

Lukashenka runs to Putin amid protests

On 22 August while meeting military personnel in Hrodna Province, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka announced that his opponents had – with the aim of bringing about a “colour revolution”– been attempting to divert his attention from the domestic situation by creating tension on the Western borders. He specifically blamed NATO and ordered his troops to “defend Hrodna”.

This statement may sound odd, yet its messages clearly reflect Lukashenka’s greatest ever level of dependence on Moscow, a dependence which has developed within a mere two weeks since the election. It is little wonder, that his rhetoric in recent days has focussed on the threat from the West, with Russia hailed as Belarus’ saviour. Even to keep state TV running since an employee strike last week, Lukashenka has had to bring in journalists from Moscow. This new dependence threatens to undermine Belarusian statehood, bringing it ever closer to a situation such as that in South Ossetia or Transnistria – towards becoming a semblance of a state.

No Tiananmen Square for Belarus

The violent crackdown after the election in Belarus failed to brutally suppress the opposition, as for example the Chinese government did in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989. The Chinese leadership at that time remained internationally isolated but firmly in power. On the contrary, all Minsk is now demonstrating is its own fragility and inability to cope alone. It has been forced to withdraw special police forces from the streets, tolerate unannounced demonstrations

throughout the country and, ultimately, to [beg Russia](#) for help.

Lukashenka's situation deteriorated further after 19 August, when the European Council explicitly refused to recognise the Belarusian presidential election of 9 August. This may put incumbent president Lukashenka in a precarious situation when important Western European countries, and in all likelihood the US and neighbouring states, will not accept his decisions on behalf of the country as legitimate.

This signals the end of the "multidirectional" foreign policy which his government has pursued since the mid-2000s, through careful manoeuvring between opposite poles of international politics, especially between Russia and the West. Going forward, the Belarusian government may only be able to rely on Russia and [China](#) – although Beijing is geographically far away and not willing to compete with the Kremlin over a small European country.



Military exercise on
Belarusian-Polish border.
Image: State Border
Committee of Belarus.

Notwithstanding future EU sanctions, the recent decision of the EU leaders has already rendered Minsk extremely vulnerable and has affected the rhetoric and behaviour of the Belarusian leadership. In addition to suddenly switching to anti-Western and pro-Moscow rhetoric, it has compelled Lukashenka to [militarise the crisis](#). On 19 August Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin ordered the troops to conduct a large-scale "comprehensive tactical" exercise around Hrodna on the border with Lithuanian and Russia, adjacent to the so-called "[Suwalki Gap](#)".

Belarusian political scientist Andrei Kazakevich underlines that Lukashenka's loss of international legitimacy "contradicts Russia's plans of "deepened integration," and may even hamper the selling of Belarusian companies to Russian businesses. However, the existence of several precarious polities on the borders of Russia proves that Moscow feels quite comfortable with unrecognised statelets, such as those in Donbas, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria, some of which have existed for decades. Belarus is now drifting towards this type of situation. Moreover, with a better recognition status, it is still far from these pseudo-states and, hence, even more attractive an asset for Putin.

The EU to Solve the Belarusian Issue with Putin

The new situation has already led to an unprecedented flurry of direct contacts between the EU and Russia concerning developments in Belarus. No wonder that Lukashenka has refused to talk to German Federal Chancellor Merkel, which has led to her holding talks with Russian President Putin.



European Commissioner
for Internal Market
Thierry Breton.
Image: Wikipedia

Even high-ranking European officials emphasise that in dealing with the political crisis in Belarus, they will take account of Moscow's interests. A case in point is the interview by the European Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton after an emergency conference at which the EU leaders decided to tighten sanctions on Belarus. He emphasised that negotiations

with Russian leader Putin would take into account the specificity of Belarus' relations with Russia. Breton added: "Belarus is not Europe, it is on the border of Europe, between Europe and Russia, and the situation is not comparable to Ukraine or Georgia. Belarus is really strongly connected with Russia and the majority of the population is favourable to close links with Russia."

It is possible to imagine what kind of compromise solution the EU and Russia may hammer out for Belarus: a peaceful and nominally independent state with no major human rights issues which retains most of its existing dependencies on Russia. The minimal interest most EU countries have in Belarus may make their leaders more easily agree to the Kremlin's role in resolving the Belarusian crisis.

How sincere is Minsk's new policy?

There is, however, another factor which makes the sudden rapprochement with the Kremlin a shaky affair, and that is the hidden but deep distrust harboured by the Belarusian government towards current Russian leadership. Minsk knows it has to struggle for balance even now. This explains, for example, why, on 20 August, Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey thanked the US Under State Secretary for Political Affairs, David Hale, for American support for Belarusian independence and sovereignty. The very next day, President Lukashenka again accused the US of provoking the unrest in the country.

Nevertheless, sudden changes of rhetoric and approach (like the unexpected war games accompanied by the anti-NATO unheard of for more than a decade) are scarcely an indication of sincere conviction within the Belarusian leadership. This conviction appears forced and resembles the behaviour in recent months of the mid-level Belarusian government officials

with whom Belarus Daily has been in contact – avoiding articulating the issue of the Kremlin role in Belarusian politics publicly, but complaining about it privately.



Belarusian state TV on 29 July broadcast the detention of Russian so called “Wagner” mercenaries near Minsk.

Despite being well aware of the Kremlin’s hostile policies towards Belarus, nevertheless even when confronted with undeniable facts (such as the detention of Russian mercenaries with affiliations to “Putin’s Cook”, Evgeny Prigozhin) they have continued to interpret all traces of Russian influence in Belarusian politics as private initiatives by oligarchs (especially Alisher Usmanov and Oleg Deripaska) or as a crusade by Russian liberals “linked to the Democratic Party” in the US.

Although never presented publicly in a consistent and intellectually sound manner, the suspicions concerning the role of Russia even became a theme by which the Belarusian leadership motivated the security agencies for violent crack-down on the protesters. A Russian activist detained by Belarusian special police units [reported](#) how the policemen explained their actions: “There was once a great country, the Soviet Union, and because of such fagots like you, it demised. Because no one cut you down to size on time. If you [the Russian Federation] think that you have planted your Tikhanovskaya here... then you shall know that you will not succeed in making a second Ukraine here, we will not allow Belarus to become part of Russia.”

To sum up, over the last two weeks Belarus has backtracked on much of its former progress in strengthening its statehood,

including developing its [international neutrality](#) and the credibility it has won over the recent decade. All of these losses have become gains for the Kremlin. If Putin further succeeds in becoming the partner of the West in solving the Belarusian issue, he can multiply his advantage.

This is the reality which all the parties in internal political confrontation must take into account, and raise in talks with foreign governments. Neither Belarusians, nor the EU, nor even Russia will benefit from Belarus becoming a new unrecognized South Ossetia. Only Putin's corrupt government will benefit. The idea of Putin engaging to promote democracy in Belarus is a charade.

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Belarusian Independence Day: tanks and “carnivals”

On 3 July Belarus celebrated [its official Independence Day](#). Many Belarusians felt frustrated despite a [military parade](#) and festivities to celebrate the achievements of the national economy. While Alexander Lukashenka branded the parade as “the best” in Belarus's history, Minsk residents complained of traffic jams and damage to public roads.

In both Minsk and other centres, local authorities have traditionally celebrated Independence Day with displays of what they considered the most important achievements of the Belarusian economy, showing off refrigerators, washing machines, hospital equipment and tractors.

Rocket launchers and T-34 tanks attack Minsk's streets

So, what did Minsk's streets endure on 3 July this year? About 250 military vehicles took part in the parade, including multiple-launch rocket systems (Smerch, Grad, and Polonez) and anti-aircraft missile systems (S-300 PS, Osa-AKM, and [Tor-M2](#)). As well, T-72 B battle tanks, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, and BTR-70 family vehicles also rolled through the streets. As has become tradition, the legendary WW2 T-34-85 tank led the convoy.

The hundreds of armoured vehicles put colossal pressure on the roads, leaving numerous cracks in the asphalt surfaces. Each year, after military parades, Minsk's residents share pictures of tank tracks and bumps left on the roads.



Source: tut.by

In 2017 more than 9,000 Belarusians signed a petition against military parades in the centre of Minsk. Among major complaints, they listed ecological damage, excessive noise, traffic jams, and road damage.

To date Belarusian state officials have downplayed public concern about road damage and other inconveniences caused by annual parades. The Ministry of Defence emphasises that military parades take place in accordance with the decision of the President of Belarus and with the full support of the Belarusian people. The Ministry of Defence adds that the potential relocation of any annual military parade would significantly raise its costs.

Dzianis Glinsky, the head of the capital's road administration, rebutted claims about road damage caused by

armoured vehicles. According to Glinsky, tank tracks hardly constitute a danger to the capital's asphalt and concrete surfaces.

A risky show funded by taxpayers?

Despite optimistic affirmations from top Belarusian officials about the parades' popularity with the general public, each year Belarussians discuss them in a negative context. First, the use of a large volume of military equipment inevitably leads to incidents. In June 2017, during a parade rehearsal, a tank hit a lamppost on one of Minsk's central streets. The video of the incident has garnered significant attention and collected more than 754,000 views on YouTube.

In June 2018 an infantry fighting vehicle near Hrodna accidentally crashed into a passing car, injuring the car's driver. The incident led to the heated discussion of parades' feasibility across Belarus.

Expenditure on military parades also raises concerns. Since [the Ministry of Defence](#) has not divulged parades' costs, several analysts have attempted to estimate their budget independently. Naviny.by reported that Belarusian taxpayers paid approximately \$2.37 million for the arrangement of the 2017 parade. Analyst Aliaksandr Alesin provided another figure: in 2009, he claims, the military parade cost taxpayers about \$50 million. Taking into account the reluctance of the Ministry of Defence to disclose the real figure, speculations about parades' budgets will continue.

The scenarios of the annual military parades annoy some Belarusians. The "carnival" part of the parades receives an utmost criticism. For instance, Belarusian internet users

mocked the previous year's parade, which featured Belarusian-made refrigerators, washing machines, and TV-sets as a demonstration of national industrial success. Amid criticism, the recent parade avoided showing off refrigerators and stuck to dancers and singers instead.

Consequently, the feasibility of an expensive and sometimes dangerous [display of the nation's military power](#) remains questionable for a number of Belarusians. Two weeks ago a popular newspaper, "Nasha Niva", conducted a survey asking whether the celebration of Independence Day should involve a military parade this year. 85 % of respondents replied that it should not.

Or a patriotic display of national unity?

For Lukashenka, an annual demonstration of the nation's military might serves to unify of the Belarusian people. The president maintains that the nation must see a [battle-ready Belarusian army](#). According to Lukashenka, Independence Day's parades must be "impressive" and their arrangement should "spare no resources". In this way, annual military shows continue to remain a viable tool of the Belarusian state ideology with [aviation](#), armoured [vehicles](#), and [missile systems](#) as irreplaceable components.

Globally, approaches to military parades vary from "spare no resources" to the utterly pragmatic. While the United States and the United Kingdom constrain themselves to soldiers and horses, the post-Soviet States traditionally engage armoured vehicles in parades. Hundreds of battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles hit the streets of Moscow and Kazakhstan's Astana on a yearly basis.

In this way, Lukashenka's intention to carry on with impressive parades despite the growing national displeasure looks in line with his neighbours' policies. Armoured vehicles will, therefore, continue to roll through Minsk's streets next year, resulting in additional cracks and tracks, much to the anger of the capital's citizens.

Belarus Introduces Alternative Civilian Service

On 1 July 2016 a new law on alternative civilian service comes into effect in Belarus. This coming fall, 10, 000 young Belarusian conscripts will start their compulsory military service. According to tut.by 20 of these would like to exercise their option for alternative civilian service.

Finally, after more than a decade of debates in parliament and discussions by various commissions, the new law will stipulate the conditions for such an alternative service. Known as "alternativschiki", these young men will fall under the mandate of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. In Belarus they will have to serve for three years, twice the time required of regular military conscripts.

Conscripts, dodgers, and 'alternativschiki'

Twice a year the Belarusian Ministry of Defence drafts young men between the ages of 18 and 27 for conscription. During Soviet times [men were eager to sign up](#). The received wisdom

was that for men 'the army was the school of life'. They had to serve for two years and could end up virtually anywhere in the huge territory of the Soviet Union, usually outside of Soviet Byelorussia.

Since then much has changed. For each conscription round – one in the spring and one in the autumn – the Ministry of Defence aims to draft around 10,000 young conscripts. Many young men successfully dodge the draft. The army has lost its allure since Soviet times and families pay big money and pull many strings to get their sons out of it. Daughters are immune, as the Belarusian army conscripts only men.

Methods for dodging, postponing, or cutting the length of compulsory military service have become common knowledge. Education for one offers immediate payoffs. Men without higher education have to serve 18 months in the army. Having a university degree decreases this term to 12 months. If the individual's university itself offers military training, a conscript's time in the army is further reduced to six months.

Now, starting from 1 July, those with religious pacifist beliefs could qualify for a different kind of deal. The new Belarusian law on alternative civilian services offers conscientious objectors a paid option instead of conscription. It stipulates 36 months – instead of 18 in the army – of paid labour in the healthcare sector or social system institutions, agriculture or railroad maintenance, or other areas as delegated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection.

Victor's story

The new Belarusian law covers only religious pacifist beliefs as possible grounds for conscientious objection. In order to be eligible for alternative civilian service one needs to submit a written petition no later than ten days before the end of the conscription term. The committee will then consider

the application, and hand down its ruling. This is how the process should work if properly applied. Victor's story shows how the law does not work in practice.

Victor works at a factory in Brest. He comes from a middle class working family with an alcoholic father. He identifies as a Jehovah's Witness, and has refused to serve in the army. Victor would eagerly commit to 36 months of alternative civilian service, double the time of a regular conscript. Except he faces criminal charges and a BYR 21m (roughly \$1,000) fine instead.

Victor's story started when the law on alternative civilian service did not exist. And yet even then two consecutive court hearings ruled in his favour. The court found his desire to serve in a 'non-military' way was justified by his religious beliefs. The Prosecutor General, dissatisfied with the decision of the local courts, appealed to the Supreme Court, and won.

Victor filed an appeal on 24 June, and is awaiting the decision. In his interview to people.onliner.by Victor speaks of the possible resolution:

Two courts have ruled in my favour, and on a third attempt under the same article they charged me with a criminal offence. Certainly the law (on alternative civilian services) will soon come into effect, as it is only a matter of time. But why should I depend on it? How can I account for the lack of alternative civilian services up til now? I have never dodged conscription; I wanted to serve my country. And not just for a year and a half, but for all three! I see it as my responsibility to my country, but wish to do so in an alternative way.

Naysayers

Formally Article 57 of the Belarusian Constitution grants eligible Belarusian men a right to alternative civilian service if their religious beliefs did not allow them to serve. However, in reality, no mechanism for enforcing this has existed until now. In the eyes of the Ministry of Defence, men who could not serve because of their religious beliefs were no different from other army dodgers.

Current and previous Ministers of Defence have openly denounced an alternative civilian service, called it outright harmful, and spoke about it in other negative terms. The Ministry has typically seen its biggest challenge as being to make alternative civilian service so unattractive that men would not choose to pursue it. It seems they have succeeded.

The new law takes into account only religious grounds. It stipulates double the term of service as compared to regular conscripts – three years instead of one and a half for those without higher education, and two years instead of one for college graduates. And most importantly, ‘alternativschiki’ will get paid around BYR 2m monthly, which roughly comes to \$115.

These conditions certainly make it highly unappealing. Moreover, the Ministry of Defence reserves the right to deny applicants this option without explanation or recourse to appeal. It seems at least for now that the service exists only formally. And the Ministry of Defence has no intention of turning it into a viable alternative to military service.

Russia Reviews Military Doctrine: Can Belarus Remain a Buffer State?

On 2 September, Russia vowed to revise and update its national Military Doctrine by the end of 2014. The decision was a direct reaction to NATO's plans for deploying a rapid-reaction force in Eastern Europe, a move to be finalised at the summit in Wales this week.

In a speech in Tallinn on 3 September U.S. President Barack Obama announced plans for additional U.S. Air Force units to be based in Estonia.

NATO's increased presence in Eastern Europe may inject new energy into Russia-Belarus military cooperation. Pivotal for defending Russia's western borders in the event of conflict, Belarus could soon turn from a buffer state into the Russian military's most forward post.

For nearly two decades, Belarus has successfully [balanced](#) Russian interests against the West's. While closer military cooperation could strengthen Minsk's bargaining position with Moscow in the short run, it could eventually undermine Belarus' multi-vector balancing strategy and restrict its freedom to act alone.

Friends and Foes According to Russian Military Doctrine

The revisions to the Russian doctrine would reflect "changing military dangers and military threats," according to Mikhail Popov, senior official at Russia's Security Council. In a recent interview with the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti, Popov called NATO's expansion "one of the leading military dangers for the Russian Federation." Indeed, all of

Russia's military doctrines – passed in 1993, 2000, and 2010 – recognised NATO as a threat.

Yet the priority accorded to NATO as an enemy has increased over time. While the 1993 and the 2000 doctrines mentioned “the expansion of military blocs and alliances to the detriment of the interests of Russian Federation” among external dangers, they did not name NATO explicitly.

In contrast, the 2010 document moved the threat of NATO to the top of the list of external threats. It explicitly mentioned NATO's goal “to arrogate to itself the assumption of global functions in violation of international law, and to expand the military infrastructure of NATO nations to Russia's borders including through expansion of the bloc.”

The 2014 revisions could also amplify the importance of the Russia-Belarus military alliance. This indeed has happened with each subsequent edition of the Russian doctrine. The 1993 doctrine did not contain any references to Belarus or other CIS states. The 2000 document briefly acknowledged that  countries in the region implement a common defence policy.

The [2010 doctrine](#), on the other hand, contains an explicit commitment to respond to an armed attack against the Union State of Belarus and Russia.

It lists the development of the armed forces and the maintenance of the defence capabilities of the Union State as top priorities for Moscow.

It also contains an additional clause regarding military cooperation within CSTO, which applies to Belarus and the four other CSTO members (Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan).

Were NATO to increase its presence in the Eastern European states along Belarus' border, Belarus' role in Russia's military planning would quickly grow in importance.

Belarus' Role in Russia's Security

To date, Belarus has fulfilled primarily a symbolic role in Russia's security. Its [armed forces](#) have remained small and military capabilities limited. Belarus's defence budget (about \$ 745 million) is more than 100 times less than Russia's. In 2013, Belarus proved incapable of protecting the union-state airspace as it failed to register an amateur plane entering Belarus from Lithuania to distribute [800 teddy bears](#) with human rights messages.

The military alliance may gain ground in its actual substance, however, as Russia-NATO tensions intensify. Russia may need Belarus to defend its Western borders. Belarusian territory is particularly useful for stationing Russian military posts and missile divisions, including the S-300 and S-400 anti-aircraft systems.

Russia has mulled the idea of establishing its [first military airbase](#) in Belarus. It would be located at Lida, close to the Lithuanian (35 km) and Polish (130 km) borders. So far, the terms of the base agreement remain up in the air. But the ongoing crisis in Ukraine could hasten the process of securing the base on Belarus' border with the EU. If so, Belarus could extract concessions in return for Russia's right to maintain a base on its territory.

An airbase in Lida would be Russia's third military installation in Belarus. Moscow already operates an early-warning radar system near Baranavichy and a radio-electronic centre near Vileyka, which can be used for communications spying against NATO.

Russia's Role in Belarus' Military Planning

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Belarus has published only two [military doctrines](#). The 1992 doctrine, passed under the leadership of Stanislau Shushkevich, emphasised the nation's neutrality and envisioned the creation

of a "nuclear-free belt" from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Neutrality was absent from the 2002 doctrine, which prioritised the formation of "a single defence space with the Russian Federation." Among the threats mentioned in the doctrine is the "enlargement of military blocs and alliances at the expense of military security of the Republic of Belarus and the counteraction of collective security systems pertaining to the Republic of Belarus." This exact threat is also mentioned in the corresponding Russian doctrine.

Russia and Belarus have concluded over 30 binding [cooperation agreements](#) in the military-technical field, including the Treaty on Military Cooperation, the Agreement on Joint Efforts to Provide Security in the Battlefield, the Concept of Belarus-Russia Joint Defence Policies, the Concept of Security of the Belarus-Russia Union, and the Military Doctrine of the Union State.

Unsurprisingly, Belarus' perception of security threats in the region has increasingly reflected those of Russia.

The End of the Buffer State?

Lukashenka has succeeded in extracting significant [economic benefits](#) by arguing that Russia's military security depends on Minsk's economic wellbeing. Even as the President has been [careful not to side](#) with Russia as the conflict in Ukraine has unfolded, he has continued to emphasise that, as Russia's military ally, Belarus would have to react to an increase in NATO's military capabilities on its borders.

On 3 September, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin twitted a veiled threat, "The Government of Ukraine approved the abolition of the country's non-block status. NATO is now screwed [Rus. '*Hana teper*' NATO]."

Should Russia-NATO tensions continue to escalate, Belarus' buffer zone status would erode and its territory would be at

Russia's disposal.

The old, long-standing rumours that Russia may deploy Iskander missiles in Belarus could become reality if NATO establishes a greater presence on Russian borders following the summit in Wales on 3-4 September.

If the need should arise, Russia could also take direct control over components of Belarus' national defence system, as it has always sought to do.

Even if the Russia-NATO tensions are defused, Belarus' dependence on the Russian economy and its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union leave it exposed to Western sanctions.

Russia Plays War in Belarus

On 12 March, Minsk and Moscow agreed that Russia will deploy 15 fighters jets in Belarus in reaction to NATO's drills on the border between Poland and Belarus.

However, Belarus remains reluctant to support Russia in the Crimean conflict either politically or militarily. Lukashenka's regime wants to simply show its loyalty and get its hands on some new equipment.

Belarusian military dependence on Russia remains critical. Belarus conducts only small drills on its own, and many Belarusian officers have received their training in Russia.

Purchases of Russian-made arms at discounted rates remains almost the only opportunity for Belarus to update its own arm supplies, though the country's military industry

maintains strong ties with Russian companies.

Belarus' military dependence on Russia is the result of a deliberate policy continuously implemented by Lukashenka. Belarusian authorities are well aware of the fact that the Kremlin will always financially support Belarus, because it views Belarus as a buffer zone for Russia.

Belarusian Army Will not be a Party to the Crimean Conflict

Although Belarus remains officially a neutral country the Kremlin likes to play war with the West within its borders. The decision to have 15 fighters jets relocated shows that Lukashenka has made a concession to the Kremlin, but this does not mean that Belarus is going to fight for Russia.

It seems that regime wants to testify to its loyalty to the Kremlin after its recent refusal to support Russia in the Crimean conflict. Belarus, it cannot be forgotten, has a strong desire to acquire new military equipment as well.

On 13 March, six Russian Su-27s and three military transport planes landed in Belarus. The same day, Lukashenka said that the redeployment took place at Russia's request. Also on 13 March, the Ukrainian MFA expressed its concern about Russia's attempts to involve Belarus in Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

For many outsiders, [Lukashenka](#) looks like the Kremlin's vassal and the Belarusian army like a division of Russia's armed forces. However, the Belarusian authorities have [refused to support](#) the actions of Russia in the Crimea and Belarusian troops continue to remain within the country's borders.

As a member country of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Belarus can refuse to support any Russian offensive. According to the Charter of the CSTO, Belarus should support other members only during defensive actions. Furthermore, Putin has so far failed to publicly admit that Russian troops have entered Ukraine. Belarus cannot

support these troops so long as they remain officially unrecognised.

Belarusian obligations to Russia within the framework of the [Union State](#) remain limited to real warfare. Military expert Alexander Alesin explains that "the only way that Belarus will participate in Crimea is to go there with a peacekeeping mission with a UN mandate and at the consent of Ukraine."

Belarusian Military Dependence on Russia

Although Belarus has neither politically nor militarily supported Russia in the Crimean conflict, the Belarusian army remains deeply dependent on Russia.

After the creation of the [United Regional System of Air Defense](#), Russia has effectively gained full control over the Belarusian air force. In the near future, the first Russian military [air base](#) in Belarus will begin to operate. This facility is the first of its kind that was personally authorised by Lukashenka. The Belarusian authorities have inherited two other Russian military sites from their predecessors.

Belarusian troops effectively subordinate to Russia. Belarus lacks even its own ground force command.

Military cooperation has always been the sacred cow of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Even during periods of crises between the countries, military collaboration has continued unphased. The existence of a regional army group for the Union State make Belarusian troops effectively subordinate to Russia. Belarus lacks even its own ground force command.

Belarus conducts only small-scale training exercises on its own and [operational drills](#) with Russia every two years. The so-called ["West" drills](#) have repeatedly made Belarus'

relations with Lithuania and Poland very tense. However, some experts argue that Warsaw and Minsk have found that by speculating on an imaginary threat emanating from each other, Poland and Belarus can get money from their own allies in Moscow and Washington, respectively.

Belarus lacks the opportunity to acquire new weapons at market prices and is therefore condemned to begging for them from Russia. In 2012, the Belarusian ruler caused outrage by [asking Russia to finance](#) his country's military. Russia gives great discounts on their wares, but regularly delays the delivery of military supplies. Belarus [is still waiting](#) for four Yak-130s and several S-300s to replace their old S-200s.

On 19 February, the Belarusian Ambassador to Russia announced that Belarus will receive Yak-130s in 2015. Previously, Lukashenka said that Russia would support and deliver several military aircraft, but none of this has come into fruition. Russia requires real money from its western partner, not just loyalty.

Many of Belarus men-in-arms continue to receive their military education in Russia.

Many of Belarus men-in-arms continue to receive their military education in Russia. The Secretary of the Security Council [Aliaksandr Miashueu](#), the Chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee [Siarhei Huruliou](#), the Chairman of the State Border Committee [Leanid Maltsau](#) and the Minister of Defence [Iuryi Zhadobin](#), all studied in Russia.

According to the Polish Centre for Eastern Studies, "in 2012, fewer than 800 people began officer training in Belarus, while as many as 600 individuals attended courses in Russian military schools." However, it is noteworthy, that Belarusian officers study in Belarus also in civilian universities. It seems that Centre for Eastern Studies missed this data.

The Belarusian [military-industrial complex](#) continues to work primarily with Russia. Even when Belarus fulfils arms contracts with other countries, it still requires components that are produced in Russia. Moreover, Russia [keeps pushing](#) for the sale of the MZKT, a Belarusian manufacturer that produces a chassis of world-renowned quality, something that some have speculated could even happen this year.

Conscious Policy of the Regime

The military dependence of Belarus on Russia is the result not only of the Kremlin's efforts, but also the policy of Lukashenka's regime. Belarus remains reluctant to pay for its own army. The authorities have never afforded the nation's armed more than 2% of the GDP. In the 2000s, the spending was regularly at a level of approximately 1.5% of the nation's GDP.

At the moment, it seems that Russia has also become reluctant to pay – because Belarus is losing its role as the main military ally of Russia. In 2014, Russia is set to start supplying five battalions with the air defence missile system S-300PS to Kazakhstan – free of charge.

In the case of Belarus, Russia requires payment for weapons, albeit with discounts. While there are only three Russian military sites in Belarus, Kazakhstan hosts eleven Russian military sites. The total space they occupy is about the half of Belarus.

However, Belarus will remain an important Russian ally, since it is situated to the west of Russia's heart. Given this, Russia will have to continue to dole out funding, although it will do so in a more and more humiliating manner. The Kremlin will continue to increase its influence, but this does not necessarily mean that the Belarusian army will be a tool of Russian foreign policy.

Bearing the Cost of Teddy Bears

One year ago a Swedish PR agency [bombed Belarus with teddy bears](#) to support democracy in the country.

Last month, the authorities stated that they had completed an investigation of the incident and closed the criminal investigation. However, the debate of whether this action did more good than harm to Belarusians continues.

Some praise the Swedes as heroes while others consider them irresponsible provocateurs pushing Belarus towards Russia. If similar performances will be organised in the future, they must strengthen the position of civil society in Belarus, rather than expose it to the regime and weaken the image of the West in Belarus.

How Did It Happen

On 4 July 2012, agents of the Swedish PR company Studio Total illegally crossed the Belarusian border in a single-engine aircraft. The aircraft bombed Belarus with 800 teddy bears, holding notes in support of democracy.

At first the Belarusian Ministry of Defense denied the very fact of illegal border crossing. The regime's propagandist Vadzim Hihin wrote a long article arguing that the Swedish PR people did not cross the Belarusian border.

In response, the Studio Total sent Belarus Digest and other media links to the full video of the teddy bear landing. The authorities had no other choice but to start a criminal case and to recognize that the Belarusian air defense has holes in

its system. Military expert Alexander Alesin said that having such holes can be especially dangerous for a country that is building a nuclear power plant. Instead of teddy bears there could have been explosives to be used against nuclear reactor.

Although the teddy bear stunt has become a significant event in Belarusian media, the intentions of the Swedish PR people remain unclear. The Swedish company failed to publish, as promised, a report of the cost of the stunt. They also did not name the sponsors of the teddy bear stunt. These facts bring the independence of the Swedes into question.

Unexpected Consequences

It would be unfair to blame the Swedish PR people in all Belarusian problems when the main blame should lie with the state authorities. However, Total Studio's actions brought Belarus more harm than good.

Lukashenka sacked a head of the Border Committee and the Air Forces. The Belarusian military court sentenced an ensign of the border service to two years in prison for not reporting the crossing of the Swedish aircraft through the Belarusian border.

Lukashenka's regime [arrested](#) photographer Suryapin and real estate agent Bashamyrau and placed them in a KGB detention centre, the so-called "amerikanka" and kept them in detention for a month. Suryapin was the first one who took photos of the teddy bears on the ground and Bashamyrau provided housing in Belarus for the Swedish PR people.

Also, the Belarusian authorities fully used the teddy bears landing to reinforce its anti-Western rhetoric. The Swedish PR agency has put the Western countries in an uncomfortable situation where the citizens of Sweden violated both national and international law. Thus, the West has become the "bad guy" in bilateral relations.

Also, the regime did not extend the accreditation of the Swedish Ambassador to Belarus and closed the Swedish Embassy in Minsk. Belarusians appreciate Stefan Eriksson and for his support of the civil society as well as his perfect command of the Belarusian language. The Swedish Embassy has not resumed its work in Minsk yet. The Estonian embassy performs its visa functions.

It seems that Russia used the teddy bear landing to increase the pressure on the Belarusian authorities in the sphere of military integration. Soon, Russia will open a new air base in Lida, a town in western Belarus close to Lithuania from where the Swedes flew in.

Was the Action Worth It?

The cost of the teddy bear landing to Belarus turned out to be rather high and caused a debate about the appropriateness of such performances among the Belarusian opposition. The Belarusian civil society was divided in their opinion on the teddy bear stunt.

The opposition web-site Charter'97 awarded Studio Total a prize for their courage in the human rights struggle in Belarus. But the leader of the Belarusian opposition during the early 90s Zianon Pazniak said that the action brought nothing but harm, and called the Swedes provocateurs. Former editor of influential Belarusian daily "Nasha Niva" Siarhei Dubavets wrote that only Russia benefited from the action.

Despite the noise that the action caused in the Belarusian independent media it is difficult to say that it had a significant meaning for the Belarusian society. The reasons remain banal. First, the political apathy of Belarusian society. Secondly, civil society has not created an information tool that would reach all Belarusians. Without the appropriate media design, this action became another dry shot.

Will the Teddy Bear Stunt Happen Again?

Studio Total promises new performances in support of democracy in Belarus. It seems that not only a handful of PR people, but human rights activists from around the world who will use the World Hockey Championship in Belarus next year in order to draw attention to the problems of political prisoners or the absence of elections in the country.

The international media's attention will focus on Belarus for a short time, so democratic activists will use this opportunity. Western journalists and human rights activists will use this opportunity as well.

However, the new actions should be different from the teddy bear landing. The organisers must anticipate the consequences of the action. The police would arrest local Belarusians for the performance rather than the organisers who could enjoy the results of their actions in a safe place, away from the Belarusian security services.

Furthermore, any actions should strengthen the position of Belarusian pro-democracy forces rather than weaken them and show Western activists as criminals. Lukashenka's propaganda machine knows how to exploit the actions of Western activists and divert the media discourse from human rights violations in the country to provocations of Western citizens.

Western activists often find it easier to tease and ridicule Lukashenka and his mates from abroad, rather than implementing projects for Belarusians with lasting consequences going beyond annoying the regime.

Belarus Resists Privatisation of Large Enterprises

Lukashenka expressed on several occasions the hope that Russia would increase the volume of its subsidies to Belarus, taking into account that the West "wants to bend" him.

Defence Minister Jury Zhadobin said that Russia should help through preferential supplies of gas and crude oil, so that the Belarusian military personnel get the same salary as Russian personnel: the significance of Belarus as Russia's western outpost increases in connection with the US' plans to deploy anti-missile defence sites in Central European member countries.

In 2012 the Putin administration will not revive the acute differences in its relations with Lukashenka's regime. However, Moscow is constantly sending signals that the respite that Lukashenka got from Russia's pressure is just a temporary one.

Any lengthy pause in Russia' foreign policy activity in regards to Ukraine will mean that Putin will get back to the Belarusian issue that he was not able to solve during his first two presidential mandates.

In Moscow they are considering what benefit they can derive from the cold war between Lukashenka's regime and the West

A number of Russian officials (in particular, Vice Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin) said that Russia would not abandon Belarus while it is in a difficult situation and will back it. However, in reality, in Moscow they always have considered and are considering what benefit they can derive from the cold war between Lukashenka's regime and the West.

As expected, no results came out of backdoor talks about Belarus' participation in Russia's retaliatory measures against the deployment of US anti-missile defence sites. The topic of deployment of tactical missile system "Iskander" is no longer found in the statements of high-ranking Russian military officials.

To Attach Belarus Securely

The aim of Russian policy towards Belarus is to establish guarantees that regardless of who is president of Belarus, Russia's western neighbour will always take its lead from Russian foreign policy and play the role of the military and political ally. Russia strives to attach Belarus securely through a number of sequential steps of genuine integration, as it is seen by Russia.

Russian companies were interested in buying controlling shares of thirty major Belarusian enterprises

The first such step is the sale of major Belarusian enterprises to Russian companies. In May 2001 then-Prime Minister of Russia Mikhail Kasyanov said that the Russian companies were interested in buying controlling shares of thirty major Belarusian enterprises. Fifteen enterprises on the list, which was made public by Kasyanov, produced more than 50% of Belarus' GDP.

Russia has only recently bought 'Beltransgas'. Lukashenka did not have any other choice but to sell the asset, following the launching of the 'Nord Stream' gas pipeline. However, Lukashenka's team will keep resisting Russian business interests, as far as all other positions are concerned.

No Further Privatisation of Flagship Enterprises

On March 30, 2012, Lukashenka suggested that the Belarusian side would not meet its commitment on privatisation it had to

undertake, in order to get a loan from the EurAsEC Anti-Crisis Fund (i.e., Russia). "If you'd like to please the International Monetary Fund, the European Union, America, Russia or anyone else, saying that we are selling something, do it on your own. I will not support it. It will not happen, while I am in power."

Concerning the intentions of Russian senior managers to buy controlling shares of Belarusian enterprises, Lukashenka noted: "So far, I have always suggested to the guys to leave the property alone. Just get united and show us, how you're going to work and how you see the outcome. Then we will give you a New Year's goose, as you often say. We'll see if you may also require a cow in your shed after that. It means 10% or 25 % respectively."

On April 12, 2012, the Minister of Economics Mikalay Snapkou stated that Belarus would not sell large enterprises in order to meet its commitments to the Anti-Crisis Fund. It will go on selling only small and medium-sized enterprises. "As for the 'blue chips' and negotiations on them, it's a point of great nicety with economic and geopolitical pros and cons. It is not an indicator of privatisation. The indicator of privatisation is constant constructive work with medium-sized enterprises," Snapkou said.

New Russian Loans Suspended

Talking to journalists, Snapkou talked a lot about mistakes of Russian privatisation scenario: "The aggressive, intensive, and too quick privatisation leads to a) recession; b) loss of industrial potential; c) decline in living standards. The Russian officials in turn offered their response to these statements by their Belarusian colleagues.

Russia is waiting for the privatisation of oil refineries and oil pipelines

Thus, talking about Belarus' commitments to the EurAsES Anti-Crisis Fund on April 2, 2012, Viktor Balashov, Economic Advisor to the Embassy of Russia in Belarus noted: "Russia is waiting for the privatisation of oil refineries and oil pipelines."

On April 23, 2012, the Minister of Finance of Russia Anton Siluanov stated that Belarus failed to meet its obligations, connected with getting a credit from the the EurAsES Anti-Crisis Fund. In particular, the country has not met its commitment to privatise state-owned assets to the sum of billion \$2.5bn in 2012.

The EurAsES Anti-Crisis Fund representatives emphasised that the failure to meet the requirements for issuing the credit led to the non-provision of another transfer in the amount of \$440m. This instalment was supposed to be transferred to Belarus by February 28, 2012.

Belarus Needs an Enemy

If one listens to the Belarusian and Russian leadership, a war with the West is imminent. This weekend, the Belarusian internet was filled with stories about Moscow being ready to defend Belarus from Warsaw's claims to the Grodno and Minsk regions in Poland. In November 2011, Head of the Russian General Staff General Nikolai Makarov presented an alarmist [map](#) that showed Russia and Belarus surrounded by hostile nations plotting to occupy them.

Since the 1990s the Kremlin has used Belarus as an ally who is ready to spout radical statements about NATO – something Russia, as a more internationally respected state, cannot do to the same extent. In return, Russia arms Belarus with its

weapons at a discount. Putin's vision of the Eurasian Union, one step closer after the countries formed a common economic space on January 1 2012, is intended to take military cooperation to a new level.

Although Alyaksandr Lukashenka's outbursts have increased his country's isolation, they perform a useful function for Russia by reminding NATO of Russia's sphere of influence. Belarus also makes Russia's rhetoric look more moderate. Geographic proximity to the West of Russia allows a weak Belarus to keep its neighbors alert and to secure generous subsidies from Moscow. If the external threat is indeed growing, as claimed by the Belarusian Ministry of Defense at a December 27 conference, Belarus's prominence will increase.

Fighting Enemies as an Image Statement

With Russia equipping and training the Belarusian military, Minsk need not worry about developing a grand strategy and conducting responsible foreign policy. But if Moscow becomes serious about improving ties with the West, Belarus' leader would have to be reined in. Right now, Lukashenka enjoys reminding Russia about Belarus' role in defending the Union State and Russia. In 2010, he complained about having to buy weapons at market prices and said that for Belarus defending the "brotherly state" was "profitable, even an issue of image". This is music to the ears of some Russian policymakers paranoid about Ukraine's flirtations with NATO.

Russia's military [doctrine](#), approved in February 2010, indeed names NATO expansion as the main external threat. Similar to NATO's article 5 it considers "an armed attack on the state-participant in the Union State" to be "an act of aggression against the Union State" (aka Russia). Russia's commitment does not allay Belarus' threat perceptions. Even so, in 2009, Belarus' military budget amounted to 4.18% of government expenditure, according to a 2010 World Bank report.

A small country in such a close military alliance with nuclear-armed Russia could economize on defense, but Belarus spent slightly more than Lithuania (3.85%) or Latvia (4%). Of course, this could be because Belarus' military doctrine is based on its own threat list, which includes "interference into internal affairs", "expansion of military blocks and alliances which are detrimental to military security" of Belarus, and even "information (psychological) influence which is directed against the interests of the Republic of Belarus and its allies".

How Belarus Became Russia's Shield

How did the country that once sought neutrality and gave up nuclear weapons become a zealous Cold Warrior? After all, even Kazakhstan, also closely allied with Russia, has been moderate in its rhetoric and became a key NATO ally in the Afghan war. After a brief attempt at diversifying foreign policy by joining NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1995 (after Russia), Minsk pursued full-scale political and military integration with Moscow. The two countries' air defense forces have served together since 1995. That year, Belarus also extended Russia's right to keep early warning radar and communication bases on its territory – rent-free for 25 years. A common arms procurement program was launched in 2000.

In the 1990s the young Belarusian state had to choose. One way of generating income was by initiating reform and enhancing economic and trade cooperation with Europe. However, the price – democratization and economic reform – seemed too high for the new Belarusian leadership. Another way of generating income was courting Russia. In 1996, Minsk signed a treaty on the Russia-Belarus Community; in 1997 the Community became Union and in 1999, the Union state. Inviting Kazakhstan, introducing a common economic space and adding "Eurasian" this year is simply the next step in strengthening Belarus' dependence on Russia and foregoing its freedom to conduct independent foreign policy.

But doing business with Russia has had its perks for the regime insiders, insulating them from political competition and allowing the shadow economy to flourish. In the 1990s, Belarus [earned huge profits](#) from [selling weapons](#) to unsavory regimes, appearing on the list of the world's ten largest arms exporters. Once Belarus disposed of its own rusting Soviet arsenal, it was rumored to have helped sell Moscow's, providing Russia with political cover for trade with pariah states.

The High Price of Confrontational Policy

Playing up its role as the first line of defense against NATO and exploiting Moscow's old phobias have been Belarus' tactics for over a decade. For example, the rent-free use of Belarusian "bases", criticized by the Belarusian opposition as politically and economically unwise, has paid off for the regime if not also for the population. The military bases were used in several gas wars with Russia. In 2003, Lukashenka even warned about turning off electricity to Russia's Volga radar station. In contrast, after Russia's Central Election Commission approved the outcome of Belarus' 2010 presidential election, Minsk said the rent-free use of the bases would continue.

Over the years Belarus' has lost its ability to bargain with Russia, however. As was bluntly stated in a US cable from November 2009, published by WikiLeaks, "Belarus is bankrupt, and therefore vulnerable to Russian exploitation". Everybody knows that despite Belarus' anti-NATO bluster, it is Russia which calls the shots on both military and economic integration. Alone, Belarus has neither a strong military nor a strong economy. The December 2010 elections contributed to Minsk's loss of external support in dealings with Moscow and the economic crisis of 2011 delivered another heavy blow with Gazprom buying Beltransgaz.

At this point, the Belarusian leader has squandered his

opportunities for dialogue with the West and undermined his own “multi-vectored” foreign policy. Playing Europe against the Kremlin to get economic benefits worked in the past. However, in the end Belarus’ irrational behavior made some European states welcome rather than fear Minsk’s loss of independence to Moscow. Many in the West are [no longer concerned](#) to see Russian influence in Belarus grow, preferring to border a more predictable and responsible eastern neighbor. This is good news neither for the Belarusian people nor its current leadership.

In its 21st year as a sovereign state, it is high time for Minsk (and indeed Moscow) to develop non-confrontational foreign policy goals. As a small state, Belarus has to adjust to the greater powers around it, and the best solution is to spread the risk among several international actors rather than surrender its sovereignty to one of them. This means balancing ties with both EU and Moscow, diversifying trade and reforming the economy, and avoiding entanglement.