

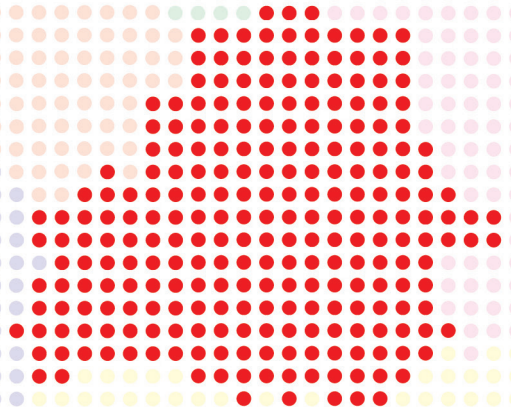


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Post-2020 Belarus:

Security and Defence Implications to the Baltic states, Poland, and NATO

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Post-2020 Belarus: Security and Defence Implications for the Baltic States, Poland, and NATO

This publication assesses implications of the post-2020 Belarus for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, as well as for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization collectively. Chapters on Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish perceptions are also supplemented by perspectives from Russia and Belarus.

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Introduction

The 2020 post-electoral crisis and the widespread state violence in Belarus came as a surprise to many – both in Belarus, as well as near and far beyond its borders. The events that followed, most notably the landing of a Lithuania-bound civilian aircraft and Belarusian instigated migrant crisis in 2021, only aggravated the unease. While many aspects of the developments in Belarus and the role of Russia in the country have been subject to extensive discussions and studies, the military implications of the crisis to Belarus' immediate neighbours – NATO member states – have been less discussed both before and after 2020. This publication gathers assessments from all three Baltic states and Poland, as well as from the “other side of the fence”, i.e., by authors from Belarus and Russia.

Poland and the Baltic states, save for Estonia, share a land border with Belarus. All four have been at the forefront of the NATO deterrence measures against Russia since the Ukrainian-Russian military conflict unfolded in 2014. For all four and NATO at large, the events in Belarus added an additional layer of complexity in crafting an effective and credible defence and deterrence approach. Meanwhile, the events in Belarus changed the military cooperation dynamics between Belarus and Russia as well, with domestic and international implications.

Chapters on the perspectives from the Baltic states are authored by Martin Hurt from the International Centre for Defence and Security in Tallinn, Evija Džatkoviča from the Latvian Institute of International Affairs and Rīga Stradiņš University, and Ramūnas Vilpišauskas from Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University. An assessment from Poland is provided by Kamil Kłysiński and Piotr Szymański, both from the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw. Finally, a perspective from Russia on its military cooperation with Belarus is provided by Maxim Samorukov of the Carnegie Moscow Center, while an assessment from Belarus on its engagement with Russia is offered by Arseny Sivitsky from the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies in Minsk.

The publication assesses the time period from August 2020, when the crisis in Belarus unfolded, until the end of October 2021.

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**Baltic and Polish
Perspectives
on Belarus
as a Security and
Defence Concern**

Perspective from Estonia: Suspense From an (Unsafe) Distance

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Estonia shares a land border with Russia and with Latvia, but not with Belarus. Therefore, Belarus has traditionally been considered less of a threat than Russia. Estonia's most recent National Security Concept from 2017 mentions Russia 13 times, but ignores Belarus,¹ illustrating the traditional focus of civil and military intelligence organisations. However, this has changed since the beginning of the political crisis in Belarus 2020.

This article describes Estonian perceptions with regard to Belarusian-Russian military cooperation prior to the 2020 post-election crisis in Belarus, the implications of the crisis on threat perceptions and military considerations, and the national as well as NATO level policies that have been introduced in response to the changed regional security landscape. The article is based on publicly available material as well as interviews conducted with Estonian officials.

Estonian perceptions of Belarusian-Russian military cooperation prior to 2020

Due to geographic reasons, Belarus plays a somewhat less significant role for Estonia's security compared to its immediate western neighbours, i.e., Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. While Estonia's National Security Concept from 2017 ignores Belarus, the country is reflected in the public reports that the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service has published annually since 2016. In these reports, Belarus and in particular its close military cooperation with Russia is considered a threat to Estonia's security.² According to the Estonian Foreign

Intelligence Service, the scenario of Russia's exercise Zapad-2017 assumed that the conflict started in Belarus. As usual, one of the main elements of the military exercise simulated an offensive against Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. In the course of the exercise, the Russian armed forces underwent all phases of an all-out war: Russia's military intervention in response to a "colour revolution" in Belarus, escalation into a conventional war with NATO, and finally, to nuclear war.³ The "colour revolution" element of Zapad-2017 demonstrated that Russia prepares for a potential rapid military intervention in Belarus, if the Belarusian people's bid for democracy starts.⁴

In its 2019 yearbook, the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service predicted that Russia would be forced to strengthen its influence in Belarus in order to control the country's leadership and to increase its pressure on Minsk as the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections were approaching.⁵

Before the 2020 presidential elections, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Estonia and Belarus held regular political consultations that focused on trade, relations between Belarus and the European Union, and the security situation in the region.⁶

Estonian authorities therefore were relatively well informed about the relations between Minsk and Moscow and the close military cooperation that was demonstrated in, for example, the major exercise Zapad-2017.

The implications of the crisis on national threat perceptions

Since Estonia and Belarus do not share a common border, Estonia's expertise and knowledge about the country is relatively limited. In maintaining situational awareness about developments in Belarus, Tallinn therefore relies primarily on cooperation and information exchange with Lithuanian and Polish authorities who have significantly better knowledge of their immediate neighbour.

Estonia's perceptions of and political willingness to act on the results of the 2020 presidential elections of Belarus depended to a certain degree on the then-ruling coalition government. It consisted of three parties: the Centre Party that traditionally has avoided public criticism of the authoritarian regimes in Russia and Belarus due to the relatively large Russian-speaking part of its electorate; the centre-right Isamaa, and the far-right EKRE. While the then-foreign minister Urmas Reinsalu loudly criticised A. Lukashenka's

crackdown on his opposition, the ministers that represented EKRE were reluctant to encourage opposition activists to leave Belarus for Estonia since that party has a sceptical attitude towards refugees and migration.

In the spring and summer of 2021, Estonian authorities received indications that Belarus may apply more pressure on Lithuania using migrants as a weapon, but the scope of this effort was realised relatively late. The Estonian Police and Border Guard Board launched preparations, including planning and exercises, to be better prepared in case also Estonia would be subjected to similar pressure. Other Governmental agencies were more passive, and the summer vacations did little to stimulate more action.

As a complicating factor, issues related to mass-migration are heavily politicised and both government agencies and politicians have been reluctant to prepare for the potential reception of migrants because such could have been exploited by the opposition, primarily the far-right Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE), that according to one poll has become the most popular party.⁷ Estonians have been able to learn the lessons identified by Lithuania, particularly the divisive social issue resulting from keeping migrants in rapidly established camps against the will of the local population and being exploited by populist parties. Estonian officials are also well aware of the fact that solidarity from other European Union members would be comparable with Estonian previous (un)willingness to redistribute migrants and refugees from the southern European countries that have been hit hard. Therefore, instead of being proactive, some authorities have embarked on a strategy that relies on simply not letting migrants cross Estonia's border with Russia, should Moscow decide to employ weaponised mass migration against Estonia. "We cross that bridge when we come to it" appears to be the guiding principle in case upholding a restrictive border regime would fail due to a potentially overwhelming number of migrants.

Short and mid-term national policy implications

Explicit national policy implications stemming from the crisis in Belarus may be difficult to identify but one likely consequence of the weaponised migration tool directed against Latvia, Lithuania and Poland and its negative impact on the security environment is the decision by the Estonian Government not to cut the 2022 defence budget as originally intended in Spring 2021. National

defence is not a priority area for any of the two coalition parties and the State Budget Strategy for 2022-2025 approved in May 2021 revealed that the Government intended to let the percentage of GDP devoted for military defence decrease towards the 2 %-target. This was difficult to conceal and heavily criticised by the opposition. Minsk's hybrid war against Estonia's closest NATO Allies and the strategic exercise Zapad-2021 were testimony to the deteriorating security environment and likely contributed to the decision to allocate 2,3 % of GDP on defence in the 2022 state budget draft.⁸

The increased military activity in Belarus being a direct consequence of Mr Lukashenka's concessions to President Putin strengthens Russia's overall posture in the western direction. A stronger posture enables Russia to cut the Baltic states off from the rest of Alliance territory by using (or "closing"?) the so-called Suwalki gap in case of an armed conflict with NATO.

Estonia's Chief of Defence Lieutenant General Martin Herem said on 10 September 2021 that Russia has publicly for the first time confirmed the participation of a large force in the Zapad exercise after Russian authorities stated that 200,000 troops and more than 80 planes and helicopters would participate in Zapad-2021. Although the joint exercise officially started on 10 September, the main part of it had already been completed, according to General Herem.⁹

General Herem has time and again called for closer cooperation between the Baltic states and the need to develop long-range capabilities that could be used regionally to assist the neighbours. General Herem has mentioned two examples of such capabilities: a coastal defence capability based on i.a. long-range missiles with a range of up to 200 km and an indirect fire support capability that would centre around multiple-launch rocket systems with a range of 70-350 km.¹⁰ Funding for the first one, the coastal defence capability, including naval mines and long-range missiles, was added to the defence budget in the autumn of 2020 outside the regular defence planning cycle on the initiative of the then coalition party EKRE.

The Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) and the Police and Border Guard Board have assisted their Lithuanian counterparts in various ways. The EDF transferred 100 km of barbed wire from its war time stocks and deployed three drone teams to assist Lithuanian authorities,¹¹ deploying a team of 10 police officers. These efforts illustrate the overall ambition to prevent weaponised migrants to cross the European Union border in the first place, thus avoiding the very sensitive question of how to handle the people who actually have managed to enter the country.

Time will tell whether there will be any more consequences in Estonia from the turmoil created by Mr Lukashenka's desire to remain in power. The previous Government, despite being publicly sceptical towards mass migration, made funding cuts in the development of border infrastructure between Estonia and Russia. The cuts resulted in a lower level of ambition and postponed the acquisition of drones, cameras and sensors to a point in time when the physical infrastructure has been completed.¹² The events that unfolded at the border between Belarus and Latvia, Lithuania and Poland may force the Government to speed up the development of the border infrastructure to manage the risk that Russia also may start sending migrants across the border to the European Union, for example via Estonia.

Impact on NATO

Interviews with Estonian officials indicated that NATO has yet to develop a sufficient awareness of the developments in Belarus and adapt its policies. When considering the strategic direction east, the Alliance focuses on Russia and has had difficulties determining how it should address Belarus and the challenges posed by Mr Lukashenka.

The North Atlantic Council, NATO's decision-making body, nevertheless decided to restrict access to its headquarters for a group of Belarus officials following Minsk's intervention in May forcing a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius to land in Minsk in order to arrest a dissident journalist, which caused outrage in the West.¹³ This is, however, a symbolic act similar to the restrictions that have been imposed on Russia in response to similar events. Such decisions do little to strengthen the security of individual Allies, in particular Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

The crisis in Belarus has also indicated potential weaknesses in NATO's ability to respond. One example are the concerns reportedly raised by German representatives during discussions at NATO that the decision to deploy a Counter Hybrid Support Team to Lithuania could escalate the ongoing crisis. Such teams consist of civilian experts drawn from a pool of NATO experts as well as specialists nominated by Allies to an Ally requesting support, either in a crisis or to assist in building national counter-hybrid capacities. In this case, deploying a team of experts was seen as a potentially "escalatory" step and this raises questions about the viability of rapid decision-making in crisis and

conflict when much more may be at stake and when decisions are prepared to launch military operations to support an Ally under attack. Would military and political decision-makers be mentally prepared to launch a collective defence operation or have existing procedures been negatively affected by the last two decades of out-of-area operations that have given military and political decision-makers the luxury of lengthy deliberations before taking action?

NATO has in recent years made numerous decisions to strengthen its deterrence and defence posture in response to Russia's aggressive action against Ukraine. Some of these decisions have already been implemented, such as the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). In 2017, the four enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups were deployed to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Other decisions require more time to be properly resourced and implemented, especially those that concern modernisation of existing forces or the development of new forces and capabilities. More decisions are being made in order to keep pace with the ongoing modernisation of the Russian Armed Forces. The Alliance is currently developing strategic, domain-specific and regional military plans to improve its ability to respond to any contingencies and ensure timely reinforcement.¹⁴

NATO considered long before the 2020 political crisis that in a potential conflict with Russia, the forces of Belarus would be integrated into the Russian Armed Forces. The peace-time integration is, however, far from finished. The Belarus Air Force and Air Defence Forces were integrated with the Russian air force already in the early 1990s because Belarus was unable to fund the development of a national air defence system. Before the 2020 political crisis, Belarus was reluctant to conduct joint exercises with Russia in order to avoid upsetting its neighbours with whom Minsk wished to maintain good relations.

According to one Estonian official, the orchestrated migration pressure on Lithuania did not result in NATO taking any steps to reinforce its military posture since hybrid warfare against one or several Allies has already been assessed and reflected in NATO planning. Existing assessments have therefore been considered to be sufficient. This could of course change, if A. Lukashenka decides to escalate the situation, potentially resulting in NATO taking more decisive action than sending a Counter Hybrid Support Team, but so far, this has not been required.

A. Lukashenka has suggested to arrange regular, almost monthly exercises in Belarus where Russia can deploy its forces on a rotational basis.¹⁵ This could be seen as mimicking the US back-to-back rotation of Brigade Combat

Teams to Poland that could be claimed to be in the spirit of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act by avoiding permanently present forces.

According to one Estonian military expert, rotation of Russian forces in and out of Belarus can in fact develop more valuable capabilities compared to if only a small number of Russian forces would be permanently stationed in Belarus. By rotating forces, personnel gain valuable experience from rapid deployments to Belarus and this knowledge is not concentrated only in a small number of forces, but is spread out across relevant Russian units that in times of crisis or conflict could be sent to Belarus and pose a significant threat to the three Baltic states and Poland. The logic is similar to what American officials often have stated is valid for US armoured brigade combat teams. Through back-to-back rotations, more units become familiar with the procedures related to deploying entire units to a specific theatre of operations. Also civilian authorities and service providers involved in transporting heavy equipment and sustaining deployments gain valuable experience.

The enhanced Forward Presence established through a decision at the 2016 Warsaw Summit in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland relies on NATO Allies being able to rapidly reinforce the Baltic states and Poland in case they have come under threat. This reinforcement capability essentially depends on rapid decision-making, maintaining sufficient forces at high readiness and the ability to move them quickly over great distances to support threatened allies. Once a consistent reinforcement concept is in place, it will need to be exercised in the region. To ensure coherence, such NATO exercises should be closely coordinated with the US reinforcement plans and activities under the US Defender exercise series. Only by doing that will the magnitude of logistic challenges and the necessary sequence in the flow of forces become clear and ready to be tested and improved. Such an approach will not only send a credible message towards the potential adversary, but also help enhance Allies' own mechanisms and procedures of managing reinforcements.¹⁶

As of 2021, NATO does not exercise significant and rapid reinforcement of the Baltic states. The US continues with its back-to-back rotations of brigade combat teams. Other eFP framework nations have exercised reinforcement of their respective contingents rather than of the Baltic states. This level of ambition is seen as insufficient by the Baltic states. Therefore, one takeaway is that Allies must start exercising reinforcement of north-eastern Europe on a larger scale than what has been the case so far.

Conclusions

Belarus plays a somewhat less significant role for Estonia's security compared to its immediate western neighbours, i.e., Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Estonian authorities kept a close eye on the developments in Belarus already before the 2020 presidential elections, to a significant degree relying on the expertise of Minsk's immediate neighbours.

Despite having received indications from other Baltic neighbours of the risk of Belarus taking action against one or several Allies, Estonian authorities were to some extent caught by surprise by the weaponized migration flows that hit Lithuania in the summer of 2021. The slow realisation that this could be something more extensive than small numbers of migrants led by human traffickers was further affected by summer holidays that decreased the ability of streamlined bureaucracies to take decisive action. It is noteworthy that after more than seven years after the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the publicity surrounding hybrid warfare, authorities have yet to learn how to identify such activities.

The political crisis in Belarus, the pressure against Latvia, Lithuania and Poland combined with the Zapad-2021 exercise had a negative impact on the already tense security environment. This most likely contributed to the recent decision of the Estonian Government to maintain the level of defence spending at 2,3% of GDP in the 2022 state budget draft.

NATO has yet to develop a sufficient awareness of the situation in Belarus and adapt its policies, focusing on the threat posed by Russia since 2014. NATO and capitals need to exercise decision-making under time constraints and learn how to exploit all the existing political and military tools. Special attention needs to be given to escalation processes in today's security environment where NATO members do not have the luxury to stay out of a conflict in case one or several Allies already are under severe pressure or under attack.

NATO as well as individual Allies should implement the decisions already taken to increase the readiness of forces and exercise rapid deployment in a collective defence scenario inspired by the back-to-back deployment of brigade combat teams that the US has conducted since 2017. Also, European Allies need to step up their deployment exercises in order to ensure the credibility of NATO's deterrence and defence posture.

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Perspective from Latvia: From Complacency to Anxiety

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Over the past three decades, pragmatic cooperation was the driving force behind Latvia's bilateral relations with Belarus. The EU's collective approach to Belarus shaped the interaction between the two countries, though Latvia unlike most other EU countries spotlighted commonalities instead of differences in its relations with the immediate neighbour.

Bilateral engagement was dominated by economic considerations and a lively political dialogue. Belarus has never been among the top trade partners for Latvia, but has played a significant role in its cargo transit sector – it is the second largest railway cargo transit source to Latvia (after Russia), with other players way behind. Given Russia's cargo reorientation to its own transit routes, the importance of Belarus has been increasing in the past years.¹ Latvia additionally associated its transit expectations with the China-Belarus industrial park “Great Stone” development near Minsk. It was seen as an opportunity to bandwagon to the Sino-Belarusian cooperation and benefit from the potential Chinese cargo in the region.²

As the Latvian side sought economic gains, Belarus not only benefited from the economic cooperation, but also from Latvian advocacy in the EU. The advancement of Belarus – EU relations was among the key Latvian foreign policy portfolio elements. Partnership with Belarus has been mentioned in every annual report by the Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2011 (reports available from 2011).³ Latvia's support to the neighbour culminated in 2015–2016, when the country facilitated the partial lifting of the EU restrictive measures imposed on Belarus for human rights and electoral violations.⁴ The country was among the key supporters of the

agreement on visa regime facilitation and readmission between Belarus and the EU, concluded in 2020.

Bilateral political dialogue was intense as well. Official visit exchange took place regularly in the past decade.⁵ In spring 2020, A. Lukashenka was expected to visit Riga,⁶ and earlier in the year, the Belarusian leader hosted the Latvian Prime Minister in Minsk.⁷

The positive relationship context would have been landmarked by the jointly held World Ice Hockey Championship in 2021, but the post-election crisis in Belarus marked a sudden relationship downward turn instead, including in security and defence.

Belarus in Latvia's security and defence policy before 2020

Caution to Belarus and its military tandem with Russia has always existed in Latvian defence planning. However, prior to 2020, Belarus was not considered an immediate security threat.⁸ The national security and defence policy planning documents, as well as the official communication of institutions illustrate this perspective well.

Between 2005 and 2021, the Ministry of Defence did not focus much of its attention on Belarus, the country is mentioned little more than hundred times in the Ministry's news articles on its website. Around 30 % of mentions were devoted to the confidence and security building activities conducted by Belarus (often together with Russia) in Latvia or, vice versa, Latvian experts in Belarus.⁹ Countries not only upheld obligations arising from the Open Skies Treaty and other OSCE mechanisms (e.g., the Vienna Document), but had their own bilateral transparency facilitation agreement since 2004.¹⁰

Also, the State Defence Concepts and the National Security Concepts talked little about Belarus from 1995 to 2020. The former mentions Belarus two times in seven concepts throughout the period from 1995 to 2020, the later depicts the south-eastern neighbour seven times from 1995 to 2019. Belarus is first mentioned in the National Security Concept of 2002 in the context of its collaboration with Russia on readmission and border demarcation issues. The next mentions were in 2011 (the National Security Concept) and 2016 (the State Defence Concept). Both paid attention to Russian-Belarusian military manoeuvres in close proximity to Latvian and NATO eastern flank borders. It was in 2011, when Belarus

was first described an indirect threat to Latvian security in reference to the joint military drills with Russia. The anxiety over Russia's regional military build-up and the Belarus' role were outlined in 2016. The latest mentions of Belarus were detected in the National Security Concept of 2019, when cross-border cooperation was depicted as a potential risk area, and in the State Defence Concept of 2020. It described Russia's worrisome regional ambitions, including those concerning Belarus, and the enhanced Russian presence along the Latvian border.¹¹

The State Security Service likewise paid limited attention to Belarus prior to 2020. The country was mentioned one time in every annual report between 2015 to 2020 (currently the public reports are available from 2013–2020 only). According to the reports, Belarus alongside Latvia was exposed to Russia's information warfare activities. In 2018, Belarus was discussed more often (with five mentions) in the context of Latvia's cargo transit and energy security. Since 2018, intelligence activities of other (apart from Russia) member countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) towards Latvia were mentioned. However, their risks have been incomparable to those posed by Russia, the report suggested.¹²

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs elaborated the cooperation with Belarus intensely in the annual reports of the Minister over the course of the 20 years, but touched upon the country in security context in 2013 for the first. Mention was related to Zapad 2013" drills. The reports of 2019 and 2020 addressed the enhanced military cooperation of Russia and Belarus in more detail.¹³

The documents note that peaceful co-existence was paramount for the bilateral security relations of Latvia and Belarus until the second decade of 2000s. In the following years, a gradual revision of perceptions related to Belarus' role in Russia's military planning vis-à-vis its "near abroad" took place. However, it was Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 which transformed Latvia's understanding of regional security architecture. Respective military plans both on the national and NATO level followed.¹⁴ While Latvia increased its defence budget, boosted armed forces and their military capabilities, NATO pursued assurance and deterrence activities in its eastern frontier. Since then, Belarus came to be seen as a collateral concern given its military cooperation with Russia and the role it might play in instrumentalizing the so-called Suwalki corridor.

Changed perceptions: Belarus in the post-2020 security environment

The Belarus crisis of 2020 in many ways disillusioned Latvia and depicted the other side of the coin when it comes to friendship with autocratic regimes. The plane hijacking allegedly organised by the Belarusian authorities in May 2021 became an alarm signal for Europe illustrating repercussions of processes taking place in the neighbourhood; whereas the migrant crisis orchestrated by Belarus was a wake-up call for Latvia.¹⁵ Security planning miscalculations became demonstrative in the wake of the migrant influx. The 173 km long poorly secured border with Belarus and the overreliance on the neighbour's good will in guarding the common border exposed Latvia to considerable security risks. Economic implications emanating from the cooperation with politically dependent businesses also became clear. As a consequence, the strategic perception of Belarus was revisited.

A major u-turn in the foreign affairs domain took place in 2020, which set the tone for other realms. The Foreign Ministers' annual report depicted the paradigm shift from bilateral and EU-level cooperation with Belarus to harsh condemnation of the human rights situation and confrontational political stance. The intensity of Belarus' coverage in the report of 2020 doubled comparing to the year before and increased tenfold in comparison to the reports of 2017 and 2018.¹⁶ Practical steps followed, including the introduction of bilateral sanctions and refusal to jointly host the World Ice Hockey Championship.¹⁷ Substitution of the Belarusian official flag to the Belarusian oppositions' white-red-white by the Riga city mayor during the championship resulted in the de facto suspension of diplomatic relations and brought Latvia and Belarus to the ever-lowest point of their relationship.¹⁸

The perception of Belarus in the defence sector changed significantly after the outbreak of the migrant crisis. In 2021, the official communication of the Ministry of Defence covered Belarus more intensely than ever before. About 20 % of all mentions from 2005 to 2021 were reported in 2021, and most of them referred to the migrant crisis. Communicative narratives shifted from cooperation-oriented descriptions to texts claiming that the migrant crisis is a Belarusian hybrid attack on Latvia.¹⁹

The migrant crisis became a game changer also for institutional cooperation between the two countries. Throughout the initial phase of

instability, the operational interaction in border control, people mobility management, trust building was maintained. Most institutional contacts were suspended as soon as the first few dozens of Middle East migrants attempted to illegally cross the Belarusian-Latvian border.²⁰

The State Security Service turned to the reassessment of internal security risks, too. The attention to Belarus increased significantly. In contrast to previous years, mentions of Belarus grew twenty-fold in 2020. The country was mentioned 26 times across a variety of topics. Belarus' intelligence service activities in Latvia were in the focus, along with the security measures taken to monitor Belarus' nationals arriving to Latvia. Attention was paid to Latvia's economic cooperation with Belarus, as well as to energy security issues.²¹

The deepening Russian and Belarusian military cooperation additionally troubled the minds of Latvian policy makers and military analysts. "Zapad 2021" military drills were expected with even greater concern than the "Zapad 2017".²² Provocations in the border area were not excluded, neither was military intervention completely ruled out in light of recently enhanced military integration of two eastern neighbours. A joint Russian-Belarusian combat training centre was established in Grodno, among other things, setting up Russian missile troops there, and Russian fighter jets were stationed in Baranovichi amid "Zapad 2021". Two more joint military training centres are to emerge in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and on the Russian mainland – Nizhny Novgorod.²³ Even if tactical by nature, the potential of the centres should not be underestimated, as they may lead to installing a bigger Russian presence in Belarus in the future.

Latvia's response to the post-election crisis in Belarus

Latvia's response to the altered security environment should be analysed on two levels: tactical and strategic. The country was quite effective in its tactical steps aimed at minimizing immediate implications from the turbulence in Belarus. Actions included response to the migrant crisis and cautionary measures during "Zapad 2021" exercise.

The migrant crisis did surprise Latvia, but the country had time and opportunity to learn, as well as to implement necessary preparatory measures. Before the migrants appeared at the Latvian doorstep, they were already at Lithuania's. The country thereby took over practices of access

denial and skipped, by and large, those of accommodating people first and solving their legal status afterwards. Well organised institutional coordination, the declared state of emergency in the border area and the engagement of armed forces in border control facilitated the stability of situation. Latvian institutions played out the migrant influx simulation shortly before the migrant crisis erupted, which could also have improved the country's performance in real life emergency.²⁴

Observation and deterrence during the "Zapad 2021" exercise, meanwhile, was a multitasking test for the Latvian defence as the strategic attention of armed forces had to be split among many tasks. They included observing malign foreign military activities, securing the country's eastern border and hosting a large-scale military exercise "Namejs 2021". No major incidents happened during "Zapad 2021". However, the success of deterrence measures is hardly measurable since no credible information is available on adversarial intentions. In other words, the country does not know whether it succeeded, because it has no clue if anyone really tried to distort the order. The actual repercussions of the "Zapad 2021" as well as the consequences of deepening Russian-Belarusian military integration are likely yet to come.

The strategic response triggered by the crisis in Belarus, if any, so far has been limited. Therefore, room for improvement exists. Russia's 2014 aggression in Ukraine made Latvia realise that NATO collective defence guarantees cannot be considered an ultimate security assurance without its own effort. Political decisions were made, and the national priorities leaned toward better defence. Increasing the size of national armed forces was amongst the key tasks, including in the most vulnerable parts of the country²⁵. Among many other measures, in 2018, additional military contingent was stationed in the eastern part of Latvia.²⁶ Sufficient recruitment, however, remains a challenge. Despite the recent increase in interest (due to active advertising), achieving the 24,000 military personnel (professional soldiers, National guard and reserve personnel) goal by 2024 set in the State Defence Concept of 2020²⁷ seems unlikely. Even if achieved, the Latvian armed forces will still probably fail to deter, balance, or significantly hamper an intervention of Russian Military District troops and Russian-Belarusian military formations. The Latvian armed forces may possibly even fail to withstand an aggression until the NATO assistance arrives. The Russian and Belarusian military tandem is superior in its mobility and interoperability than that of Latvia and NATO and in quantity and combat power than Latvia alone. The military asymmetry in NATO eastern

flank is by far not a new issue. However, the progressing Russian-Belarusian military cooperation exacerbates the challenge and requires new solutions at the national and NATO level. In 2020, Belarus was addressed in detail in the NATO summit communique for the first time, which signals an opportunity for Latvia and likeminded countries to follow up with concrete policy suggestions.²⁸

The migrant crisis exposed one more previously unaddressed strategic vulnerability. A slow and complicated barbed wire procurement in the wake of the migrant crisis pointed at the weaknesses of the Latvian crisis management legislature. A fence would not solve the problem, but could help. The ability to gather resources and implement decisions at short notice is of strategic importance for any future emergency.

Conclusions

The crisis in Belarus both changed and did not change the regional security considerations at the same time. On the one hand, Belarus has always been a non-ally country for Latvia, the Baltic region, and Europe, therefore scrutinised for security matters. On the other hand, Belarus was preferentially treated as a partner, and the post-2020 neighbour took Latvia by surprise. The changed relationship context with Belarus revealed national security vulnerabilities stemming from the idealistic engagement with Europe's "last dictatorship".

The crisis has influenced national and NATO level defence calculations. The change took place in the way Latvia and NATO think of Belarus. From a limited risk country prior to 2020, Belarus has transformed to a high-risk country in the post-2020 security environment. The perception shift invigorated tactical response; strategic response, arguably needed even more than in 2014, is yet to be designed nationally and transatlantically. The NATO Strategic Concept 2022 currently in development provides a perfect timing for that.

At the national level, Latvia has been moving in the right direction by increasing military spending and resources, including military personnel. The lasting crisis on the other side of Latvia's border provides a momentum for boosting wider military participation and a reconsideration of long-debated reintroduction of conscription. This could ensure and, most importantly, demonstrate the country's readiness to defend itself, including its borders. Latvia is the only country in the Nordic-Baltic region save for Iceland without any form of a compulsory military service.

Further development of the defence and resilience means in the country's eastern territories is just as important. Apart from improving military capabilities there (troops, equipment, weaponry), assuring better access to the Latvian public TV and radio, including in the Russian language, is of utmost importance to win hearts and minds of all citizens.

Looking from a NATO perspective, its frontier would benefit not only from a more expanded presence of allied troops on the Baltic countries' soil, but also from more armaments stationed there. Shortage of combat capabilities undermines the defence credibility of the Alliance. The military tension in the region has increased, though conventional conflict still seems unlikely. The relative stability though may turn to be deceptive and will be tested in a longer run. For now, joint Russian-Belarusian provocations look more realistic, as exemplified by the migrant crisis. Faced by the non-military aggression against its members, NATO should also consider prevention and reaction options for tackling incidents below the Article 5 threshold.

With all its imperfections, at the end of the day, the US led trans-Atlantic alliance remains the best security guarantee for the Baltic countries and Poland. This means that the countries should devote vast diplomatic effort to retain the US attention on Russia and Belarus and regional security in the fragmented agenda of international politics.

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Perspective from Lithuania: Towards no Illusions of an Independent Belarus

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Events of the summer 2020 in Belarus and the measures taken by the official Minsk afterwards led to an increase in alert in Lithuania with respect to military or hybrid provocations from its neighbour. The most important cause of growing security concerns, however, is related not so much to the unpredictability of A. Lukashenka but has to do with the actual and potential military integration of Belarus' into Russia's military structures. The self-imposed isolation from the West of A. Lukashenka, desperate to remain in power, further increases Moscow's leverage over the already heavily dependent regime. The potential of further military integration between Belarus and Russia is seen as an additional argument for the rapid implementation of NATO decisions taken in recent years to reinforce security of the Baltic states and deter potential aggression from the East. Lithuanian authorities reacted to the Belarus 2020 crisis by reinforcing defence capabilities, intensifying cooperation within NATO, and within the EU, especially after the forced landing of the Ryanair Athens-Vilnius flight in Minsk and the weaponisation of migration flows by Belarus. The 2020 crisis marks a milestone, when the hopes of convincing A. Lukashenka to open up to the West and reform the country to increase its autonomy from Russia have been finally abandoned.

The perception of Belarus-Russia military cooperation prior to mid-2020

In Lithuania, the concern about aggressive external policies of authoritarian Russia aiming to strengthen its influence in neighbouring countries through diverse channels of interdependencies has been growing since early 2000s. The authoritarian regime in the neighbouring Belarus, especially its repressions against the society and opposition, has also been seen as negatively affecting regional security. Lithuania's State Security Department and the Second Department of Operational Services under the Ministry of National Defence have been regularly alerting to the activities of Belarus intelligence agencies, often undertaken under the cover of diplomatic presence.¹ Such activities were aimed at gathering information in Lithuania, maintaining ties with the local Belarus diaspora, trying to establish political and business contacts with Lithuanian officials travelling to Belarus to buy cheaper products, and with business people with commercial interests in the neighbouring country, to exploit those contacts for the benefit of the ruling regime in Belarus. Belarus security services have been also monitoring activities of Belarus' opposition activists residing in Lithuania.

The report on security threats in 2014 pointed to the intensification of activities by Belarus state apparatus to establish contacts with officials of Lithuanian state border protection service and institutions of interior such as police, collecting information on military and other objects of critical infrastructure in Lithuania.² In 2015, after yet another victory of A. Lukashenka in the presidential elections in Belarus, further tendencies of strengthening authoritarian control were noted.³ At the same time, it was reported that Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in 2014 has shifted the focus of opposition activists in Belarus from a regime change to the preservation of the statehood of Belarus. Meanwhile, the release of political prisoners in Belarus created the potential for some rapprochement between the West and Minsk. The report also noted that in 2015, in addition to usual intelligence activities targeting opposition activists residing in Lithuania and Lithuania's statutory officials who travel to Belarus, Belarus actively sought to find lobbyists in Lithuania who could help convince the EU to remove its sanctions targeting Belarus.

However, there were more reasons for security concerns in Lithuania than the authoritarian regime and hostile intelligence activities of Belarus.

As witnessed by the annual reports on the threats to Lithuania's national security, it was the prospect of Belarus' stronger dependence on Russia that figured most prominently in the background as the most important potential threat. For example, in its 2014 report, the State Security Department noted that Belarus intelligence gathering activities target the same objects and areas as the Russian intelligence. Cooperation between intelligence gathering institutions of Russia and Belarus was assessed as a threat to Lithuania's national security.⁴ In 2015 report, the growth of Russian military build-up in its Western military district and joint Russian-Belarus military trainings "Shchit Soyuzu 2015" were provided as indications of growing military ties.⁵ Thus, despite some signs of Belarus' political and economic rapprochement with the West, it was observed that military integration of Russia and Belarus continued, especially in the area of joint air defence, thus minimising the prospect of Belarus neutrality. The plans for establishing a Russian military air base in Belarus would have further reduced such a prospect.

In the report on threats to national security released in 2017, for the first time, the threats posed by both Belarusian and Russian intelligence and security agencies were discussed in the same chapter.⁶ Russia, actively attempting to dominate the region and to alter the global balance of powers, was named (again) as the source of the most important threat to the national security of Lithuania. Systemic dependency of Belarus on Russia was described as the risk factor. It was noted that Russia could use its instruments of influence in Belarus against both Belarus and its neighbouring states. Belarusian and Russian intelligence agencies have continued their aggressive activities directed against Lithuania in a closely coordinated way, especially since Russian institutions became more isolated after international reactions to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and started relying more on information provided by Belarus' agencies. The intelligence gathering in Lithuania focused on foreign and energy areas, EU and NATO related matters, also Lithuania's defence system (military resources and objects, purchase of new equipment and its modernisation, NATO military presence in the region, military personnel in Lithuania). At the same time, it was also noted that Russian intelligence agencies were also spying on Belarus in a sign of mutual distrust.

The systemic dependency of Belarus on Russia has been illustrated by a number of different societal and economic indicators, such as almost a 100 pro-Russian organisations and about 20 military patriotic clubs that support "Russian world" ideas operating in Belarus, Russian media making up

around 60 % of Belarus information space, 60 % of Belarus loans being issued by Russia, about 50 % of trade turnover being with Russia, Belarus being 100 % dependent on Russian natural gas and 90 % on Russian oil.⁷ Particular attention has been given to the nuclear power plant project in Belarus built by the Russian company Rosatom, which was considered unsafe and used as an instrument of integrating Belarus further into the energy system of Russia.

Belarus-Russia military cooperation was discussed in more detail. In addition to the usual remarks about the joint military trainings and the development of the Regional military group as well as the Joint air defence system, it was noted that Russia is supplying Belarus with military equipment (fighter jets, military helicopters, rocket launchers, radars) on the basis of preferential conditions. However, it was noted that Russia's plan to establish a military base in Belarus has not been implemented, although Belarus maintains the infrastructure needed for its establishment.⁸

In the report covering the threats to Lithuania's national security observed in 2017, the tendency of growing dependency of Belarus on Russia has been observed again leading to reaffirm that it remains a risk to country's national security.⁹ Particular attention was given to the military strategic exercises Zapad 2017, which have been conducted every four years. It was maintained that this time they were more extensive in terms of territory covered, participating military personnel, and duration, than officially announced by Russia. Besides, it was noted that unlike the officially presented information that those exercises would simulate defence against terrorist groups, they actually included offensive simulations against NATO allies, conducted in Belarus, Kaliningrad region and other parts of Western Russia.

The report commented on the misunderstanding observed during the Zapad 2017 exercises, when the Russia-issued information that its tank units were moving to Belarus were denied by Belarus. These differences were explained by a mismatch between publicly provided information and the real situation on the ground. Besides, Belarus' continued military cooperation with Russia was illustrated by examples, such as hosting two strategically important military objects of Russia – early anti-missile warning system Volga in Baranovichi and Military marine communication centre Antej in Vileika. However, despite previously expressed fears that Zapad 2017 exercises could be used as a cover to establish Russia's permanent military presence in Belarus, there was no evidence that this actually took place.

In 2018, according to the authors of the annual threats assessment,

Russia's aggressive behaviour against the West continued.¹⁰ The report focused its attention in Lithuania's neighbourhood on Belarus, which continued to be dependent on financial support of Russia and due to the lack of domestic reforms was unable to conduct independent policies. It was noted that Russia possessed long-distance A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) military systems located in Belarus and Kaliningrad region, which in a case of conflict with NATO could complicate the operations of the latter in the Baltic sea region. Russia considered Belarus as a buffer state and could use its territory in case of military conflict with NATO. Russia's joint actions with Belarus to reinforce common air and land defence system and an increase in the number of joint military trainings of special forces were discussed. The deepening military integration was reducing possibilities for Belarus to conduct an independent defence and security policy. Russian intelligence activities in Belarus against citizens from Western countries were observed.

In 2019, according to the annual threats assessment report, Russia's foreign and security policy, especially the increase in military build-up in Russia's western district and Kaliningrad region as well as the deepening military integration with Belarus, continued to pose the main threat to Lithuania.¹¹ Russia continued to exert its political influence over Belarus by using its financial and economic dependency, in particular in the energy sector, repeatedly referring to the agreement signed in 1999 on the establishment of the Union State between Russia and Belarus. It was forecasted that in the coming years the pressure of Russia on Belarus to advance with the implementation of integration measures in various policy areas would grow, as Belarus continued to postpone them and drag its feet in terms of deeper integration with Russia. Minsk continued to evade the permanent location of Russian military forces in Belarus, in spite of the facts that the threat assessment of Russia and Belarus has been very similar, the integration of military structures was evolving, and Russia has been the main supplier of military equipment to Belarus.

To sum up, before mid-2020, Lithuanian authorities closely followed the military cooperation between Russia and Belarus, which was seen in the context of Belarus' growing economic, financial, and political dependence on Russia. However, the positioning of Minsk as being neutral on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the signs of A. Lukashenka's efforts to balance between Russia and the West nurtured hopes of a possibility to convince him to open up to the West and to reform the country, thus increasing its autonomy from Russia.

For example, at the start of her first term as the president of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė attempted to revitalise political relations with Belarus and bring it closer to the EU, only to end with a failure after A. Lukashenka's renewed persecution of the opposition in 2010. Similar efforts to re-set relations with Belarus were taken by Gitanas Nausėda, who was elected as the president of Lithuania in 2019. He initiated the debate on the need to end the isolationist policy towards Belarus, had a phone conversation with A. Lukashenka in the run up to the EU's Eastern Partnership summit in June 2020, and argued in his first annual address to the Parliament of Lithuania on June 18, 2020, that the sovereignty of Belarus is a matter of national security for Lithuania. In less than two months the hopes of re-setting relationship with Belarus were laid to rest.

Shift in security considerations after the crisis of 2020

The chain of events in Belarus, starting with repressions against potential candidates in the run-up to the elections, followed by the conduct of the elections leading Western observers to declare they were neither free nor fair, and the unprecedented wave of popular protests in Belarus and brutal repressions of regime against them. This resulted in opposition activists fleeing to Lithuania and other neighbouring countries, represented a turning point for Lithuania's policy vis-à-vis Belarus.

Initially, there were attempts made to initiate a dialogue with A. Lukashenka, hoping to convince him to stop violent repressions, release political prisoners, and organise democratic elections. However, with Minsk unwilling to engage in dialogue and even reinforcing its repressive actions, the focus shifted to engaging with opposition activists and trying to push-back and constrain the regime. This implied that the risk of Moscow taking advantage of weakened A. Lukashenka desperate to remain in power became ever more real. Besides, the increase in military build-up since August 2020 near the Lithuania-Belarus border, and hostile actions such as flying military helicopters close to public protestors in Lithuania who had organized a human chain from the centre of Vilnius to the Belarus border in support of the democratic activists in Belarus, as well as the rhetoric of A. Lukashenka referring to the heightened threats posed by NATO, all further contributed to growing security concerns in Lithuania.

Thus, the annual threat assessment announced in 2021 devoted considerable attention to the Belarus crisis, calling it the most important change that has been unfolding in Lithuania's neighbourhood.¹² It noted that Minsk reacted to peaceful popular protests with violence and unprecedented demonstration of military power near the border with Lithuania. The use of military forces and security apparatus by Belarus to deal with domestic issues was increasing the tension in the neighbourhood. It expressed concern that the military leadership of Belarus designated year 2021 as a year of increased military readiness, when the number of joint military exercises with Russia, including Zapad 2021, would increase by one third. The report presented information on the announcements of the state of highest military readiness in Belarus in August, 2020, tactical trainings, the location of Belarus military forces, noting the fact that most of them were close to the Western border, but concluded that such a use of military forces for domestic political purposes did not pose a direct military threat to Lithuania.

The report maintained that Russia's policy directed against the sovereign right of its neighbours to decide their future will remain one of the most essential security challenges in the Baltic region. It also pointed to the support expressed for the authoritarian Minsk by Moscow and the dependence of Belarus on Russia, as illustrated by its military exercises conducted after August 2020. During the ongoing mass protests in late September in Belarus, Russia announced that it was planning to increase its military presence at the annual exercises "Slavianskoye bratstvo" from 300 to 900 troops, and the next day they were stationed in Brest, near the Belarus border with Poland. The report also noted that on the inauguration day of A. Lukashenka (September 23, 2020) 6 strategic military bomb carriers TU-22M3 performed flights over Belarus close to its borders with Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania, and 2 ultrasonic strategic bomb carriers TU-160M performed bombing of targets in the training ground near Baranovitchi.

These military exercises were interpreted as signalling Moscow's resolve to show the West that Belarus is within the Russian sphere of influence and that Russia's military forces can be located at Belarus and NATO borders very fast. This message, similarly to the issue of permanent stationing of Russian military base in Belarus, causes concern, as it alters calculations of the potential time needed to respond by Lithuanian and other NATO forces in case of a surprise attack by Russia. Therefore, military exercises Zapad 2021 in September 2021 were watched closely, although, again, no reports

of Russian military forces staying in Belarus after those exercises were issued.

It should be noted that just before Zapad 2021 exercises, the Eastern Europe Studies Centre in Vilnius released a policy paper on the durability of the Belarusian-Russian military union and scenarios of its dynamics (itself a sign of concern in Vilnius about how the situation after the 2020 crisis could affect military integration of those two countries).¹³ It argued that events of 2020 led to a fundamental change in the attitude of the ruling regime in Minsk towards the creation of a common defence space between Belarus and Russia, and that its formation gained momentum. After reviewing the key indicators of the potential alliance under formation, such as continuous military exercises and trainings, joint programmes of standardisation and interoperability, it noted that so far a number of important elements were missing. The two states had not agreed on a renewed military doctrine of the Union State (with reference to 1999 agreement), the aspects of joint command and the establishment of a military air base in Belarus remained unresolved. It concluded that, although the likelihood of a direct military confrontation between NATO and Belarus/Russia forces was extremely low, various provocations and incidents in the border sections should not be ruled out. It also argued that the military integration of the two states was growing and that Lithuania was increasingly facing a dilemma – while pressure on the regime in Minsk pushed it further into the sphere of Russian influence, concessions would indicate recognition of the regime and its repressive practices. It recommended developing mechanisms for response, transparency and exchange of military information while focusing on the transformation of the Belarus security sector that could oppose the integration of the state into Russia.

A couple more developments have to be considered in the context of growing security concerns in Lithuania related to the decisions made in Minsk since the 2020 crisis. The forced landing of the Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius in Minsk on May 24, 2021 by using Belarus' military jets was perceived in Lithuania as yet another indication of the unpredictable behaviour of A. Lukashenka. This incident received broad coverage in Lithuania and was described as a state sponsored act of terrorism, showing that A. Lukashenka could manipulate international civil aviation norms and pose danger to civilians on EU's internal flights with the goal to persecute and silence opposition activists.¹⁴ Lithuanian authorities called for a joint EU-NATO response to the actions of the Belarus regime.

The confrontational approach of A. Lukashenka's regime moved to another stage in June, 2021, when it started actively using migration flows from the Middle East (mostly Iraq) and other parts of the world to the EU by organizing illegal border crossings to Lithuania. This weaponisation of irregular migrant flows to Lithuania, and later to Latvia and Poland, very quickly created pressure on the Lithuanian authorities responsible for border protection and for accommodating asylum seekers. By mid-July, the total number of irregular arrivals to Lithuania from Belarus exceeded by 40 times the number of immigrants that arrived in 2020. The press was daily reporting the numbers of illegal immigrants detained in Lithuania or the attempts to cross the border, and the migration crisis started dominating the political agenda similarly to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. However, differently from the pandemic, the migration crisis was seen as originating from the intentional actions of the regime in Minsk, actively organising flights to Minsk and assisting migrants in their travel to the border with Lithuania. This hybrid attack on Lithuania, which included a disinformation campaign by Minsk, has become an important new factor in Lithuania's attempts to deal with the crisis collectively through the EU and NATO, as discussed below.

It should be noted that both the forced landing of the Ryanair flight and the weaponisation of migration flows by Belarus was perceived as having a strong tacit or open support from Moscow. Therefore, viewed from Vilnius, these hostile acts had to be assessed in the wider context of confrontational relations between Western democracies and their authoritarian neighbours.

Responses to the crisis by national and collective policies

Publicly, most attention of Lithuania's response to the Belarus crisis of 2020 focused on policy measures aimed at hosting democratic opposition activists and others seeking refuge in Lithuania, at the same time initiating sanctions both on national and EU level targeting officials and enterprises linked to the regime in Minsk.¹⁵ From the start of the crisis, Lithuania became a pace-setter inside the EU in terms of its reaction to the repressive actions of the regime in Belarus – a role which was not left unnoticed in Minsk, as evidenced by its decisions to expel Lithuanian diplomats, threaten counter-sanctions, and eventually target Lithuania first with the hybrid (migration) attack.

In the field of security, Lithuania's growing concern with respect to the prospect of increasing influence of Russia in Belarus led to the stronger emphasis on deterrence measures both nationally and through a more intense coordination with NATO partners. This concern figured prominently in the new version of the National Security Strategy prepared by the ruling coalition in 2021.¹⁶ The document referred to the growing hostility of the authoritarian regime in Minsk and its provocations against Lithuania, as well as the increasing influence of Russia in Belarus and the growing political, economic and military integration of those two states, as negatively affecting security of Lithuania and the whole region. The strategy outlined a list of policy measures to strengthen the defence capabilities of Lithuania, especially military forces, by aiming to allocate 2,5 % of GDP to this sector by 2030. It also underlined the importance of strengthening NATO collective defence guarantees to credibly deter potential aggression. Besides, societal preparedness and resilience, as well as business and civilian state institutions were discussed.

Arguably, the 2020 crisis in Belarus did not cause such a fundamental shift in Lithuania's defence policies as the annexation of Crimea and Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. It was after 2014 when all major political actors in Lithuania agreed to increase defence spending and introduce other measures such as compulsory military conscription, upgrading of cyber security policies, more active efforts at increasing the military presence of NATO (i.e. enhanced Forward Presence battalion led by Germany, launched in 2017) and especially US troops, and others. The Belarus crisis reinforced the perceived need that those defence policy measures are indeed important and their implementation should be accelerated and strengthened (for example, by achieving the permanent military presence of the US in Lithuania, enabling air defence and defence from the sea, conducting more frequent NATO military exercises and trainings in the region).

It should be noted that after the start of the hybrid attack by Belarus in summer 2021, there has been an internal debate in Lithuania within the state institutions responsible for defence whether there was a need to trigger Article 4 of NATO which provides for the consultations among its members whenever, in the opinion of one of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security is threatened.¹⁷ However, the position that the use of this article should not be abused, prevailed, especially in light of a sharp decrease in numbers of border-crossings after the adoption of push-back measures in early August. Instead, the efforts were directed towards more

intense sharing of information within NATO on situation at the border with Belarus and initiating a NATO mission to Lithuania to assess the situation. In September 2021, the group of NATO experts dealing with hybrid threats visited Lithuania and spent two weeks analysing activities of Belarus as a practical case of hybrid attack. It was expected to provide recommendations for Lithuania and the whole alliance on how to better deal with such type of attacks. The mission was considered important not only in terms of practical management of the crisis but also symbolically, as an act of NATO's involvement and recognition that Lithuania was targeted by hybrid attack.¹⁸ In mid-October, 2021, the NATO Military Representatives of 21 allied nations visited Lithuania to be briefed on the situation on the eastern flank of NATO.¹⁹

Finally, Lithuania's policies within the EU in addressing challenges posed by hostile activities of regime in Belarus have also developed as the situation evolved. The newly prepared National Security Strategy devoted a particular section to the need for the strengthening of EU external border protection and the management of migration flows, taking into account new developments in the neighbourhood. From the start of migration crisis, Lithuanian institutions actively coordinated their position with the EU and requested involvement of EU's agencies such as Frontex in the management of the crisis. Of particular political and symbolic importance was the statement of European Commission President U. von der Leyen in her state of the union address in September 2021, expressing solidarity with Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland.²⁰ She also stated that Belarus instrumentalised human beings by putting them on planes and literally pushing them towards EU's border, and called it a hybrid attack to destabilise Europe. Coordination of Lithuania's policies with the European Commission led to the adoption of the push-back approach which allowed to stabilise the situation, although sparking a debate about the conformity of these measures with respect to the rights of migrants.

Endnotes

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Perspective from Poland: From an Independent Neighbour to a Satellite of Russia Across the Eastern Border

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The political crisis in Belarus following the 2020 presidential election has led to an unprecedented deepening of Belarus' dependence on Russia, which was already significant in previous years. The dialogue with the EU and the US, which had been in place for several years, collapsed. As a result, the Belarusian regime found itself isolated from the West – in a no-win situation, as Moscow remains its only ally and supplier of energy resources. The greatest rapprochement has taken place in the military dimension. In August 2020, Lukashenka crossed the last important boundary of separateness suggesting that Russian troops could enter Belarus to crush the post-election protests. Therefore, any action taken by Minsk in the security sphere must now be considered solely in terms of joint operations coordinated with the Kremlin. This constitutes a major challenge for Poland's eastern policy, for which strengthening Belarusian sovereignty is one of the key components intended for halting Russian expansion in the Eastern Europe. Warsaw is currently unable to play the game of Belarusian sovereignty; the main aim of its activities towards the Belarusian regime is first and foremost counteracting the negative effects of Belarusian-Russian cooperation, also in the area of security and defence.

In the military domain Poland is increasingly worried about the gradual incorporation of the Belarusian military into Russia's Western Military District.

In response to the growing Russian/Belarusian threat, Poland has called for strengthening NATO posture in the region, expanded the defence cooperation with the US, established new military formations in eastern part of the country, as well as invested in new military capabilities. However, Poland has not undertaken any extraordinary measures in the field of national defence in the wake of the 2020 Belarusian crisis, focusing on diplomacy, situational awareness and information sharing. From the Polish perspective, this crisis has not been a “game changer” in the strategic sense. Rather, it has confirmed that Poland and other countries in the region should expect more instability and more Russian influence over Belarus. This reading of the current situation in Eastern Europe was confirmed by two seemingly interrelated events: the migration crisis on the border between Belarus and the EU and the Russian-Belarusian Zapad 2021 exercises. The growing tension on Poland’s eastern border and the risk of escalating information warfare on the part of Minsk prompted Polish authorities to take the unprecedented decision to impose a state of emergency in the border area.

Political considerations

From the beginning of its independence after the collapse of the USSR, Belarus was perceived in Warsaw as one of the Eastern European countries (along with the Baltic states and Ukraine) blocking by its very existence the return of Russia to the Soviet-era imperial status. Thus, the preservation of real sovereignty by Belarus has become a goal in itself for Polish diplomacy: an axiom coinciding with the national interest of Poland, which fears renewed domination of Moscow in Eastern Europe or even more broadly in Central and Eastern Europe. Supporting the young independent post-Soviet states emerging in the early 1990s with all available means was deeply rooted in the tradition of Polish Eastern thought, most fully expressed in the doctrine of Jerzy Giedroyc. In the 1960s, this Polish émigré and intellectual convincingly argued that Russia would not pose a threat to Poland provided the countries in between – primarily Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine – gain independence. Moreover, contrary to the critics who accused him of promoting Polish supremacy in the region, Giedroyc emphasised the need for partnership between Poland and these countries, which – in the most optimistic scenario – could lead to an alliance.¹

Warsaw's pro-Belarusian efforts may have been encouraged by Minsk's declaration of Belarus' military neutrality in the early 1990s. After gaining independence, the issue of neutrality was an important factor in discussions on the country's new foreign policy. It resulted from the Belarusian people's deep-rooted recollection of experiences in World War II and the terrible consequences of the Chernobyl disaster (Belarus suffered the most of all of the former USSR countries). The universal awareness among the Belarusian elite that the country is situated between East and West became a major factor reinforcing the line of non-involvement on either side and shaping a balanced foreign policy strategy. This idea was presented as being closely linked to the declaration on renouncing the nuclear power status (the nuclear warheads inherited from the Soviet Army were eventually moved out of Belarus by November 1996). At the same time, in the first half of the 1990s, Belarusian diplomats tried to promote the creation of a nuclear-free zone throughout the entire Central and Eastern European region. The goal was to emphasise its declaration of neutrality in a regional context. This, however, was not received well by other countries. Regardless of the moderately sceptical response abroad, the idea of neutrality became so fundamental for the Belarusian authorities that it was mentioned in all official foreign policy and administrative documents at the time. Art. 18 of the current Belarusian Constitution also states that the country strives to be neutral. Nevertheless, already in the early 1990s, a parallel tendency emerged to re-establish a new form of close relations and an alliance with the former decision-maker in the USSR, Russia. Belarus ratified the 1992 Tashkent Collective Security Treaty, thereby entering the military alliance being built by Moscow involving some former USSR countries. It was subsequently transformed into the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

Belarus' complete economic dependence on Russia has been a major factor helping to boost Kremlin's influence there. It encompassed preferential conditions for supplies of Russian oil and gas, crucially important access to the sales market in Russia, and the ties of cooperation forged during the Soviet era. Lukashenka's takeover in 1994 significantly sped up the expansion of Russia's foothold in Belarus. By appealing to Soviet nostalgia and an idea of Slavic unity (popular in Belarusian society at that time), the Belarusian President initiated and actively supported the process of Russian-Belarusian integration. This led to the creation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus in 1999. Within this structure the Regional Military Group was also formed,

which was responsible for organising joint military exercises, among others. This resulted in the closer military cooperation between the two countries, also beyond the CSTO. Belarusian foreign policy, therefore, began to focus principally on a strategic partnership with Russia, while the idea of striving for neutrality – as written into the Constitution – merely became little more than a catchy slogan in the propaganda used by the Belarusian authorities.²

Firmly oriented towards the east and bound by a close military alliance with Russia, Belarus was becoming an ever-greater challenge for Poland: especially in the context of the Poland's unambiguous aspirations for NATO membership, which were finally fulfilled by accession to the Alliance in 1999. From that moment, it was obvious that the fundamental contradictions between the military alliances would be one of the main factors limiting the potential of the Polish-Belarusian relations. As a result, for many years Poland pursued a policy of the so-called 'critical dialogue' towards Belarus. In practice it meant maintaining bilateral relations in a very limited format, which provoked a similar reaction from Minsk. Apart from the lack of a common vision for military security in the region, an important reason for this was the increasing violation of human rights and democratic principles by the authoritarian regime of A. Lukashenka.

This did not mean, however, that Warsaw developed a perfect political strategy to counter Russian-Belarusian military alliance, which has undermined its security. The need to support a sovereign Belarus rather than one dependent on Russia was still valid for the Polish political elite. The only problem was to convince the authorities in Minsk to take action leading to at least a partial weakening of the Kremlin's growing domination. Therefore, after 2004, when serious disputes regarding the shape of further integration within the Union State emerged between Moscow and Minsk, Poland became actively involved in expanding cooperation with Belarus. Back then A. Lukashenka, fearing the loss of power, increasingly emphasised Belarusian distinctiveness while attempting to enter into a dialogue with the West. For Warsaw, cooperation with the Belarusian regime did not mean acceptance of authoritarian standards, but a chance to weaken the dependence of Belarus on Russia. At the same time, Polish decision-makers were perfectly aware that the area of military cooperation would be the most resistant to any alternative proposals from the West, including from the neighbouring Poland. Nevertheless, Polish diplomacy was very active during both periods of intensive dialogue between the EU and Minsk (2008–2010, 2015–2020).

For instance, it initiated the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, which also included Belarus. It was aimed at gradual rapprochement with the EU or even integration of Eastern European post-Soviet republics.³ Warsaw has also put forward an offer to diversify Belarus' oil supplies as an alternative to Russian resources.

The very independence of Belarus was at stake in that game. Sovereign Belarus is vital not only for Poland, but also for the entire region. It was particularly evident in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014 and the growing threat from Russia. In recent years, Lukashenka – pursuing a policy of balancing between East and West – was able to win this conflict to boost Belarus' profile in European politics (to a certain, rather limited extent). The Belarusian authorities have tried to demonstrate their autonomy also in the sphere of military security. In 2015, attempts by the Kremlin to install a military air base in Belarus in Lida, Baranovichi or Bobruisk failed. Minsk argued that it remains capable of ensuring the protection of the Belarusian airspace on its own, provided it had an adequate technical support from Russia.

Today, one can say beyond any doubt that it has been an element of a broader game played by Minsk – intended for continuous threatening Western Europe (including Poland) with a “Russian bear” in Brest in case of insufficient support from the EU and the US for Belarus. Joint Russian-Belarusian military exercises under the code name “Zapad” – taking place every four years on Belarusian soil – have been yet another important factor influencing the imagination of Western political elites. Poland and Lithuania appeared in the scenarios of Zapad 2017 and 2021 (without mentioning both countries names directly) as aggressors threatening the territorial integrity of Belarus. In addition, these exercises were a model example of information warfare aimed at spreading a number of unconfirmed rumours suggesting, for example, that Russia will not withdraw its troops from Belarus after the drills or that the troops participating in the manoeuvres will be used to launch aggressive actions against one of the neighbouring states (especially Ukraine).⁴ On the one hand, such fears demonstrated serious limitations in developing cooperation with Belarus. On the other hand, they encouraged the EU countries involved in the eastern neighbourhood, including Poland, to intensify their efforts to strengthen Belarusian sovereignty.

This state of affairs existed until the presidential elections in Belarus on August 9, 2020. The brutal suppression of post-election mass demonstrations and the torture of detained participants of the protests led to the collapse of

the political dialogue that had previously taken place. The game of 'Belarusian independence' has also broken down. Desperate for survival, Lukashenka put everything on the Russian line, breaking with the policy of balancing between East and West he had practised for years. Just one week after the outbreak of the protests, the Belarusian leader held two telephone calls with Vladimir Putin, from whom he obtained assurances that Russia would provide assistance "if needed" under the mechanisms envisaged in the Union State Agreement and the CSTO.⁵

The following weeks showed that this was above all a bluff by Lukashenka, who in this way tried to intimidate his internal opponents and the West, which reacted with harsh criticism. Nevertheless, Minsk has symbolically crossed a line in its military cooperation with Russia. The request for military intervention, even if it was only a propaganda stunt, made it clear to the Western countries, including Poland, just how far Lukashenka was capable of going to defend his power. As a result, he is no longer seen as a guarantor of Belarus' independence from the Western perspective. Furthermore, his actions could rather be interpreted as a direct threat not only to the continued sovereignty of the country, but also to regional security. Poland found itself in a particularly difficult situation, since it was Minsk which, from August 2020, started to address insinuations about the preparations for an alleged 'armed aggression' aimed, inter alia, at annexing the Grodno region. Warsaw was forced to both deny these completely unfounded accusations and to mark its clear opposition to possible Russian military involvement in the political crisis in Belarus. On 27 August, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki officially urged Russia to "immediately withdraw from plans of a military intervention in Belarus, under a false excuse of 'restoring control' – a hostile act, in breach of international law and human rights of Belarusian people, who should be free to decide their own fate".⁶

From Warsaw's point of view, Belarusian-Russian military cooperation has become a serious threat, especially in the context of the gradual evolution of the Belarusian political system towards totalitarianism. Belarus has turned from a more or less flexible player on the international arena into a satrapy completely dependent on Russia and increasingly unpredictable from the Western perspective. This is evidenced by a number of Minsk's actions targeting the West in recent months, including the forced landing of a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius over Belarusian territory, or orchestrating a migration crisis on the Belarusian-EU border. As a result, Poland's policy

towards the regime has been definitively deprived of elements of support for Belarus in its negotiating position vis-à-vis the Kremlin. Defending against and, if possible, counteracting the effects of far-reaching Russian-Belarusian cooperation and integration in the area of security and defence, has become the primary objective.

Military considerations

Poland's 2020 National Security Strategy defines its security environment as increasingly unpredictable with the most serious threats emerging from Russia's neo-imperial policy. The strategy – published in May 2020 – notes the development of its offensive military capabilities in the western strategic direction, extension of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) systems in the Baltic Sea region, and large-scale military exercises assuming conflict with NATO (including the use of nuclear weapons).⁷ Therefore, it is striking and telling that the document does not mention Russia's only regional ally – Belarus – at all. This absence seems to derive from Poland's perception of the strategic situation in its eastern neighbourhood. It sees Belarus as completely dependent on Kremlin in military terms – as an integral part of the Russian security space. Russian-Belarusian military integration falls under the umbrella of the Collective Operational Reaction Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States' Collective Security Treaty Organisation as well as the Regional Group of Forces (RGF) and the Regional Air Defence System (RADS) encompassing corresponding military branches. Both countries cooperate also in reconnaissance, communications, logistics and electronic warfare. For Poland, this means that Belarus' military capabilities are being shaped in line with operational requirements of the Western Military District (WMD) and that Russia's military frontier is *de facto* located at the Polish-Belarusian border instead of the Smolensk region.⁸ Interestingly, in some cases, for instance in the air force domain, Russia curbs the development of Belarusian capabilities. In Belarus, the funds allocated to internal security exceed military spending, which clearly shows its priorities.

With regard to defence planning, Poland and the Baltic states are flanked by the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus/Russia. From the perspective of Warsaw, which is 3-hour drive from the eastern border, Belarus is considered an extension of Russia's WMD and Kremlin's geopolitical wedge in the Central

and Eastern Europe. At the tactical level, it could serve as a springboard for Russia's offensive operations, providing necessary infrastructure and host nation support. In fact, Russia has already demonstrated its readiness to use Belarusian territory in 2014 during the war against Ukraine. Back then it deployed a A50 airborne early warning and control aircraft to Belarus to conduct surveillance of the central and western parts of Ukraine (during its missions A-50 was escorted by both Russian and Belarusian fighters).⁹ It is also a vital part of Russia's regional A2/AD architecture with a large number of ground-based S-300 air defence systems. At the strategic level, Russia has maintained two forward military facilities in Belarus. These are the 43rd Naval Communication Centre of the Russian Navy with the RJH69 radio station (ensuring strategic connectivity with nuclear submarines and performing reconnaissance & electronic warfare tasks for the Strategic Missile Forces and Aerospace Forces) and the 474th Independent Radio Technical Unit of the Russian Aerospace Forces with 70M6 Volga ballistic missile early warning radar. The most visible biannual manifestation of the military cooperation between the two countries are large-scale Zapad exercises rehearsing an armed conflict with NATO and military involvement in the western direction.¹⁰

During the 2020 Belarus crisis, Poland was focused on monitoring the developments beyond its eastern border as well as information sharing/building situational awareness among its allies regarding the situation in Belarus.¹¹ It deliberately refrained from any *ad hoc* military measures in response to Lukashenka's terror campaign and the uncertainty surrounding the events across the border, including the military demonstrations in the course of Russian-Belarusian Slavic Brotherhood and Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises carried out in September and October 2020. With this restrained approach Warsaw wanted to avoid fuelling regime's anti-Polish propaganda and repressions against the Polish minority in Belarus. In April 2021, Belarus accused Poland of two airspace violations, one of which was confirmed by the Polish Armed Forces Operational Command.¹² Although there were some attempts to link this incident with Poland's reactions to the crisis in Belarus, it was hardly the case. In fact, Poland stepped up the surveillance of the border zone already in 2017 – before the Zapad 2017 exercise. Enhanced military presence in the regions bordering Belarus is also related to the ongoing development of new military formations of the Land Forces and newly-established voluntary Territorial Defence Forces (TDF), which started in 2017/2018.

The 2020 Belarus crisis was not a watershed in Poland's security and defence policy in the way Russia's wars against Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) had been. Rather, it exacerbated already existing concerns and further contributed to the instability of Poland's security environment. Taking a broader view, since 2014, Poland's response to the Belarusian/Russian military challenge has been double-layered – combining efforts to enhance national capabilities with strengthening allied defence and deterrence on NATO's eastern flank.

In the field of national defence, Poland has secured sustainable spending on the development of its Armed Forces. In 2014-2020, its defence budget increased by nearly 50% - from \$8.5 bn (1,86 % of GDP) to \$12.6bn (2,28 % of GDP). At the same time, military personnel expanded by over 20 % - from 99,000 to 120,000. In 2020, the size of its military and defence expenditures placed Poland in 8th position in NATO.¹³ The 2017 Defence Concept sets the ambitious 2030 targets for the number of troops (200,000) and military budget (2,5 % of GDP).¹⁴ The procurement of the Patriot air defence systems at a cost of \$4.75 bn should be considered Poland's biggest modernisation programme of the decade. The primary driver behind this big-ticket acquisition is the need to intercept wide range of Russia's offensive weapons including ballistic and cruise missiles.¹⁵ Although Poland's military capabilities have been almost entirely developed to repel an armed aggression from the east, recent years saw several investments connected directly to the threats posed by enhanced Russian-Belarusian cooperation in the RGF and the RADS. Firstly, Poland has reinforced its own "eastern flank" to deter a major land incursion. A legacy of the Warsaw Pact, the bulk of the military infrastructure and Army's formations are located in western Poland. To augment the regions east of the Vistula River, the Land Forces redeployed their armoured units in 2017. This rebalancing resulted in moving two battalions of Leopard 2A5s eastwards to the garrison in the vicinity of Warsaw. It was followed (2018) by the establishment of a new division in eastern Poland, namely the 18th Division (fourth in the Army). This mechanised formation is set to reach operational readiness by 2026 and will partly consist of already existing units adding a new brigade and support elements. The 18th Division will cooperate with TDF brigades. In July 2021, it was announced that 18th Division will receive M1A2 Abrams tanks – yet another major procurement from the US (\$6 bn-worth). Secondly, in order to break through or tackle Russian/Belarusian A2/AD system, Poland has acquired AGM-158 Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles

(JASSM), including the extended-range version.¹⁶ If supported by capable sensors, this will enable hitting targets within the range of up to 370 and 926 kilometres. In the near future, JASSMs will not only be carried by Polish F-16s, but also by the new F-35 fleet.¹⁷

In addition to the modernisation of the Armed Forces, Poland has also advocated for strengthening NATO's (north)eastern flank to offset Russian-Belarusian capabilities. Its vision for regional security has included: reinforcement of the NATO Force Structure (transforming the Szczecin-based Multinational Corps Northeast into high-readiness HQ); establishing two Multinational Division HQs – North East in Elbląg and North in Ādaži; quick implementation and further development – in terms of enablers, integration and reinforcements – of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence concept (four battalion-size battlegroups in Poland and each of the Baltic states); exercising large-scale multi-domain operations; more investments in military infrastructure to improve Host Nation Support; closer military cooperation with the Baltic states.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that the US-led NATO Battlegroup Poland guards the so-called Suwałki Gap – a narrow land strip connecting Poland and Lithuania (sandwiched between Kaliningrad and Belarus). With additional 4,500 US troops deployed on bilateral basis, Poland has become a regional hub for American and allied military activity. The US military footprint in Poland encompasses: the forward HQ of the V Corps and the Forward Division Command, a rotating Armoured Brigade Combat Team, a Combat Aviation Brigade task force, the Aviation Component, and unmanned aerial vehicles MQ-9.¹⁹ The latter seems valuable in the context of Russia/Belarus since the US UAVs have improved regional surveillance & reconnaissance capabilities. This military presence has not been focused solely on defending Poland. Instead, different elements of US forces are rotating on the entire eastern flank.

It is also noteworthy that Poland does not perceive strengthening NATO and the US posture on its soil in terms of a security dilemma which would prompt Moscow to tighten its grip on Belarus, for instance by setting up a military base there. On the contrary, from Poland's perspective the regional balance of power still remains unfavourable to NATO despite the numerous defence and deterrence measures which have been in place since the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit. This is not only due to Russia's local quantitative edge over NATO (taking into account only military formations in the WMD), but also due to the level of its military integration with Belarus. The 2018 saw a heated debate

on enhancing the US military presence in Poland among security and defence experts. Some argued that a permanent US military base in Poland (known as “Fort Trump”) would adversely affect the regional security by forcing Minsk to accept the deployment of Russian troops to Belarus in response.²⁰ Poland, however, rejects this view.²¹ It sees the issue of the “Fort Putin” in Belarus as an element of political bargaining between Kremlin and Minsk since Russia is capable of moving its units to Belarus at very short notice under the cover of snap military drills (within estimated time of 24 hours). This capability has been tested and exercised by Russia. Therefore, the base issue seems more about politics than about military necessity.

Reactions to the Zapad 2021 exercises

In response to increasing migration pressure created by the Belarusian regime, the Polish authorities decided to introduce a state of emergency on September 2, 2021, in the areas adjacent to the border with Belarus.²² The aim of this measure, modelled on steps taken earlier in Lithuania and Latvia, was primarily to weaken the media effect created around groups of illegal migrants camped on the Polish-Belarusian border. As a result, this objective was partially achieved by lowering the temperature of the political debate. This reduced the effectiveness of Minsk’s actions anticipating the destabilisation of the Polish political scene and provoking tensions in Polish society. Punishing Lithuania, Latvia and Poland for their support to the Belarusian opposition and the EU sanctions on Belarus as well as forcing the dialogue with the West, were among Lukashenka’s goals. At the same time, the active phase of the Zapad military exercises, taking place in September, was an additional and important factor which influenced the introduction of restrictions on the Polish eastern border. It is worth emphasising that the migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border was widely seen in Poland as a part of the Zapad 2021 exercises. This means that in the perception of Warsaw – as well as the Baltic States – the artificially created migration crisis was a Belarusian operation, carried out at least with the support of its military and political ally, Russia.

The Zapad 2021 exercises were closely followed in Poland and across the region. However, the 2021 Russian-Belarusian strategic manoeuvres were approached differently than in 2017. Instead of focusing mostly on the military side, more emphasis was placed on hybrid measures (instigating

migrant crisis by Belarus on the borders of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia) and psychological/information warfare aimed at intimidating Western societies with Russia's sabre-rattling and display of military power.²³ There were also some discussions on possible border violations and provocations by troops exercising in Belarus.²⁴ It is worth mentioning that September 2021 saw an unprecedented level of diplomatic contacts between Poland and the Baltic states including meetings of foreign and defence ministers, prime ministers and presidents. This clearly demonstrated regional solidarity in the face of aggressive actions by Belarus and Russia.

Polish Armed Forces' activities during the Zapad 2021 were pre-planned. On 5 September, units from the 12th Mechanised Division began the two-week tactical Rys'-21 exercise. Roughly 4,000 troops and 1,000 pieces of military equipment were moved from the northwestern Poland to the southeastern training grounds. In this way the Polish Armed Forces signalled their capability to quickly reinforce eastern parts of the country in the event of a military crisis. Simultaneously, military drills were conducted by the 18th Mechanised Division and 2,500 soldiers from the 16th Mechanised Division joined Border Guards in the border protection efforts to prevent illegal immigration from Belarus.²⁵ Since then, this number has gradually risen to 10,000 troops from 12th, 16th, and 18th Divisions. Military involvement in the border zone is also augmented by the local Territorial Defence Forces. The MoD decided to increase the level of readiness for 23,000 territorial defence troops in order to prepare for a possible escalation of the border crisis.²⁶ In addition, a mechanised company with Rosomak armoured vehicles and Rak self-propelled mortars was deployed to Latvia to participate in the Silver Arrow-21 exercises (bolstering Polish tank company deployed to Latvia on permanent basis within the NATO enhanced Forward Presence framework).

Future scenarios

As a result of the political crisis following the 2020 presidential election, the dependence of Belarus on Russian support, including the military one, has reached an unprecedented level. Therefore, any actions undertaken by Minsk in the security and defence sphere must be considered in the context of Russian interests in the region. At the same time, there is no indication that A. Lukashenka will again become a partner for dialogue with the West

as has already happened several times in the last 20 years. In addition, the regime – presumably with Moscow's approval – is taking actions typical for “rogue” states. It poses and will pose a threat to the entire region of Eastern and Central Europe, including Poland.

Next steps in Russian-Belarusian military cooperation may include the implementation of a new military doctrine of the Union State, prepositioning of Russian military equipment and supplies to Belarus, or rotational detachments of Russian units there. In 2021, both parties agreed on a new 5-year military cooperation programme envisaging enhanced exercises and shared combat training facilities.²⁷ An accelerated military integration will pose increasingly urgent threat for NATO. It could be assumed that in response Poland would seek additional allied measures aimed at strengthening NATO's northeastern flank. This could also motivate Poland to accelerate its Armed Forces' modernisation and to introduce changes in its military posture to counterbalance a possible enhanced presence of the Russian Army across the border. Finally, hijacking a civilian aircraft or pressuring Lithuania, Latvia and Poland with illegal immigration in 2021 show that Poland and the Baltic states should step up efforts to improve regional resilience to Belarusian hybrid warfare.

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**Russian and
Belarusian
Perspectives on
Bilateral Security
and Defence
Engagement**

Perspective from Russia: Belarus and Russia – Allies More in Words than in Deeds

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Few international issues generate more conflicting interpretations than the military cooperation between Belarus and Russia. Alternating between secretive deals and acrimonious disputes, this bumpy relationship regularly puzzles even close observers. At times, the two countries' dealings are so confusing that the very same arrangements may be seen as either a major boost or a severe blow to Belarusian sovereignty, depending on the viewpoint of the beholder.

The acute political crisis that engulfed Belarus in the wake of the contested 2020 presidential election has not made things any clearer. The authorities' violent crackdown on protests against electoral fraud led the West to sever its ties with the regime in Minsk and put the country under mounting sanctions. Belarus' embattled and isolated veteran leader A. Lukashenka had little choice but to rely entirely on Russia's support. This made the Kremlin look well-positioned to cut its recalcitrant ally down to size and put a stop to Belarus' attempts to act independently once and for all, especially in the security sphere.

The ensuing year of frantic negotiations between Moscow and Minsk has offered mixed results, however. Lukashenka's frequent and prolonged talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin remain opaque and bode ill for Belarusian independence, but so far have brought limited change to the two countries' relations.¹ Although a number of new security arrangements have been agreed upon, they appear to be more of a compromise than the unconditional surrender that many were expecting from Minsk.

This state of affairs has created an atmosphere of ambiguity, in which any new step in the security cooperation between Moscow and Minsk stokes fears among Belarus' Western neighbours that it may be a prologue to sweeping changes that may overturn the existing military balance in Eastern Europe. Bleak expectations are further fuelled by the Minsk-sponsored refugee crisis on Belarus' border with NATO countries, the large scale Zapad-2021 military drills that Russia held jointly with Belarus, and growing hostility in the latter's relations with neighbouring Ukraine. And neither Minsk nor Moscow is keen to defuse tensions with a compelling explanation of their motives and objectives.

The following article attempts to discern the key driving forces behind the security cooperation between Belarus and Russia. It follows the evolution of the two countries' military ties over almost three decades, paying particular attention to the impact of the 2020 political crisis in Belarus. The main goal of the article is to analyse how the crisis has transformed the basic premises of Russian-Belarusian military relations and the countries' priorities in the security domain, as well as to evaluate the significance of this transformation for the wider region.

Three decades of distortions

The history of Belarusian-Russian security cooperation appears to abound with the same contradictions and vagaries that plague their energy trade or attempts at economic integration. Lofty proclamations of eternal brotherhood alternate with petty bargaining and mutual accusations of ingratitude, leaving observers wondering whether the two countries are on the edge of merging into one nation or severing ties completely. Still, despite the numerous ups and downs in the relationship, both Russia and Belarus have remained surprisingly consistent about their security priorities.

The two countries make no bones about the fact that the primary objective of their military cooperation is to counteract NATO. But both are also ready to use the partnership to pursue an unrelated agenda, since neither sees war with NATO as an immediate possibility. For the Kremlin, it boils down to transforming the two countries' security interdependency into a one-way street, where Belarus would be militarily helpless without Russian assistance, while Russia should be prepared to easily overcome even the complete loss of its Belarusian ally.²

Lukashenka, ever obsessed with reinforcing his personal power, has always treated military cooperation with Russia as a sphere in which tangible benefits can be secured in exchange for undertaking obligations that will never have to be delivered on.³ His promise to take Russia's side in the event of a full-blown war with NATO neither strains the Belarusian budget nor limits his control over the country, as that eventuality is highly improbable. Nevertheless, such a commitment, no matter how ephemeral, is sure to make the Kremlin more amenable in the incessant haggling with Minsk over gas prices.

The inherent contradictions of both approaches are easy to see. Russia's efforts to phase out the import of Belarusian military hardware may boost the self-sufficiency of its own defence industry, but they also push Belarus to look for other markets, making the country less dependent on Moscow's favour.⁴ In a similar vein, Lukashenka's pursuit of a more independent foreign policy line has always been hamstrung by the security obligations he has undertaken towards Russia: obligations he is unable to abandon without the risk of dealing a major blow to the socio-economic stability of his country.

The inherent contradictions notwithstanding, the two countries' visions of the security agenda are compatible enough to allow them to carry on and even elaborate certain aspects of their cooperation. Their military priorities do not collide directly, but rather distort each other's policies. Every time a step forward is made in one sphere, it has to be paid for with concessions and setbacks in another. In pursuing security cooperation, Moscow and Minsk are heading in a direction that neither of them really likes but both are ready to tolerate, fearing the costs of changing course.

The trajectory of the cooperation is further skewed by the fact that just three decades ago, the armed forces of both Russia and Belarus were part of a single army: that of the USSR. A brief hiatus of several years in the early 1990s was not enough for the erstwhile parts of the once united Soviet armed forces to become self-sufficient and independent institutions. When the two countries restored close military cooperation in the mid-1990s, they started to integrate something that had never been fully separated in the first place.

Moreover, making their fledgling states viable remained the main preoccupation of all post-Soviet governments for decades after the breakup of the USSR. The key element of this viability was greater self-sufficiency of national security, which was boosted at the expense of ties with other former Soviet republics. The degree of success of these policies varied greatly over the region, but neither Moscow nor Minsk were exceptions to the general

trend. Even at moments of utmost affinity, they remained mindful of the need to reinforce their own state structures.

Finally, the leadership of both countries tends to value written documents less than informal arrangements or their personal sense of fair play, adding further fluidity to relations. Taken together, this reality obfuscates the military cooperation between Russia and Belarus to such an extent that even an ostensibly breakthrough agreement that took years of talks to forge may turn out to be a mere formalization of past informal practices dating back to the Soviet era, or a vague list of preferences that will still be subject to numerous changes and renegotiations in the course of a drawn-out implementation process.⁵

Skewed Achievements

The above contradictions have left their mark on all the major military arrangements Minsk and Moscow have reached since the mid-1990s. Take the Regional Group of Forces (RGF), which comprises Belarus' ground and special forces and the troops in Russia's Western Military District. The RGF has become notorious in Europe because of the massive Zapad military exercise that Russia and Belarus hold jointly every four years to boost the Group's interoperability.

Lukashenka and then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed the accord establishing the RGF back in 1997.⁶ Since then, Russia has locked Belarus into a number of related treaties, including the Agreement on the Joint Use of the Military Infrastructure (1998),⁷ the Agreement on the RGF's Joint Combat Service Support (2002),⁸ and the Agreement on the RGF's Joint Technical Support (2016).⁹

The very design of the RGF highlights imbalances in the relationship by equating Belarus' entire ground forces with a single Russian military district.¹⁰ In this way, it seems to nicely fit Moscow's quest for asymmetrical dependency as it stops Minsk from conducting large scale military operations on its own.

However, the reality gets more complicated when Minsk's inputs to the RGF are taken into consideration. The RGF was established within the framework of the Union State of Russia and Belarus and is activated only in case of war or a grave military threat. Such an activation can only be declared by the Union State's joint institutions in which Minsk wields a veto — a power

that gives the Belarusian leadership significant leverage in the management of the RGF.¹¹

Another downside of the asymmetric dependency cherished by Moscow is that Minsk feels little need to invest in the modernization of its armed forces, reducing its value as an ally. Lukashenka has repeatedly stated Belarus will not pay for Russian armaments as their only use is to protect Russia.¹²

Indeed, for decades, the Belarusian defence budget has remained one of the lowest in the region in both relative and absolute terms. It hovers a bit above 1 % of GDP and, in financial terms, is on par with the defence budget of Latvia (the latter's economy is half the size of Belarus and its population is just two million versus nine million in Belarus).¹³ Lukashenka is convinced Moscow needs a modern Belarusian military much more than Minsk does — so it is up to Russia to foot the bill. He believes Belarus' duties as an ally should be limited to welcoming such investments and remaining loyal.

For Russia, this is a non-starter. As Soviet unity faded, Moscow grew convinced that its allies in the post-Soviet space should accept not only the perks but also the costs of independence — and pay the same for Russian armaments as buyers further afield. This difference of opinion has plagued another joint Belarus-Russia military undertaking: the Unified Regional Air Defence System.

The talks on its establishment date back to 2001 when the project was conceived as a response to NATO's eastward enlargement. But the two countries only signed the corresponding agreement in 2009.¹⁴ It took them another three years to ratify the agreement and it was not until 2016 that the system was fully operative.¹⁵ The Unified Regional Air Defence System is active in peacetime but, judging by the frequency of Moscow-Minsk talks on the issue, apparently still fails to meet Russian expectations.

Minsk never seriously objected to participating in the Unified Regional Air Defence System but dragged its feet, insisting its reward should be a thorough modernization of its air force and antiaircraft defence systems — because it was Russia who needed protection against a NATO attack. Moscow dithered, weighing up the remote possibility of a NATO assault against the billions of dollars that would be lost if its relatively modern Su-30SM fighter jets and S-400 missile systems were sold to financially-unreliable Belarus. In all truth, Russia did not really want Belarus to acquire a more modern military as this was sure to embolden Minsk in its attempts to forge an independent foreign policy.

In the mid-2010s, Moscow tried to reconcile these conflicting priorities by suggesting a new Russian air base inside Belarus.¹⁶ The initiative was supposed to kill two birds with one stone: make up for the deficiencies of the Belarusian air force and relieve Moscow of the need to subsidize the military capabilities of its restless ally. However, the idea met strong resistance in Minsk. The Belarusian leadership saw the base as an attempt to expose the country to new risks without proper compensation. Minsk's opposition was buttressed by the fallout from the 2014 Ukraine crisis, which allowed Belarus to portray itself as a country aspiring for neutrality and better ties with the West.

After a few years of tense negotiations, Russia was forced to shelve plans for a base and come to a compromise. Belarus agreed to improve its military capacity by procuring 12 Su-30SM fighter jets from Russia at a price not much below the market one (reportedly \$600 million).¹⁷ This arrangement left both sides unhappy, striking yet another uneasy balance between conflicting agendas.

At home in the Russian halls of power, Lukashenka has never hesitated to play one part of the Russian elite off against another, or to use military issues to improve his economic negotiating position. In 2009, he made headlines by refusing to join the Collective Rapid Reaction Force of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).¹⁸ Moreover, he called the corresponding treaty illegitimate as it was signed in his absence and CSTO decisions are supposed to be taken by consensus.

Lukashenka's ostensibly emotional outburst was actually a calculated move. In this way, he dragged the Russian security establishment into Belarus' dispute with the Russian sanitary authorities over a ban on imports of Belarusian dairy products. Predictably, security considerations took precedence over petty trade issues and Moscow soon overturned the ban.¹⁹ A few months later, Lukashenka added his signature to the treaty on the Collective Rapid Reaction Force.²⁰

Moscow tolerates Lukashenka's frustration of its military designs largely because the Belarusian leader has never questioned the principle of a military alliance with Russia, arguing only over the details. The Belarusian officers continue to study in Russia. Minsk buys almost no weapons from countries other than Russia.²¹ Belarus invariably participates in Russia-led security initiatives in the post-Soviet space. And Belarus regularly co-hosts military exercises, including Zapad and Shchit Soyuz, which Russia believes to be crucial for sustaining its defence capability against NATO.

Still, Moscow's toleration of Lukashenka's intransigence has always gone hand in hand with attempts to rein him in. For example, in 2021, Russia extended the lease on its two military facilities in Belarus — the Vileyka Naval Communications Center and Hantsavichy Radar Station — for another 25 years.²² Minsk's demands for better terms were brushed aside as Moscow had recently constructed similar facilities on Russian territory, including in Kaliningrad Region.²³ In a similar way, Russia gave up trying to privatize the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant, which produces chassis for missile launchers, and instead invested in replacing Belarusian imports with its own goods produced by Kamaz.²⁴

If Minsk excelled in getting short-term concessions, Moscow tried to play the long game, gradually reducing its dependence on Belarusian services. Both nations believed they had time on their side. The Kremlin assumed that, sooner or later, Lukashenka would run out of room for manoeuvre, while the Belarusian leader hoped another realignment of forces in the region would buttress his position vis-à-vis Moscow (an event like the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 or Russia's conflict with Ukraine since 2014). These assumptions remained in place until a profound political crisis shook Belarus.

Inversion of priorities since 2020

The 2020 presidential elections in Belarus were mired by massive fraud and severely undermined Lukashenka's legitimacy. Clinging to power, he resorted to a level of political violence that alienated large parts of Belarusian society and caused uproar abroad. The West imposed sanctions on Belarus and Lukashenka survived only thanks to Kremlin support.

In the wake of the crisis, Russia was widely expected to take advantage of Belarus' isolation and reshape the bilateral relationship on its own terms. However, the ensuing negotiations proved more complex. The 2020 crisis may have altered priorities, but it has largely kept the basic patterns of interaction on security issues between the two countries intact.

From the beginning, Lukashenka played an old card: offering to intensify military cooperation as a trade-off for Russian support. He promised to purchase Russian arms in unprecedented quantities and suggested a major expansion of joint military exercises.²⁵ He deliberately targeted the Kremlin with the message that he was dealing with neither opposition protests, nor a

revolution, but hybrid NATO aggression.²⁶ The implications were easy to grasp: Moscow should inundate Minsk with assistance with no strings attached because they were facing a common foe.

However, Lukashenka was in no hurry to match words with deeds. Some oral sabre-rattling towards neighbouring NATO states notwithstanding, he stuck to his old position that it was Moscow who needed the rearmament of Belarus, not Minsk. In August 2020, at the peak of the protests, Belarus inked a few relatively minor deals for several dozen BTR-82A armoured carriers and four Mi-35M helicopters.²⁶ But the Belarusian 2021 defence budget envisages only a 10 % increase in the country's national currency, which is subject to inflation and devaluation, and is unlikely to grow further.²⁷ This precludes significant arms purchases, including of Russian Iskander or S-400 missile systems, which the two countries have been discussing for many years.²⁸

The modernization of the Belarusian air forces also proceeds at the same leisurely pace. Under the 2017 contract, Belarus so far has received only four out of 12 Su-30SM fighter jets. Another four jets are planned to be delivered no sooner than in October 2022 well behind the initial schedule.²⁹

Similarly, Lukashenka's anti-NATO diatribes failed to persuade Moscow to review its parsimonious approach to military cooperation. Russia welcomed the opportunity to expand joint exercises: Slavic Brotherhood in September 2020³¹ and Zapad in September 2021 involved many more troops than before.³² But the Russian stance on arms sales remains the same: Russia is ready to offer Belarus modern armaments only at market price, or in the form of Russian armed forces deployed in Belarus itself.

Minsk continues to fight tooth and nail against hosting a Russian military base. And, even in the current situation, it has been successful. Moscow agreed to substitute its long-coveted air base for a Joint Military Training Center, where Russian jets and missile systems will be stationed in limited numbers and (ostensibly) for training purposes.³³ Joint air patrols suspended in 2015 will also resume.³⁴

Nevertheless, the astonishing continuity in Russia-Belarus bickering over military issues does not mean the 2020 Belarusian crisis has only had a marginal impact on the security situation in Eastern Europe. The significance of a few extra Russian fighter jets stationed near the Belarusian city of Grodno pales in comparison with a profound change in the security priorities of the Belarusian regime.

Before the August 2020 presidential elections, Lukashenka believed a reduction of regional tension to be his best guarantee for political survival. This made him preach transparency, restraint and dialogue – and he tried to engage as many parties as possible in security negotiations. Now, the opposite is true. The Belarusian leader is determined to up the ante with the West, viewing this as the only way to make Moscow appreciate his services and keep him in power. There is nothing that can eclipse the issue of political reform in Belarus more effectively than Eastern Europe being on the brink of war.

If one compares Minsk's approach to the Zapad military exercises with Russia in 2017 and 2021, the contrast is striking. Back in 2017, the Belarusian leadership went to great length to reassure Western neighbours and persuade Moscow to show restraint. In 2021, things could not have been more different: Lukashenka outdid the Kremlin in anti-Western rhetoric and strained relations with neighbouring NATO states, including by sponsoring a refugee crisis on their borders. Unlike in 2017, he wanted the Russian military presence to be as big as possible to show that Moscow was on his side.³⁵

Belarus' relations with NATO underwent a similar inversion. Cautious dialogue and confidence building measures were swept away when Lukashenka began to attack the military alliance.³⁶ Well aware of Moscow's old grudge against NATO, he saw this as a sure way to endear himself to the Kremlin.

However, the most unsettling change has taken place in Belarus' relations with Ukraine. Before the crisis, Minsk used to aim for neutrality in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. That helped Kyiv secure the country's northern border and went some way to compensate for the rupture of economic ties with Russia. But when Ukraine joined the West in condemning and sanctioning the Belarusian regime, Lukashenka took it as a personal affront and an act of utmost ingratitude.

Lukashenka understands the sensitivity of the Ukrainian issue for the Kremlin. Unlike a war with NATO, a military conflict with Ukraine is a realistic possibility for Moscow, a fact that makes the long and porous Belarusian-Ukrainian border strategically significant.³⁷ Lukashenka's vengefulness, his desperate desire to curry favour with the Kremlin and the relatively low costs of escalation with Ukraine are a dangerous mix.

It is not yet clear what use the Kremlin intends to make of Lukashenka's brinkmanship. So far, it has opted for a hands-off approach. Russia displays little desire to restrain its Belarusian ally, enjoying the opportunity to pose as a more responsible and moderate power in the region. No evidence has surfaced

that the Kremlin was behind Minsk's more risky gambles such as forcing down a Ryanair flight with an opposition journalist on board, or manufacturing a refugee crisis on Belarus' borders with NATO states.

Mounting Western pressure notwithstanding, the Belarusian regime retains a significant degree of autonomy and Moscow's ability to impose its will remains limited. Personal control over Belarusian security is the last thing Lukashenka will abandon, and the Kremlin is not yet willing to challenge him. Instead, Moscow has to continue accommodating Minsk. The 2020 crisis has weakened Belarus' position in decades-long haggling with Russia. But this has come at a high price for Moscow, which now has to manage the risks of being dragged into a region-wide conflict by its reckless and power-hungry ally.

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Perspective from Belarus: Russia and Belarus – Still Reluctant Allies

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Despite a deep level of political-military integration, Belarus has managed to preserve a considerable degree of strategic autonomy within its alliance with Russia. In 1990s, the Belarusian leadership succeeded in ensuring that the institutional architecture of the joint military components (Regional Group of Forces and Unified Regional Air Defence System) of the Union State were all designed in a way that gives Minsk the option to exercise veto power over any Kremlin decisions inconsistent with Belarus's national interests (e.g., command and control over joint military components, consensus-based procedure of decision-making). This is one of the main reasons why Belarus never became involved in any recent Russian military adventures, including the war with Georgia (2008), ongoing conflict with Ukraine (since 2014), geopolitical standoff with the West, and other Kremlin-backed crisis around the globe.

Since at least 2015, however, Russia has been demonstrating that it is no longer satisfied with the status quo regarding the military-political integration within the Union State. By pushing a new model of military integration – establishing Russian permanent military presence in Belarus, resubordinating the Regional Group of Forces to the Western Military District of Russia, and creating a single military organization of two countries – the Kremlin tried to shake the constraints to its strategic intentions within this supranational format, namely, Belarus' considerable veto power and strategic autonomy.

Although the 2020 post-election crisis in Belarus resulted in a significant aggravation of relations with the West and Belarus's increasing dependence on Russian economic, political, and security assistance, the Belarusian

leadership is not going to meet the Kremlin's strategic demands regarding the deeper political-military integration. However, in need of political and financial support from Moscow, Minsk speculates about its readiness to integrate deeper within the framework of the Union State in the field of security. In fact, A. Lukashenka still resists to establish a Russian permanent military base and is ready to make only tactical concessions to the Kremlin, such as resuming the practice of joint air-patrolling missions and establishing a joint training centre of air force and air-defence forces in Belarus, but under his full command and control and on the rotational basis. Moscow has to content itself with little and agree with these formats, since they also serve the goal of expanding its influence over Belarus and conveying a message to the West and other geopolitical actors that the country is a part of the Russian privileged sphere of influence. Moscow can also justify and present these initiatives in response to the NATO enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States and Poland, also on rotational basis.

Nevertheless, since 2014, irreversible processes have been taking place in military cooperation between Russia and Belarus. Russia is reducing its dependence on Belarus for military security in the western strategic direction by deploying and reformatting new groups of troops. And Belarus is losing its exclusive status as an indispensable military partner for Russia, typical of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which was well demonstrated during the Zapad-2021 Joint Strategic Exercise and the delay in the extension of agreements on Russia's free lease of two military-technical facilities on the Belarusian soil (474th Gantsevichi Independent Radio Technical Site and the 43rd Communications Node of the Russian Navy).

In this context, Belarus' attitude towards NATO has been dictated by the international security environment and geopolitical conjecture and depending on different phases of five-years domestic political cycle. The 2020 Belarus political crisis has put them at the lowest point. But despite the radical anti-Western and anti-NATO rhetoric of the Belarusian leadership, which is directed primarily at the Kremlin, Minsk is striving to establish pragmatic and mutually beneficial relations with the Alliance, although for ideological and political reasons, all the misfortunes of the Belarusian regime have been blamed on it. It might be an indication that Minsk is preparing ground for resuming its balancing act strategy due to increasing pressure of the Kremlin insisting on its own format and parameters of crisis resolution and power transfer (via a constitutional reform) in Belarus.

However, the prospects for dialogue are complicated by a new model of official Minsk behaviour on the international arena, increasingly associated by Western countries with threats and challenges to regional and, lately, global security (especially after Ryanair aircraft forced landing and use of the migrant crisis to put pressure upon the Baltic states and Poland). Further development of cooperation with the Alliance is also limited by institutional and ideological constraints, which include the lack of necessary NATO framework agreements, false perceptions in the West of Belarus as a political-military appendage of Russia (not without the efforts of the Belarusian authorities themselves), and growing concerns over the human rights situation in Belarus.

Evolution of Belarusian-Russian military cooperation prior to the 2020 post-election crisis in Belarus

Upon coming to power in 1994, President A. Lukashenka almost immediately announced that economic and political-military integration with Russia would be among the strategic priorities for the Belarusian foreign policy. In the mid-1990s, he signed a number of treaties and agreements with Moscow, culminating in the conclusion of the 1999 Treaty on Establishing the Union State of Belarus and Russia and representing a sort of strategic deal between two countries.

The idea for this strategic deal was developed in 1995–1996 in the depths of Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI), an analytical centre subordinated at the time to the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) under Yevgeny Primakov. In its assessments, the Russian intelligence community concluded that Kremlin's strategy towards Minsk should be guided by geopolitical interests, especially in the military sphere, and not solely economic considerations.¹ It guaranteed Russia's national security in the western strategic direction, as it could serve as a land corridor to Russian troops in Kaliningrad in case of a hypothetical crisis scenario. In the end, the Kremlin proposed Lukashenka who had faced already a serious economic crisis and isolation from the West to conclude a strategic deal that he gladly accepted.

In accordance with it, Belarus pledged to join the various ongoing integration processes with Russia and agreed to renounce its Euro-Atlantic aspirations – in contrast with a number of other neighbouring post-Soviet states that had already decided to join NATO and the European Union. In light of NATO and

the EU's eastward enlargement as well as the emerging conflicts in North and South Caucasus and Central Asia, Belarus suddenly took on a crucial role for Moscow, ensuring Russia's national security in the western strategic direction, particularly with respect to the Kaliningrad exclave.² In turn, Russia was obliged to provide Belarus with preferential oil and natural gas supplies, offer privileged access for Belarusian industrial and agricultural products to the Russian market and financial assistance, as well as supply the Belarusian military with significantly discounted (if not outright free) arms and equipment. In brief, Russia agreed to exchange economic and military-technical support for a certain level of geopolitical loyalty and security services in the western strategic direction on behalf of Belarus. Thus, security and military integration became one of the cornerstones of this bilateral strategic deal.³

In January 1995, Lukashenka signed the Customs Union Agreement with his Russian counterpart, then-President Boris Yeltsin. The two leaders also concluded agreements that allowed Russia to lease for free two Soviet-era military-technical facilities for a 25-year period (expired on June 7, 2021). One of these facilities is the 474th Gantsevichi Independent Radio Technical Site (ORTU) with a stationary digital decimetre radar station (radar) of the Volga type, located near the village of Ozerechye, Kletsk District (48 km southeast of Baranovichi), which is part of the Russian Space Forces Missile Attack Warning System (MEWS). It is designed to detect launches of ballistic missiles and space objects at ranges up to 5000 km in the western sector of 120 degrees, i.e., in Western Europe, the North Atlantic Ocean and the Norwegian sea. Work on building the ORTU began in 1986, but only in the first half of 2002 it was put on pilot combat duty, and October 1, 2003 – on combat duty. The number of Russian service personnel is about 600 people. In addition, up to 200 citizens of Belarus work at various facilities that support ORTU activities.⁴

The second facility is the 43rd Communications Node of the Russian Navy, located 7 km west of Vileika, Minsk region, which was put into service on January 22, 1964. The Antey radio transmitter (RJH69) located at the site ensures continuous radio communication of the Russian Navy Headquarters with the ships and submarines, including those on submarine duty in the waters of the Atlantic, Indian and partly Pacific oceans, as well as radio reconnaissance and electronic warfare, and operates for other branches of the Russian armed forces and service branches: Strategic Missile Forces, Air Forces, Space Forces, etc., transmitting reference time signals as part of the Beta project. The number of personnel at the communications node is about

350 officers and midshipmen of the Russian Navy. The external perimeter of the facility is guarded by freelance personnel from among Belarusian citizens.⁵

In 1995, when signing these agreements, the Kremlin agreed to partially write off Belarus's debts for energy resources. In addition, Russia was obliged to share with Belarus intelligence data about the regional space and missile operating environment, as well as provide access to training ranges for conducting air-defence combat firing (in particular, at the Ashuluk training ground) due to the absence of such installations in Belarus.

Neither ORTU "Gantsevichi", nor the 43rd Communication Node are actually military and technical facilities of a foreign state. They are legally the property of Belarus under lease and have no enclave status, so they are not foreign military bases in the legal sense.

Simultaneously, since 1995, the process of developing a system of collective security and military cooperation within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (in particular, on the issue of a unified air defence system) took place. But these formats didn't meet Belarus and Russia's strategic intentions towards each other and were less profound comparing to the bilateral ones.

In January 1998, the Concept of Joint Defence Policy of Belarus and Russia was adopted, defining the main principles and directions of the joint defence policy, common approaches to the organization, and provision of armed defence of the Union of Belarus and Russia against external aggression. According to the document, the purpose of creating the Regional Group of Forces (RGF) is to parry military threats and repulse possible aggression. It was assumed that RGF would take part either in a frontier armed conflict (with the aim to localize and stop such a conflict) or in a similar international conflict (with the aim to repel aggression, to defeat coalitions of aggressor's troops and create conditions for termination of military actions on favourable conditions for the member-states of the Union of Belarus and Russia).

The deployment of RGF is carried out during the threatened period (period of growing threat of aggression) by decision of the Supreme Council of the Union of Belarus and Russia (that is, by joint decision of the heads of state). In addition, during the threat period, the Joint Command of the RGF is created on the basis of the Ministry of Defence of Belarus. In practical terms, this means that the position of RGF commander is permanent (non-rotational) and always occupied by the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus (since March 2021 – General Major Victor Gulevich).

Until then, the associations, formations, military units and institutions of the Armed Forces and other military formations of Belarus and Russia, allocated as part of the RGF, remain directly subordinated to their respective national ministries and commands. Planning for use of the RGF is carried out by the respective national General Staffs. The RGF is responsible for the so-called region – territory of Belarus and the neighbouring regions of Russia (which, therefore, excludes Kaliningrad region).⁶

In October 1998, an agreement was adopted between the Belarus and Russia on joint use of military infrastructure facilities in the interests of national security. According to the document, the defence ministries of the two countries are developing a list of military infrastructure facilities for joint use in the interests of the RGF. During peacetime, troops are let through to these facilities by prior agreement between the authorized bodies, in wartime – in accordance with the RGF deployment and application plan. The sides also undertake to preserve and develop these facilities.

The Treaty on the Creation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, signed in 1999, fixed the functioning of RGF in the exclusive competence of the Union State. However, since all key decisions on this issue are made by the Supreme State Council of the Union State (i.e., by presidents of the two countries on the basis of consensus), this provision has changed little in terms of RGF command and control.⁷

Today, the RGF consists of all ground and special operations units of the Belarusian Armed Forces as well as the 1st Guards Tank Army (military unit 73621, Moscow region, Bakovka) of the Russian Western Military District. The 1st Guards Tank Army was established in 2014 and substituted the 20th Combined Arms Army (military unit 89425, Voronezh) as part of the RGF after the latter was deployed on the border with Ukraine to assist Kremlin-backed separatists in the military conflict in Donbas.

The 2001 Military Doctrine of the Union State enshrines the principle of collective defence: the member-states of the Union State regard an attack on one of them as an attack on the Union State as a whole.⁸ However, in order to declare an act of aggression against the Union State, a Supreme State Council must be convened and a corresponding consensus decision of the heads of states must be taken. Without this decision, the RGF application plans cannot be automatically activated.

The 2009 Agreement between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on joint protection of the external border of the Union State in the

airspace and creation of the Unified Regional Air Defence System (URADS) of Belarus and Russia was the next step in the development of Belarusian-Russian military integration. However, it came into force only in 2013, due to prolonged political wrangling by the two sides. Unlike the RGF, which carries out strategic deployment only in a threatened period, the URADS exists and functions on a permanent basis in peacetime. A commander of the URADS is appointed by joint decision of the presidents of Belarus and Russia.⁹ However, since the URADS was created back in 2013, only Belarusian representatives have been put in charge of it — Air Forces and Air-Defence Forces Commanders of the Republic of Belarus Oleg Dvigalev (2013–2017) and Igor Golub (since 2018). This fact is quite remarkable, demonstrating Belarus's strong desire to preserve control over this joint military component.

In peacetime the ministries of defence of the two countries together with the commander of the URADS plan the use of troops (forces) and means of the URADS and organize their air defence combat duty and interaction. Direct subordination to the national commands is preserved. During the threatened period, the URADS becomes a composite part of the RGF and operates according to a single plan, and a Joint Command is established.

Today, the URADS includes all Air Forces and Air-Defence Forces of the Belarusian Army as well as the 6th Air Forces and Air-Defence Forces Army, located on the territory of the Western Military District of the Russian Federation (military unit 09436, St. Petersburg).

In 2016–2017, a package of updated documents regulating the activities of the RGF was adopted. In 2016: the Directive of the Supreme State Council of the Union State on joint actions; the Plan of Operations of the RGF of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation; the Regulation on the Joint Command of the RGF of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation; the Structure of the Joint Command of the RGF and URADS of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation. All the mentioned documents have been classified. In addition, a new Military Doctrine of the Union State is being developed.¹⁰ In 2017, the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the Government of the Russian Federation on joint technical support of the RGF was adopted. According to this Agreement, Moscow is legally constrained in when it can deploy military assets across the border to Belarus, nor is there any pre-deployed Russian military equipment in Belarusian storages. Namely, the Russian Ministry of Defence is allowed to transfer and deploy to Belarus all necessary military equipment and weapons

for the 1st Guards Tank Army and the 6th Air Forces and Air-Defence Forces Army only in the period of a growing military threat (threatened period) to the Union State and in wartime. The material and technical base of the Armed Forces of Belarus is used jointly in this case.¹¹

However, the need to adopt the updated documents was caused by organizational and staff changes in the national formations of the armed forces of Belarus and Russia, assigned to the RGF and URADS, as well as clarification of the subordination of the URADS in relation to the RGF. They did not essentially change the decision-making and command-and-control of the RGF and URADS, but merged them in one entity – the Regional Group of Forces consisting of the land and air components.

Thus, although a strategic military and political ally of Russia, Belarus wields enough checks and balances to block any unilateral decision by Moscow and preserve a high degree of strategic autonomy within their joint alliance. It is based on the fact the Belarusian side controls permanently the positions of the RGF Commander, URADS Commander at the current stage of the rotation, while all political and military decisions within the Union State including application of the RGF and URADS are taken and approved by the Supreme State Council, the main collective decision-making body, on the basis of consensus by leaderships of Russia and Belarus.

Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia in the post crisis period: follow the deeds, not words

The political crisis that erupted after the August 2020 Belarusian presidential elections sharply affected Belarus's *modus operandi* on the international arena, removing the association with its contribution to security and stability in Central and Eastern Europe of the 2014–2020 period. The crisis significantly aggravated Belarus's relations with the West and led to an increasing dependence on Russian economic, political, and security assistance. No surprise, the Kremlin has been exploiting Belarus's return to isolation from its Western partners and Lukashenka's pro-Russian rhetoric in order to expand its influence over the vulnerable ally. For political and ideological reasons, the sides pretend in public that there are no serious contradictions between the countries, and that the process of integration, including in the military sphere,

is developing systematically. But by demonstrating geopolitical loyalty to the Kremlin in the form of tactical concessions related to military cooperation, Lukashenka is trying to sideline the Kremlin's agenda of deeper political-military integration, establishing a permanent military presence in Belarus, as well as dictating the scenario of power transfer through a constitutional reform on the Russian terms as a way to resolve Belarus political crisis.¹² In practice, despite the statements of the Russian and Belarusian leaders about breakthrough agreements concerning the development of a common defence space of Russia and Belarus,¹³ they remain far from being consistent with each other's strategic interests and demands.

Since at least 2015, however, Russia has been demonstrating that it is no longer satisfied with the status quo regarding the Union State. Namely, by preserving its considerable veto power and strategic autonomy within this supranational format, Belarus actually constrains the Kremlin's strategic intentions. The constraints come from not allowing Russian permanent military bases on its soil as well as abstaining from involvement in Russia's conflict with Ukraine and confrontation with the West.

In addition to the Kremlin's unsuccessful attempt to push the issue of a Russian military airbase in Belarus¹⁴, in September 2015, the commander of the troops of Russia's Western Military District, Anatoly Sidorov, proposed to include the joint Regional Group of Forces within the structure of the group of forces in the Western strategic direction.¹⁵ In other words, he effectively proposed reassigning the Armed Forces of Belarus, which are part of the RGF, to the command of the Russian Western Military District (Joint Strategic Command "West"). It is worth pointing that that, in 2016, the Kremlin implemented this model in its relations with Armenia. The Russian-Armenian Joint Group of Forces (JGF) is included in and assigned to the Southern Military District (Joint Strategic Command "South"). The commander of the Southern Military District can exercise command and control over the JGF in a period of growing military threat (threatened period).¹⁶

At the end of 2015, Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu proposed to complete the formation of a joint military organization of the Union State by 2018.¹⁷ This proposal referred to an in-depth integration of the military and security apparatuses of Belarus and Russia, with a joint decision-making centre in the Kremlin. Such a model has already been implemented with regards to Russia's military relations with the separatist (and Moscow-backed) Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

Altogether, the above-mentioned Russian proposals to Belarus demonstrate that Moscow no longer considers Minsk an equal partner from a formally institutional point of view and intends to reshape their military-political alliance by undermining Belarus's strategic autonomy. While the Belarusian leadership has the opposite intentions – to preserve the strategic autonomy and veto power within the joint military alliance with Russia, as well as monopoly on the use of force in the country. The change in this *status quo* risks the loss of power by A. Lukashenka.

These conflicting intentions have been reflected in the recent joint military initiatives – resuming joint air-patrol and air defence missions and establishing three joint combat training centres. The first initiative is stipulated by the Action Plan for on-duty air-defence forces within the framework of the URADS agreed upon at the end of 2020.¹⁸ The second initiative is envisaged by the bilateral Strategic Partnership Program for 2021–2025 signed between ministries of defence in March 2021.¹⁹ One of these joint facilities, a joint combat training centre of the Air Force and Air-Defence Forces, is located on the territory of Belarus, in Grodno and Brest region. Russia will host the other two combat training centres – in Nizhny Novgorod (for motorized rifle and tank units) and Kaliningrad oblasts (for naval infantry and special operation forces).²⁰

On September 9, 2021, the joint units took on combat duty to jointly protect the airspace of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, at the 61st Fighter Air Base of the Belarusian Air Forces (military unit 54804), in Baranovichi, Brest region. At the same time, joint air-defence units in the western part of Belarus assumed combat duty with the same tasks. The purpose of the Joint Air-Defence and Air Force Training and Combat Centre is to improve professional instruction and study new types of equipment that, in the near future, may be put into service in the Belarusian army. Moreover, the centre will improve the practical skills of personnel from the Armed Forces of Belarus and the Russian Aerospace Forces.

Russia contributed both air-defence and air force components to this facility. On August 28, the first train loaded with Russian military equipment and crews – including multifunctional radars, command-and-control vehicles and at least two S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) launchers – arrived in Grodno, Belarus.²¹ Presumably this equipment is from the 210th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment of the 4th Air-Defence Division of the 1st Army of the Air- and Missile-Defence Forces. The S-400 units brought into Belarus were deployed on the territory of the 2285th Independent Radio Technical Battalion, near

the positions of the 1st Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment of the Belarusian Air-Defence Forces, equipped with S-300PS SAMs, in Grodno region, only four kilometres from the Polish border.

On September 8, 2021, at least a wing of four Russian Su-30SM heavy fighter jets landed at the 61st Fighter Air Base in Baranovichi, Brest region,²² where they will stay to conduct both joint training and combat duty missions. Presumably, they belong to the 14th Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment of the 105th Combined Aviation Division of the 6th Air Force and Air-Defence Army of the Western Military District of Russia.²³

Belarusian military officials argue that the Joint Training and Combat Centre strengthens the practical component of the Unified Regional Air-Defence System (URADS) of the Union State, meaning the facility is presumably included in this system as a subordinated element. According to the agreement on the joint protection of external borders that established the Union State URADS, peacetime duty by joint assets and crews is carried out in accordance with the duty plan approved by the Russian and Belarusian ministries of defence. Russian aircrews on combat duty in Belarusian airspace are put in the air by an agreed decision of operational duty officer of the Control Centre of the Aerospace Forces of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the operational duty officer of the Central Command Post of the Air Force and Air-Defence Forces of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus. The procedure for the use of weapons and military equipment by forces on air-defence duty is determined by the legislation of the party on whose territory the weapons and military equipment are used. In sum, this means that, legally, all Russian military assets and crews assigned to the Joint Air-Defence and Air Force Training and Combat Centre in Grodno are subordinated to the Belarusian side – i.e., the Central Command Post of the Belarusian Air Force and Air-Defence Forces.²⁴

And if political and geopolitical expediency prompts Belarusian leadership to withdraw the visiting Russian forces back to Russia, it will take this step. Illustratively, A. Lukashenka ousted four Russian Su-27PM fighter jets in 2015, fulfilling the same tasks of joint air-patrol missions the previous time, against the backdrop of the escalating Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Therefore, the Joint Centre in Grodno and Brest regions should not be seen as a Russian “military base” in terms of command and control since it lacks extraterritorial status and does not subordinate directly to Russian command. It is worth noting that the Kremlin specifically tried to dictate those terms

and conditions in 2015, when it unsuccessfully pushed for installing a Russian airbase in Bobruisk, Belarus.²⁵

By subscribing to the idea of a joint training centre on Belarusian territory, Lukashenka apparently tried to secure the inflow of modern Russian military equipment (at least eight Su-30SM fighter jets and one S-400 SAM battery with Russian crews) for free and under his command. He also tried to substitute the Kremlin's agenda of establishing a Russian military base in Belarus by making tactical concessions in the form of Russian limited and rotational military presence. But it seems the Kremlin saw through his cunning plan and provided him with only four Su-30SMs and two S-400 SAM launchers, most likely on a rotational basis. The Russian leadership still considers a permanent military base in Belarus as the only acceptable option despite Lukashenka's constant arguments that there is no military-strategic necessity for such a step.²⁶ Therefore, Moscow is not interested in reinforcing the Belarusian Armed Forces by supplying extensive modern Russian military equipment for free or even on preferential terms. From the geopolitical point of view, stationing troops on the ground is the most effective means of securing Belarus within the Russian sphere of influence.²⁷ Therefore, it is highly unlikely Moscow will ever accept Lukashenka's arguments as to why a permanent Russian base is unnecessary – particularly amidst his vulnerability at home and isolation from the West.²⁸ But at this particular moment the Kremlin is satisfied even with the rotational military presence in Belarus – it conveys a message to the West and other geopolitical actors that Belarus is a part of Russian privileged sphere of influence. Moscow can also justify and present these initiatives in response to the NATO enhanced Forward Presence in Baltic states and Poland, also on rotational basis.

The quadrennial Russian-Belarusian Joint Strategic Exercise Zapad-2021, held on September 10–16, 2021, didn't reveal any substantial changes in command and control of the joint military components as well as decision-making algorithms, at least when it comes to the Belarusian part of the exercise, that should be distinguished from the Zapad-2021 Strategic Command and Staff Manoeuvres of the Russian Armed Forces.²⁹

The scenario of the Joint Strategic Exercise Zapad-2021 largely reflected the propaganda narratives of the Belarusian authorities, which they used to describe the events of the political crisis in Belarus in August–September 2020, rather than real strategic concerns. Back then, according to the Belarusian authorities, the Western countries, including the US, Poland and

Lithuania (in the exercise scenario these were codenamed as “Westerns” – Pomoria, Nyaris, the Polar Republic), sought to implement a scenario of regime change in Belarus, annex the Grodno region (one of the most protested regions, where local authorities went to meet some of the protesters’ demands), break Belarus away from Russia, and undermine the unity of the Union State (in the exercise scenario these were codenamed as “Northerns” – the Republic of Polesye and the Central Federation) to create a territorial base for hybrid aggression against Russia.

The exercise scenario envisaged an escalation of local conflict to the level of the regional war after the failed coup attempt and hybrid aggression. So, the “Westerns” began launching precision-guided missile strikes against critical infrastructure in Belarus and preparing a coalition group of forces to conduct offensive invasion operation. While the URADS was repelling precision-guided missile strikes, the Russian part of the RGF was deploying in the Belarusian territory. After that, the “Northerns” first were defending, and then turned to counterattack in order to complete the defeat of the adversary and restore the lost positions.

It is true that the descriptive part of the exercise scenario stipulated not only the formation of the RGF by Armed Forces of Belarus and the 1st Guards Tank Army and the 6th Air Forces and Air-Defence Forces Army of the Western Military District (in the scenario, the 11th Tank Army and Air-Space forces grouping), but also the deployment of the 20th Combined Arms Army of the Western Military District (in the scenario, the 51st Army) of Russia in Belarus, as well as probably the 41st Combined Arms Army of the Central Military District as a reserve (in the scenario, the 30th Army) deployed close to the Ukrainian border during escalation of military tensions in Spring 2021. However, this description also reflects propaganda narratives of the Belarusian leadership, repeatedly stating that the entire Western Military District (WMD) will help to defend Belarus in case of a military aggression rather than illustrates organizational and staff changes in the RGF. In particular, this is evidenced by the participation in the territory of Belarus of units only from the 1st Guards Tank Army of the WMD of Russia (4th Tank Division and 2nd Motorized Rifle Division).³⁰ At the same time, the composition of RGF could be reenforced by including in it the 76th Airborne Assault Division of the Russian Armed Forces, that actively took part in the exercise. Some other Russian units deployed close to the Belarusian border could be assigned to the RGF (for instance, the 144th Motor Rifle Division of the 20th Combined Arms Army of the Western

Military District located in, Yelnya, Smolensk Region). Thus, there are no signs that the RGF might have resubordinated and included in the Western Military District in accordance with the Kremlin's intention of 2015.

In general, the beginning of the conflict and its further development in the exercise scenario reflected the understanding by Belarusian and Russian military strategists not only of the concepts of hybrid warfare, but also of the so-called multi-domain battle developed by the US' Department of Defence.

At the same time, in contrast to the previous period, the current Zapad-2021 Strategic Command and Staff Manoeuvres of the Russian Armed Forces overshadowed the Zapad-2021 Joint Strategic Exercise³¹, turning it from a landmark bilateral event in Belarusian-Russian military cooperation into a multinational event, in which Belarus is only one of a dozen participants, albeit the second most important. This serves as more evidence of the Kremlin's intention at depriving the Belarusian-Russian relations of the exclusive status in the field of military security. Minsk is shifting to the level of one of Russia's peripheral partners in this area, the importance of which is determined by the specific situation in the region. This knocks out the historically most effective and, in fact, the last argument of influencing the Kremlin position towards Minsk from the Belarusian leadership, nullifying the strategic significance of Belarus for Russia.³² While before 2021, the Belarusian authorities were emphasizing that Belarus was protecting Russia in the Western Strategic Direction, the current Zapad-2021 exercise reveals that it is no longer the case, and Russia is now pretending to become a security provider for Belarus.³³

By September 30, 2021, all Russian units that had participated in the Zapad-2021 Joint Strategic Exercise withdrew from Belarus. And only a wing (of four) of Su-30SM fighters and units of the S-400 complex assigned by the Russian side to the Joint Training and Combat Centre for of the Air Force and Air Defence Forces remained on the territory of Belarus.

The ongoing negotiations over extending the free lease agreements on the 474th Gantsevichi Independent Radio Technical Site and the 43rd Communications Node of the Russian Navy after the June 2021 deadline expired also reflects the contradictory nature of the bilateral relationship.³⁴ More recently, Russia deployed analogous facilities on its own territory and the two installations on Belarusian soil no longer hold any major military-technical significance, but it is the only available form of Russian military long-

term and permanent presence in Belarus. In its turn, the Belarusian leadership is trying to conclude a package deal exchanging its approval for preferential supplies of Russian modern military equipment to Belarusian Armed Forces. However, it is still unclear whether the Kremlin is going to meet Lukashenka's demands and accept this package deal.

NATO in Belarus's Threat Perception: From a Partner to the Root of All Evil and Vice Versa?

Belarus's attitude towards NATO has been dictated by the international security environment and geopolitical conjecture, and has depended on different phases of five-years domestic political cycle. Traditionally, the lowest point in the relations with the Alliance coincides with the beginning of a new five-years domestic political cycle in Belarus, immediately after the presidential elections that traditionally face harsh criticism of the West and subsequent sanction pressure due to human rights violations and mass repressions by the Belarusian authorities (with the exception of the 2015 presidential elections).

But when the Belarusian leadership is concerned about Russia's pressure and interference in the domestic affairs of the country, Minsk tries to establish pragmatic and beneficial relations with NATO in order to counterbalance the Kremlin's strategic intentions. It was the case in 2008–2010 and 2014–2020, when A. Lukashenka was pushed by Moscow to support Russia's military aggression against its neighbours. Moscow urged him to recognize the independence of Georgian separatist regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as join the Kremlin's military campaign against Ukraine and subsequent geopolitical confrontation with the West, including the deployment of a Russian military base in Belarus allegedly in response to the NATO enhanced Forward Presence in Baltic states and Poland.

When Belarus was associated with a regional stability and security provider in 2014–2020, Belarusian leadership wanted to expand constructive dialogue with NATO on the basis of trust, equality, transparency, and mutual respect.³⁵ A. Lukashenka also believed at the time that warmer relations with the Alliance would eventually enhance the security of Belarus. The idea to upgrade relations with NATO was natural, considering that Belarus shares

a border with three NATO member states (Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia) and Ukraine, which intends to join the Alliance in the future. According to Lukashenka, neither Belarus nor its neighbours needed dividing lines; therefore, Belarus and NATO should be actively talking to each other.³⁶

The 2020 Belarus political crisis has reversed these intentions, at least on the level of official rhetoric. In response to non-recognition of Lukashenka's legitimacy and sanction pressure by the West, the Belarusian leadership accused the EU, the US and NATO of waging a hybrid war against Belarus and exporting a colour revolution³⁷ to the country, including attempts of invading Belarus by NATO forces at the call of the Belarusian opposition. Moreover, Lukashenka weaponized his anti-NATO rhetoric, speculating on Russia's strategic phobias. According to him, if the revolution had been successful, NATO would have placed its troops close to Smolensk, transforming Belarus into a springboard for an attack on Russia.³⁸ By deploying such rhetoric, the Belarusian leadership not only solidarized with the Russian anti-NATO propaganda, but also wanted to mobilize the Kremlin's support, emphasizing that Belarus still defends Russia, and limiting freedom of the Kremlin's actions on the Belarusian track.

According to the Belarusian military officials, over the past few years, NATO forward command centres have been established near the western borders of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Implementation of the US "Four Thirties" initiative, adopted at the 2018 NATO Summit, will enable NATO to expeditiously concentrate a much more considerable ground force near the Belarusian borders.

Belarusian military authorities believe that operational equipment of the territories of Belarus's neighbouring countries is being actively upgraded, including special warehouse facilities for accommodation and maintenance of weapons, military and special equipment, storage of materiel stocks, and storage of ammunition in the interests of the US Armed Forces. NATO exercises are conducted with high intensity in the vicinity of the state border of the Republic of Belarus, during which, among other things, the issues of troop redeployment, preparation of advance routes and areas of combat mission, creation of groupings, setting up crossings, forcing water obstacles, landing troops and many other tasks specific to offensive operations are practiced. At the same time, the Belarusian General Staff considers conducting exercises to be one of the main elements in training of troops. However, the nature and progressing intensity of such exercises cannot but cause concern, especially after a series of provocative actions on the part of Belarus's Western neighbours.³⁹

Such rhetoric is traditionally aimed at demonstrating geopolitical loyalty to Russia, it serves propaganda purposes of official Minsk rather than reflects the real threat perception. In fact, despite the crisis in relations with the West, Belarus seeks to build equal dialogue with NATO, increase openness and develop mutual understanding as part of strengthening international and regional security. These agenda points come from the priorities of the planning cycle of cooperation between NATO and Belarus within the framework of Partnership for Peace (PfP) program for 2022–2023.

Belarusian military officials consider the development of dialogue with NATO as one of important areas in ensuring national and regional security. From this perspective, the NATO PfP program is a tool for maintaining and strengthening, for mutual benefit, cooperation in the political, military, economic, scientific and legal fields with the Alliance as a whole, as well as with NATO member states and partner countries separately.

Officially, participation in the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP) is consistent with the Belarus's policy of openness and transparency in the field of defence and military planning. The implementation of the partnership objectives within the PARP allows to work towards achieving interoperability of forces and means, allocated from the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and the Ministry of Emergencies of the Republic of Belarus, with forces and means of NATO to participate in joint activities of operational and combat training, as well as activities to maintain international peace and security under the aegis of international organizations.

Belarus has established a national legislative basis for participation in activities to maintain international peace and security, and there is interest in practical participation in NATO exercises, as well as in the framework of the PfP. Also, Belarus is intending to:

- continue the work under the provisions of the Agreement between the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus and the NATO Cataloguing Committee on the provision of services for connection to the NATO cataloguing system, signed in 2016;
- complete the interagency internal consultations conducted in preparation for accession to the Agreement between the member states of the North Atlantic Treaty and other states taking part in the Partnership for Peace on the status of their forces of June 19, 1995, and the Additional Protocol thereto;

- continue consultations with the relevant structures of NATO and individual member states of the Alliance to complete the process of certification of the Security (Information) Agreement, in order to expand the list of promising areas of cooperation both with NATO in general and with individual member states of the Alliance in particular.⁴⁰

Such messages might serve an indication that Minsk is preparing ground for resuming its balancing act strategy due to increasing pressure of the Kremlin insisting on its own format and parameters of crisis resolution and power transfer (via a constitutional reform) in Belarus.

However, today the main obstacle in development of relations between NATO and Belarus is the political crisis in the country and its international implications. Further development of cooperation with the Alliance is also limited by institutional and ideological constraints, which include the lack of necessary NATO framework agreements, and false perceptions of Belarus as a political-military appendage of Russia (not without the efforts of the Belarusian authorities themselves) in the West. Growing concerns over the human rights situation in Belarus and the lack of progress in democratic reforms will be a deterrent factor as well.

The prospects for dialogue are also complicated by a new model of behaviour of official Minsk on the international arena. With the beginning of the political crisis in Belarus after the August 2020 presidential election, the actions of the Belarusian authorities are increasingly associated by Western countries with threats and challenges to regional and, lately, global security (especially after Ryanair aircraft forced landing and use of the migrant crisis to put pressure upon the Baltic states and Poland). The Belarusian side has found itself in a position when the strategy of converting its contribution to regional stability and security into various political-economic and diplomatic dividends from the West no longer works because of the harsh reaction to the results of the presidential campaign and large-scale repressions against civil society, bringing the human rights and democracy agenda back to the first place in relations with Minsk.

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Conclusions: Belarus – from a Complex to an Even More Complex Neighbour

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The prolonged Belarusian post-electoral crisis, comprised not only of the domestic state violence, but also the landing of the Lithuania-bound commercial aircraft and the migrant crisis in 2021, constitutes one of the most significant turning points in the security of the Baltic region since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This set of events falls in a somewhat similar though a lower category of concussions to the regional security as the Crimea and Donbass events in Ukraine. Paradoxically, the largest border-engagement of the Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish armed forces has not happened on the Russian border, but rather on the Belarusian one, as the migrant crisis spiralled out of control in 2021.

This study has underlined some important aspects of Belarus as a defence and security challenge to the Baltic states and NATO. The situation is more complex than often perceived. First, the domestic violence, the forced landing of commercial aircraft and the migrant crisis have not only demonstrated the resolve of the Belarusian authorities, but also “creativity” and potential for yet other provocative moves. Second, Belarus is a troublesome neighbour not only to the Baltic states and Poland, but also to Russia. Belarus is neither (yet) a (military) satellite state of Russia, nor is it an entirely separate (military) entity. Therefore, Belarus is likely to remain an issue of concern not only to its neighbouring NATO member states, but also to Russia.

Estonia does not border Belarus, and its engagement has been rather limited. Still, as Martin Hurt argues in his chapter “Perspective from Estonia:

Suspense from an (Unsafe) Distance”, the Belarusian events and their repercussions have impacted the Estonian defence and security policy. Among other things, it is likely that those events have contributed to maintaining the defence spending comfortably above the NATO 2 % guideline.

More paramount Belarusian events have been to Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Once cherishing Belarus as an economic partner, as a bridge with the People's Republic of China, as a prospective place for gradual democratization and maybe even as a potential accomplice against Russia, in the end of 2021 Belarus is no less topical to their national defence and security than Russia.

As Evija Djatkoviča writes in her chapter “Perspective from Latvia: from Complacency to Anxiety”, Belarusian events took Latvia by surprise and led to u-turning in several areas. Belarus has become an increased focus of Latvia's defence and security policy, though a lot of progress to tackle it still lies ahead. Ramūnas Vilpišauskas in his contribution to this publication “Perspective from Lithuania: Towards no Illusions of an Independent Belarus” writes that actions of Belarus have led to reinforcing Lithuanian defence capabilities towards it, as well as have raised concerns of further integration of Belarus in Russia's military structures. Similarly, Kamil Kłysiński and Piotr Szymański in their chapter “Perspective from Poland: From an Independent Neighbour to a Satellite of Russia Across the Eastern Border” describe the Polish fear that Belarus is being increasingly integrated into Russia's Western Military District. Chances of rapprochement and normalization with Belarus are seen as bleak.

Chapters from the perspective of Russia and Belarus offer a more detailed insight in the political and military dynamics between both countries. Both Maxim Samorukov with his chapter “Perspective from Russia: Belarus and Russia – Allies More in Words than in Deeds” and Arseny Sivitsky with his contribution “Perspective from Belarus: Russia and Belarus – Still Reluctant Allies” underlined that both countries are not perfect allies. Distrust between both remains rife. Despite Belarus even exceeding Russia's negative rhetoric towards NATO and its eastern flank countries, Belarus retains a notable political and military autonomy from Russia. Belarus so far has successfully resisted a permanent & notable Russia's military base on its soil. To the disappointment of Belarus, Russia has not been keen at (re)arming its ally.

Events in Belarus should also serve as a yet another lesson to the Baltic states and Poland in future dilemmas between interests and values. The message of the Belarus story is rather clear – sooner or later, incompatible interests and values collide. Meanwhile, as collateral damage, also the space

for engagement with another authoritarian state, the People's Republic of China, has narrowed even further, given that Belarus has been one of the closest partners of China in East Europe.

Finally, NATO and its member states, especially those neighbouring Belarus, have undoubtedly reconsidered Belarus as a security and defence challenge. Notwithstanding further negative or maybe positive developments in Belarus, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian and NATO planners should permanently treat the Belarusian border and risks emanating from it like that of Russia. Belarus can become another frontline against already experienced or yet unexperienced threats from Belarus itself, as well as serve as a platform or an instrument of Russia.