.by. Available at <https://news.tut.by/economics/705943.html> (accessed 5.03.2021).

76 Deutsche Welle (2020a). Specsamolet iz Rossii priletal iz Moskvy v Minsk. Available at <https://www.dw.com/ru/specsamolet-iz-rossii-priletal-iz-moskvy-v-minsk/a-54620858> (accessed 5.03.2021).

77 BBC (2020). Putin: Rossija sformirovala rezerv silovikov dlja pomoshhi Belarusi. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-53929091> (accessed 5.03.2021).

78 Deutsche Welle (2020b). MVD Belarusi i Rosgvardija zakljuchili dogovor o sotrudnichestve. Available at <https://www.dw.com/ru/mvd-belarusi-i-rosgvardija-dogovorilis-o-sotrudnichestve/a-55981437> (accessed 5.03.2021).

location, the country serves as a buffer between Russia and NATO, and could play a significant strategic role in case of a military conflict. Using military objects on Belarusian territory, Russia could quickly deploy its military forces to block a potential advancement of troops, influence air operations, and defend Kaliningrad Oblast⁷⁹. Belarus performs the role of an important part of Russia's military-industrial infrastructure within the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Commonwealth of the Independent States and the Union State⁸⁰.

Regional Group of Forces

In 1998 Belarus approved the Concept of Common Defense Policy, within which the Agreement on the joint provision of military cooperation had been signed⁸¹. This document stipulated the establishment of the Regional Group of Forces, which was designed to react to security threats in the region, with the decision on the command being handed to the administration of the Union State (i.e. the two countries had to reach a consensus on the deployment of the RGF). Although this unit still exists, due to the lack of clarity on the mechanisms of decision-making, it is difficult to utilize it in the situation of conflict.

Military exercises

Since 2009 Belarus has been participating in the military exercises "Zapad" (West), usually taking place near the borders with NATO countries. The latest edition of the exercise, conducted in 2017 with the participation of 12,700 troops, envisioned Belarus and Russia defending themselves against the attacks of Veyshnorina (occupying the territory of Western Belarus), Visbaria, and Lubenia (located in Poland and Lithuania)⁸². Given the sheer number of Russian troops participating in the exercise, some activists suggested this could be the first step in the Russian occupation of Belarus in an attempt to solve the so-called "2024 problem"⁸³. However, the Russian president found another solution to this problem, by initiating a constitutional reform, which in fact "nullified" his terms in office. Another cooperative military activity regularly upheld by Moscow and Minsk, albeit on a smaller scale, is Shchit Soyuz (Shield of the Union). These exercises make it possible for two countries to have a significant degree of interoperability, however, Belarus prefers to remain neutral with regards to military conflicts initiated by Russia. Belarus has not participated in Russia's wars with Georgia and Ukraine, and has refused to acknowledge South Ossetia and Abkhazia, along with self-proclaimed DNR and LNR as independent formations. However, some Belarusian former officers have been fighting on the side of the DNR/LNR⁸⁴, for which they have not been prosecuted, despite Lukashenka's declarations⁸⁵ that any military mercenary irrespective of the side he was fighting for, should be convicted. At the same time, some of the volunteers who participated in the military conflict on Ukraine's side, were imprisoned⁸⁶.

79 Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (2021). The Belarus Military District — Military Cooperation between Russia and Belarus. In International Security and Estonia. Available at https://valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport/2021-ENG.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0PYZ6CiyXKPpLXKO_IDQoXbWuk3imYUmH91EXfTyBj3IRBnxFiz_SN14k (accessed 5.03.2021).

80 Boulègue, Matthew (2020). Russia's Assets and Liabilities in Belarus. CEPA. Available at <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:wPDz8pEv6l0J:https://cepa.org/russias-assets-and-liabilities-in-belarus/+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=lt> (accessed 5.03.2021).

81 Marin, Anais (2020). The Union State of Belarus and Russia. Myth and Realities of Political-Military Integration. Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis. Available at <https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Anais-Marin-Union-State-of-Belarus-and-Russia.pdf> (accessed 5.03.2021).

82 Astapova, Anastasia & Navumau, Vasil (2018). Veyshnorina: A Fake Country in the Midst of Real Information Warfare. In Journal of American Folklore, Issue 552.

83 Marin, Anais (2020). The Union State of Belarus and Russia. Myth and Realities of Political-Military Integration. Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis. Available at <https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Anais-Marin-Union-State-of-Belarus-and-Russia.pdf> (accessed 5.03.2021).

84 Beloruskii Partizan (2016a). Oni srazhalis' za Putina: o sud'be belorusov, voevavshih za „DNR-LNR“. Available at <https://belaruspartisan.by/politic/366292/> (accessed 21.03.2021).

85 Ibid.

86 Svaboda (2020). Otsidevshij za vojnu. Available at <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30976669.html> (accessed 21.03.2021)

Military objects on Belarusian territory

Since the dissolution of the USSR, there are two Russian military objects that remain on the territory of Belarus: the first is the communication center for atomic submarines Antey, which is located west of the town of Vileyka (Minsk region), and maintained by around 250 Russian specialists; while the second is the station of radio electronic intelligence Volga, which is located near Hantsavichy (Brest region) and is maintained by around 1,200 Russian specialists⁸⁷. In 2021 the two countries will have to renegotiate the conditions of the leasing agreement, which is set to expire⁸⁸. Most likely, during the talks, Belarus will try to bargain for some financial benefits, given the poor condition of the country's economy. Up until now, Belarus has been actively resisting attempts by Russia to establish a permanent military airbase on the territory of Belarus. However, according to Lukashenka's recent report on meeting with Putin in Sochi, this topic has again emerged at the forefront of the Russian agenda amid the political crisis in Belarus and Lukashenka's shaky position within the country⁸⁹. It is worth mentioning that in 2016 the countries launched the Joint Air Defense System (JADS), which served as compensation for the reluctance of Minsk to place an airbase on its territory⁹⁰.

Belarusian military-industrial complex

Since the Soviet times, the Belarusian enterprises comprising its military-industrial complex have been closely connected to Russia (Belarus has been an assembly hall for the whole USSR). Hence, Russia remains the key producer of Belarusian defense elements, as is outlined in the Agreement on military cooperation, signed in 1995⁹¹. Russia also remains the main buyer of Belarusian VPK⁹² products, such as telecommunications and electronics necessary for producing or repairing military equipment. Hence, it is dependent on Rosoboronexport⁹³ orders. This situation determines Russia's interest in Belarusian factories producing components for certain kinds of weapons⁹⁴.

To summarize, while Belarus remains significantly dependent on Russia in the military dimension, up until now it has managed to secure autonomy by bargaining its way out of Russia's attempts to inflict the deepened integration. However, the recent economic decline and large-scale protests mean Lukashenka could try to negotiate economic support in exchange for some concessions. For example, according to his latest interview⁹⁵, the topic of an airbase on the territory of Belarus reappeared on the agenda of meetings between Putin and Lukashenka. Should Russia succeed in pressing Belarus to install an airbase, it would allow

87 Deutsche Welle (2017). Skol'ko rossijskih voennyh ob'ektov na territorii Belarusi? Available at <https://www.dw.com/ru/сколькo-российских-военных-объектов-на-территории-беларуси/a-40359816> (accessed 21.03.2021).

88 Rubaltic (2020). Rossiya namerena prodlit' dogovory na ispol'zovanie dvuh voennyh baz v Belarusi. Available at <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/16022021-rossiya-namerena-prodlit-dogovory-na-ispolzovanie-dvukh-voennykh-baz-v-belarusi/> (accessed 5.03.2021).

89 Belorusskii Partizan (2021). Klaskovskij: Mezhdru Minskom i Kremlem mozhet v ocherednoj raz zaiskrit'. Available at <https://belaruspartisan.by/politic/527635/> (accessed 21.03.2021)

90 Boulègue, Matthew, (2020). Russia's Assets and Liabilities in Belarus. CEPA. Available at <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:wPDz8pEv6l0J:https://cepa.org/russias-assets-and-liabilities-in-belarus/+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=lt> (accessed 5.03.2021).

91 Marin, Anais. (2020). The Union State of Belarus and Russia. Myth and Realities of Political-Military Integration. Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis. Available at <https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Anais-Marin-Union-State-of-Belarus-and-Russia.pdf> (accessed 5.03. 2021).

92 VPK stands for Voyenno-promyshlennyj kompleks (in Russian) = military industrial production.

93 Rosoboronexport (Russian Defence Exporting Agency) - Russia's intermediary agency, dealing with export/import of and related components and technologies.

94 For example, in 2015 the organisation signed a contract with the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus for the supply of five combat vehicles from the Tor-M2K anti-aircraft missile system.

95 BELTA. (2021). Lukashenka rasskazal o podrobnostjakh peregovorov s Putinyim i otreagiroval na domysly. Available at <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-o-podrobnostjakh-peregovorov-s-putinyim-i-otreagiroval-na-domysly-430898-2021/> (accessed 5.03. 2021)

Putin to put Ukraine and NATO member states at a strategic disadvantage (Ukraine will be encircled, while Baltic countries will be under greater risk of direct invasion). Other than that, by buying key assets (such as factories producing the main components for weaponry), Russia could further increase Belarus' dependence in the economic sphere and at the same time cement full control over the process of weapon production.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND INSTITUTIONS

De facto Russia has a share in every political development in Belarus, as well as a broad influence on the economy. Being in the position of the President of the Republic of Belarus since 1994 Alyaksandr Lukashenka is simultaneously a populist who intends to stay in power and is the main pro-Russian politician in the country. Lukashenka's pro-Russian positions are easily proved by all Belarus-Russia integrational projects which are outcomes of his foreign and domestic policies. At the same time, he appeals to Belarusian identity and independence (especially after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine) as an instrument to preserve Belarus as an independent state while otherwise he loses his presidential positions. In addition, Lukashenka is totally pro-Russian in culture, outlook, and values. We can see it in almost all public statements he makes, as well as in the values he defends and promotes. However, despite his obvious pro-Russian geopolitical orientations and values, Lukashenka's main objective is to preserve his own political positions. Thus, he is seeking to balance Belarusian independence as his own guarantee of staying in power and good relations with Russia as the main source of external support of his political regime in Belarus. It should be mentioned that being a populist, Lukashenka uses similar tactics of balancing, or flirting with, the West (during the periods of liberalization) or with China when he wants to negotiate something with the Kremlin. However, Russia has always been and continues to be the most significant geopolitical component of Lukashenka's policies. The limits of Lukashenka's resistance to Russia are based on room for maneuver in foreign policy and on "the successful strategy of exchanging symbolic loyalty to Putin's initiatives for economic advantages"⁹⁶.

Formal level of Russian influence on the public administration system is provided through the Union State of Russia and Belarus, founded in 1996. The Union has several executive (Supreme State Council, Council of Ministers) and legislative (Parliamentary Assembly) - but no judiciary - institutions. However, these structures have never developed into effective political institutions and still lack functionality alongside others promoted by Russia integration initiatives targeting the countries of "Near Abroad" (CIS, CSTO, EaEU)⁹⁷. Nevertheless, these formal structures of the Union State create space for cooperation and communication between Belarusian and Russian officials. Similar to the Union State, formal cooperation of Belarusian public administration and officials with Russian counterparts exists at the level of the 2015-founded Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) and its institutions (Eurasian Economic Commission, the Court of the Eurasian Economic Union, and its related economic initiatives).

The Belarusian Government (the Council of Ministers) and the Parliament (the National Assembly) as a part of Lukashenka's vertical model of governance follow the path of the President and do not create their own policy options at the national or international level. In parallel, the Presidential Administration preserves a tight control of state apparatus ("vertical power")⁹⁸ and regularly reshuffles the Government and other public institutions to avoid the formation or strengthening of any elite's groups within it⁹⁹. From a formal point of view, both Belarusian ministers and MPs have profound and well-established relations with Russian colleagues, as demonstrated by regular visits, meetings, summits and numerous other official events.

Belarusian officials are still considered among the most susceptible to Russian influence groups¹⁰⁰. In addition

96 Yadorau, Andrei (2014). Belarus and EaP: in the Light of Ukrainian Crisis. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/belarus-and-eap-light-ukrainian-crisis-10190> (accessed 21.03.2021).

97 Vieira, Alena. "A tale of two unions: Russia-Belarus integration experience and its lessons for the Eurasian Economic Union." *Journal of Borderlands studies* 32, no. 1 (2017): 41-53.

98 Yadorau, Andrei (2014). Belarus and EaP: in the Light of Ukrainian Crisis. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/belarus-and-eap-light-ukrainian-crisis-10190> (accessed 21.03.2021).

99 OSW (2018). Government reshuffle in Belarus. Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-08-22/government-reshuffle-belarus-0> (accessed 21.03.2021).

100 ISANS (2019). Re-Building of the Empire: Behind the Facade of Russia-Belarus Union State. Available at: <https://isans.org/analysis-en/reports-en/re-building-of-the-empire-behind-the-facade-of-russia-belarus-union-state.html> (accessed 21.03.2021).

to the cooperation with their Russian counterparts within official institutions of the Union State they also have joint public organizations and platforms, for example, the International Public Chamber of the Union State, established in 2017, which includes around 100 official Belarusian representatives¹⁰¹. Another example, institutionally supported by the Parliamentary Assembly of Union State, is the Youth Chamber, created in 2017, where representatives of both countries regularly meet for discussions. In 2019 the Civic Initiative “Soyuz” was established as a joint Russia-Belarus initiative and some Belarusian officials willingly joined it¹⁰². Interestingly, and as mentioned in Chapter 1, “Soyuz” leaders (Segrei Lusch, Lev Krishtapovich) from the Belarusian side were previously involved in other pro-Russian organizations in Belarus.

Links between the Belarusian officials and their colleagues in Russia are also established via different initiatives and platforms of regional cooperation: from the high-profile annual Forum of the Regions of Belarus and Russia¹⁰³ to meetings, working visits and minor projects of transborder cooperation at the local level. The Forum of the Regions has been conducted since 2014 and is supported by the parliaments of both states as a space for regional cooperation in different spheres from trade to culture¹⁰⁴. At the local level, the representatives of pro-Russian organizations can be members of consultative bodies (e.g. “Russian House” in Mahiliou is a member of the Regional Coordination Council of Political Parties and CSOs)¹⁰⁵.

Officials at different levels themselves often even refer to Russia as the main (and often the only) source of “good practices” when it comes to the design and implementation of any innovation within the public administration system. Russian “good practices” appear to be the most available and valuable source of innovation because of the cultural, geographical, political and linguistic proximity. Susceptibility of Belarusian officials towards Russia is also explained by the ethnic origins while some of them were indeed born in Russia (e.g. allegedly from Lukashenka’s inner circle, the Head of the Upper House of the Parliament Natallia Kachanova). However, unlike military officers in the Belarusian Army¹⁰⁶, civil servants received their higher education and were socialized predominantly in Belarus¹⁰⁷.

Large Belarusian Governmental nongovernmental organizations (GoNGOs) (including Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU); Public Association Belaya Rus’, Belarusian Women Union, etc.) might also be considered to be pro-Russian. More information about GoNGOs is in Chapter “Civil Society” of this text. They have counterparts from Russia as their official partners and jointly implement various activities. Thus, the list of BRYU’s partners includes Rossotrudnichestvo, the Parliament Assembly of the Russia-Belarus Union, the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC)¹⁰⁸, the Russian Youth Union (RYU) etc. Meanwhile, one could question the nature of such partnerships, which can be rather formal¹⁰⁹.

101 The International Public Chamber of Russia and Belarus (IPC) (2021). Official website <https://op-soyuz.ru/kratkayspravka/> (accessed March 21, 2021).

102 ISANS (2019). Re-Building of the Empire: Behind the Facade of Russia-Belarus Union State. Available at: <https://isans.org/analysis-en/reports-en/re-building-of-the-empire-behind-the-facade-of-russia-belarus-union-state.html> (accessed March 21, 2021).

103 For more info see: <http://www.sovrep.gov.by/ru/forumy-ru/> (accessed March 5, 2021).

104 Mazepus, Honorata, Antoaneta Dimitrova, Matthew Frear, Tatsiana Chulitskaya, Oleksandra Keudel, Nina Onopriychuk, and Natallia Rabava. “Civil society and external actors: how linkages with the EU and Russia interact with socio-political orders in Belarus and Ukraine.” *East European Politics* (2021): 1-22.

105 Ibid.

106 Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (EFIS) (2021). Report “International Security and Estonia”. Available at: https://valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport/2021-ENG.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0PYZ6CiyXKPpLXKO_IDQoXbWuk3imYUumH91EXfTyBj3IRBnxFiz_SN14k (accessed March 21, 2021).

107 Nasha Niva (NN). (2016). Top-60 of Belarusian civil servants. Available at: <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=162949&lang=ru> (accessed March 21, 2021).

108 More information in chapter “Civil Society”

109 Mazepus, Honorata, Antoaneta Dimitrova, Matthew Frear, Tatsiana Chulitskaya, Oleksandra Keudel, Nina Onopriychuk, and Natallia Rabava. “Civil society and external actors: how linkages with the EU and Russia interact with socio-political orders in Belarus and Ukraine.” *East European Politics* (2021): 1-22.

Belarusian public institutions and public officials are often perceived to be generally pro-Russian. Indeed, the formal Union State with the Russian Federation, close economic and geopolitical ties, and formal and informal communication at various levels create grounds for such evaluation. Nevertheless, despite all these facts we may claim that the formal and informal institutional interconnections quickly become less relevant when there is a threat to the authoritarian system of Lukashenka. The whole system of public administration in Belarus is aimed, above all, at preserving his position rather than pursuing any geopolitical preferences. When it comes to the personal biographies of the officials, the situation varies between the military and civil block of the Belarusian government. However, in both cases Lukashenka plays the same game of the regular reshuffling of people and positions to prevent the development of any connections or attitudes besides personal loyalty to him.

BELARUSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

In Belarus, as in the entire region of Eastern Europe, which for a long time was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the church-religious issue is of great importance in the formation of a worldview, political values and orientations.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is a canonical subdivision of the Russian Orthodox Church on the territory of Belarus, which has the status of an exarchate. The Belarusian Orthodox Church has administrative independence and is governed by the Synod. The Belarusian Orthodox Church is headed by an Exarch, who is appointed in Moscow by the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The dependence of the BOC on the ROC is especially significant in the appointment of the episcopate. All bishops are appointed by Moscow, and only there are they ordained. The Exarch is also appointed, and can be removed at any time by the Moscow Synod. Therefore, Metropolitan and other bishops are closely connected to Moscow. But in everyday life, this dependence is not so essential.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has a special, privileged status in Belarus and is one of the mechanisms of state and ideological governance. Until about 2014, the Belarusian regime had a kind of political monopoly on ideological issues related to the BOC. The Church was actively used as one of the instruments for legitimizing the regime. However, in recent years, the Orthodox Church has become a mechanism for promoting Moscow's foreign policy interests and soft power, with which Russia expands its geopolitical influence and sets goals for strategic influence. Belarus turned out to be an exposed space in this regard, since during the reign of Lukashenka, it has become strongly integrated within the so-called "Russkiy Mir". The Orthodox Church constitutes one of the key elements, the spiritual core of the idea of the "Russkiy Mir".

The regime has always relied on the loyalty of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and sought a monopoly on support from religious organizations. For 26 years of Lukashenka's rule, the Moscow Patriarchate has existed alongside him in a close "symphony". Patriarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church Alexy II and Kirill periodically came to Minsk, and exchanged orders and medals with Lukashenka. All these years in Belarus has been impossible to register an Orthodox community outside the Moscow Patriarchate, as was the case in neighboring Ukraine. Lukashenka called himself an "Orthodox atheist", constantly "inspected" churches and monasteries and allocated funds for their construction. In this position, the Church clergy saw a guarantee of non-interference in their internal, "purely church" affairs. On one occasion, Lukashenka cautiously spoke about the need for greater independence of the BOC. It is politically more convenient for the Belarusian president to have "his own" Church. But he must take into account the whole complex of complicated relations with Moscow.

There are 25 different denominations registered in Belarus. The most numerous are Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants. According to state statistics¹¹⁰ as of January 1, 2020, the situation looks like this: 50.4% are Orthodox, 30.5% are Protestants of various denominations and 14.7% are Catholics.

According to a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center¹¹¹, nearly three-quarters of the Belarusians surveyed consider themselves Orthodox. Moreover, 12% of them say that they go to church every week.

110 Official website of the Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Belarus (2021). Religious communities in the Republic of Belarus (as of January 1, 2021). Available at <https://belarus21.by/Articles/kolichestvo-religioznyh-obshhin-v-respublike-belarus-na-1-yanvarya-2019-g>

111 Pew Research Center (2017). Religion and nationality in Central and Eastern Europe. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2017/05/CEUP-Overview-Russian-FOR-WEB.pdf>

Belarusian Orthodox Church after the elections on August 9, 2020

In 2020, in the post-election period, the religious community, including the Orthodox, became so actively involved in the protest movement and criticism of the regime's actions that it shocked Lukashenka and led to unprecedented repression. Lukashenka's dissatisfaction was caused by various confessions, as well as the leading one, the Orthodox. It had been considered traditionally loyal to the authorities, so these manifestations of opposition had not been anticipated.

Because of his position, the head of the Belarusian Catholics, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, was first expelled from the country. In the end, he was allowed to return to Belarus, but immediately resigned from his post.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church has responded to the brutal crackdown on protests in the country much more cautiously than many of its parishioners expected. The head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Pavel, following the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill, congratulated Lukashenka on his victory, which many Orthodox Christians perceived with indignation. However, subsequently, due to the particular cruelty of the security forces during the arrest of protesters and pressure from Orthodox believers who were outraged by the position of the Church on this issue, Pavel officially turned to Lukashenka with a request to stop violence in the country, began visiting victims in hospitals and participating in religious processions, which were organized in support of the peaceful removal of the president from power.

Note that apart from the official position of the Church, there are individual priests and hierarchs. Some supported the protesters: for example, Archbishop of Grodno Artemy Kishchenko condemned the actions of the authorities during the sermon. The clergyman spoke harshly¹¹² about those who were involved in fraudulent elections: "You need to stand on your knees for fraud." The BOC hastened to declare¹¹³ that Father Artemy's speech is his private position does not reflect the official opinion of the Church.

Priests were detained in different cities, priest Vladimir Drobyshevsky was arrested in Gomel for 25 days, and in November the press secretary of the Belarusian Orthodox Church Sergei Lepin, who condemned the destruction of the national memorial to Roman Bondarenko and called¹¹⁴ the actions of the security forces "satanic", resigned.

Several clergymen of the Russian Orthodox Church, including Archpriests Andrei Kordochkin, Alexy Uminsky, Georgy Mitrofanov, Oleg Batov and others, asked the authorities to show mercy, abandon repression and enter into dialogue with their own people.

But not all Orthodox priests support the protesters. For example, the rector of the Minsk Church of All Saints, Father Fyodor Povny, whom the media calls¹¹⁵ "Lukashenka's personal confessor", repeated the words of the incumbent president about the inadmissibility of the Church's involvement in political actions, and also called¹¹⁶ on protesters "to stop provocations and mutual insults". A popular Church blogger, Archimandrite Savva Mazuko, published a video message calling for mercy on the security forces.

Seeing the ambiguity of the official Church position, Orthodox believers initiated their own events. For

112 Sermon by His Eminence Artemy, Archbishop of Grodno and Volkovysk (16.08.2020). Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekD7jDsQFlo>

113 BOC Official Portal (2020). Ob uchastvii verujushchih v obschestvenno-politicheskoy zhizni. Available at <http://church.by/news/ob-uchastii-verujushih-v-obshestvenno-politicheskoy-zhizni>

114 Facebook page of the ex-press secretary of the BOC Sergey Lepin. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/sergy.lepin/posts/3694576197261785>

115 News.tut.by (2019). About the president, a personal helicopter, the tragedy in Stolbtsy and the death penalty. Interview with Archpriest Fyodor Povny. Available at <https://news.tut.by/society/627852.html>

116 Belarus 1 (2020). Fedor Povny: It is unacceptable to use the Church for political purposes. Available at https://www.tvr.by/news/obshchestvo/fedor_povny_nedopustimo_ispolzovat_tserkov_v_politicheskikh_tselyakh/

example, they held a religious procession together with Protestants and Catholics. The BOC first issued a statement that it had nothing to do with the action, but later Metropolitan Pavel began to go out to the believers and talk to them. Orthodox priests visited the detainees several times in the detention center in Akrestsin Lane.

On August 25, the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church replaced¹¹⁷ the head of the Belarusian Exarchate. Metropolitan Pavel was recalled back to Russia, and for the first time an ethnic Belarusian, Bishop Benjamin (Tupeko), was appointed Metropolitan of Minsk.

The appointment was met with criticism. The new Metropolitan is characterized as a conservative and fundamentalist, for whom the main sin is the autocephaly of the Belarusian Church. Some experts believe that Metropolitan Pavel was dismissed to prevent the autocephaly of Belarus according to the “Ukrainian scenario”.

Some Russian media outlets report¹¹⁸ that if it came to power, the opposition in Belarus would immediately begin the implementation of Church independence - the creation of autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Belarus. Perhaps such “fears” are an attempt by religious arguments to persuade the BOC to side with Lukashenka. However, representatives of the Belarusian Orthodox Church itself - both opposition-minded and loyal to the authorities - did not speak about autocephaly either in connection with the latest events in Belarus or for any other reasons.

The new Metropolitan declares neutrality and tends to maintain loyalty to the regime, and ignores the brewing anger within the Orthodox Church community. However, this strategy does not relieve tension; on the contrary, it reduces trust in the hierarchy.

Christian resistance to the regime became a separate phenomenon of the Belarusian revolution. The protest united hundreds of thousands of Belarusians and erased the confessional borders that separated them for a while: Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Protestants began to gather for joint religious processions, participate along with others in Sunday protest marches and campaign on social networks calling for an end to the violence. The priests wrote about this openly in their blogs and social networks, spoke out at sermons, volunteered, went to solidarity actions, and opened their church doors to shelter the persecuted.

Among the important results of the awakening of Belarusians was the activation of inter-Christian interaction: believers, looking at representatives of other confessions, begin to create competitive initiatives, borrow ideas and come up with their own in order to be even better. Representatives of the Church community have created a group “Christian Vision”¹¹⁹, uniting Christians who are members of the Coordination Council of the Belarusian opposition.

On November 25, 2020, priests and laity of the Russian Orthodox Church, other local Churches, believers of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as Christians of other confessions, addressed words of solidarity, support and consolation to the Christians of Belarus. The letter¹²⁰ condemns human abuse and torture in Belarus and calls on the authorities to stop. This letter became an event in the Church and political history of Russia and Belarus. There has been no precedent in post-Soviet history when Orthodox Christians and Catholics

117 Current Time (2020). The ROC Synod replaced the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Former Metropolitan regretted congratulating Lukashenka on his election victory. Available at <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/rossiya-rpts-belarus-pavel/30802142.html>

118 Tsargrad TV (2020). “Ghost Of Autocefalia”: Will The Belarusian Church Become Antirussian. Available at https://tsargrad.tv/articles/prizrak-avtokefalii-stanet-li-belorusskaja-cerkov-antirussoj_272786

119 BOC Official Portal (2020). Christian Vision Working Group. Available at <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/rabochaya-gruppa-xristianskoe-videnie/>

120 Pravmir.ru (2020). Letter from priests and laity to Christians in Belarus. Available at <https://www.pravmir.ru/pismo-svyashhennikov-i-miryan-k-hristianam-belarusi/>

would publicly and unanimously act as a community of believers. They urged everyone to show mercy and understanding not only to co-religionists, but absolutely to all Belarusians, regardless of their attitude to Christianity and religion in general. The signers of the letter showed what real Christian humanism is. This letter was met with silence by the official structures in Belarus and Russia.

Evolution of the Belarusian Orthodox Church

The state of the Belarusian Orthodox Church today can be characterized by the word “self-awareness”. In the past, many associated the Church with “professionals,” that is, with bishops, monks, and priests. But now a certain part of believers and ordinary priests who know the problems of our society have realized that they are the Church, they are responsible for it.

The Church is made up of people, and whatever happens in society also affects the Church to one degree or another. The sharper the conflict between the government and the people, the greater the tension within the Church. The higher clergy, the “position of the Church” which is most often judged, gravitates more towards power, tries to maintain loyalty to authorities. But still not unlimited. The general corporate interest forces such authority to “save face” in front of the laity and society. It is not the state that feeds the Church, but parishioners and sponsors.

The lower clergy do not form the “position of the Church”, but it is they who are forced to answer to the people for the actions of their leadership. The more obvious the conflict between the authorities and the people, the more the ordinary priest is torn apart in different directions. At the same time, if he is more connected with the leadership and the duty to obey, than with people - human empathy and solidarity, it is not surprising that the latter often outweighs, especially if the church leadership themselves are indecisive and in fact disoriented.

This dynamic played a role in the Belarusian protests. Against the background of a certain confusion within Church leadership, priests emerged who spoke in a full voice, went out with prayer and sermon on the streets, and began to provide assistance to prisoners and victims.

The reconfiguration of prominent personalities in the Church (people with high-quality theological education, journalists, choir directors) has established “gravity points” around them for other believers. They are still engaged in their activities and continue to attract people, but at other, non-Church platforms. This contributes to the development of horizontal ties and the creation of a community that is not tied to any structures.

The support of the Moscow Patriarchate for an unpopular leader widens the gap¹²¹ between the Church and society and polarizes the Church community in Belarus. The consequences of this separation of hierarchs from the flock and ordinary clergy can be expressed in the fact that hierarchs will play an increasingly formal role, and real church life will focus on the localities - with greater initiative of the laity, collaborating with secular civil society.

121 Protest in Belarus and the Orthodox Church: <https://publicorthodoxy.org/ru/2020/08/20/7351/>

CIVIL SOCIETY

In its 'near abroad', to enforce ideological and cultural linkages, Russia promotes diverse propagandistic narratives. One of the main narratives is "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World). It reflects Russia's ambitions to be seen simultaneously as a global and as a regional power who must be consulted regarding any issues in the region. It is founded on the resentment for the loss of imperial greatness and intention to cope with the unjust outcomes of historical developments after the Cold War. The "Russkiy Mir" narrative also includes the vision of Russia as a distinct and self-sufficient civilization, and emphasizes that 25 million Russians were displaced after the USSR's collapse. All these Russian counterparts are Russian speakers and Russians by identity wherever they live¹²², and must be supported when needed. Alongside this central narrative is the one about '(East) Slavic unity' which presumes the primordial unity for all Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians¹²³ with the two latter claimed to be no nations at all.

Existing studies suggest that many civil society actors (CSOs and initiatives) are engaged in transmitting Russian influences in Belarus¹²⁴. The wide range of possible agents of Russian influence include political parties and different civil society organizations.

Russia is actively attempting to influence public opinion to win sympathy at the grassroots level and to advance its agenda in the neighboring countries. The Kremlin's current strategic aim in Belarus is to promote the idea of further integration in the political and economic spheres within the project of the Union State. Despite the best efforts (Moscow launched and sponsored civic organizations, political parties, and media outlets in the regions of Belarus), merely 40.4% of Belarusians voice their support to the Union State, according to the polls conducted before the 2020 presidential elections¹²⁵. This figure is likely even lower today¹²⁶, considering Russia's support of Lukashenka's recent atrocities.

Russia tries to use this part of the population ("compatriots") for the dissemination of Russophil ideas. The main active Russian sponsored agencies and foundations in the region are Rossotrudnichestvo, Russkiy Mir Foundation, and the Gorchakov Foundation for Public Diplomacy¹²⁷. Rossotrudnichestvo works with compatriots, and Young Russia prominent in advancing the ideology of Russkiy Mir¹²⁸. In particular, Rossotrudnichestvo, controlled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, launched the network of pro-Russian organizations (CSOs and GNGOs)¹²⁹. Together with the Russian Council on International Affairs and The Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, Rossotrudnichestvo conducts workshops, seminars and festivals, and provides grants to support pro-Russian initiatives. These 'agents of the Russkiy Mir' work with trusted partners and their local associates in Belarus. A Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in

122 Dimitrova, A., M. J. Frear, H. Mazepus, D. D. Toshkov, M. Boroda, T. Chulitskaya, O. Grytsenko, I. Munteanu, T. Parvan, and I. Ramasheuskaya. "The Elements of Russia's Soft Power: Channels, Tools, and Actors Promoting Russian Influence in the Eastern Partnership Countries." *EU-STRAT Working Paper Series* 2017, no. 4 (2017): 1-50.

123 Fedor, Julie, Simon Lewis, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko. "Introduction: War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus." In *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, pp. 1-40. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017.

124 Kłysinski, Kamil, and Piotr Żochowski. "The End Of The Myth of a brotherly Belarus? Russian soft power in Belarus after 2014: the background and its manifestations. *OSW Studies* #58, November 2016." (2016).

125 Deutsche Welle (2020). Pochemu vse men'she belorusov hotjat sojuza s Rossiej. Available at <https://www.dw.com/ru/почему-все-меньше-белорусов-хотят-союза-с-россией/a-52279440> (accessed March 21, 2021).

126 Krawatzek, Felix. (2020). Young Belarusians are turning away from Russia and looking towards Europe. Available at <https://theconversation.com/young-belarusians-are-turning-away-from-russia-and-looking-towards-europe-145562> (accessed March 21, 2021).

127 Lutsevych, Orysia. "Agents of the Russian World." Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighborhood. Chatham House Research Paper (2016).

128 Marin, Anais. (2020). The Union State of Belarus and Russia. Myth and Realities of Political-Military Integration. Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis. Available at <https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Anais-Marin-Union-State-of-Belarus-and-Russia.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2021)

129 For example, so-called "Russian Houses" in the regional centers.

Belarus, based at the Russian Embassy in Minsk, seeks to work with the Russian diaspora¹³⁰. Rossotrudnichestvo has three centers in Belarus; in Minsk, Brest and Homel. The centers' activities include: cooperation with compatriots, culture and art, research and education, language, and public diplomacy. The Minsk agency of the Russian state-owned Moscow Centre of International Co-operation – 'Moscow House' – according to some evaluations plays a role as an informal soft power coordination center in Belarus¹³¹. Russkiy Mir Foundation has been represented at Brest State University since 2014.

Another meaningful organization, promoting the Russkiy Mir ideology, is the Coordination Council of the Heads of Belarusian Public Associations of Russian Compatriots at the Russian Embassy in Belarus.

The majority of cultural organizations are built around Russian compatriots. These networks of people of Russian nationality cooperate with each other (and with other Belarusian citizens) based on common interests and shared cultural visions. These organizations are relatively old (with many established back in the 1990s) and stable, however, both their number of members (around 20 – 100 people) and their respective toolkits, are limited¹³². They are mostly focused on youth, women, pensioners and teachers, targeting them with traditional educational events, and study or exchange opportunities in Russia. Their informational activities are limited, sometimes lacking websites or social network pages. In general, despite their significant number, these organizations are almost invisible to the general public.

Educational organizations represent another type of pro-Russian actor in Belarus. They are mostly focused on youth and students. Some Russian universities have their branches in Belarus (e.g. the Russian State Social University and the Russian University of Economics in Minsk) and there are also specially established higher education institutions like the Belarusian-Russian University in Mahileu. These are actual branches of universities which offer access to their courses, rather than institutes set up with the specific purpose of promoting Russian influence, although they may also conduct some pro-Russian events^{133 134}. As noted above, the Russkiy Mir Foundation has its centres in local Belarusian universities with the express purpose of promoting the Russian language, education and culture. In addition, when it comes to the international academic cooperation, Russian institutions and funding bodies are still the most attractive for Belarusian researchers¹³⁵. The educational linkage is even stronger because of the domination of Russian-language handbooks and literature at all levels of the Belarusian educational system.

Finally, there are pro-military and sporting organizations in Belarus which support pro-Russian agenda, messages and ideas. These include actors as diverse as Cossack organizations, Afghan veterans, paramilitary or ultra-radical groups, and even martial arts clubs¹³⁶. They promote ideas and values of Orthodox Christianity and traditional values in parallel with pro-Soviet nostalgia and Stalin's positive evaluation. They also share ideas of Slavic Unity, patriotism and anti-Western values.

130 Kłysiński, Kamil, and Piotr Żochowski. "The End Of The Myth of a brotherly Belarus? Russian soft power in Belarus after 2014: the background and its manifestations. OSW STUDIES 58 November 2016." (2016).

131 Ibid.

132 Union State (2012). Interview with leader of 'Rus' organization Ivan Korda (in Russian). Available at <https://www.postkomsg.com/interview/196647/> (Accessed March 21, 2021).

133 Mazepus, Honorata, Antoaneta Dimitrova, Matthew Frear, Tatsiana Chulitskaya, Oleksandra Keudel, Nina Onopriychuk & Natallia Rabava (2021): Civil society and external actors: how linkages with the EU and Russia interact with socio-political orders in Belarus and Ukraine, East European Politics.

134 Belorusskii Partizan (2018). "Rossiya khochet sdelat' Mogilev tsentr 'russifikatsii'?" Available at <https://belaruspartisan.by/politic/422377/> (accessed March 21, 2021).

135 Mazepus, Honorata, Antoaneta Dimitrova, Matthew Frear, Tatsiana Chulitskaya, Oleksandra Keudel, Nina Onopriychuk & Natallia Rabava (2021): Civil society and external actors: how linkages with the EU and Russia interact with socio-political orders in Belarus and Ukraine, East European Politics.

136 Kłysiński, K., & Żochowski, P. (2016). 'The End Of The Myth of a brotherly Belarus? Russian soft power in Belarus after 2014: the background and its manifestations'. OSW STUDIES 58, November 2016. 1. Lutsevych, O. (2016) 'Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood', *Chatham House Research Paper* (April): 1-45.

These organizations take the forms of classical sport or pro-military clubs. However, the information about them is rather limited and the activities themselves appear mostly at the local level. Moreover, despite close attention paid by experts and political activists to such organizations, their activities seem relatively marginal and sporadic.

Divided between oppositional and pro-governmental forces, Belarusian political parties do not have access to de-facto political power under the current political regime¹³⁷, they are in effect excluded from the elections (under the current Belarusian electoral system, candidates rather than parties are the main actors) and thus can be put into the civil society dimension of analysis.

On the formal level we could observe some interconnections between Belarusian pro-governmental political parties and Russian partners. For example, the Communist Party of Belarus (CPB), the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus (LDPB) and the Republican Party of Labor and Justice (RPLJ) have formal or informal cooperation agreements with Russian counterparts (including United Russia) and promote ideas of closer cooperation, common history and culture with Russia in their programs. They also have strong institutional and personal interconnections with Russian political parties, reflected in numerous visits, common meetings, discussions etc. In their activities these parties promote ideas for deeper integration with Russia, as well as the legitimization of Russia's policy towards Crimea, and the war in Ukraine (ISANS 2020). However, pro-Russian orientations and interconnections with Russia are less important for the pro-governmental parties than their loyalty to authorities. Thus, in case of any discursive choice they support, first, Alyaksandr Lukashenka rather than their Russian counterparts. As noted in Chapter 1, new developments in the Belarusian partisan sphere might appear if the pro-Russian party 'Soyuz' is officially registered.

As already mentioned in the Chapter "Public administration and institutions", large Belarusian Governmental nongovernmental organizations (GoNGOs) (including Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU); Public Association Belaya Rus', Belarusian Women Union etc.) enjoy preferential treatment of Belarusian authorities. For instance, they receive direct funding from the state, Belarusian citizens are subject to involuntary membership in these organizations and their right to withdraw is limited both at legislative and practical levels¹³⁸. Meanwhile, supported by the Belarusian authorities, GoNGOs cooperate with counterparts from Russia and jointly implement various activities. Thus, the list of BRYU's partners includes Rossotrudnichestvo, the Parliament Assembly of the Russia-Belarus Union, the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), the Russian Youth Union (RYU) etc.¹³⁹

To sum up, we may say that despite the sufficient quantity and diverse dimensions of activities of pro-Russian organizations in Belarus, their real influence in civil society is rather limited. There do exist diverse and strong links and leverages with Russia in the sphere of politics, economy, culture and religion (Russian Orthodox Church). However, the latter make pro-Russian organizations at the level of civil society ancillary rather than the central tools of influence.

Political parties

Divided between oppositional and pro-governmental forces Belarusian political parties do not enjoy de-facto political power under the current political system (Kulakevich 2014) and thus can be more effectively analyzed in the context of civil society.

137 Kulakevich, T. (2014) "Twenty Years in the Making: Understanding the Difficulty for Change in Belarus." *East European Politics and Societies* 28(4): 887-901.

138 CSO meter: Belarus. Available at <https://csometer.info/sites/default/files/2021-02/CSO%20Meter%20Country%20Update%202020%20Belarus%20-%20ENG%20%28Final%29.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2021).

139 Mazepus, Honorata, Antoaneta Dimitrova, Matthew Frear, Tatsiana Chulitskaya, Oleksandra Keudel, Nina Onopriychuk & Natallia Rabava (2021): Civil society and external actors: how linkages with the EU and Russia interact with socio-political orders in Belarus and Ukraine, *East European Politics*.

MEDIA

The Belarusian information field is significantly influenced by the Russian one. Among the reasons for this situation are the ineffectiveness of state media; strict work rules for independent media; the absence of a language barrier; and Belarusian-Russian ties in various fields. The linguistic situation in Belarus plays an important role here: it is characterized by bilingualism - heterogeneous and asymmetric, with the dominance of the Russian language in all spheres of life (state apparatus, primary, secondary and higher education, and so on). A similar situation is observed in Belarusian media. The main supplier of propaganda Belarus is Russian media — both TV channels and Internet sources.

Day after day, Russian federal TV channels, news agencies, dozens of pro-Kremlin websites and people on social networks generate hundreds of publications, audio and video content about Belarus.

Propagandistic publications are often interspersed with neutral news - educational and entertainment content drawn from other sources. Neutral content is copied from regional state and independent sites, national portals of Belarus and individual sites on the Runet. This feature allows the use of a “Trojan horse” strategy: the attention of readers to targeted materials is attracted by providing a variety of neutral content.

State television as a conductor of the “Russkiy Mir”

Television remains the main source of pro-Russian propaganda in Belarus. Despite declarations by Belarusian authorities to increase Belarusian content on television, four out of nine TV channels included by the government in the compulsory public TV package are based on Russian TV production and broadcast more than 60% of Russian TV programs in prime time¹⁴⁰.

According to monitoring from the Belarusian Association of Journalists, which was presented in 2019, about 49% of the programs shown in prime time by TV channels included in the mandatory public package are Russian-made. Four TV channels, including the Belarusian RTR-Belarus, NTV-Belarus and ONT, broadcast over 60% of Russian-made content in prime time. At the same time, Russian television content is on air for much longer (as a result of showing films and series). Thus, on the Belarus 1 TV channel, out of 105 hours of prime time, Russian series took 71 hours - 67.61% - of the airtime¹⁴¹.

The inculcation of Russianness takes place on three levels. Not only through political statements and chronicles, but also the Russian-centric presentation of world information, Russian experts and Russian production of entertainment content. Programming the corresponding ideological and cultural orientations is carried out not only at the conceptual level of “direct” messages, but also through media rhetoric, as well as through the formation of an emotionally subconscious dependence of the average person on Russian content. The total effect turns out to be larger and stronger than the impact of “frontal” propaganda. Measures taken by Belarusian authorities to protect the country’s information space do not seem adequate to tackle the real threats. The Belarusian audience systematically and regularly receives a predominantly Russian media agenda and a pro-Kremlin view of the main events in the world (including from state-funded media outlets).

Changes in media consumption of Belarusians

By the beginning of 2020, a persistent distrust of the official media was formed in Belarusian society. According to Sociolytics, 54.3% of Belarusians prefer independent media and only 29.4% prefer state ones; the remaining 16.3% use both sources. 43.3% of Belarusians never watch the programs of the pro-government ONT, STV, “Belarus 1” or “Belarus 2” taken together. According to Sociolytics, the coronavirus pandemic forced Belarusians to critically overestimate all information sources: against this background, mistrust of television,

140 Belarusian Association of Journalists (2019). Monitoring of pro-Russian propaganda in the media of Belarus. Available at <https://baj.by/sites/default/files/analytics/files/monitoring-prorossiyskoy-propagandy-v-media-belarusi.pdf>

141 Ibid.

the print press and statements of the authorities increased¹⁴².

Belarusians switched to the Internet, not only creating new communication channels, but also actually saying goodbye to traditional sources of information: television and newspapers. Now, the largest audience in Belarus belongs to social networks. The top five in popularity include the Russian social networks VKontakte (74.5%) and Odnoklassniki (54.4%), as well as YouTube (72.5%), Instagram (65.7%) and Facebook (44.8%). Among the most popular messengers are Viber and WhatsApp (73.7%, they were combined in the study) and Telegram (60.3%). Social networks and messengers are followed by independent online media - Tut.by and Onliner.by¹⁴³.

War for the minds of Belarusians on the Internet and social networks

After the events in Ukraine, since 2014, some websites began to appear on the Internet that regularly posted publications about Belarus with disinformation. A dozen such sites were created for Belarus - eight specifically for propaganda in Belarusian regions - which became a new mechanism for influencing public opinion, forming an alternative agenda. Ross-bel.ru, Teleskop, Sozh.info, Berestje-News, GrodnoDaily, Mogilew.by, Podneprovie-Info, Imhoclub.by, Politring, Dranik.org, Vitbich.org - each region has a website with pro-Kremlin rhetoric, which aggressively promotes ideas of the "Russkiy Mir". Most of the material on these sources is neutral regional news, republished from other sites. Their own publications use chauvinistic rhetoric, sometimes openly questioning the existence of an independent Belarusian ethnos and language, as well as discrediting and distorting the history of Belarus.

These sites have a small reach and low traffic. They are, to a certain extent, a gathering point for a nuclear pro-Russian audience; a place of aggregation of pro-Russian content; and, most importantly, such resources are a source of toxic theses for media outlets working for a wide audience, as well as suppliers of "local Belarusian experts".

Sputnik Belarus, which is part of the Rossiya Segodnya holding, regularly invites authors of materials on these sites to air, changing their status from marginalized to "experts". Administrators and authors of the same sites regularly appear with comments on Russian media sources of various sizes.

Pro-Kremlin propaganda also circulate on social media. There is an extensive network of four dozen toxic communities on the Vkontakte social network, which are the infrastructure for working out propaganda theses for the Belarusian audience. For example, Belarusian statehood, history, the language and culture, Belarusian activists, human rights activists and journalists are being discredited. This toxic niche regularly publishes anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western messages. Some use hate speech, and sometimes open calls for violence against individuals and groups on professional, ethnic and political grounds.

Kremlin technologists were able to quickly transform Telegram from an alternative means of information exchange into another dynamic channel for delivering disinformation and propaganda to the most active part of the Russian-speaking audience. Telegram has become an effective tool to replace rumors in the pre-digital era: it is rife with a mix of "insiders", "leaks" and "first-hand truth".

The largest channels like Nezygar have a significant Belarusian audience. But at the same time, there are several successful projects aimed at Belarus. Worthy mentions include "Trykatzh" (about 25 thousand subscribers), "Minsk Seven Boyarshchyna" (5 thousand), "Belorussky Dialogue" (about 8 thousand). Their statements are then actively relayed by Russian channels, thus forming an agenda in Russia regarding Belarus.

142 Meduza.io (2020). The landing of Russian propagandists is to break the oppositional moods in Belarus. Well, how is it? Sociologists have conducted a comprehensive study on this topic. Available at <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/11/16/perelomit-oppozitsionnye-nastroeniya-v-belarusi-d-olzhen-desant-rossiyskih-polittechnologov-nu-i-kak-poluchaetsya>

143 Ibid.

How Belarusian propaganda turned into an offshoot of the pro-Kremlin one

After the start of mass protests in Belarus caused by falsifications in the presidential elections, Lukashenka asked the Kremlin for support, among other things, and professional Russian propagandists went to the country. At the same time, correspondents of independent Western media were deprived of accreditation by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry and, as a result, the opportunity to work legally. Brigades of the Russian RT channel arrived in Minsk: their own journalists appeared in Lukashenka's press pool, which covers the president's trips around the country. Russians took the place of employees who supported the protests and quit - or were fired. The Russian channel RT admitted that 32 of its employees are currently working in Belarus. At the same time, they advise their Belarusian colleagues "on a variety of issues"¹⁴⁴.

The Belarusian official propaganda after the August 9 elections very quickly became a branch of the pro-Kremlin one. It repeats all the main statements of the pro-Kremlin media with very few differences. The language of the Belarusian state television has changed radically. Now the words "Maidan" and "partition of Belarus" are heard on it, and they also speak of a complete ban on the Russian language and frighten viewers with the Ukrainian scenario of unrest.

Talk shows on the Belarusian state channel ONT are now also tailored according to Russian recipes. Mykola Azarov, the former prime minister of Ukraine at the time of Viktor Yanukovich, speaks on the channel: he fled Ukraine in 2014 and has been living in Russia ever since.

"Now, observing what is happening, I want to say that it reminds me of the preparation of the first Maidan," he says.

After Lukashenka mentioned inviting Russian specialists so that "young people could learn," an information war began against the "Russophobic program of the opposition," Poland, Lithuania, and the West as a whole.

The Current Time channel drew attention to the fact that not only Russian journalists appeared on Belarusian TV, but also the content of Russian channels¹⁴⁵. For example, on August 25, RT published an interview with a riot policeman who became famous after featuring in a photo in which he throws up his hands over a protester lying on the ground. Two days later, "Belarus 1" released an exclusive recording of the conversation.

The Belarusian authorities are trying to present the protests as intrigues of Western special services and not as inspired from within. That is why there is a lot of talk in the state media about the "hand of the West" and that the true goal of the protests is allegedly the "partition of Belarus".

Some major media outlets have changed editors. For example, acting editor-in-chief of the newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus", Alexander Kots, became a journalist to the Moscow editorial office. At the same time, Article 31 of the "Law on Mass Media" states that only a citizen of Belarus can be the editor-in-chief of a Belarusian publication.

Alexander Kots is a war correspondent for the Russian Komsomolskaya Pravda. He participated in the coverage of conflicts in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, Iraq, Libya, Egypt and Nagorno-Karabakh. Kots is included as a Ukrainian "Peacemaker": he has a medal "For Courage".

On October 30, several employees of the Belarusian Komsomolskaya Pravda, including the deputy editor Inna Brizinskaya, announced that they had left the publication¹⁴⁶.

144 EU East Stratcom Task Force (2020). Question Less: Rt Strike-breakers Replace Belarusian Journalists On Strike. Available at <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/question-less-rt-scabs-replace-belarusian-journalists-on-strike/>

145 Current Time (2020). "Topics from Russian TV channels spilled over the Belarusian ones": how hybrid Russian-Belarusian channels synchronise their content. Available at <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-journalists-state-tv-detention/30836238.html>

146 Tut.by (2020). Deputy chief editor of "Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus" and several journalists left the newspaper. Available at <https://news.tut.by/society/706128.html>

Prior to that, in August, KP had difficulties with printing and distribution. Several issues were refused by the printing house “due to equipment breakdown.” Those issues covered the situation in the country, including mass protests and violence by security officials. After that, the newspaper began to be printed in Russia, but it disappeared from the kiosks of “Belsoyuzpechat”.

“Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus” is the largest non-state print newspaper in the country. The circulation of the daily issue reached 31 thousand copies and the weekly “bbw” — 200 thousand. The newspaper is part of BelKP-PRESS CJSC, its main share belongs to the Russian holding Komsomolskaya Pravda. However, this did not in any way affect the editorial board’s policy: “KP in Belarus” is considered an objective publication. On August 15, the newspaper came out with photographs of people beaten in the Minsk detention center in Akrestsin lane.

Russian propagandists and political strategists are trying to correct the mistakes of Lukashenka, who underestimated network communication: they create numerous fake accounts and a network of bots, and troll farms issuing hundreds of comments every hour. Their task is to create the illusion of mass confidence that the protesters are wrong. Thus, they try to demotivate people as much as possible.

On Belarusian television, the tonality and content of news and analytical blocks describing the internal political situation have changed noticeably. They are trying to “sell” to Belarusians the idea that the protest has run out of steam: for people to stop their resistance; quarrelling among themselves; doubting their leaders, each other, themselves; believing that nothing is possible and that there is no need to even try. “Troll factories” are actively working on this idea: network comments are trying to create the impression that everyone is against you, that everyone around you is crazy.

It is worth noting the attempts of propagandists to “split” society into two opposing camps. Protesting opponents are presented not only as a “threat” to stability and “destruction of the country”, but also as followers of collaborators of the Second World War. Simple and sufficient “proof” of this is the historic white-red-white flag, presented as a symbol of collaboration. Such “social engineering” goes beyond the framework of traditional propaganda, bringing the development of the situation to a very dangerous line, the crossing of which - planned or accidental - is fraught with unpredictable consequences.

At the same time, one gets the impression that the Russian teams are not working at all for Lukashenka, but mainly for the Kremlin, to consolidate its foreign economic and foreign policy priorities in the Belarusian agenda. This does not mean that it is not acting in the interests of Lukashenka, at least now: the interests of Minsk and Moscow largely coincide. Thus, many Russian commentators emphasize that the Kremlin is not interested in the transit of power in Belarus under popular pressure - from the “street”. But at the same time, it is noted that the Kremlin is not interested in strengthening the internal political positions of the nominal Belarusian ally, taking into account current “integration” prospects. That is, the Kremlin does not rule out the option of realizing these prospects with other political figures that may appear in the event of new elections.

In this context, it can be assumed that the main motives and goals of Russian propagandists (by the way, including those working from Moscow through the federal media) are to designate “red lines” for Belarusian partners (current and future). This is the preservation of the Russian foreign economic and foreign policy priority on the Belarusian agenda; and the maintenance of guarantees of the continuity of Russian positions in the event of a transit of power - and, perhaps, the acceleration of such a transit.

Russian propaganda messages aimed at the Belarusian audience

Russian propaganda uses a certain set of messages aimed at the Belarusian audience: the West is bad and aggressive towards Belarus, Russia and other countries beyond its control; Belarus is part of the Russkiy Mir; Belarusians are part of the Russian people; there is no alternative to cooperation between Belarus and the

Russian Federation; deepening integration is a strategic choice; the future of Belarus is possible only through an alliance with Russia or as part of it; Russia and Belarus are against everyone; Belarus is an outpost of Russia in the West^{147 148}.

However, as Russian propagandists emphasize, Russia, with all its desire to help, must defend its own interests. In order not to incur losses, it is important for Belarus to come to an agreement with Russia.

History plays an important role among the messages of Russian propaganda. Propagandists are instilling the idea that Belarusian history is part of the Russian one: the history of Belarus seems inglorious and all good things are associated with Russia; Belarusian statehood, language and culture are defective; Belarusian historical symbols are pro-fascist and their heroes are not real; the USSR is a common denominator in Belarusian and Russian history. Shared memory “equals” shared victory: the West is falsifying the history of the Great Patriotic War; the collapse of the USSR is the greatest geopolitical catastrophe.

Belarusian opposition and activists are shown as puppets of the West. Belarusian protests are allegedly the result of Western technologies; NATO and the EU are preparing to arrange a color revolution in Belarus; Belarus without Russia cannot resist pressure; the West is using double standards to divide us.

Pro-Kremlin media are paying increased attention to Belarus’ neighboring countries - Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic countries. Everyone except Russia is being consistently discredited. Parallels with Hitler’s Germany, accusations of fascism/Nazism and their support are often used as a method of discrediting the Western states and neighbors of Belarus.

Propagandists pay a lot of attention to “horror stories” about the West: the EU is decaying and crumbling, bringing chaos; as soon as protests begin, Europe forgets about human rights and begins to violate them; before our eyes, the European system of liberalism and “tolerance to whatever is possible” is breaking down; the USA is a threat to the world and confused by double standards; US policy is directed against Russia and the Europeans are playing along with them; European business is in crisis and shock with US policy.

In contrast to this, the EAEU is developing better than the EU. It makes it possible to resist the pressure of political opponents. It is necessary to strengthen the unification of the EAEU and closer integration.

A huge number of materials denigrate Belarusian political and public figures give an absurd interpretation of Belarusian historical events; and discredit Belarusian national heroes, symbols, Belarusian language and culture. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is declared a puppet of Lithuania and the United States, who (Tikhanovskaya) “is guided by the ideology and practice of Hitlerism” - like the entire Belarusian opposition. Together, these propaganda statements are aimed at creating a picture of a hostile, decaying West and Russia as the only truly friendly state for Belarus.

147 Elisyeu Andrei (2020). 25 narratives of the Kremlin propaganda about Belarus. The International Strategic Action Network for Security. Available at <https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/propaganda-in-belarus-review.pdf>

148 Elisyeu Andrei (2020). Anti-Belarusian propaganda and hate speech: results of monitoring VKontakte toxic public pages. The International Strategic Action Network for Security. Available at <https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/monitoring-toxic-publics-eng.pdf>

PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Belarus ranks 36 out of 36 European countries in the Health Care Index by Country 2021 (the Russian Federation ranks 24th)¹⁴⁹.

The Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation signed several agreements on the basis of which cooperation in the field of healthcare is currently being carried out, especially under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions:

- The 1999 agreement between the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Belarus and the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation on cooperation in the field of registration, standardization and quality control of medicines.
- The 2007 intergovernmental agreement on the development of cooperation in the field of joint production of drugs and the promotion of these products to foreign markets¹⁵⁰.
- The 2017 common pharmaceutical market of the EAEU member states.

The country does not produce modern biotechnological drugs. Nevertheless, according to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, in 2020, the Belarusian export of medicines to Russia was \$210 446.40. Belarus plans to increase its export of pharmaceutical products to 50% by 2022. Most of the drugs will continue to be supplied to Russia¹⁵¹.

Of the ten largest pharmaceutical companies operating in Belarus, four are foreign; two are joint ventures with foreign companies; one is a non-state company and two are state-owned. The latter are the market leaders. The open joint stock company “Ferein” (25% -RB state and foreign PJSC “Bryntsalov-A”, RF, Moscow-75%) produces biologically active food additives (BAA), natural plants and raw animal materials for medications, as well as raw materials for microbiological and chemical synthesis and other medical products¹⁵².

At the end of March, 2021, the Deputy Minister of Health Dmitry Cherednichenko announced that industrial production of Sputnik V - a Russian vaccine against COVID-19, certified by the WHO - is planned soon. He also said that on February 26, a validated batch of 15,000 doses had been launched. Now it is undergoing an examination for stability and effectiveness at the Russian National Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology named after N.F. Gamaleya. It is planned to produce 500 thousand doses per month to saturate the domestic market¹⁵³.

149 Numbeo (2021). Europe: Health Care Index by Country 2021. Available at https://www.numbeo.com/health-care/rankings-by_country.jsp?title=2021®ion=150

150 Ministry of Health of the Republic of Belarus (2021). Regulatory framework in the field of international relations. Available at <http://www.minzdrav.gov.by/en/ministerstvo/mezhdunarodnaya-deyatelnost/>

151 Neverova, Olha (2020). What the doctor prescribed: How Belarus and Russia create a common drug market. Rg.ru. Available at <https://rg.ru/2020/01/15/kak-belarus-i-rossija-sozdaiut-obshchij-rynok-lekarstv.html>

152 Kvitkevych, Alexandra (2021). Storm on the drug market. We compared how prices on the same medicines changed since the end of 2020. Tut.by. Available at <https://finance.tut.by/news720256.html#c>

153 Reformation (2021). Belarus will launch industrial production of “Sputnik V” at the end of March. Available at <https://reform.by/206919-belarus-zapustit-promyshlennoe-proizvodstvo-sputnik-v-v-konce-marta>

INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF RUSSIAN AND BELARUSIAN RELATIONS

Vladimir Putin was one of the first heads of state, who congratulated Aliaksandr Lukashenka on the election victory on August 10, 2020¹⁵⁴. In the following days, Lukashenka promised to “preserve common fatherland from Brest to Vladivostok” as a response to pressure from the West¹⁵⁵. Such statements were a drastic change compared to the rhetoric preceding the electoral campaign, when Lukashenka accused Russia of attempting a “color revolution” in Belarus¹⁵⁶. The tensions with Russia before the elections were related to the detention of the Wagner group near Minsk and the arrest of the leadership of “Belgazprombank”, including Viktor Babariko, who intended to run for president¹⁵⁷.

As the protests unraveled and Lukashenka found himself in the position of isolation by the West, he dissolved the accusation towards Moscow and turned to the “brotherhood” rhetoric. Lukashenka elaborated on the notion of external meddling into domestic affairs, switching the focus from Russia to NATO. In August 2020, during the visit to the military base in Grodno, Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed that NATO was moving towards the Belarusian border on the territory of Poland and Lithuania¹⁵⁸. Lukashenka further reiterated such statements at the session of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), in December 2020, arguing that NATO pressures Belarus as a doorway to Russia¹⁵⁹. The Russian ambassador Dmitry Mesentzev commented that massive protests and NATO tanks along the Belarusian border were an external attack on the Russo-Belarusian Union State¹⁶⁰.

As the Belarusian crisis unraveled, neighboring countries raised concerns about possible consequences for regional security. Thus, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Dmitry Kuleba portrayed weakened Belarus as an easy target for Russia¹⁶¹. Similarly, Baltic states questioned whether the Kremlin managed to push forward the Union State integration agenda and, among other issues, place military bases in Belarus in exchange for political support of the regime¹⁶².

Realizing that Russia has great say over the developments in Belarus, in the first days of the crisis, European leaders called for the mediation under the OSCE umbrella. Thus, Emanuel Macron reached out to Vladimir Putin to discuss the possible role of the OSCE¹⁶³. The rationale behind such a suggestion was that such an offer could be acceptable to Moscow, considering that both Russia and the collective West are members of the OSCE. However, the Kremlin chose to ignore such an offer and rather to pursue exclusive dialogue with Lukashenka.

Lithuania and Estonia took a proactive role in supporting Belarusian democratic forces. At the invitation

154 Official website of the Kremlin (2020). Congratulations to Alexander Lukashenka on election victory. Available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63872>

155 Belta.by (2020). Lukashenka on relations with Russia: we will preserve our common Fatherland. Available at <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ob-otnoshenijah-s-rossiej-my-sohranim-nashe-obschee-otechestvo-405013-2020>

156 BBC (2020). Lukashenka accused Moscow of lies and promised not to allow the revolution. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-53649256>

157 BBC (2020). Conflict between Minsk and Moscow intensifies. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53618070>

158 Belta.by (2020). Lukashenka: as we suggested, it goes according to the plan of the color revolution with the use of external factor. Available at <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-kak-my-i-predpolagali-vse-idet-po-planu-tsvetnyh-revoljutsij-no-s-ispolzovaniem-vneshnego-403755-2020>

159 Vedomosti (2020). Lukashenka claimed that NATO intends to conquer the western part of Belarus. Available at <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2020/12/02/849209-lukashenko-zayavil-o-namerenii-nato-zahvatit-zapadnyuyu-chast-belorusii>

160 Naviny.by (2020). Russian ambassador: tanks are pointed at Belarus and the Union State. Available at <https://naviny.online/new/20201030/1604031554-posol-rf-segodnya-tanki-naceleny-na-belarus-i-soyuznoe-gosudarstvo>

161 RT (2020). MFA of Ukraine named the weakened Belarus an easy target for Russia. Available at <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/773813-mid-ukraina-belarus-rossiya>

162 Based on the author’s interview with the EU diplomats.

163 Reuters (2020). Macron tells Putin to talk to Belarus opposition leader. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-belarus-election-france-russia-idUKKBN26M4YQ>.

of Estonia, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya spoke at the UN Security Council in August 2020. However, raising the Belarusian issue at the UN Security Council is merely possible as an informal hearing, such as the Arria formula, otherwise Russia would most likely veto the consideration. Following up on the hearing, the Russian president's press-secretary Dmitry Peskov underlined that Russia has not changed its stance on Belarus, implying that Moscow supports the current Belarusian leadership¹⁶⁴. Thus, the Russian Federation voted against the United Nations Human Rights Council's stance on Belarus, adopted in March 2021, which condemned the systematic denial of human rights and called on Belarusian authorities to ensure free and fair elections¹⁶⁵. Previously, at the Arria formula hearing at the UN Security Council, Russia's First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy labeled the meeting "a clear provocation and a blatant attempt of interference into internal affairs of a sovereign state"¹⁶⁶.

In the EU, Lithuanian MPs champion the Belarusian agenda in the European Parliament and push for EU sanctions against the Belarusian regime. Following up on EU sanctions against Belarusian leadership, several sources in the State Duma suggest synchronizing restrictive measures against the EU on behalf of Moscow and Minsk¹⁶⁷.

The Belarusian diaspora in the United States managed to bring the attention of the legislators to the Belarusian issue and submitted multiple petitions that facilitated adoption of the new Belarus, Human Rights, Democracy and Sovereignty Act 2020¹⁶⁸. The Act entails an important clause supporting Belarus' sovereignty in case of Russian aggression and envisions the opportunity to sanction Russian individuals complicit in the crackdown on peaceful protesters. The Act also states that the U.S. would not recognize the incorporation attempts, should Russia try to capitalize on the Belarusian crisis. It is noteworthy that the Act received bipartisan support in Congress, uniting Republicans and Democrats in support of Belarus. However, it is an open question whether Washington would have enough political will to proceed with the sanctions against not only Belarusian assets, but to bring Lukashenka's Russian cronies to account.

164 Sputnik.by (2020). Kremlin and permanent representative at the UN about the meeting with Tsikhanouskaya. Available at <https://sputnik.by/politics/20201113/1046136351/Postpred-RF-pri-OON--o-vstreche-s-Tikhanovskoy-nikomu-ne-otkazyvaem-v-slove.html>

165 UN General Assembly (2021). Situation of human rights in Belarus in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and in its aftermath. Available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/235/35/PDF/G2023535.pdf?OpenElement>

166 Russiaun.org (2021). Statement by First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy at informal Arria-formula VTC of UNSC members on Media Freedom in Belarus. Available at https://russiaun.ru/en/news/arria_220121

167 Baynazarov, Elnar & Raskalov, Eldar (2020). Brother for brother: Union state synchronizes sanctions against the EU]. Izvestia. Available at <https://iz.ru/1092536/elmar-bainazarov-eldar-raskalov/brat-za-brata-soiuznoe-gosudarstvo-sinkhroniziruet-sanktcii-protiv-es>

168 Congress.gov (2020). Text - H.R.8438 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020." Available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/8438/text>

CONCLUSION

The strong bilateral relations between the Russian Federation and Belarus were known long before August 2020. However, the Belarusian presidential elections and the aftermath made apparent how Lukashenka's regime relies on Kremlin. The report aims to monitor the Russian influence in Belarus and to provide both the expert community and the interested public with a comprehensive overview. The outcome serves as a baseline/background study for further research and analyses of Russia's presence and activity in its neighboring Western country.

The report analyzed the spheres of politics, economy, healthcare, public administration, and civil society organizations. In the case of the **political sphere**, Kremlin tightens up the grip on Lukashenka's régime. It maintains exclusive contact with Lukashenka and simultaneously undermines western efforts and initiatives to launch mediation between the president and the opposition. At the same time, Moscow pushes for constitutional reforms weakening the position of Lukashenka and strengthening the power of the parliament. It also consolidates pro-Russian political groups and individuals in order to prepare them for future parliamentary elections. Under the direct Russian influence in the political area are *Aliaksandr Lukashenka*, political parties such as "Soyuz" and *Communist Party of Belarus, Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus and Republic Party of Labour and Justice*.

When it comes to Belarusian **military and law enforcement agencies**, the majority of the officers and security personnel has been trained in Russia. Belarusian and Russian military forces continue to be in close coordination and synchronization, broadly tested during joint military exercises such as "Zapad" or "Shchit Soyuza". Since Belarus plays a significant role in a possible conflict between Russia and NATO, Russia deploys military infrastructure and weaponry on Belarus's soil and maintains a strong relationship between their military-industrial complexes.

The Russian influence in the **economy** is used in two directions. The first one is to secure its economic interests; the second strengthens the economic leverage over Lukashenka. The Russian capital is the largest source of foreign direct investments, and their growth would further increase the Minsk dependence on Kremlin. The leading Russian-owned companies and subsidiaries that play an important role in the Belarusian economy are *Mobile TeleSystem* (mobile operator), *Belgazprombank*, *Alfa-Bank*, *BPS-Sberbank*, *VTB Bank Belarus* and *BelWEB* (banks with Russian capital), *Gazprom*, *Rosneft*, *Rosatom*, and *Belarusian Railways*.

In **public administration**, the essential element is the *Union State of Russia and Belarus* – the unique political structure establishing a cooperation platform between government officials. In addition to that, links are also found via different initiatives and platforms, from the high-profile annual forums to the projects of transborder cooperation - *Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus; National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus; Union State of Russia and Belarus; Forum of the Regions of Belarus and Russia*.

The **Belarusian Orthodox Church** plays a significant role in the Orthodox Church itself. Giving the importance, Moscow consolidates its control over the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Specifically, Moscow Patriarchate appoints all Belarusian bishops allowing Kremlin to influence the clergy in Belarus directly. Through the direct appointments, Moscow influences the key personas such as *Metropolitan Benjamin of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Father Fyodor Povny*, and the *rector of the Minsk Church of All Saints*.

One of the Kremlin's strategic goals is to further integrate the political and economic spheres of the two countries. For the purpose of its aim, Moscow tries to win the hearts and minds of Belarusian **civil society**. It orchestrates the establishment and funding of various agencies, foundations, and organizations, which endorse or disseminate Russophile ideas and Russian-Belarusian togetherness. The most influential and well-known entities in Belarus are *Rosstrudnichestvo*, *Russkiy Mir Foundation; Gorchakov Foundation for Public Diplomacy; "Moscow House" — the Minsk agency of the Russian state-owned Moscow Centre of International*

Co-operation. In the case of education institutions, the worth-mentioning is the *Coordination Council of the Heads of Belarusian Public universities*, which involves *Russian State Social University*, the *Russian University of Economics in Minsk*, *Belarusian-Russian University in Mahileu*.

The Belarusian **information and media field** is also significantly influenced and interconnected with Kremlin. The Russian media such as TV channels (RTR-Belarus, NTV-Belarus, ONT, Belarus 1), newspapers (*Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus*), local media (*Ross-bel.ru*, *Teleskop*, *Sozh.info*, *Berestje-News*, *GrodnoDaily*, *Mogilew.by*, *Podneprovie-Info*, *Imhoclub.by*, *Politring*, *Dranik.org*, *Vitbich.org*), news websites (*RT and Sputnik Belarus*) are very popular with Belarusian audience. These media outlets serve Kremlin to promote content important for its own international and domestic policy goals, often using pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation narratives. The purpose of the Kremlin's propagandists is to "split" the Belarusian society into two opposing camps and thus prolong the ongoing political crisis, weaken the position of Lukashenka, and bring Belarus, even more, closer to Russia in order to strengthen its influence and power there.