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Belarus: Sovereignty under Threat

Impacts of the Russian War against Ukraine

Manfred Huterer and Astrid Sahm

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 also called the sovereignty of Belarus into question. The country served as a launching pad for the attack, thus becoming a co-aggressor. However, relations between Minsk and Moscow changed the longer the war has lasted. Belarusian leader Lukashenka has increasingly acted like a self-confident war service provider toward Kremlin boss Putin. At the same time, he has been able to avoid any direct military involvement and has sought to preserve his chance at serving as a mediator. Nevertheless, Belarus' structural dependence on Russia has continued to increase in many areas. Right now, this gradual loss of sovereignty can still be reversed. In order for this to remain the situation, the EU and Germany must not write the country off.

After the Belarusian presidential elections in August 2020, Alexander Lukashenka, who has ruled since 1994, found himself in the role of a supplicant before Kremlin boss Vladimir Putin. The mass protests against the rigged elections shook his regime to the core. It was the brutal use of force and Putin's support that ensured Lukashenka's political survival. The threat of military intervention from Russia prevented more government institutions from showing solidarity with the protesters.

The crisis in Belarus offered the Kremlin the opportunity to expand its control over the country and impose its integration demands that Lukashenka had previously always refused to fulfil. The abrupt break in relations to the West drastically restricted Minsk's room for manoeuvre in foreign policy.

In addition, Western sanctions led to an increased economic dependency on Russia. The Kremlin used this to expand its military presence in Belarus and to finally finalize the roadmaps on deepening integration of the Union State of both countries formed in 1999. Their development began in 2019, but had been blocked by the Belarusians in key areas and had been effectively put on hold before the presidential elections there.

Diminishing control

In November 2021, 28 out of the original 31 planned roadmaps were signed by Lukashenka and Putin. These plans aim to create a far-reaching alignment in economic and financial policy. Nevertheless, there are no plans to build supranational struc-

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tures or to introduce a common currency. As the roadmaps were to have been implemented by December 31, 2023, it seems that the Kremlin has postponed the more ambitious goals until later. This is at least indicated by a document from the Presidential Administration of Russia leaked in February 2023, according to which Moscow is planning a discreet takeover of Belarus by 2030.

To what extent the Belarusian side was able to fend off the roadmaps' further-reaching Russian demands is difficult to determine due to the opaque negotiation process. In any case, the documents only partially reflect the "national economic interests" as defined by Lukashenka. Belarus must largely adapt its legislation to Russia's. In doing so, Lukashenka risks losing control of the country's economy, which is practically a planned economy. In order to delay liberal economic reforms, he has therefore proven to be willing to make major concessions in other areas, including security policy and military cooperation.

Lukashenka's strategy of geopoliticization

From the very beginning, Lukashenka viewed the political crisis in Belarus in a geopolitical context, starting with his conviction that the protests against the country's elections were being controlled by the West. If the West were able to topple the regime in Belarus, then Russia would be the next target. By crushing local opposition, Lukashenka was, in his view, also contributing to Russia's stability and thus hoping for Putin to reciprocate.

At the same time, in the summer of 2021, Lukashenka put pressure on the EU with a wave of refugees at the borders of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. This artificial migration crisis was an unsuccessful attempt to make Brussels repeal the sanctions it had imposed against Belarus without having to respond to EU's political demands. In July 2021, Belarus closed its border to Ukraine, claiming it was trying to prevent weapons intended to be used to overthrow the government from being smuggled in. Around the same time, Russia began deploying its troops to the Ukrainian border and demanded security guarantees from the USA and NATO at the end of the year. For Lukashenka, these steps fit in seamlessly with the general threatening position adopted towards the West and also served the security of his own regime.

In September 2021, Belarus and Russia carried out the "Zapad" (West) military manoeuvre, which takes place every four years. Exercises included the military's defence against Western attempts to overthrow the government and the deployment of joint attack groups in urban areas. The latter were obviously in preparation for the subsequent invasion of Ukraine, especially as Zapad 2021 was the largest exercise of its kind to date.

The manoeuvre also marked the start of operations of the joint Air Force and Air Defence Forces training and combat centre in Grodno, Belarus, that Lukashenka had agreed to set up in March 2021. Shortly before the Russian attack began, the new military doctrine of the Union State came into effect, which Putin and Lukashenka had already announced in November 2021. It declares the West to be the main enemy and its stipulations include an increase in the number of joint troop exercises and the expansion of joint military infrastructure.

The turning point: The start of the war

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine was preceded by a further joint manoeuvre in February 2022, which allowed the presence of more than 30,000 Russian soldiers and their military equipment in Belarus. Lukashenka's approval of this exercise turned his country into a co-aggressor. Whereas in the past, he had always categorically rejected the possibility that an attack on this neighbouring country could be mounted from Belarus. However,

his political relations to Kyiv had become markedly worse since Volodymyr Zelenskyy refused to recognize the results of the Belarusian presidential elections.

It remains unclear when Lukashenka was informed about the aggression planned or whether he thought up to the end he was merely involved in creating a threatening situation. His own remarks were contradictory. On the one hand, he publicly stated that he was only informed of Putin's plans shortly before the beginning of the war and denied having any responsibility for the Russian invasion. On the other, he accused Ukraine of having prepared to attack Belarus, thereby forcing Russia to intervene. Moreover, Western sanctions left Belarus with no alternative. In this way, Lukashenka legitimized the Russian invasion and his own support of it.

The fundamental constant in his appearances was his assurance that Belarus would not involve its own soldiers in the war. Here, he was taking into particular account the attitude of the Belarusian people, the majority of whom opposed the invasion. Lukashenka had to fear that direct involvement in the war would reignite the painstakingly suppressed conflicts in the country. Accordingly, he always presented the lack of Belarusian troop involvement as his personal achievement — also to avoid giving the impression that he had completely surrendered the country's sovereignty to Russia. However, independent military experts understood that the Kremlin never intended on having any active involvement from the Belarusian armed forces, as they had no international combat experience whatsoever. Instead, by serving as a logistical base for Russian troops, Belarus is fulfilling the precise role that Putin had intended for it.

On the international stage, Lukashenka has unreservedly supported the Russian position. In March 2022, Belarus was one of five countries to vote against the resolution from the UN General Assembly condemning the war of aggression. All of the other countries in the Eurasian Economic Union either abstained or were not present for the vote. With that said, Belarus could no longer claim for itself the neutral role of mediator as it had in the war in eastern Ukraine that began in 2014. After three meetings that took place in the Belarusian border region at the end of February and beginning of March 2022, negotiations to end the combat relocated to Istanbul and/or online formats, before being broken off in May of that year.

Readjusting relations

Belarusian-Russian contacts intensified extensively in the first year of the war. There were ten direct meetings between the heads of state. Lukashenka became increasingly self-confident. Moreover, in December 2022, Putin travelled to Minsk again for the first time in three years. There are several reasons for this shift in relations. First, this was due to the fact that Lukashenka successfully furthered the restructuring of the political system in Belarus after the constitutional referendum on February 27, 2022. He was therefore convinced that he once again had the domestic situation fully under control and would be able to run in the 2025 presidential elections without any opposition from the Kremlin. Second, the Western sanctions imposed after the invasion created a new balance between Putin and Lukashenka as the war progressed. For now, both leaders had become international pariahs.

The economic sanctions imposed were different in each country, so that Belarus was able to partially satisfy Russian demand for goods they had previously imported from the West. In addition, Belarus produced military equipment (including optoelectronic sensors and chassis used for missile vehicles) that was not being made in Russia. This increased the Russian need for cooperation with and support from Belarus.

Economic interdependence and false recovery

The increasing share of Russian exports from Belarus shows just how important the Belarusian economy had become for Russia. In 2022, this had increased from around 5 percent in the previous years to around 9 percent. At the same time, there was a decrease in the imports from Russia. This meant that Belarus had a positive trade balance with Russia for the first time since 1992. Nevertheless, Belarus' overall trade balance showed a slight deficit (of USD 99 million), as exports fell more sharply than imports in its trade with the EU. The 3.7 percent decrease in the Belarusian gross domestic product (GDP) was lower than many had expected in light of Western sanctions and the loss of the important Ukrainian market. According to official figures, Belarus' GDP once again increased by 3.5 percent in the first nine months of 2023.

These apparently positive trends are offset by the growing dependency of the Belarusian economy on the economic development in Russia. While in 2021, Russia's share made up 49 percent of Belarusian exports, it is now around 70 percent. When the fact that the transport of Belarusian goods to third countries takes place from Russian ports and on Russian trains is taken into account, the Russian share in Belarusian exports reaches almost 90 percent. This demonstrates how fragile the economic stabilization of the country is.

In parallel to the stimulation of the economy, imports from third countries that do not belong to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) once again increased in 2023. As a result, the trade deficit grew to a total of USD 2 billion in the first nine months of 2023 showing a clearly negative development as in previous years. Besides the EU's involvement in this development, the fact that China has replaced Ukraine as Belarus's second most important trading partner as a result of the war also plays a role. This means that Belarus is dependent on countries other than Russia for the further modernization of its economy, particularly as the domestic information and communications technology sector has lost its role as an innovative driver of economic growth through the brain drain taking place since 2020. This is also likely to have an effect on Russia's imports from Belarus in the medium term.

Foreign policy diversification initiatives

In order to reduce the political and economic dependence on Russia, Minsk has significantly increased its efforts to expand its cooperation with third countries not participating in Western sanctions, with the focus mainly on Africa. Besides economic benefits, Lukashenka is interested in alliances against the West's export of democracy. Here he, like Putin, employs anti-colonial rhetoric. Mainly contacts to authoritarian countries like Equatorial Guinea, Iran and Zimbabwe have seen dynamic development.

Lukashenka's greatest foreign policy successes were both of his trips to China in March and December of 2023. His first visit was significant mainly because Lukashenka's meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping took place shortly after China had publicized a twelve-point paper on ending the war in Ukraine and before Xi had travelled to Moscow. However, this gain in status was relativized at the latest when Putin took part in the Silk Road Summit in Beijing in October 2023 as the guest of honour. In addition, Belarus cannot expect any significant financial support from China.

A further focus of Minsk's foreign policy lies in stronger participation in regional cooperation structures outside the sphere of Western influence. Belarus is in the process of becoming a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It is also applying to become a full member of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). This is not least due to its interest in securing a market for Belarusian potash fertilizer in Brazil and India. Belarus

also hopes to secure these countries' support in its call for an end to EU sanctions.

Expansion of security policy cooperation

Minsk and Moscow have further expanded their security policy cooperation over the course of the war. In October 2022, Lukashenka announced in consultation with Putin that a joint regional military unit of the Union State would be based in Belarus for the first time. This was the result of invoking a mechanism from a 1997 bilateral agreement on military cooperation. This was justified by the increasing threat to Belarus from its western neighbouring countries and Ukraine. One factor that played a role was likely Lukashenka's concern that Belarusian mercenaries fighting for Ukraine in the Kalinoŭski regiment could be preparing a military coup against him. By January 2023, 9,000 Russian soldiers had been sent to Belarus. However, they were completely withdrawn by the summer. Currently there are up to 2,000 Russian soldiers and maintenance personnel at the airports in Belarus used by Russia and at the radar station in Vilyeyka.

In the summer of that year, Russia began stationing tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus indefinitely, significantly limiting Belarus's sovereignty in security policy. In fact, this had been a long-held wish of Lukashenka. The legal framework had been laid in February 2022, when Belarus relinquished its neutrality principle and nuclear weapon-free status in a constitutional referendum. Lukashenka views the stationing of the weapons as a guarantee of his continued power. No one would attack a country with nuclear weapons — these were his words in June 2023, apparently in reference to the alleged threat from the West, particularly Poland. At the same time, with this he is actively supporting the Kremlin's approach of fanning the fears of the West of a looming nuclear escalation so that it does not increase its military aid to Ukraine.

The rebellion staged by Yevgeny Prigozhin and his Wagner mercenaries on June 24, 2023 offered Lukashenka the unique opportunity to present himself as Russia's "saviour" and Putin's equal. At the same time, he was effectively returning the favour for the Kremlin's political support in August 2020. While Lukashenka certainly exaggerated the importance of his negotiations, the important thing was actually the Belarusian Security Council announcement on the afternoon of June 24th that every domestic conflict would only serve to benefit the hostile West. He thus laid the line of argument that would allow Putin to offer Prigozhin and his mercenaries the prospect of impunity if they were to put down their arms and withdraw to Belarus.

This invitation to the Wagner troops was both an opportunity and a risk for Lukashenka. The combat-experienced mercenaries were to train the Belarusian army and strengthen the military deterrent directed against the West and potential coup attempts by the opposition at home. It was also to be expected that Prigozhin's contacts in Africa would serve Belarusian economic ambitions on that continent.

At the same time, the presence of thousands of Russian mercenaries could threaten the country's political stability and serve to prepare a new attack on Ukraine from Belarusian soil. Prigozhin's death on August 23, 2023 put an end to the hype surrounding Lukashenka's role as an inner-Russian mediator. The majority of the Wagner mercenaries now left the country.

Continuing mediation ambitions

Since February 2022, Lukashenka has been clearly pursuing a dual strategy. On the one hand, he has positioned himself fully on the side of Russia and acts as an active provider of military services. On the other, he emphasizes that Belarus is not an active military participant in the war, thus attempting to signal a position different to the Kremlin to the outside world. The latter is also supported by the fact that the risk of Russian

missile attacks from Belarusian territory has significantly decreased since the fall of 2022. Furthermore, Lukashenka has repeatedly called upon the Ukrainian leadership to return to the negotiation table as long as this option still exists and offered his mediation.

The Ukrainian side has always rejected such offers, particularly as Lukashenka's mediation offers were also aimed at having Ukraine give up their aspirations to become a member of NATO, which obviously served Russian interests. Nevertheless, Kyiv was interested in the Belarusian leadership maintaining their relative restraint in the war. With this in mind, Ukraine has at least at times appeared to have lobbied Brussels not to impose stricter sanctions on Belarus. Ukraine has also refrained from high-level contacts to the Belarusian exile opposition. Diplomatic relations remained intact and informal talks continued to take place between the two sides.

The ambitions of the Minsk leadership are not limited to mediation in the war between Russian and Ukraine. It would like to play an active role in shaping a new multipolar world order. For example, on September 25, 2023, the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Aleinik addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations advocating for the expansion of the circle of permanent members of the UN Security Council to include countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. He appealed to Great Britain, France and the USA to accept "the realities of the time".

At the Eurasian Security Conference hosted by the Belarusian leadership in Minsk on October 26—27, 2023 with a total of 300 participants, Aleinik called on the West to abandon its NATO-centric security model and return to the principle of indivisible security. With his predominantly constructive tone, he clearly differed from his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. However, the Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó was the only representative from the EU present at the conference.

Finally, Minsk advocated for the strengthening of multilateral organizations in the post-Soviet region, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization. In June 2023, Lukashenka also urged the strengthening of the Organization's crisis reaction mechanism. This is likely to be motivated not least to decrease the Kremlin's pressure on Belarus by tying up Russian resources in managing conflicts in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Closing ranks and setting boundaries

The continuing war has paradoxically strengthened the position of the regime in Minsk towards Moscow, as Lukashenka is Putin's only reliable ally. However, Belarus has only gained tactical advantages, which will likely be lost with the end of the Russian aggression. Even under the conditions of the war, the implementation of the 28 Union programs is progressing. As announced by the Russians in November 2023, 90 percent of them have already been completed. However, it is almost impossible to say how many of the roadmaps have actually been fully implemented at this time.

Moscow's pressure on Lukashenka is likely to further increase regardless of whether Russian succeeds or fails in the war in Ukraine. In either scenario his supplying of military services would lose relevance; in the second scenario, Putin would likely view the integration of Belarus as compensation for his failure. For this reason, it is of upmost importance for Lukashenka to take part in international negotiations to end the war. The Kremlin appears to be seeking to prevent exactly this by further deepening the rifts between Minsk and Kyiv. For example, it is forcing its ally to strengthen its contacts to the self-proclaimed People's Republics in the Donbas and to participate in war crimes such as the deportation of Ukrainian children.

Despite the significant dependencies, it would be wrong to view Lukashenka merely as Putin's minion. Rather, he is acting in his own interests in accepting the close ties

to Moscow as they help to keep him in power. Additionally, both heads of state share an anti-liberal and anti-Western worldview, although Lukashenka's is rooted more in Soviet traditions while Putin's Russia has an imperialistic-nationalistic orientation.

Regarding domestic policy, Minsk is striving to prevent being completely co-opted into the Russian information space. To this end, Lukashenka's regime is pursuing a Soviet-style national history policy, including the theory of genocide of the Belarusian people. The plan to create a joint Belarusian-Russian media holding has not yet been implemented. Although Russian war narratives dominate the information space in Belarus, the country's population has so far proven to be surprisingly resilient overall.

The multifaceted lateral communication between Belarusian and Russian players deserves special attention. On the one hand, Lukashenka personally cultivates intense contacts to Russian governors, hoping in this way to be able to remain in power even under a possible successor to Putin. On the other, he is obviously concerned that he could lose influence among members of his coterie due to their cooperation with Russia. This is indicated by the fact that per a presidential decree from October 10, 2023, Lukashenka placed the national security organizations including the KGB secret service directly under his sole control, whereas they had previously answered to the government and the Security Council.

Strategic conclusions

In a resolution adopted on November 7, 2023, the German Bundestag called on the German federal government to work to preserve the national sovereignty of Belarus. Corresponding appeals are also coming from the country's democratic opposition and in other statements from European politicians. However, the central question remains which approaches and instruments European and German policymakers have at their disposal to strengthen Belarus independence and counteract its gradual annexation by Russia. Overall, Western influence is limited. However, based on the actual circumstances in the country and the results of Western Belarus policy in recent years, the following points can be made.

Belarus is not a protectorate of Russia. Even if the country has continued to deepen its ties to Russia under Lukashenka's rule, the West should not dismiss Belarus and treat it as a protectorate of Russia. Rather, the West should try to define its own relationship to Belarus and not view it as a feature of its relations to Russia.

Sanctions are not game changers. Western sanctions have hit the Lukashenka regime hard, yet have still not made it respond to Western demands. Many members of the Belarusian state apparatus are coming to terms with the loss of their European foothold in foreign policy. They speculate that the importance of the West will in any case diminish in the emerging multipolar world order. In their view, this would balance out the imperial claims of the Kremlin. Therefore, the EU must not rely exclusively on sanctions.

(Informal) talks with the regime must not be taboo. Providing comprehensive support to the country's democratic opposition and civil society is a necessary, but not a sufficient prerequisite for Belarus being able to develop freely and independently in the future. The further actions of the Lukashenka regime depend on whether the country's progressive loss of sovereignty becomes irreversible. Therefore, selective talks with representatives of the regime should not be ruled out, so that it is possible to convey messages and receive more information. The Belarusian elite is less monolithic in its attitudes than it appears from the outside. European prospects for the future should be communicated not just to the Belarusian population, but also to those in power who are not repressive hardliners. This applies

even more as the Lukashenka regime will be faced with the question of its succession plan sooner or later.

Borders must remain open. Crucial social exchange can only be maintained as long as the borders remain open and visas issued not only for humanitarian purposes, but also for tourism and business trips. Therefore, the EU has every interest in ensuring that there is no further escalation in the relations between Belarus and Poland or the Baltic states. A poker game with the stakes of closing the borders against migrant flows is also not in the West's interests. It is therefore particularly important to coordinate with Poland and the Baltic states as closely as possible. The change in government in Warsaw offers new opportunities here that should be used.

Consider the opportunities of conditionality. The Lukashenka regime fears that its position with regard to Moscow will be significantly weakened if there are negotiations to end the war in Ukraine and a restructuring of the European security order without Minsk's involvement. In this case, the West could consider if the Belarusian leadership would be open to conditionality logic, which it had always rejected in the past. This would mean that Minsk fulfil Western demands for the release of all political prisoners and, in exchange, specific sanctions would be lifted. In any case, for the foreseeable future, the West will remain confronted with the problem that the goal of preserving Belarusian statehood is being undermined by isolationist strategies that are effectively driving the country into Moscow's arms. The yardstick of Western policy should be to what extent it succeeds in ending the inhumane repressive practices in Belarus, securing the release of political prisoners and expanding the scope for change in the country.

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