ESSAY

Belarus and the Russo-Ukrainian War: The Consolidation of Strategic Dependence in 2022–2025

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Abstract

This paper analyses Belarus's evolving international position in the context of the first three years of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war (2022–2025). Although Belarus did not participate in direct combat operations, it offered Russia logistical and political support. At the same time, the Belarusian regime sought to maintain an image of neutrality and present itself as a potential mediator. Drawing on structural realism and dependency theory, the paper examines how alignment with Russia has resulted in the consolidation of Belarus's strategic dependence, transforming Belarus into a de facto client state. Special attention is given to changes in Belarus's relations with both Russia and Western partners. The findings suggest that Belarus's capacity for multi-vector diplomacy has been effectively eliminated, while its international marginalisation has intensified. The war served as a catalyst that not only entrenched Minsk's subordination to Moscow but also reduced the likelihood of any return to strategic autonomy in the foreseeable future.

Keywords

Belarus, Russia, Russo-Ukrainian war, strategic dependence, foreign policy, client state

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Introduction

The full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, which began in February 2022, marked a turning point not only for the Euro-Atlantic security architecture but also for the geopolitical situation of Ukraine's neighboring states. Belarus has remained one of the most important—but also one of the least transparent—actors in this war. Although it has not participated in direct combat, it has offered Russia extensive strategic, logistical, and political support. At the same time, Minsk has attempted to position itself as a potential mediator in the ongoing conflict. Its geographic location, close integration with Russia, and internal political dynamics have placed Belarus in a uniquely complex situation. Three years into the full-scale war—regardless of how the conflict evolves—it is clear that this war has had a fundamental impact on Belarus's future standing in the international arena, the extent of its sovereignty, and the possible paths of its political transformation.

The paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Belarus's policy towards the Russo-Ukrainian war in the years 2022–2025. The analysis focuses on the foreign and security policy choices made by Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime—both before Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, and over the following three years. It also looks at how Belarus has been viewed by the international community and what that has meant for its place in the broader international system.

Focusing on the first three years of the full-scale war, from 2022 to 2025, makes it possible to capture the key shifts in Belarus international position resulting from its alignment with Russia. This period includes the initial phase of the conflict, during which Belarusian territory was actively used for military operations, and the gradual consolidation of the country's strategic dependence on Russia, alongside a progressive marginalization of its relations with the West. While the conflict itself began in 2014 and may extend beyond 2025, this timeframe covers a critical period in which Belarus's security relationship with Russia underwent a fundamental transformation.

To maintain analytical clarity, the paper confines its analysis to Belarus's interactions with the main actors either directly involved in or significantly influencing the conflict—namely Russia, Ukraine, and Western powers (the European Union and the United States). Belarus's relations with actors outside the region, particularly China, are a relevant and worthwhile research topic, but they are treated here as secondary, due to their limited impact on Belarus's international position during the period under consideration.

The analysis draws on a combination of the realist perspective in international relations, which emphasizes the primacy of state survival and security under conditions of power asymmetry and limited sovereignty—and elements of dependency theory (specifically neocolonial studies). From a realist standpoint, a subordinate state functions as an instrument for promoting the strategic interests of the dominant power. The neocolonial perspective, in turn, allows us to understand long-standing

structural dependencies—political, economic, and military—between the center and the periphery.

In this article the two lenses are used sequentially and in tandem: structural realism explains Minsk's short-horizon choices under coercion and uncertainty (cost–risk calculations and bandwagoning), whereas dependency analysis tracks how repeated bargains in trade, finance and security sediment into durable hierarchies and path dependence. Where they diverge is on time and agency—realism foregrounds immediate survival logics; dependency theory maps how those logics, when iterated, narrow autonomy over time.

Discourse analysis is used as a bridge: official narratives translate short-term alignments into domestic legitimacy and gradually normalise subordination. Normatively, reading outcomes through a critical dependency lens alongside a non-normative realist diagnosis makes the trade-off explicit: policies that reduce near-term insecurity may entrench unequal power structures; this duality informs the interpretation of Western sanctions and of Lukashenka's hedging claims throughout the text.

To complement this analysis, the paper considers how the Belarusian authorities have constructed their official messaging—language that reflects both subordination to Russia and an effort to preserve some degree of reputational independence. In this context, selected tools of discourse analysis were applied, focusing in particular on the official statements made by Aliaksandr Lukashenka. This discursive layer is not an add-on; it is treated as the mechanism that links realist threat-framing ("defence," "pre-emption") with dependency's reproduction of hierarchy by making subordination appear necessary, even prudent. The analysis examines how key narratives were shaped, especially those regarding a "threat from the West," the notion of Russia's "preventive measures," and Minsk's willingness to act as a mediator.

The key sources used include official communications from Belarus and Russia, as well as research papers and policy analyses related to Eastern Europe and security issues. Legal and doctrinal documents (including military doctrines) have also been taken into account to place the examined processes in a broader institutional context.

Belarus's international position on the eve of the full-scale war

Belarus emerged from the Soviet Union with one of the weakest traditions of statehood and national identity in the region, a factor that shaped its later dependence on Russia.[1] A distinctive feature of post-Soviet Belarus's foreign policy has been the gradual deepening of cooperation and integration with the Russian Federation—ties that were disrupted following the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the Belarusian authorities, relations with Russia were seen not only as a guarantee of economic and military security but also as a source of domestic legitimacy and a tool for

[1] N. Bekus, "Belarus's winding path to a post-Soviet identity," *Current History* 118, no. 810 (2019): 258–264, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48614465?seq=1.

stabilizing the authoritarian regime.[2] At the same time, Minsk remained aware of the structural imbalance in bilateral relations, which led to growing dependence on Russia and raised concerns about potential threats to its sovereignty. In response, Belarus sought to preserve as much autonomy as possible within the framework of integration, which was reflected, for example, in the selective implementation of commitments arising from bilateral or multilateral agreements involving other post-Soviet states.[3]

Belarus also used its ties with Western partners—including the European Union, its member states, and to a lesser extent the United States—primarily as a way to strengthen its negotiating position vis-à-vis Moscow and to counterbalance Russia's political and economic influence.[4] An example was Minsk's attempt to secure alternative energy supplies in order to loosen its economic dependence on Russia. This included oil imports from Venezuela (2010) and Azerbaijan (2011 and 2020).[5] Despite their small scale, these deliveries held political significance and provided Minsk with leverage in negotiations with Moscow over energy prices and supply terms.

Another way Belarus sought to bolster its international standing was by positioning itself as a mediator in regional conflicts—most notably the conflict between Russia and Ukraine after 2014. Hosting the peace talks in Minsk that led to the Minsk agreements on 5 September 2014 and 12 February 2015 allowed Aliaksandr Lukashenka to present himself as a guarantor of regional stability and a constructive dialogue partner.[6]

It is essential to note, however, that Belarus's western foreign policy vector was not an alternative to its strategic orientation towards Russia. Rather, it played a secondary and highly variable role. Relations with the West followed a distinctly cyclical pattern. Moments of renewed dialogue with the West rarely lasted long. Sooner or later, relations would sour again—usually ending in regime isolation and

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[2] D.R. Marples, "Between the EU and Russia: geopolitical games in Belarus," *The Journal of Belarusian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2013): 31, https://brill.com/view/journals/bela/7/1/article-p38_3.xml?srsltid=AfmBOopli6yv-_C8WloqYoM-kl8zGCPQS_uHIEbzbLZlanDMgcL0WrOl.

[3] V. Pazdnyak, "The rise and fall of Belarus' geopolitical strategy," *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 9, no. 1 (2011), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Vyachaslau-Pazdnyak/publication/270171980_The_Rise_and_Fall_of_Belarus%27_Geopolitical_Strategy/links/5baa880f299bf13e604c86a0/The-Rise-and-Fall-of-Belarus-Geopolitical-Strategy.pdf?origin=publication_detail&_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uRG93bmxvYWQiLCJwcmV2aW91c1BhZ2UiOiJwdWJsaWNhdGlvbiJ9fQ&__cf_chl_tk=BMM2w0l7VmSqq5D1voEmhN9wqgnX66hpLEz7sm6vqaA-1762426340-1.0.1.1-0L0dMj16P3lUJb.sHO0Wh8cJ7B8OLadXXd7_SAd7XDs.

[4] B. Zogg, "Belarus between East and West: the art of the deal," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, no. 231 (September, 2018), https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse231-EN.pdf.

[5] "Venesuela v mae 2010 goda postavit v Belarus probnuiu partiiu nefti," [Venezuela to deliver a trial shipment of oil to Belarus in May 2010], March 18, 2010, https://president.gov.by/ru/events/venesuela-v-mae-2010-goda-postavit-v-belarus-probnuju-partiju-nefti-5109.

[6] A. Shraibman, "Belarus, the tactical peacemaker," Carnegie Moscow Center, June 25, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/05/belarus-the-tactical-peacemaker?lang=en.

fresh rounds of political or economic sanctions. These swings were closely linked to Belarus's internal political cycle, especially around presidential elections.[7]

After every presidential election, marked by manipulated results and the suppression of the opposition, Belarus found itself increasingly isolated from the West. This pattern repeated in 2001, 2006, 2010, 2015, and 2020.[8] In response, the EU and the United States imposed visa bans and sectoral sanctions on representatives of the regime and institutions involved in the repressive apparatus. Over time, typically after a dozen or so months of domestic stabilization and rhetorical gestures towards liberalization, relations would partially normalize. This was often reflected in the suspension or easing of sanctions (as in 2015–2016) and the resumption of sectoral dialogue with the EU in specific areas.[9]

The domestic political developments in 2020 followed the well-established pattern of Lukashenka's opportunistic approach to the West. In the run-up to the presidential election, there were signs of a limited thaw: the release of some political prisoners, cautious media liberalization, and interest in closer cooperation with the European Union. These actions, consistent with previous episodes of tactical opening before elections, aimed to improve the regime's international image and reduce Western pressure.[10]

However, the August 2020 presidential election and its aftermath brought a dramatic rupture in Belarus's relations with the West. The unprecedented scale and brutality of repression against participants in equally unprecedented mass protests triggered a strong international response. As authors Elena Korosteleva and Irina Petrova have noted, this popular mobilization signaled a profound societal transformation, as the regime's brutality galvanized a previously apolitical society into a resilient 'peoplehood' fighting for dignity.[11] The EU and the United States refused to recognize the official election results and, following the brutal suppression

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[7] A. Eberhardt, *Gra pozorów. Stosunki rosyjsko-białoruskie 1991–2008* (Warsaw: PISM, 2008); G. Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and how Western foreign policy misses the mark* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); M. Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka: adaptive authoritharianism* (London: Routledge, 2019); E. Mironowicz, *Polityka zagraniczna Białorusi 1990–2010* (Białystok: UwB, 2011).

[8] S. Bedford, "The election game: authoritarian consolidation processes in Belarus," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 24, no. 4 (2017): 381–405, https://www.academia.edu/35065295/_The_Election_Game_Authoritarian_Consolidation_Processes_in_Belarus.

[9] D. Melyantsou, *Belarus-West relations: the new normal* (Washington (DC): Center for Transatlantic Relations, March, 2017).

[10] Y. Vasylyev, "Belarus in the multipolar world: Lukashenka bets on himself," *New Eastern Europe,* 2020, https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/01/21/belarus-in-the-multipolar-world-lukashenka-bets-on-himself/.

[11] E. Korosteleva and I. Petrova, "Community resilience in Belarus and the EU response," *J Common Mark Stud* 59, no. S1 (2021): 124–136, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354890582_Community_Resilience_in_Belarus_and_the_EU_response.

of the protests, imposed new rounds of sanctions on regime officials, state institutions, and economic sectors.[12]

In parallel, the crackdown created the conditions for the emergence of an organised political alternative in exile. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia, the main opposition candidate in the 2020 presidential election—widely believed to have won a majority of votes—was forced to leave the country shortly thereafter and went on to establish first the Coordination Council and later the United Transitional Cabinet.[13] These structures gradually developed contacts with Western governments and international organisations, offering them a channel to express political and moral support for Belarusian democratic aspirations. While such recognition was deliberately cautious and fell short of formal diplomatic status, it nonetheless signalled that the legitimacy of Lukashenka's rule was fundamentally questioned by many Western actors. This new dimension further complicated Minsk's relations with the West in the run-up to the full-scale war.

At the EU institutional level after 2020, policy toward Belarus coalesced around three pillars: non-recognition of the presidential election results and consistent condemnation of repression; progressively tighter restrictive measures (individual and sectoral) in response to abuses; and support instruments for Belarusian civil society and independent media outside the country. Brussels framed Minsk as responsible for grave violations and increasingly aligned with Russia, while maintaining humanitarian exemptions and a societal "engagement track" to signal that isolation targeted the regime rather than the population.[14]

Among EU member states, approaches diverged. Frontline states (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia) drove the most restrictive line—hosting the democratic opposition, tightening border, visa and trade regimes, and treating Belarus as a vector of Russian pressure on NATO's eastern flank. The Nordics, Czechia and the Netherlands tended to align with maximal sanctions. Germany and France backed sanctions and deterrence while keeping limited diplomatic channels for crisis

[12] United States Department of State: List of sanctions imposed by the U.S. administration following the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, "European Union, Sanctions against Belarus," https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/; K. Kosowska and P. Kosowski, "Belarusian economy in the face of Western sanctions [version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 2 approved with reservations]," *Stosunki Międzynarodowe - International Relations* 4 (2024): 2; P. Żochowski, *Paintful EU sectoral sanctions against Belarus* (Warsaw: OSW, June 25, 2021), https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-06-25/painful-eu-sectoral-sanctions-against-belarus; K. Kłysiński, *Belarus: further Western sanctions* (Warsaw: OSW, December 3, 2021), https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-12-03/belarus-further-western-sanctions.

[13] F. Jalalzai and K. Jurek, "The "Accidental Candidate" versus Europe's longest-serving dictator: Belarus's unfinished revolution for women," *Politics and Governance* 11, no. 4 (2023), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368267793_The_Accidental_Candidate_Versus_Europe's_Longest_Dictator_Belarus's_Unfinished_Revolution_for_Women.

[14] G. Bosse, "Policy-learning in EU democracy support: strategic adaptation and (un)learning in the EU's response to authoritarian consolidation in Belarus," *Democratization* 32, no. 7 (2025): 1708–1728, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2025.2484591#abstract.

management. A smaller group (notably Hungary, at times Austria) argued for narrower sectoral scope. For Minsk, this heterogeneity offered only modest room to probe intra-EU differences.

The United States also set its course after 2020. Washington's approach centred on three elements: non-recognition of the vote; U.S. Treasury (OFAC) sanctions on major state-owned firms, banks and intermediaries; and export controls. These measures constrained Belarus's access to Western finance and technology and, together with EU/UK steps, pushed trade and supply chains further into Russia's orbit. In parallel, the U.S. expanded support for exiled media, human-rights defenders and accountability efforts.

This sequence of developments marked an unprecedented decline in Belarus's position as a potential partner for the West and significantly deepened its dependence on Russia—an outcome that proved decisive for the country's international standing in the lead-up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The dynamics of Belarus-Russia relations before 2022

As noted earlier, in the first years of independence, Belarus pursued a clear course aimed at first maintaining and later, amid regional disintegration processes, restoring relations with the Russian Federation. From the mid-1990s onwards, the Belarusian government steadily deepened cooperation with Russia, becoming its closest partner in the post-Soviet space. This choice was driven by political and economic considerations, as well as social and identity factors.[15] A significant portion of Belarusian society remained strongly attached to Soviet realities due to a weakly developed sense of national identity and the hardships of the post-Soviet transition, exacerbated by the breakdown of production and trade ties inherited from the Soviet era.[16]

These sentiments aligned with the personal worldview of Aliaksandr Lukashenka—a politician shaped within late Soviet bureaucratic structures—who was wary of both national emancipation movements and the Western model of liberal democracy.[17] His vision of statehood was centered on the idea of a strong,

[15] V. Laine, A. Lastouski and R. Nizhnikau, "Ideational travels of Slavophilia in Belarus: from Tsars to Lukashenka," in *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. M. Suslov, M. Čejka and V. Đorđević (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-17875-7_7#citeas.

[16] Eberhardt, *Gra pozorów. Stosunki rosyjsko-białoruskie 1991–2008*; D.R. Marples, *Belarus: a denationalized nation* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1999), https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Belarus.html?id=EMCYfOSaLSgC&redir_esc=y; A. Yekadumaw, "The Russian factor in development of Belarusian culture," in *Belarus-Russia Integration*, ed. V. Bulhakaw (Minsk: Minsk-Warsaw Analytical Group, 2003).

[17] D.R. Marples, *The Lukashenka phenomenon: elections, propaganda, and the foundations of political authority in Belarus* (Trondheim: Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures and Societies, 2007), https://hdl.handle.net/11250/2711454.

paternalistic state oriented towards integration with the post-Soviet space, particularly with Russia, which he regarded as a key political, economic, and cultural partner.[18]

In the early post-independence period, Belarus portrayed its integration with Russia mainly as a way to rebuild economic and political ties that had existed during the Soviet era. Later, as regional dynamics evolved, this narrative gave way to new ideas—ones that emphasized forms of cooperation more in line with the emerging geopolitical context. On a practical level, this led to the creation of several institutional formats: the Community of Belarus and Russia in 1996, followed by the Union of Belarus and Russia in 1997, and ultimately the 1999 treaty that established the Union State. The idea of a Belarus–Russia union has deep roots in post-Soviet integration projects, reflecting Moscow's attempt to preserve influence over the former imperial periphery after 1991. The Union State was conceived as a confederation-type arrangement, envisaging shared institutions, common economic and defence policies, and even a single currency, while formally preserving the sovereignty of both members.[19]

Despite Belarus's declared commitment to integration with Russia, many of the signed agreements—especially those involving deeper institutional integration—were never fully implemented or were carried out selectively and with delays. The most notable examples include the unfulfilled plans for a common currency within the Union State and repeated failures to harmonize energy markets.[20] Economic disputes, especially those related to energy supply, also remained a recurring source of bilateral tension.

These tensions stemmed from Lukashenka's reluctance to transfer key powers to supranational bodies, fearing a loss of control over state institutions and deeper dependence on Moscow. He was also concerned that deeper integration could lead Moscow to question whether he still served as the most effective guarantor of its interests in Belarus. Lukashenka's strategy of tactical maneuvering allowed him to maintain a degree of decision-making autonomy despite the growing asymmetry in the relationship with Russia.

Sectoral cooperation between Belarus and Russia was uneven and asymmetrical, though Belarus benefited economically in tangible ways. A key aspect of this relationship was the preferential supply of Russian energy resources—mainly natural

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[18] A. Feduta, *Lukashenko. Politicheskaia biografiia* [Lukashenko: A Political Biography] (Moscow, 2005); V. Karbalevich, *Aleksandr Lukashenko: politicheskii portret* [Alexander Lukashenko: A Political Portait] (Moscow, 2010).

[19] Eberhardt, *Gra pozorów. Stosunki rosyjsko-białoruskie*; A. Marin, *The Union State of Belarus and Russia: myths and realities of political-military integration* (Vilnius: Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, 2020), https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Anais-Marin-Union-State-of-Belarus-and-Russia.pdf.

[20] Eberhardt, *Gra pozorów*; U. Markus, "Russia and Belarus: elusive integration," *Problems of Post-Communism* 44, no. 5 (1997): 55–61.

gas and crude oil—sold to Belarus at prices well below market rates. Another significant element was Russia's provision of loans, repayable and non-repayable, which helped maintain Belarus's fiscal stability and finance infrastructure and industrial projects. Belarusian goods also enjoyed privileged access to the Russian domestic market, which was vital for several sectors of the national economy, including machinery, agri-food, and chemicals.

The deepest level of Belarus-Russia integration prior to 2022 was in the field of security and defense. The Belarusian armed forces and defense industry were fully dependent on Russian support, and Minsk consistently ceded sovereignty in defense matters in favor of operational subordination to Russia. As a result, Belarus's military evolved into a supporting structure for Russian operations. Key components, such as air defense, were integrated into Russia's command system, and military infrastructure on Belarusian territory was adapted to meet the needs of Russian combat formations. At both the operational and strategic levels, Belarus ceased to function as an independent actor in the regional security system and became part of Russia's military space.[21] A key element of this military integration was the organization of regular joint exercises with Russia—especially the "Zapad" (West) drills—featuring realistic scenarios of conflict with NATO states. On the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Belarus was hosting the "Union Resolve 2022" exercises. Officially described as allied drills, they in fact served as a pretext for the large-scale deployment of Russian forces and enabled the attack on Ukraine from the north.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian authorities employed a consistent anti-Western rhetoric aimed at demonizing NATO and selected countries—especially Poland, Lithuania, and the United States. These narratives were used strategically, both domestically and in relations with Moscow. They served to legitimize the authoritarian model of governance, reinforce loyalty of the security apparatus, and portray Belarus as a "frontline bulwark" of the Russian sphere of influence confronting a supposedly aggressive West.

Discursively, this "bulwark" trope converted security alignment into domestic legitimacy—coherent with realism's threat logic while, in dependency terms, naturalising asymmetric integration as common sense.

In the second half of the 2010s, Belarus-Russia integration entered a new phase of acceleration, exemplified by negotiations on so-called integration roadmaps, which were preliminarily agreed upon in December 2019. These plans aimed to deepen sectoral and institutional cooperation in 31 areas, including energy, taxation, finance, transport, and regulatory harmonization. Although officially presented as technical efforts to align the functioning of both economies, the documents effectively represented Moscow's attempt to institutionalize its influence through the creation

[21] A. Wilk, *Russia's Belarusian army: the practical aspects of Belarus and Russia's military integration* (Warsaw: OSW, 2021); Marin, *The Union State of Belarus and Russia*.

of joint governance structures. Despite publicly declared loyalty to Moscow, the authorities in Minsk remained reluctant to establish supranational decision-making bodies, fearing a loss of sovereignty and formal subordination to Russian institutions.

Official pro-Russian rhetoric in Belarus was accompanied by growing concerns about Moscow's rising assertiveness, especially following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014. In response, the Belarusian authorities sought to insulate the country from the more aggressive aspects of Russian messaging. One element of this approach was the promotion of so-called "soft Belarusianisation," aimed at reinforcing national identity and countering external narratives.[22] At the same time, Lukashenka moved to weaken explicitly pro-Russian political currents at home. The unwritten rule in Belarusian politics has long been to ensure that no domestic force emerges that is more pro-Russian than the president himself.[23] Granting Moscow such a lever could prove dangerous if bilateral tensions escalated. Lukashenka even went so far as to describe "fraternal Ukraine" as a nation fighting for its independence. He stressed that Belarus was engaged in a similar struggle—not military or political, but economic—clearly alluding to the pressure Moscow was exerting on Minsk at the time.[24] Between 2015 and 2020, there were growing concerns that Belarus could become the next target of Vladimir Putin—through hybrid tactics aimed at bringing the country under full Russian control.[25]

The presidential election in Belarus in August 2020—and its immediate aftermath, marked by mass protests and a brutal government crackdown—proved to be a turning point in Belarus-Russia relations. In the face of pro-European and pro-democratic protests, Lukashenka's regime received full political backing from the Kremlin. Russian elites viewed the events in Belarus as a threat to their power in Minsk and to Russia's internal stability. The support provided by Moscow was political, media-driven, and operational in nature, while the exact extent of any involvement by Russian security services or advisers in suppressing the protests remains unclear.

The 2020 events had seemingly contradictory consequences for bilateral relations. On the one hand, Russia temporarily eased pressure on Lukashenka to pursue

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[22] P. Rudkouski, *Soft Belarusianisation: the ideology of Belarus in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict* (Warsaw: OSW, November 3, 2017), https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2017-11-03/soft-belarusianisation-ideology-belarus-era-russian-ukrainian.

[23] A. Shraibman, "Belarus's second front: is Lukashenko really afraid of Russia?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 24, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/06/belaruss-second-front-is-lukashenko-really-afraid-of-russia?lang=en.

[24] "Brother Ukraine is fighting for its independence - Belarus president," *The Moscow Times*, January 27, 2017, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/01/27/brother-ukraine-is-fighting-for-its-independence-lukashenko-a56954.

[25] D. Francis, "Is Belarus Putin's next target?," Atlantic Council, January 20, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-belarus-putins-next-target/.

further institutional integration within the Union State.[26] In November 2021, at a meeting of the Supreme State Council, 28 integration programs and a new military doctrine were adopted. However, Moscow refrained from pressing for a transfer of sovereign powers to supranational structures. Instead, it achieved its strategic goals by other means. Following the violent suppression of protests, Belarus effectively lost the ability to conduct an independent foreign policy based on balancing between Russia and the West. Lukashenka became internationally isolated and, as a result, found himself almost entirely dependent on Moscow—politically, economically, and in the information sphere.[27]

The Lukashenka regime responded to this new reality by escalating its anti-Western rhetoric. This shift is also evident in the actions of the Belarusian security services in autumn 2021, which triggered a migration crisis on the Belarus–Poland border—and, to a lesser extent, on the borders with Lithuania and Latvia. The operation was part of a broader confrontational strategy by Minsk and Moscow toward the West, aimed at destabilizing the eastern flank of the European Union, polarizing Poland's domestic politics, and provoking a humanitarian crisis. One may ask—though the question remains open—whether these actions were also intended to undermine public support in Poland for Ukrainian war refugees, just weeks before Russia's planned full-scale invasion.

Ukraine in Belarus's foreign policy before 2022

Ukraine never played a prominent role in Belarus's foreign policy priorities. Even so, ties with Kyiv held clear geopolitical and economic relevance. The two countries shared cultural affinities, a long border, and the legacy of the Soviet Union—including many of the same post-communist challenges. Yet the differences soon outweighed the similarities. Politically, Belarus took a distinctly authoritarian path, while Ukraine—though marked by oligarchic influence—pursued a democratic course and steadily worked to distance itself from Moscow. Public pressure only reinforced Kyiv's westward drift.

Political relations between the two states were marked by pragmatic cooperation but remained shallow and distrustful. Aliaksandr Lukashenka viewed Ukraine's political upheavals—the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Euromaidan protests (known in Ukraine as the Revolution of Dignity) in 2013–2014—with unease, seeing them as a threat to his own regime and a dangerous precedent. Still, Belarus did not formally recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea, despite its alignment with Moscow. This was widely interpreted as an attempt to retain room for manoeuvre—a bargaining chip in dealings with the Kremlin. The gesture was part of Minsk's balancing policy and a bid to maintain neutrality in the conflict between Russia and

[26] A.M. Dyner, "Russia and Belarus deepen integration," PISM, November 8, 2021, https://pism.pl/publications/russia-and-belarus-deepen-integration.

[27] E. Götz, "Takeover by stealth: the curious case of Russia's Belarus policy," *Probl Post-Communism* 71, no. 3 (2024): 206–218, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2224570.

Ukraine. At the same time, Lukashenka's rhetoric left little doubt that he considered Crimea to be Russian.[28]

This cautious approach allowed Belarus to position itself as a mediator in the early phase of Russian aggression. The peace talks held in Minsk led to the two agreements signed in 2014 and 2015, intended to end the war in eastern Ukraine. The mediating role boosted Minsk's international visibility—and Lukashenka's standing—especially in the eyes of Western partners.

After 2014, as Ukraine reduced trade with Russia, Belarus emerged as one of Kyiv's key economic partners. It exported oil products, fertilisers, electricity, and manufactured goods, while importing Ukrainian steel, agricultural products, and machinery. Despite political tensions, the business relationship proved resilient.

At the same time, the Belarusian leadership saw Ukraine as a warning: a society mobilised to remove an authoritarian leader and upend the system. For Lukashenka, the Ukrainian experience posed an existential threat—and served as a useful tool in shaping internal narratives. He frequently depicted Ukraine as a dysfunctional and unstable nation in decline, where living conditions were much worse than in Belarus. Relations with Ukraine were used instrumentally: when courting the West, Minsk emphasised its constructive role in peace efforts; when leaning toward Moscow, it amplified the spectre of the "Ukrainian scenario". Overall, the Belarusian approach to Kyiv was ambivalent, often inconsistent, and closely tied to shifting geopolitical calculations.[29]

The 2020 presidential election and the regime's violent response to mass protests signaled a significant shift. Ukraine, siding with Belarusian civil society, moved to distance itself from Lukashenka. From Minsk's point of view, this signaled the end of any credible strategy of balancing between Ukraine and the West. Politically isolated, Belarus slipped further into Moscow's orbit, and its ability to pursue an independent policy toward Kyiv was reduced to a minimum.

Aggressor or mediator: Belarus's policy towards the full-scale war

Although Belarusian armed forces did not participate in direct combat against Ukraine, the country played a significant operational role in Russia's aggression, particularly in its initial phase in February 2022. Russia used Belarus's territory and its military, transport, and logistics infrastructure to launch the full-scale invasion. The main axis of the Russian assault, intended to quickly seize Kyiv, advanced from the north, across the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. Missile strikes and an

[28] "Lukashenko nazval Krym rossiyskim. Belarus priznala anneksiyu?," [Lukashenko called Crimea Russian. Did Belarus recognize the annexation?], BBC Russian, December 1, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-59491521.

[29] S.A. Mudrov, "Belarus, Crimea and the Donbas: Belarusian attitudes to the post-maidan events in Ukraine," *J Contemp Cent East Eur* 28, no. 1 (2020): 85–91, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2020.1807732.

airborne landing from Belarusian territory targeted the strategic airfield in Hostomel near Kyiv in the war's first hours. Belarus became an essential staging ground for Russian forces. Supplies moved through its territory, and key transport and maintenance services operated in support of units deployed in Ukraine. While Belarusian personnel did not participate in combat, their logistical role was critical to sustaining Russian operations in the northern theatre.

The scale and nature of Belarus's cooperation with Russia fall within the scope of aggression as defined by UN General Assembly Resolution 3314 (1974), which states that aggression includes "The action of a State in allowing its territory, which it has placed at the disposal of another State, to be used by that other State for perpetrating an act of aggression against a third State".[30]

Minsk consistently steered clear of open military involvement, wary of both public opinion and the domestic fallout such a move could trigger. Prevailing reluctance to military involvement characterised Belarusian society, and the regime feared that deploying troops to Ukraine might destabilise the domestic situation.[31] Lukashenka had long insisted that Belarus would stay out of foreign wars and would not deploy its citizens abroad—statements clearly aimed at preserving the image of a neutral, peace-minded state. In reality, though, the limited combat readiness of the Belarusian army made any meaningful military engagement unlikely in practical terms. Underfunded and ill-equipped, it was poorly suited to carrying out large-scale offensive operations.

The authorities in Minsk rejected accusations of complicity in the war.[32] At the same time, Lukashenka offered Russia full political backing. He publicly endorsed the official goals of the invasion, as announced by Vladimir Putin, including the "demilitarization" and "denazification" of Ukraine. In official speeches, he blamed NATO and Ukraine for provoking the conflict and escalating regional tensions. He also suggested that Ukraine had been preparing an attack against Belarus—rhetoric used to justify what was described as Russia's "preemptive action".[33]

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[30] B.B. Ferencz, "Defining aggression: where it stands and where it's going," *Am J Int Law*, March, 2017, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-journal-of-international-law/article/abs/defining-aggression-where-it-stands-and-where-it-s-going/077F9150157F5E3A47BBF37EFF2A8615; United Nations, "Definition of aggression," A/RES/3314 (29), https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/3314(XXIX); M. Anderson, "Reconceptualizing aggresion," *Duke Law J* 60, no. 2 (2010): 411–456.

[31] A. Shraibman, ""Keep us out": Belarus' public opinion amidst the war," *German Economic Team Newsletter* no. 77 (July–August, 2022), https://www.german-economic-team.com/en/newsletter/keep-us-out-belarus-public-opinion-amidst-the-war/.

[32] S.A. Mudrov, ""We did not unleash this war. Our conscience is clear." The Russia-Ukraine military conflict and its perception in Belarus," *J Contemp Cent East Eur* 30, no. 2 (2022): 273–284, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2022.2089390.

[33] "Lukashenko v Moskve zaiavil, chto Ukraina khotela napast' na Belarus' - pokazhet Putinu "kakie-to karty"," [Lukashenko in Moscow said that Ukraine wanted to attack Belarus - he will show Putin "some maps"], Ukrainska Pravda, March 11, 2022, https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2022/03/11/7330394/; "Lukashenko schitaet, chto Ukraina atakovala by Belorussiyu, yesli by ne preventivnyi udar RF," [Lukashenko believes Ukraine would have attacked Belarus if not for Russia's pre-emptive strike], TASS, March 11, 2022, https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14040463.

Minsk simultaneously tried to maintain its traditional narrative of being ready to act as a mediator. In the early weeks of the war, from late February to early March 2022, Belarus hosted the first three rounds of peace talks between Russian and Ukrainian delegations.[34] However, the negotiations soon moved to Istanbul. Ukraine increasingly questioned Minsk's role as the battlefield situation stabilised, limiting Belarus's credibility as a neutral mediator from the outset. When Belarus expressed interest in participating in potential peace negotiations in December 2024, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Belarus was a "partner in aggression" and could expect only a "fair hearing" during any future legal process.[35]

In the months that followed, Lukashenka's regime continued to simulate preparations for entering the conflict. Between late 2022 and 2024, Minsk repeatedly staged sudden military readiness checks, held joint exercises with Russian troops in the Homel and Brest regions, and moved additional units closer to the Ukrainian border. In June 2023 and again in August 2024, the Belarusian army ran large territorial-defence drills, with state television warning of "threats from the south". It turned out that the purpose of these actions was not to launch a direct attack but to strategically tie down Ukrainian forces. Faced with uncertainty about Minsk's intentions, Kyiv was forced to keep a significant military presence in the north, limiting its ability to redeploy those forces to more active fronts.[36]

Several factors reduced the likelihood of an actual Belarusian offensive: not only the limited combat readiness of its military and the risk of internal destabilisation but also geographical constraints. Much of the Belarusian-Ukrainian border runs through Polesia—a region of forests, swamps, and sparse infrastructure. The terrain had been heavily mined and fortified by Ukrainian forces, turning it into a natural barrier. Any attack in that direction would have been slow, exposed, and uncertain in outcome, with a serious risk of high losses.

Through a realist lens, this was low-cost coercive signalling: tying down Ukrainian forces while avoiding prohibitive costs. Through a dependency lens, it was a performative pledge of loyalty that deepened Belarus's functional role as a support platform for Russia. Discursively, framing these moves as "defensive" and "preventive" helped domesticate the costs of alignment.

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[34] K. Kłysiński, "Lukashenka's political manoeuvres: Belarus and the war," OSW, March 1, 2022, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-03-01/lukashenkas-political-manoeuvres-belarus-and-war.

[35] "MZS: vse, na shcho mayut pravo pretenduvaty bilorus'ki posadovtsi, tse spravedlyvyi protses za zlochyn ahresiyi proty Ukrayiny," [MFA: all that Belarusian officials are entitled to is a fair trial for the crime of aggression against Ukraine], LB.ua, December 16, 2024, https://lb.ua/news/2024/12/16/650592_mzs_vse_shcho_mayut_pravo.html.

[36] V. Châtelet, "Ongoing Russian-Belarusian drills keep up the pressure on northern Ukraine," DFRLab, June 23, 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/06/23/russian-belarusian-drills-broadened-threat-to-ukraine/; P. Rad, "Ukrainian-Belarusian relations amid the Russo-Ukrainian war," *Ukrainian Analytical Digest* 10 (2024): 2–7, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/104368.

The war's impact on Belarus's international position

Belarus's relations with the West after 2022

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine further weakened Belarus's international position. Even prior to the war, Belarus had already found itself politically isolated following the violent suppression of mass protests after the fraudulent 2020 presidential election. The support it extended to Russia, including the use of its territory and military infrastructure, as well as logistical and political backing, led to a new wave of much harsher sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States.

These new measures targeted not only individuals linked to Lukashenka's regime but also key sectors of the Belarusian economy. Among the most significant EU actions were the disconnection of selected Belarusian banks from the SWIFT system, restrictions on trade in raw materials, and a ban on Belarusian road transport operators entering EU territory. U.S. authorities also expanded trade and technology sanctions on regime-linked enterprises and imposed further restrictions on Belarus's financial sector.[37]

While the first phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014–2015 had briefly strengthened Belarus's international role by allowing it to act as a mediator, the full-scale war that began in 2022 only deepened its isolation and marginalisation. The situation resulted not only from Belarus's involvement in the war—which, as noted earlier, meets the formal criteria of aggression—but also from the regime's continued, unprecedented repression of civil society since 2020, widely condemned by the Western community.

After February 2022, these pre-existing policy tracks hardened and broadened—adding financial disconnections, transport bans and heightened secondary sanctions risks—further deepening Minsk's isolation.

At the EU level after 2022, the center of gravity shifted from policy design to enforcement. Measures broadened (finance, high-tech and dual-use controls, transport and transit limits), but equally important was the anti-circumvention drive: closer monitoring of re-exports via third countries, stricter end-use scrutiny and coordinated listings with transatlantic partners. Humanitarian carve-outs and funding for exiled media, NGOs and education were retained to signal that pressure targeted the state, not society. In practice, even firms not directly listed faced higher compliance costs and bank risk aversion, narrowing Belarus's access to European finance, technology and logistics. In realist terms, enforcement compressed Minsk's room for manoeuvre and raised its security costs; in dependency terms, Western de-risking

[37] U.S. Department of State, "List of sanctions imposed by the U.S. administration following the 2022 aggression against Ukraine," https://2021-2025.state.gov/belarus-sanctions/; "Overview of US sanctions against Belarus," B1.ru, November 18, 2024, https://b1.ru/en/insights/law-messenger/us-sanctions-on-belarus-18-november/; Council of the European Union, "List of sanctions imposed by the EU," https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/.

amplified Russia's leverage as the default provider of market access, credit and transit.

At the bilateral level, relations between Belarus and its NATO-and EU-member neighbours deteriorated sharply—most notably with Poland and Lithuania, and, to a lesser extent, with Latvia. Minsk's actions, particularly the orchestration and maintenance of the 2021 migration crisis, combined with an aggressive anti-Western narrative, solidified Belarus's image as a destabilising actor on NATO's eastern flank and an enabler of Russian regional policy. Frontline governments coupled the EU line with national steps: restricting selected border crossings, tightening consular and visa policies, and institutional support for the democratic opposition.

The United States amplified its post-2020 stance after 2022: Treasury sanctions on major state firms, banks and intermediaries, expanded export controls, and a clearer threat of secondary sanctions for third-country facilitators. This chilled access to Western finance and technology even where EU rules were looser, and pushed Belarusian trade and supply chains deeper into Russia's orbit. In parallel, Washington increased support for exiled media, human-rights defenders and accountability initiatives, and consistently condemned the presence of Russian forces and the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Close coordination with the EU, UK and G7 kept the overall approach relatively tight, despite tactical differences.

In 2025, Lukashenka reopened a narrowly transactional channel with the U.S. administration of President Donald Trump, centred on phased releases of political detainees. The gestures briefly improved his image and supplied material for domestic propaganda, but they did not yield durable policy change in Washington or Brussels. Most EU capitals framed the moves as "hostage diplomacy," and U.S. engagement remained tactical and tightly conditional. In net terms, the dividends for Minsk were largely optical; Belarus's structural dependence on Russia and the broader sanctions architecture stayed intact.

China featured in this picture mostly as a potential—but limited—economic hedge. Belarus's role on the China–EU rail corridor kept some transit volumes flowing, yet enforcement against sanctions circumvention raised costs and uncertainty, and Chinese firms remained cautious about financial and technology exposure.[38] Flagship initiatives such as the "Great Stone" industrial park continued to operate, but their scale did not offset the loss of Western markets or capital.[39] In practice, ties with China softened the shock only at the margins and did not reopen avenues to the West. Analytically, Beijing's caution underlined a central point of the framework: short-term hedging attempts (realism) do not automatically translate into alternative

[38] K. Rudy, *A look at China and Sino-Belarus Cooperation: this is different* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), https://cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-6351-3/.

[39] Z. Liu, M. Dunford and W. Liu, "Coupling national geo-political economic strategies and the belt and road initiative: the China-Belarus great stone industrial park," *Polit Geogr* 80 (2021): 102296, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629820303590.

centres of gravity when structural dependencies (finance, logistics, technology) are already locked in.[40]

The war also amplified the role of the Belarusian opposition in exile. By this point it had become a recognised interlocutor for Western institutions. Its sustained visibility further reduced the scope for any renewed rapprochement with Lukashenka and kept the democratic dimension of the Belarusian question firmly on the Western agendas. Normatively, Western support for the exile structures reduced the moral hazard of normalising repression; strategically, it also unintentionally lowered the regime's incentives to diversify away from Russia by narrowing the political space for conditional engagement.

As a result, Belarus lost the last remnants of its ability to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy or to re-engage in a "critical dialogue" with the West—a strategy of balancing simultaneously between Russia, the West, and other partners to maximise autonomy and economic benefits—an approach it had successfully maintained prior to 2020.[41] From a state that once exercised limited but tangible strategic autonomy, Belarus has become not only an unreliable international actor but one lacking any real alternative in the conduct of its foreign policy.

Belarus's relations with Russia after 2022

The full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war significantly reshaped the dynamics of the relationship between Minsk and Moscow, leading to a further deepening of strategic cooperation while simultaneously reinforcing the asymmetry between the two partners. At the same time, the Lukashenka regime managed to convince the Russian leadership that Belarus's limited involvement—providing political, logistical, and infrastructure support, as well as periodically tying down Ukrainian forces along the shared border—was sufficient to secure Russia's interests without requiring Belarus to send troops into active combat. As a result, Moscow refrained from pressuring Minsk to commit military forces to the front and for a time even scaled back its demands for deeper institutional integration beyond the realm of security cooperation. Read through realism, this was "minimum cooperation" by a weaker ally—delivering utility to the patron while avoiding unsustainable costs; through dependency, it further entrenched hierarchy by letting Moscow define the value and limits of Belarus's contribution.

Lukashenka also tried to leverage ties with China as a counterweight. High-level encounters with Xi Jinping (Beijing, March 2023; and again in 2025) framed an

[40] A. Yeliseyeu and O. Aleszko-Lessels, *Relations between Belarus and China in 2020–2022: what lies behind the "All-Weather Partnership* (Kyiv: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Ukraine/Project Belarus, December, 2022), https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19851-20221220.pdf; Y. Preiherman, "Belarus, China and the laws of physics in international relations," Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations, June 11, 2025, https://minskdialogue.by/en/research/opinions/belarus-china-and-the-laws-of-physics-in-international-relations.

[41] V. Silitski, "Making Lukashenka think twice," *Transitions Online*, August 30, 2005, https://tol.org/client/article/14417-making-lukashenka-think-twice.html.

"all-weather" partnership. The effect was largely symbolic. Beijing avoided steps that would trigger Western secondary-sanctions exposure and did not challenge Russia's primacy in Belarus's security or finance. Trade remained asymmetric and credit cautious; as a result, China supplemented—but could not substitute—Russia as the anchor of Minsk's external dependence. Discourse again did important work: the "all-weather" label promised strategic latitude that the material flows did not supply, cushioning the reputational costs of deepening reliance on Moscow.

Taking advantage of the protracted nature of the conflict, the Belarusian authorities were able to slightly strengthen their tactical position in the area of economic cooperation. Most importantly, Russia played a central role in mitigating the effects of Western sanctions by opening its domestic market to Belarusian exports and facilitating access to third-country markets through Russian ports. Available data show a sharp increase in Belarusian exports to Russia. By mid-2023—eighteen months into the full-scale war—trade with Russia accounted for approximately 70% of Belarus's total trade volume. When factoring in the reliance of Belarusian goods (mainly petroleum products and potash-based fertilisers) on Russian transit infrastructure, Russia's effective share of Belarus's total exports exceeded 90%. In contrast, the EU's share dropped to around 5%, down from 40–50% just three years earlier.[42] While these shifts brought short-term benefits to Lukashenka, they also carried profound long-term consequences. As Kamil Kłysiński of the Warsaw-based Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) observed, "In economic terms, Belarus is gradually being transformed into a region of the Russian Federation".[43]

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine and the growing confrontation with the West provided Moscow with an opportunity to expand the military dimension of integration, including its direct presence on Belarusian soil. A key step in this direction was the announcement of Russia's plan to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus—a move that was preceded by a constitutional referendum in February 2022, which removed the clause declaring the country's neutral and non-nuclear status. One year later, in May 2023, Russia and Belarus signed an agreement governing the terms of the deployment. In May 2024, the Belarusian authorities further updated the country's military doctrine and national security concept, sharpening their anti-Western orientation. For the first time, the documents explicitly allowed for the possibility of Belarusian military involvement outside national borders as part of allied obligations.

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[42] U.S. Department of State, "List of sanctions imposed by the U.S. administration following the 2022."; "Overview of US sanctions against Belarus."

[43] K. Kłysiński, "Towards a dependence with no alternative: Russia's increased role in the Belarusian economy," OSW, August 18, 2023, https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2023-08-18/w-strone-bezalternatywnej-zaleznosci-wzrost-roli-rosji-w.

On 6 December 2024, marking the 25th anniversary of the Union State Treaty, the presidents of Belarus and Russia signed a package of ten documents, including a mutual security guarantee agreement. This agreement pledged support using "all available means" in the event of a threat to either party's security. Crucially, it also granted Russia a formal basis for potential military intervention in Belarus—not only in response to external threats but also in the event of internal unrest that could jeopardise the country's "constitutional order".[44]

Even though they are presented as protective, these rules reflect what can be described as a neo-Brezhnev doctrine of "limited sovereignty," which allows Russia to step in whenever an allied government is in danger, even if that danger comes from changes within the country itself.[45] This logic is reinforced by the presence of Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory, which not only serves as a deterrent for NATO but could also provide a pretext for intervention in the event of a political crisis under the guise of securing "strategic nuclear infrastructure". In effect, Russia has secured a formal mechanism for maintaining a loyal political regime in Minsk. The normative upshot is stark: deeper nuclear–military dependence exposes Belarus to escalation dynamics it cannot control, while the reputational and strategic costs accrue primarily to the junior partner.

Alongside this deepening structural dependency in the security sphere, the war has also highlighted the growing interdependence of the political systems in Moscow and Minsk. A serious political crisis in Russia—whether caused by the prolonged war or economic strain—would likely pose a threat to the stability of Lukashenka's regime, which increasingly relies on Russian support. Conversely, a sudden departure by Lukashenka—whether natural or forced—would present Moscow with an opportunity to reshape the Belarusian political landscape in its favour. In such a scenario, Russia could seek to install new elites more firmly under its control, and in the extreme case, the prospect of Belarus's formal incorporation into the Russian Federation could no longer be ruled out. Such a scenario should not be dismissed as purely hypothetical: already in 2002 Vladimir Putin publicly floated the idea that Belarus could join the Russian Federation on a region-by-region basis.[46] This reflects a view within the Russian elite that Belarus's sovereignty remains conditional and

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[44] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Dogovor mezhdu Rossiyskoy Federatsiyey i Respublikoy Belarus' o garantiakh bezopasnosti v ramkakh Soyuznogo gosudarstva," [Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Security Guarantees within the Union State], https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/2_contract/62699/.

[45] For a detailed discussion of the Brezhnev doctrine, see R.A. Jones, *The Soviet concept of "limited sovereignty" from Lenin to Gorbachev: The Brezhnev doctrine* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-1-349-20491-5.pdf.

[46] P.A. Rudling, "Belarus in the Lukashenka era: national identity and relations with Russia," in *Europe's Last Frontier? Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine between Russia and the European Union*, eds. S. Yekelchyk and O. Schmidtke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); 55–77, https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-1-137-10170-9.

reversible. This is also where the limits of the framework appear: neither realism nor dependency theory fully captures the micro-politics of elite competition, security-service cohesion or diasporic mobilisation—factors that may condition the pace (though not the direction) of dependence.

Summary

In the period 2022–2025, the initial three years of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, Belarus significantly deepened its multidimensional strategic dependence on the Russian Federation. The ongoing conflict not only exposed but substantially intensified the structural asymmetry in relations between Belarus and Russia. This dependence became firmly entrenched, with its most striking manifestation being the expansion of the Russian military presence on Belarusian territory, including the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and the signing of a mutual security guarantee agreement that allows for Russian intervention in the event of a threat to the "constitutional order".

Two developments drove this process. First, the breakdown of Belarus's relations with the West following the brutal suppression of the 2020 protests. Second, its support for Russia's war against Ukraine, which further isolated Minsk and left it more reliant on Moscow than ever before. Although Belarus refrained from participating directly in the full-scale military campaign, the political dynamics that unfolded led to a loss—possibly irreversible—of its capacity to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy. The country has effectively become a subordinate actor within the Kremlin's foreign policy orbit. Belarus's international marginalisation has deepened, and its relations with neighbouring NATO and EU member states have taken on an openly confrontational tone. Sanctions imposed by the West further reoriented Belarus's economic ties, significantly increasing its reliance on Russia.

In light of these developments, Belarus must be viewed as having consolidated its status as a client state—subordinated to the interests of a dominant power, particularly in the spheres of foreign and security policy, and functioning with only limited sovereignty. What we are observing is the realization of mechanisms characteristic of structural realism, such as the projection of power through asymmetrical alliances, coupled with the strengthening of dependency relations as described in dependency theory. These patterns, combined with the postcolonial dimension of Belarus's relationship with Russia—rooted in the historical legacy of domination—form a coherent model of systemic subordination, in which Minsk serves as an auxiliary executor of Russian strategic interests.

The full-scale war has acted as a catalyst in this process—accelerating Belarus's subordination to Moscow while drastically narrowing the space for reclaiming any form of strategic autonomy in the foreseeable future.

The theoretical takeaway is that the discussed lenses are complementary rather than competing: realism clarifies the near-term bargains of a constrained actor; dependency theory explains how those bargains, repeated and routinised, harden into a

structure that narrows future choice. Discourse provides the connective tissue by legitimising today's alignment and socialising tomorrow's constraints. The policy implication follows: Western mixes of pressure and support can reduce immediate harm yet still deepen long-term asymmetries unless paired with investments that expand non-Russian options (finance, logistics, skills, media). And the caveat stands: internal dynamics—elite bargains, identity shifts, coercive capacity—can modulate tempo and thresholds, even if the strategic direction remains set by the external hierarchy described above.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability statement

No data is associated with this article.