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ANALYSIS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION POLICY WITH RELATION TO THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

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Introduction

This analysis is an overview of the main areas within the relationship between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. It touches upon such aspects of the ties between the two countries as the political and economic integration, the interaction of their military, security and law enforcement forces, as well as issues related to the public opinion on these processes.

The aim of this exercise is to provide a brief yet substantive overview of the key reasons behind the current state of relations, close yet quite unequal, between the two countries. A particular attention has been accorded to the process of transformation of the once multi-vector Belarusian policy into a subordinate partnership with Russia, the changes accompanying this process, as well as the reasons that have produced the dramatically substantial inequality between the two parties, inequality that cannot be explained exclusively by objective factors. The objectives of the research have emerged as, firstly, an overview of the historical events that had predestined the rapprochement of the two States; secondly, an analysis of the legal and institutional forms of the integration process, thirdly, the identification of those factors and events that strongly affected or significantly altered the relationship between the two countries, and, finally, the identification of the steps, both implemented and still remaining on paper, towards the gradually overwhelming subordination of the Belarusian State to the Russian geopolitical regional project.

The undertaken research is, in part, based on primary sources of information, particularly for the period of 2020-2024, with the remaining part being a meta-overview of books, scientific articles, and analytical reports on the topic of interaction between the Russian and Belarusian authorities currently available publicly or stored in scientific databases. A particular note should be taken of the fundamental work “Russian Policy towards Belarus after 2020”, ed. Arkady Moshes and Ryhor Nizhikau. This work, to a certain extent, resonates with the aims and objectives of this analysis and for this reason it has become a framework for some of its sections augmented by relevant information accumulated throughout 2023 and 2024, as well as by an analysis of historical preconditions.

The text of this analysis is intended, above all, for a circle of political and trade union activists, as well as the broader public, without assuming to provide fundamentally new ideas, concepts, and facts for the narrower expert community specializing in the area of Russian-Belarusian relations.

SECTION I: POLITICAL RELATIONS

1.1. The legal basis for political integration of the two states

While economic interlinks between the independent Russia and Belarus began taking shape right after the disintegration of the Soviet Union based on the ties inherited from the Soviet era, the process of political rapprochement between the two countries became more active after Alexander Lukashenko came into power. Taking place initially within the CIS, it reached its culmination point in 1999 in the form of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. The early stages of this process are recorded in the following documents:

- the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and Government of the Russian Federation on creation of interstate economic structures of July 20, 1992;
- the creation of the Customs Union of the two states on January 06, 1995;
- the signing of the Agreement on friendship, neighbourliness, and cooperation on February 21, 1995;
- the signing of the Agreement on the creation of a community of Russia and Belarus in 1996;
- the signing on April 02, 1997, of a Treaty on the Union of Belarus and Russia with a higher level of integration, and the approval of the Statutes of the Union of Belarus and Russia on May 23, 1997;
- the Declaration on the further unification of Russia and Belarus of December 25, 1998;

the conclusion of the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State of December 08, 1999, with the Action Program of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus for the implementation of the Treaty's provisions (Proleskovskiy & Kulichkov, 2008).

It is the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State signed on December 08, 1999, that became the legal framework for all subsequent actions towards the integration of the two states (RB Ministry of Internal Affairs). This Treaty provided for the establishment of supranational authorities, single citizenship, common financial, economic, and trade policies, integrated transport and energy systems, joint public defence contracts, the functioning of a regional military group, etc. (Lutskaya, 2005).

Plans for the supreme bodies of the Union State envisaged the creation of the Supreme State Council composed of the Heads of State, the Heads of Government, and the Speakers of Parliament, as well as the Chairpersons of the Council of Ministers, the Court, and the chambers of the Union State Parliament. This body was to define the common political issues for the development purposes and approve the budget.

The Union State Parliament was to have two chambers, namely, the Chamber of the Union and the Chamber of Representatives. The Chamber of the Union would be

composed on a parity basis with 36 representatives from the RF Federal Assembly and from the RB National Assembly. The Chamber of Representatives, in its turn, was to be formed by direct popular vote and consist of 75 members elected in the RF and 28 members elected in the RB. The Union State Parliament was to have legislative powers, take part in approving the budget, ratify international treaties, etc.

The executive power in the supranational structure was headed by the Council of Ministers composed of the Chairperson appointed by the Supreme State Council, heads of the governments, a State Secretary, ministers of foreign affairs, economy, and finance of the signatory states, and heads of other governing bodies of the Union State. The meetings could be attended by invited heads of Central Banks and ministers of the signatory states. The Council of Ministers was to formulate directions for the development of the Union State's policies submitted for the approval to the Supreme State Council, it would have the right of legislative initiative, take part in adopting the budget, manage the assets, and coordinate unification.

The Union State Court would cover the judicial domain. It would consist of 9 judges appointed by the Parliament for the term of 6 years with a possibility of re-appointment for another term. Its tasks would include the interpretation of the Union State's treaties and agreements and the ensuring of their uniform implementation.

The supervisory and monitoring functions were to be performed by the Auditing Chamber. Its 11 members were to be appointed by the Parliament for the term of 6 years. Having more than 7 citizens of the same state as members of the Auditing Chamber was not allowed. The Auditing Chamber would be tasked with monitoring budgetary income and expenditures and assessing the assets performance.

The majority of organizational and managerial documents of the Union State, particularly those pertaining to the establishment of its supranational bodies, have never worked in practice. The effect of integration activities was largely low, except for the economic and energy integration and, in part, the military ties.

The economic integration got its second wind with the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union. The signing of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union took place on May 29, 2014, and the document came into force on January 01, 2015. Now, the EAEU already has 5 signatory states, including, apart from Russia and Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. The document provided for the establishment of a customs union to be subsequently transformed into a fully-fledged economic union modelled on the European Union, offering free movement of goods and services, capital, and workforce. Institutional relationships within the new organization evolved much more intensively and almost instantly secured their corresponding structures like the EAEU Court, for instance, with Minsk selected as its location. Similarly, legal integration norms like the EAEU Customs Code did not take long coming. Despite the EAEU's failure to achieve the same level of economic ties among its member-states as, for example, the European Union, it has still become a significant milestone in the process of developing and deepening economic relations among the countries.

1.2. Political reasons for the rapprochement of the two countries

So, what were the point and the motives behind the creation of the Union State? And why has the Union State been unable to achieve even those results that were demonstrated by the EAEU? First of all, it should be noted that political relations between Russia and Belarus were not based solely on Russia's provision of political and economic support in exchange for geopolitical loyalty and participation in the joint integration process but also on the ideological and political similarity of the two regimes in principle, their common concept of the world, the established international order, and the Western countries' role therein (Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023). These reasons were quite important even in a situation where Alexander Lukashenko pursued a policy of maintaining a balance between the interests of Russia and the EU, a policy that had been more or less successful until 2020.

For Moscow, relations with Minsk served its political objectives, enhancing security and reputation and helping Russia keep the other country in its geopolitical orbit and maintain the "great power" status. Belarus, in return, was expected to support Moscow's regional and global agenda. For doing this, Minsk received economic, political, and resource assistance in the form of lower prices for oil and gas, as well as privileged access to the Russian internal market (Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023). The cycles of coolness and rapprochement that did take place – in any case, until recently – clearly exposed this system of mutual checks and balances. During the period of conflict, Belarus would start developing, publicly and openly, multi-polar and equitable relations with a variety of economic partners, while Moscow, in its turn, would try to put pressure on Lukashanka's regime, using the country's dependence on its economic resources and energy supplies (Nice, 2012).

Ideologically, the rapprochement was based on the common history of the Soviet State and, in particular, the trauma of the Great Patriotic War, religious ties through the Russian Orthodox Church, the use of the Russian language, as well as their support of conservative and traditional values. In practice, this manifests itself, for instance, in the unification of propaganda clichés, the persecution of the LGBT community, or the writing of uniform history textbooks for schools (BRIEF, 2024b). And one should not forget about the commonality of political ties and views on the methods of State governance. Both countries are personalistic autocracies of the mobilizing type, suppressing any form of opposition and built on personal elitist ties (Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023).

1.3 The dynamics of the integration process

In the course of their rapprochement, the relations between the two states were undergoing various changes. Initially, it was Belarus that was the main driving force behind the process. In the 1990s, adroitly balancing among the various power groupings in Moscow, Lukashenko hoped to become the head of the new integrated structure and enhance his personal status. However, when Putin became President

and started building his “[vertical power system of governance](#)”, ”, it was clear that such ambitions of Lukashenko’s were hardly realistic (Kharitonov, 2019). At the same time, Moscow began showing a geopolitical interest in launching an integration process and using the leverage it had to force the Belarusian regime which had grown quite cold to the integration agenda by then to take new steps in that direction.

Moscow’s conventional approach was based on regular reviews of the established policy of developing economic, political, and military ties, thus seeking to increase the dependency of Belarus through the creation of new and closer institutional ties. In its turn, Belarus geared its policy towards maintaining the status quo for as long as the contemporary circumstances and the possibility to continue cooperation with Western countries would allow. The pressure limits the parties would not cross were, for Moscow, the preservation of Belarus’ internal political order and, for Minsk, the political loyalty to the Kremlin and its projects (Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023).

Examples of such pressure could be found in the oil price hike of 2010 used to force Belarus to enter the Customs Union, the reduction of gas price in 2011 in exchange for selling a share of the Belarusian gas transportation system to Gazprom, the provision of regular loans in exchange for shares in other Belarusian companies (Moshes and Nizhnikau, 2020). With time, Moscow became progressively stricter in its actions. In 2016, Russia increased the gas price from USD 73 to USD 132 per cubic meter. Minsk did not accede to the new prices and continued to pay for gas, using old prices. Then, Moscow stopped money transfers through the Eurasian Development Bank, imposed restrictions on goods imported from Belarus, and decreased its oil supply. Ultimately, for the years 2018 and 2019, the price of USD 127 per cubic meter was agreed (Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023).

Trying to rebalance its bargaining position, Belarus made two attempts to improve its relations with Western countries; first, in 2008 through 2010, and then during the period of 2014 through 2020. It joined the EU “Eastern Partnership” initiative. Also, Minsk was used as a venue for meetings and negotiations between Western leaders and Russia, particularly, those related to the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The year 2014 also saw a moderate liberalization of the national legislation, particularly, in the area of energy, migration, and economic cooperation. Another prospective way out of the existing situation for Belarus was a link with China. Lukashenko signed the Treaty on cooperation with China and also joined the Beijing’s “Belt and Road” initiative. Within this project, Belarus was seen as a part of the trade and transport infrastructure joining China with the rich European market. At the same time, Belarus itself was regarded as one of the target countries for the export of industrial goods. That said, China did not consider Belarus as a priority country in terms of direct investments, which, obviously, contradicted Belarus’ own interests, particularly, in a situation of growing foreign trade deficit with regard to the Chinese economy. In practical terms, the fully-fledged implementation of the project was hindered by both the internal political instability in 2020 and the involvement of Belarus in the military conflict with Ukraine (Budginaite-Froehly & Kirchner, 2023).

1.4 The effect of the 2020 protests on the political rapprochement of the two countries

The 2020 crisis entailed serious changes in the relations between the two regimes. If, shortly before August 2020, Lukashenko was accusing Moscow of being ready to carry out an unlawful coup d'Etat, then, after receiving support to overcome popular protests, he started to claim that relations between the two countries were stronger than ever. While Moscow supported the existing vertical of power (Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023).

Ideologically, the support given to Lukashenko's regime was based on Putin's idea of the de-subjectivisation of the people, already a fully formed premise by then, according to which popular protests and revolutions could not happen by themselves, as no people would rise against their own government of their own free will. Any such protests, both successful and not so successful, always had a foreign interested party involved (Marlen, 2017). This was the view adopted vis-à-vis Russian protests and opposition leaders, particularly after the Bolotnaya Square protests of 2011. This position was replicated by both Russian and Belarusian pro-Government media when covering the situation in Belarus. The main interested party was, of course, the "collective West" trying to undermine the power of the legitimate Government (Lavrov, 2020). While Moscow itself, throughout the crisis, never questioned Lukashenko's authority and accepted him exclusively as the legitimate leader.

Equally instantaneous was the provision of institutional assistance signalling to all those in doubt that Moscow fully supported the Belarusian regime. In September 2020, Lukashenko attended the Sochi Summit where he met Putin. Minsk, in its turn, was visited, consecutively, by the Chairman of the Russian Government Mikhail Mishustin, the Foreign Intelligence Service Director Mikhail Naryshkin, and the Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu. Later, Mikhail Naryshkin spoke of the Belarusian and Russian secret services working jointly to prevent the coup d'Etat (BelTA, 2020). One of the public consequences of this collaboration was the arrest of a number of Belarusian protest leaders in Russia.

Since the Belarusian protests were, in part, based on the idea of running mass strike actions in all sectors of economy, another important element of the Russian assistance was the provision of strike-breakers. For instance, when Belarusian journalists protested against the brutality of the protest's repression, they were replaced by journalists and reporters from Russian pro-Government TV channels and newspapers (Meduza, 2020). And in 2024, all this culminated in the creation of the single media holding of the Union State (Meduza, 2024).

Resulting from such actions of Moscow was the complete termination of all relations between Belarus and the EU which Lukashenko had come to see as a threat to the stability of his own regime. There was no clear EU response action plan to the developments in Belarus either. In the course of the 2020 crisis, the EU would call for negotiations between the Government and the protestors, the release of detainees, and putting an end to violence. Later on, the EU voiced the idea of holding new

elections in the country. In the end, the EU imposed sanctions which, in experts' opinion, turned out to be much weaker than similar measures taken after the Presidential elections of 2006 and 2010. (Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023). For instance, initially, individual sanctions were applied only to 40 persons, apart from Lukashenko and his sons (EEAS, 2020). The packages that followed added 15 and 29 persons more, as well as 7 legal entities. The financial assistance to the country was also put on hold. The civil society in Belarus was assisted mainly by the Governments of Poland and Lithuania, but not the EU. The EU ambassador to Minsk continued his work and contacts between the EU and Belarus were never severed (Euractiv, 2021). The ban on flights over Belarus and sectoral sanctions were only adopted after the forced landing of a flight with the opposition journalist Roman Protasevich on board (Bloomberg, 2021). Belarus, in its turn, also took a number of response measures vis-à-vis the EU, like leaving the Eastern Partnership programme. A harsher pressure tool was the policy of attracting illegal migrants into the country with the view of sending them to the EU border in order to create tension.

While the relations between the EU and Belarus were showing increased tension both because of the sanctions and the migration crisis, the Russian leadership continued to support Lukashenko and his political position. As a result, in the summer of 2021 further steps towards the rapprochement between the two states were announced; moreover, suggestions were made to circumvent sanctions against Belarus, using the territory of Russia (Moshes and Nizhnikau, 2021). Ultimately, 28 integration programs were signed. And already during that meeting and the signing ceremony, Putin mentioned prospects for taking this process further, aiming for the creation of a single currency and a common payment system. December 2021 saw the signing of the new common migration policy and the updated military doctrine.

1.5 Relations between Russia and Belarus after the beginning of Russia' invasion of Ukraine

In February 2022 Belarus allowed Russia to use its territory for the invasion of Ukraine. Belarus provided its infrastructure, as well as medical and logistical assistance. The UN General Assembly Resolution of March 02, 2022, branded Belarus an aggressor country along with Russia. The EU sanctions resulting from the opened hostilities affected both Russia and Belarus. In the autumn of 2022, the Belarusian army was put on advance alert.

The commencement of the military campaign can be seen to mark a significant loss of the country's economic, political, military, and international independence. Foreign trade with other countries became possible only through the Russian territory. International policy was largely implemented with the support of either Moscow or organizations where Moscow had significant influence, for instance, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) where Belarus was expected to have a full formal membership in July 2024, according to the Ambassador of the Republic of Kazakhstan to Belarus (BRIEF, 2024).

Belarusian military security is now also dependent on Russian assistance and support as the expectations of retaliation actions from the Ukrainian army have substantially increased as has the number of legitimate targets like training camps and Russian troops located in the territory of Belarus (Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023).

Russia's diplomatic support on the international arena has become particularly relevant for debates on the protection of human rights in Belarus. In this sense, special attention should be given to the application of Article 33 of the Constitution of the International Labour Organization vis-à-vis Belarus, as well as the debates taking place in the UN Human Rights Council on the situation of human rights in the country. In the first instance, Russia mediated the creation of a group of countries who spoke against the application of this harshest possible measure provided in the ILO Constitution to Belarus. A delegate from the Russian Government maintained that the pressure on Belarus was politically motivated and aimed to subvert the country's achievements in the area of social protection of workers. The proposed measures, in his opinion, could have an adverse effect on the national labour market and the level of protection enjoyed by its participants (ILO, 2023). The Russian representative had made similar statements before, speaking at the meeting of the ILO Administrative Body against the recommendation to the International Labour Conference to apply the above-mentioned article to Belarus. This was particularly important as Belarus had no access to this ILO body, while Russia, in its turn, was its permanent member.

Similarly, representatives of the Russian Federation supported Belarus' agenda in the UN Human Rights Council, particularly, in the matter of the Special Correspondents' reports on the situation in the country. Thus, in September 2023, before the adoption of the resolution on Belarus, a representative of the Russian Federation noted continued attempts to put pressure on the Belarusian authorities, as well as the presence of double standards and a biased approach to assessing the situation in the country. He pointed out the massive support provided by the West to the emigrated opposition, the imposition of restrictive economic measures and the issue of informational resources to foster anti-Government sentiments (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation in Geneva, 2023).

It should be noted that Belarus responds to this support with "gestures of gratitude" towards Russia. This role particularly strongly manifests itself during crisis situations in Russia's internal politics like the rebellion of Yevgeny Prigozhin in the summer of 2023. It was Lukashenko who became the main negotiator between the parties and was able to resolve the conflict between the Russian powers that be and the rebels. His figure helped remove a seemingly insurmountable obstacle: on the one hand, Putin or other influential figures could not engage in direct negotiations with Prigozhin as that would mean recognizing him as an equal party to the negotiations; on the other hand, Prigozhin himself would not agree to negotiate with secondary persons in the Russian bureaucratic hierarchy. The figure of Lukashenko helped resolve the issue. That said, his mediation did not result in the assumed acknowledgment of Alexander Lukashenko's role in the negotiations as an experienced international politician by various countries but rather immersed him even deeper into the Russian political hierarchy system, servicing Putin and allowing him to focus entirely on geopolitical issues (Samorukov, 2023).

Despite the fact the window of opportunities for the Belarusian President is becoming ever smaller, he still tries to find ways and means to avoid total political dependence on Russia. For instance, in 2023, he made a visit to Iran. In expert opinion, the main objective of the visit was to pool experiences in circumventing the Western countries' sanctions, particularly, the ones affecting the export of potassium (Bernstein, 2024a). In a similar manner, the Belarusian authorities seek to regain the Indian market which is less susceptible to the Western sanctions regime yet is much less accessible for Belarusian exports in territorial and logistical terms (Bernstein, 2024b). The ruler of Belarus makes use of the remaining institutes of influence within the country as well. Thus, on March 14, 2024, during a meeting with the Synod members of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (and exarchate within the Russian Orthodox Church), Alexander Lukashenko expressed his displeasure with representatives of the Church hierarchy promoting the interests of Moscow. He insisted that they should work more with the society and direct it towards supporting him (Euroradio, 2024).

The relationships between and among the countries of the Soviet Union which remained in place after its collapse, undoubtedly, created preconditions for various forms of integration within this group of states. But the relations between Russia and Belarus, taken as a whole multitude of the new bilateral ties, have always been special. This does have objective prerequisites related to the different economic and political capacity of the two countries, yet there is also a personal fault of Alexander Lukashenko there. Among all the relevant centres of influence, he has been unable to establish relations with anyone but Russia. In the case of the European Union, this was precluded by the authoritarian nature of his regime and political repressions in the country. Strong relationships with Asia look quite improbable without Russia as an intermediary and, primarily, without Russia's transport infrastructure. And only Russia was available for lasting engagement, both economic and political. But in order to secure that he had to let in a constant risk of losing national sovereignty.

However, Lukashenko has no intentions to give up his power. Despite attempts to create institutes for the transition of power (All-Belarusian National Assembly), there are no plans to use them at the moment to actually effect the said transition (Boguslavskaya, 2024). It is with this in mind that he introduces new reforms one after another to reinforce his position against any contingency like guaranteeing immunity of the President after leaving the post (Delfinov, 2024), as well as planning for his next re-election in 2025 for the eighth successive term (Sotnikov, 2024).

SECTION II: ECONOMIC TIES

2.1. Preconditions for the economic integration of Russia and Belarus

Upon gaining its independence, Belarus was unable to get rid of its economic dependence on Russia based on the functioning of the single industrial complex of the Soviet times. Of course, this dependence slightly changed its character and acquired a more multi-vector nature, from the public sector of economy and debt obligations to trade and the investments sector (Bornukova, 2023). This situation pre-determined the need for shaping a legal framework of such a process. In early 1990s, it was developing on the basis of a number of agreements signed within the CIS structure – the Treaty on the Free Trade Zone within the CIS and its preceding agreements. At the turn of the century, the main role in the process was assumed by the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State and the integration programs that followed. Finally, in 2010s, the main economic agreements were signed within the EAEU; they were based on the Treaty on the Establishment of the EAEU and other international agreements (Mongush, 2023).

It should be noted that the political elites of Russia and Belarus had different motives to enter into such a relationship. Russia has always been motivated primarily by the political objective of integrating the countries that established themselves in the territory of the former USSR into the area of its own geopolitical influence, using, among other things, economic tools. Following from this is the fact that it would often become more active during those periods when Belarus was actively trying to develop trade relations with other partners (Suzdaltsev, 2023; Bornukova, 2023).

For Belarus, though, the main motive was, above all, the economic one as, politically, Belarus, at least before 2020, had sought to maintain multi-vector relationships with both Russia and its other most important trade partner, the European Union. Interestingly, in the 1990s, it was Belarus that would take the bigger steps and showed more interest in the rapprochement of the two countries, since the Belarusian economy was significantly more export-oriented than the Russian one. Consequently, the huge volume of the Russian market was becoming accessible to the Belarusian side. So, Belarus initiated the creation of the Ruble Area, financial and industrial groups, and the customs union of the two states (Lutskaya, 2005).

The pursuit of diversification was not only limited to the balancing between the EU and Russia. The political leadership of the Republic of Belarus set itself an ambitious task of “30/30/30” – equally distributing the trade flows among the three main trade partners: Russia, the EU, and Asia (Tochitskaya, 2017; Tochitskaya, 2012). Despite the fact that Belarus never managed to achieve this ratio in practice, the country would still use every opportunity to ensure it. For instance, when the EU imposed sanctions on Russia in 2014, Belarus became one of the main sources of parallel import. One of the more notorious examples was the dramatic rise in the supply of the famous

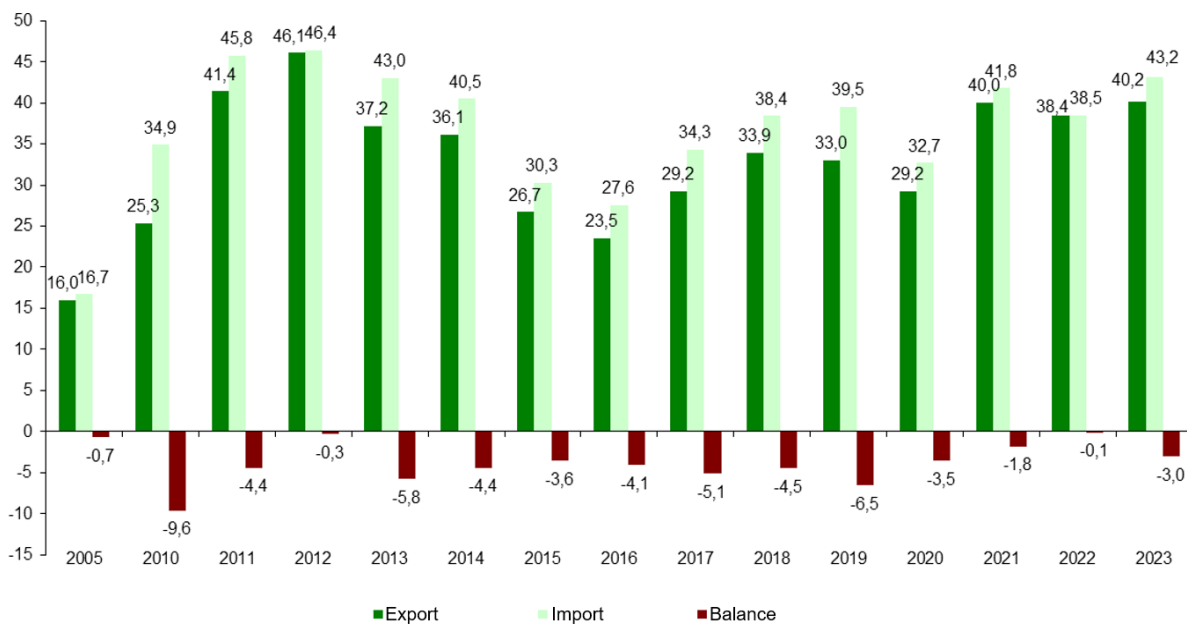
“Belarusian shrimps” by the year 2015 (Karnei & Sharyi, 2014). It was not, however, limited to only that. Until now, even despite the significant changes in the sanctions’ regimes applied to Belarus and Russia, the country is still used as a hub for parallel import to Russia, for instance, of luxury cars (Handley, 2024).

So, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it was Russia that emerged as Belarus’ main trade partner. Moreover, in the recent years, Russia’s share in the foreign trade balance of Belarus has been steadily growing, which only leads to a greater economic dependence with trade relations, the energy sector, and the foreign debt as its main aspects, among others.

2.2 Trade relations

All in all, the foreign trade balance of Belarus is sooner negative as, most of the time, import exceeds export. Official data have been showing this trend at least for the past twenty years.

Graph 1. Foreign trade balance of the Republic of Belarus.



Source: BelStat, 2024.

As of 2021, the main countries exporting Belarusian products included the Netherlands, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Poland. Trade with Germany and the USA was balanced. The country imported products from Russia, Turkey, and China (BelStat, 2022). The trend for a negative trade balance between Minsk and Moscow has existed ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union. For instance, in 2021, the turnover of goods between Russia and Belarus amounted to USD 38.4 bn (USD 28.5 and 33.3 bn in 2020 and 2019, respectively). Out of this amount, Russian export to Belarus amounted to USD 22.8 bn (USD 15.9 and 20.5 bn in 2020 and 2019, respectively)

and Belarusian export to Russia to USD 15.6 bn (USD 12.5 and 12.8 bn in 2020 and 2019, respectively) (Russia's External Trade, 2020, 2021, 2022). However, in 2022 Belarus recorded a positive trade balance with Russia for the first time. The change was explained by the reduced volume of Russian export to the country (Belousov, 2023).

Russia's main exports to Belarus include mineral products, metals and metal items, machinery, equipment, and transport vehicles, as well as chemical products. In its turn, Belarus supplies Russia with machinery, equipment, transport vehicles, alimentary goods and agricultural products, chemical products (Russia's External Trade, 2020, 2021, 2022).

All in all, the share of Russia in the overall value of Belarusian foreign trade volume remained at approximately 40% for decades (Borkunova, 2023). But from 2020 on, the situation began to change towards increased Russian participation in the country's foreign trade. Thus, according to official data, it stood at 47% in 2020 and 49% in 2021 (RB MFA). Later on, the exact data of official statistics were made confidential. However, according to expert opinion and judging by available data, the share of Russia in all exports to Belarus could be put at 55-70% (Borkunova, 2023; Zayats, 2023; Kruglov, 2024; Sitov, 2022). The Belarusian official statistics mark the Russian share as being "over 50%" (RB MFA). The current trend will apparently continue into the future.

2.3 Energy dependence and subsidies

Russia is the sole supplier of gas to the country, as well as the main, and sometimes single, supplier of oil. This level of dependence was caused by the proximity and accessibility of the nearest major exporter of energy resources, as well as the existing common infrastructure designed to sustain both domestic consumption and further transportation of gas and oil to Europe (Dashkevich, 2005).

Two thirds of all power in the country are generated by gas-firing plants, including 80% of thermal power (Borkunova, 2023) and 95% of household electric power consumption (Avdonin, 2021). The overall share of dependence on external energy suppliers stood at 85-90% throughout the years, which makes Belarus one of the most energy dependent countries in the world (Smolskaya 2017). Current objectives of the Belarusian Government in the area of energy security are to ensure maximum diversity of the energy sources used in the national economy, guided by the indicator of "not exceeding 65% of any single energy source" (The Country Speaks, 2022). One of the main solutions for this problem was the construction of a nuclear power plant that started in 2011, the plant was commissioned in 2020-2021 and currently covers 40% of the country's electric power demand, which significantly decreases its dependence on gas (Bornukova, 2023), but not dependence on Russia as the plant's main technology provider is RosAtom, a Russian State-owned company. That said, some experts claim that the project is losing money, arguing that the power generated at the Belarusian NPP is going to be too expensive and there will be too

much of it for the economy of a small country, with no opportunities to export it further West to the European Union or back East to Russia (Bernstein 2024).

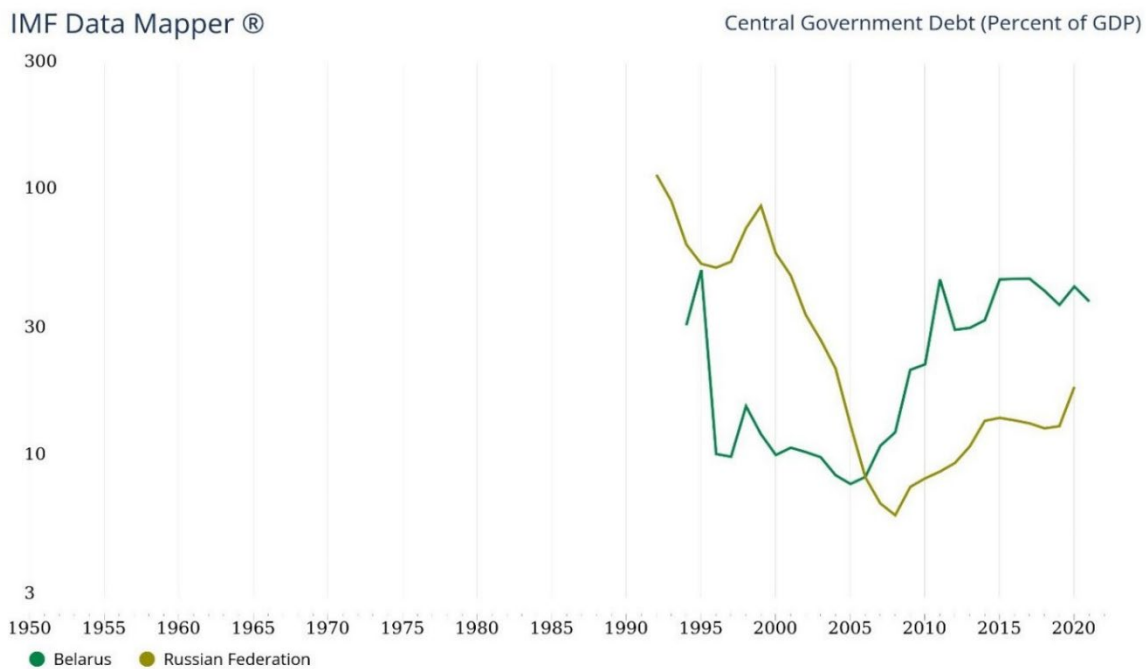
Russian gas supplies have repeatedly caused conflicts between the Governments of the two countries and been used by Russia as a pressure tool. The point is not only in the volume of the supplied resources. Russia supplies gas and oil to Belarus at prices that are below the market. The size of this “subsidy” depends on the difference between the current market prices and the prices stipulated in the countries’ bilateral agreements. Normally, it amounts to 4 to 15 per cent (Kruk, 2016). In absolute figures, already in the 1990s, the size of the subsidy combined with written off debts could be as high as USD 3-4 bn (Zaitsev, 2001), which was only partially set off by the losses suffered by the Belarusian budget from the tax legislation differences and the principles applied to levying the value-added tax – USD 150-200 mil (Tereschenko, 2004).

In these circumstances, the bargaining position of the Republic of Belarus is extremely weak. Despite this situation, it does have a couple of trumps up its sleeve which it continuously uses during the negotiations. Firstly, it is the transit of gas to Europe. And here we do not only talk of energy resources, although they make up the bulk of it; there are other cargoes whose volume is ever growing even despite the sanctions (Kruglov 2024). Secondly, it is attempts to find new suppliers such as Venezuela, the USA, etc, that Belarus had been pursuing until recently (Bornukova, 2023). Finally, Belarus is a territory that is not regularly shelled by the Ukrainian armed forces who recently have been choosing fuel storage facilities as their main targets. This allowed Belarus to sign a number of contracts to supply petrol to Russia, which has made the dependence reciprocal (BRIEF, 2024d).

2.4 Foreign debt

The external debt of the Republic of Belarus remained at a rather low level throughout the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s. According to the IMF data, a significant growth of the debt was recorded from 2006 on.

Figure: IMF Data Mapper, 2023.



Source: IMF, Global Debt Database (Sept 2023).

Difficulties in servicing the foreign debt were mainly caused by the fact that the country has no opportunities to attract international and foreign investments, as well as poor its prospects for intrastate loans. In these circumstances, Russia accounts for over a half of the total Belarusian debt. Belarus, in its turn, is Russia’s largest debtor. Out of the total amount of various countries’ debt to Russia which stood at USD 28.9 bn in 2022 (Bernstein 2023), the share of Belarus is USD 8.24 bn (Tkachev & Vinogradova, 2023).

2.5 Other aspects of dependence

Starting from 2012, the share of direct foreign investments to the economy of the Republic of Belarus, after a significant hike during the period of 2007-2011 when it reached 6% of the national GDP, remains stable at 1.8-2.4% of the country’s GDP (The World Bank, 2023a). In absolute terms, the annual amount is approximately USD 1.2-1.8 bn (The World Bank, 2023b). Russia and foreign offshore companies belonging to

Russia are the main foreign investors in Belarus (34% - Russia, 14.9% - Cyprus) (Bornukova, 2023).

The creation of the single labour market of Russia and Belarus is in its final stages. In particular, since October 26, 2023, provision of entry visas for citizens of the EAEU member states, including job seekers, has been significantly simplified. In 2023, Belarus hosted 24,387 working Russians (BelTA, 2023). In its turn, in 2022, Russia registered 174,305 Belarusian citizens working there (ILEX, 2023). Russia accounts for over two thirds of all migrant workers' remittances to Belarus (Bornukova, 2023).

There are virtually no barriers between the two countries on the labour market. Highly skilled workers can go to work in Russia without any additional recognition of their qualifications and diplomas. There is mutual recognition of the employment records. The pension systems also function along similar lines. There are plans to unify the principles for awarding temporary unemployment and maternity benefits in 2024. The size of the sick leave benefit, just like in Russia, will depend on the insurance record (TASS, 2023).

2.6 Changes in the economic dependence after 2020 and the sanctions

The main events contributing to a dramatic increase in the economic dependence of Belarus on Russia were the economic and political sanctions that followed the events of 2020 and 2022. Already in 2020, they affected over 70% of exports and reduced the Belarusian export to the EU by 56%. Not long before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Belarus had lost almost all its Ukrainian market (Bornukova, 2023).

The political crisis of 2020 itself became an important factor with a direct influence on the relations between the two countries. This had to do with massive withdrawals of money from banks by the Belarusian population after the mass protests which almost brought about a banking crisis. The situation was defused thanks to a loan from Russia in the amount of USD 1.5 bn (Bornukova, 2023).

One of the consequences of the growing dependence was the signing of 28 Union State integration programs in 2021. They had to do, primarily, with economic issues, taxes, a common banking policy, and energy. Experts were sceptic about macroeconomic programs as the common regulation mechanisms for the more market-oriented Russian economy and the more centralized Belarusian one were unclear (Degotkova et al., 2021). Simultaneously, standing intergovernmental bodies were created like the supranational tax committee and the intergovernmental coordination centre for customs risks management, although it had mainly consultative functions (Fedorova, 2023). Within two years, the common oil and gas market of the two countries was to be established. Theoretically, this was supposed to lead to a situation where oil and gas would be supplied to Belarus at Russia's domestic prices (which meant half the price that was effective at the time those agreements were signed) (Degotkova, et al., 2021). Apart from the above-mentioned

areas, the agreements included the common labelling of goods, cancellation of roaming charges, and guarantees for tourists. In 2023, the leadership of the two countries claimed that the integration programs had been 90% fulfilled (Fedorova, 2023).

The situation grew tense also in the sense that Belarus became dependent on Russia's sea trade. Since Belarus is a land-locked country, it would habitually rely on the ports of its nearest neighbours: Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. The imposition of sanctions by the EU closed the country's access to trade routes in the EU territory (Aulassenka & Haung Yan, 2023).

In this connection, relations with Ukraine came to play a particular role as one of alternative trade routes. In the period of 2014 to 2020, Minsk maintained a controversial position regarding Russia's actions on the Ukrainian territory. On the one hand, it recognized the territorial integrity of Ukraine, on the other, it would not denounce Russian actions in the Crimea and Donbas. This allowed Minsk to maintain neutral relations with the political leadership of Ukraine and the country itself emerged as the third largest economic partner of Belarus after Russia and the EU (Petrovskaya, 2016). However, after 2020, the position of Ukraine started migrating towards the political support of the European sanctions and Lukashenko's regime itself came to be seen as illegitimate (Talant, 2020). This led to the deterioration of relations between the two countries which was exacerbated by the escalations of mutual sanctions after Lukashenko's forced landing of the Ryanair flight with the Belarusian opposition activist Roman Protasevich on board (Reuters, 2021). And the full-scale war that broke out later on completely deprived Lukashenko of any opportunity to use this resource.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, import phase-out became one of the areas for the countries' joint work. They have signed agreements for over 20 projects in this area and funding has been provided to the tune of RUB 105 bn. Their implementation is scheduled for 2024 (Kryuchkova, 2023). By the end of March 2024, 25 import phase-out projects were developed in the areas of machine building, micro- and radio electronics, the automotive sector, agricultural machinery building, and the pharmaceuticals (BRIEF, 2024c).

Another consequence of the full-scale war was the levelling of the trade balance between the two countries. On the one hand, the volume of Belarusian goods exported to Russia grew considerably, on the other hand, there was a marked drop in Russian imports to Belarus. Among the exported goods, a particular hike was observed in the share of transportation vehicles, chemical products, timber and wood products, and ferrous metals (Zayats, 2023).

For decades the Belarusian leadership managed to maintain a fragile balance in the issues related to the integration of the two countries. On the one hand, it was vitally important to continue enjoying the advantages it offered, like the lower prices for energy resources or a simplified access to Russia's internal market. On the other hand, there was a need not to cede any of the important elements of the country's national

sovereignty in return. All this evolved in a situation of the countries' unequal bargaining power.

The events of 2020, the growing political dependence that followed, and the broken economic ties with the Western countries have all brought about the only possible result. Step by step, Belarus was finding itself under the ever growing influence of the Russian authorities. This evolved into and was finally fixed as Belarus' passive involvement in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

SECTION III: MILITARY TIES

3.1 Military cooperation between Russia and Belarus before 2020

The reasons behind the close collaboration between the armed forces of Russia and Belarus lie not only in the close political cooperation of the two countries but also in the common Soviet past of both armies. A large part of high- and middle-ranking commanding officers were trained in the same military colleges. Some Belarusian servicemen are trained in Russia even now (The Belarusian Embassy to the RF; BRIEF, 2024h).

The countries have concluded and are implementing a number of bilateral agreements in the area of military and armaments cooperation (RB MFA.b). A significant part of those agreements has a scope that is broader than bilateral cooperation, covering other countries of the CIS and the CSTO. The system of treaties signed by Belarus and Russia with other member-states of the CIS includes an agreement on means of missile warning system and control of space, an agreement on the creation of the integrated air defence system, the concept of air space protection, documents pertaining to bilateral cooperation among the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member-states (Karatkevich & Golovin, 2014). Also, the two countries have concluded over 40 agreements in the area of armaments cooperation, notably:

- Agreement on military and technical cooperation (29 October, 1993);
- Agreement on production, scientific and technical cooperation of defence industries companies (20 May, 1994);
- Agreement on a single procedure for export control (13 April, 1999)
- Agreement on interaction procedure when exporting military products to third countries (6 July, 2000);
- Agreement on mutual protection of intellectual property rights used and obtained in the course of bilateral military and technical cooperation (21 April, 2004);
- Agreement on the development of military and technical cooperation (10 December, 2009);
- Agreement on the implementation of the Military and Technical Cooperation Program till 2020 (25 December, 2013).

Concrete examples of military and technical ties include the use of the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT) products. Mounted on their undercarriage were the “Iskander” operational and tactical missile system, the “Bastion” and “Bal” coastal defence missile systems, the “Hurricane-1M” multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS), self-propelled missile launchers and mobile radar stations of the C-400 “Triumph” air defence missile system (ADMS), engineering support and camouflage machinery of the Strategic Missile Forces’ engineering units, the TMM-6 heavy mechanized bridges, the first prototype of the C-500 “Prometheus” ADMS (uses the running gear of the MZKT-7930 family), missile launchers and mobile detection radar stations of the C-300 ADMS, the “Tornado” (“Smertch”) MLRS launchers, the “Bereg” coastal defence self-propelled artillery systems, combat alert duty support vehicles of the Strategic Missile Forces (SMF) (the MZKT-543M running gear), and others. MZKT full-tracked chassis are used in the Russian “Tunguska” air defence missile-and-gun systems (the GM-352 and GM-352M chassis) and the “Thor” self-propelled air defence systems (Zverev, 2017; Zakvaskin, 2018). Hence, the production of key armaments of the Russian Army depends on Belarus.

Russia, in its turn, supplies Belarus with aircraft, tanks and small arms. Experts point out that in 2017 98% of all armaments of the Belarusian Army were of Soviet and Russian origin, and designer field supervision is carried out by Russian designers – the legal successors of the Soviet ones (Daneiko, 2017).

The Belarusian Constitution guarantees the country’s neutrality and its nuclear-free status. At the same time, the country is a member of the CSTO and hosts Russian military facilities on its territory. For instance, the 43d communications hub of the Russian Navy (the “Vileika” Radio Station), as well as the “Volga” radar station in Hantsavichy (Tyshkevich, 2020). “Vileika” is the communications hub that provides two-way communication between the Russian Navy General Staff and nuclear submarines on combat alert duty in the Atlantic, Indian, and, partly, Pacific Oceans over 10,000 km away that are also engaged in radio-technical surveillance and radioelectronic warfare (Belarus Today, 2007; Lukin, 2007). The stationary radar station “Volga” is a part of the Russian missile warning system and is designed for the above-the-horizon detection of ballistic missile launches. It is a unique station of its kind (Holm 2019). Unlike many other strategic security facilities located on the territory of the former USSR and gradually decommissioned and replaced with more advanced systems inside the RF, the Belarusian military facilities have remained in operation and have even been modernized (Podvig, 2016).

So, the level of integration of the armed forces of Russia and Belarus is much greater compared to other countries with the same preconditions: a single Soviet military-industrial complex, single armed forces, and the common past of commanding officers. It should be pointed out, though, that independence of the armed forces and a total control over them played a most important role for Lukashenko as the main tool for the implementation of national sovereignty and as a part of the State ideology. Till 2020, Lukashenko sought to maintain a neutral position in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. He would not recognize the legitimacy of the annexation of the Crimea, several times Minsk was the venue for negotiations between the parties, also, there existed bilateral relations with Ukraine in the area of security. Yet,

after 2020, this neutrality started shifting gradually towards an alliance with Russia (Racz, 2023).

3.2 The impact of the 2020 and 2022 events on military ties

The 2020 events significantly undermined Belarus' capability to pursue independent military policy. The need for Russia's support to suppress public protests led to the emergence of a trend towards progressively greater inclusion of the Belarusian armed forces into the Russian military machine, culminating in the involvement of Belarusian troops in the suppression of protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022, as well as the provision of the country's territory to Russian troops for their invasion of Ukraine. It was vitally important for the Russian political system and Army to maintain and increase their military influence on Belarus because, inter alia, Belarus is a most important industrial element in the Russian strategic security system as the supplier of crucial components for certain types of armaments.

Political steps to enhance ties in the military domain were connected to the Ukrainian conflict. After the 2020 changes in the balance of power, Lukashenko began publicly taking an ever more pro-Russian position. For instance, the regime started bringing criminal charges against Belarusians who were involved in the anti-terrorist operation in Eastern Ukraine. And in 2021, Lukashenko, for the first time, publicly recognized the Crimea as Russian territory (Reuters, 2021b). The same year, they staged demonstration flights of Russian strategic bombers escorted by the Belarusian Air Force planes (Racz, 2023).

However, the country managed to avoid direct intervention of Belarusian armed forces in Ukraine. Here it should be noted, that, after gaining its independence, Belarus has never sent its troops abroad except to take part in military exercises. It was only in January 2022 that Belarus offered its military assistance to carry out a "peace-keeping operation" in Kazakhstan where it sent its special elite army units. Yet, despite the fact that Belarusian armed forces were not directly involved in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and never crossed its border, the country's territory was repeatedly used to launch missile and other remote attacks of Ukraine (Racz, 2023).

Institutionally, Lukashenko also had to make considerable concessions. For instance, in March 2021, the Defence Ministries of the two countries signed a strategic partnership program for 5 years (Kommersant, 2021a). Simultaneously, the parties agreed to establish three joint military training centres, one of which, the joint Russian-Belarusian Air Force and Air Defence combat training centre was set up in Hrodna, Belarus (Sivitsky, 2021; Kommersant, 2021b).

In 2021, provisions of the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State pertaining to military cooperation were implemented for the first time. On September 01, 2021, Lukashenko proclaimed that Belarus and Russia actually had a single army. A month later, he stated that, in case of an attack, Russia and Belarus will join the conflict together (Racz, 2023). In case of a military conflict, Belarus was expected to help the

Russian Army with deployment and logistics, for which purpose storage facilities and the main transportation routes were renovated (Muzyka, 2021).

23 years after the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State was signed, a regional group of Belarusian and Russian armed forces was established and began functioning. On October 17, 2017, it started operating on a full scale. The bulk of the group was made up of Belarusian armed forces with some involvement of the Russian Army, mainly, from the Western Military District. According to statements of the Belarusian Ministry of Defence, the strength of Russian troops in the Regional Group will be around 9,000 servicemen. There are also plans to transfer around 170 tanks and up to 200 armoured combat vehicles and up to 100 guns and mortars to the territory of Belarus (Meduza, 2022; Krasilnikov, 2022).

3.3 Joint military exercises

Armed forces of Russia and Belarus regularly carry out joint military exercises like “Union Shield”, “Union Determination”, “Slavonic Brotherhood” (often together with Serbia), and the “West” military exercise of the Western Military District, to name a few. In the course of the “West” military exercise, they war-game plans of a full-scale war against the NATO with elements of nuclear warfare, and the territory of Belarus is directly used in such exercise. And while during the 2017 military exercise Belarus was still trying to affirm its own independent position through restricting the Russian contingent that was to take part in the exercise on the territory of Belarus, as well as inviting Western observers, in 2021 already, no such attempts on the part of the national leadership were observed (Boulègue, 2021).

The territory of Belarus was used for the military exercise “Union Determination” which took place right after the “West-2021” exercise was concluded. And it was not only the timing of the former (immediately following the latter) that was unusual but also the need this time to coordinate actions with the troops of the Eastern Military District rather than those of the Western one (Racz, 2023). Speaking about the exercise, Alexander Lukashenko stated plainly that the military will be war-gaming “a certain concept of confrontation with forces of the West (the Baltic States and Poland) and the South (Ukraine)” (Anisimova, 2022). Over 30,000 troops were sent to Belarus which was the largest number of foreign troops on the territory of Belarus since the end of the World War II. In the course of the exercise, Russian troops were deployed in the Homyel Region, at the border with Ukraine. After the exercise ended on February 20, 2022, the troops remained in place and, subsequently, took part in the invasion (Racz, 2023). Throughout this period, the Belarusian Government provided a diplomatic cover for the armed forces operations and on February 23, one day before the full-scale invasion, the Belarusian Defence Minister Victor Khrenin even promised to Ukraine that the territory of Belarus would not be used for any aggressive actions against Ukraine (Sonne & others, 2022).

After the war began, Belarus joined the conflict on the side of Russia without putting forward any demands to the leadership of Ukraine. The territory of the Homyel Region

was used to launch missile strikes against Ukraine, Russian planes used Belarusian airports for fuelling, while strategic bombers used the Belarusian air space. Also, the A-50 AEW aircraft coordinating military actions in the northern parts of the country were deployed there for a long time (Racz, 2023). Even after the retreat of the Russian army from Kyiv and the northern regions of Ukraine, the use of the Belarusian territory for military purposes still continued. Of course, the Russian contingent has been reduced to 1000 men, but many warehouses are still used to store Russian military gear and equipment (Lipin, 2022), thus, maintaining an opportunity of renewing hostilities in the northern regions. A group of Belarusian troops is also kept on constant combat alert on the border with Ukraine. In 2023, Belarusian servicemen took part in the training of drafted Russian conscripts and troops of the regional military group (Radio “Svaboda”, 2023).

Experts note that Russia has repeatedly tried to draw Belarus into a full-scale invasion, yet the status of a “special military operation” allowed Lukashenko to maintain control over his military forces. In the case of official declaration of war, Lukashenko, in accordance with the existing agreements and treaties, would lose command of the Belarusian Army and it would be completely subordinated to the Russian military command (Marin, 2020). That said, experts believe that the country would not be able to provide any major support to the Russians because, firstly, its own level of military supply maintenance is low and it is unprepared for military operations of such magnitude and, secondly, because of serious consequences for the country’s domestic policy (Racz, 2023).

In February 2024, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence announced that they had concentrated a strike group some 112,000-114,000 men strong on the border with Ukraine (BRIEF, 2024f). In April 2024, Belarus started the latest military exercise in the Homyel Region that borders Ukraine and the Grodna Region bordering Lithuania and Poland. The exercise began on the Day of Unity of the Russian and Belarusian Peoples. The exercise was designed to practice situations related to introduction of martial law (Sulima, 2024). Shortly before the exercise, the President of Belarus signed a decree on the procedure for putting governmental bodies on wartime operational mode (BRIEF, 2024e). The full-scale invasion of Ukraine started after a similar type of military exercise in the winter of 2022.

3.4 Deployment of nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus.

Until recently, the countries’ joint activities in the area of nuclear weapons have been limited exclusively to military materiel production. Belarus or, more specifically, the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant, produces certain components that could not be replaced by Russia’ own production. Undercarriage platforms manufactured in Belarus serve as the basis for the “Topol-M” strategic missile system, the “Yars” missile system, and the C-500 Air Defence system, which are the foundation of Russia’s strategic nuclear security (Zverev, 2022).

The situation has radically changed after Russia started the war with Ukraine. In February-March 2022, the constitutional provision stating that the country seeks non-nuclear status was deleted from the Constitution of Belarus. In March 2023, Vladimir Putin publicly declared that he intended - following a request from the Belarusian ruler, naturally, - to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, stressing that they would be operated by the Russian armed forces. Another interesting fact is that the announcement came several days after Moscow and Beijing signed a memorandum which said, among other things, that nuclear weapons should not be deployed in third countries (Aleksandrov, 2023, Starchak, 2023). Some experts believe that the reason behind this move could be, on the one hand, another step on the part of Moscow to escalate the conflict, on the other hand, the desire of Lukashenko himself to make potential adversaries, particularly, Poland and the Baltic States, respect him. At the same time, this step undoubtedly contradicts the interests of Belarusians themselves, the vast majority of whom are against deployment of nuclear weapons in their country. This also means additional risks for the country in case of a large-scale conflict (Shreibman, 2023).

Already on May 25, the Defence Ministers of both countries signed the corresponding agreements between them (Faulconbridge, 2023). During the period from June to August, the bulk of the nuclear weapons slated for deployment in the country were put in place. The parties expected the full deployment to be completed by the end of 2023 (Obukhov, 2023). American intelligence confirmed the relocation of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus (WSJ, 2024). According to the statement of the Belarusian ruler, the weapons were supplied to Belarus free of charge and Russia paid all the costs (BRIEF, 2024g).

One of the main openly voiced arguments for this action was to mirror the policy of the USA who pursued similar strategy with relation to the territory of their allies (TASS, 2023b). Other important arguments were the enhanced security level of Belarus itself (Obukhov 2023), improvement of its international status (Starchak, 2023), and protection of the Kaliningradskaya Oblast (Region) territory (Aleksandrov, 2023; Starchak, 2023).

In early 2024, Belarus included the possibility of using nuclear weapons into its military doctrine. Despite the fact that the document is largely about defence, it does say that the country can independently oppose military threats and conflicts, in particular, between states and coalitions of states, including the use of nuclear weapon in specific situations (Guscha, 2024).

Army has been seen as a basis for any country's sovereignty from the moment the first states appeared. The classics of the legal theory have also referred to armed forces as a key element of the State's independence and security. The Belarusian ruler Alexander Lukashenko understood only too well the significance of having this institute under his control and spared no effort maintaining his total control over it.

However, after 2020, he was no longer able to do that with the same degree of effectiveness. The dramatic spurring of the integration processes and pressure from

Russia made him take a number of measures which now bring into question the total independence of the Belarusian Army. With the war in Ukraine progressing, the situation is only getting worse despite his open attempts to convince the broader public otherwise.

SECTION IV: ENGAGEMENT IN THE AREA OF SECURITY

4.1 The structure and specificities of the security bodies of the Republic of Belarus

Security services along with law enforcement agencies form the main pillar of the political regime both in Belarus and in Russia. In case of the former, this became evident after the events of August 2020. Their influence has grown to such an extent, that the role of civil officials and the nomenclature has been completely marginalized and brought to naught (Żochowski, 2021).

Belarus and Russia interact not only in the area of general military security but also in the area of domestic and anti-terrorist security and the fight against crime. Such a strong position of the security and law enforcement agencies would have been impossible without this. They carry out coordinated activities in the territory of both countries to prevent, expose, and stop law-breaking acts of organized crime groupings, acts of terrorism, and human trafficking (RB MFA.b).

The structure of the security and law enforcement system in Belarus includes the State Security Committee (KGB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), the Investigative Committee, and the Prosecutor's Office. Collectively, they form the basis of the Security Council, a body headed by the President and responsible for coordinating activities of all State authorities. The security and law enforcement bodies do not report to any other State institutes like the Parliament or the Government, they are subordinated exclusively to the President. The President can modify and reform them through his Decrees without any consultations at all. The staffing policy is also under his total control (Żochowski, 2021). In this sense, they replicate the institutional scheme of the Russian vertical of power where this bloc of agencies (the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Emergencies, the Federal Security Service, the Federal Guard Service, and the External Intelligence Service) is placed under the President's direct control and follow exclusively his direct instructions and orders.

This special position allows the enforcement agencies' bloc to gradually acquire an ever growing degree of control over all other authorities in the country. Moreover, Lukashenko actively supports their gaining of weight in the national political system. In this sense, it would suffice to recall his Decree of May 2021 providing, in case of his

demise, for the introduction of martial law and a state of emergency, as well as the transfer of all powers to the national Security Council (Zhukov, 2021).

Comparing the Russian and Belarusian security and law enforcement systems. It should be noted that there is a greater degree of continuity between the former Soviet system and the existing Belarusian one. This is not only manifested in the substantive mechanisms of operations which have been preserved from the Soviet times. For instance, the only structural difference between the current State Security Committee and its predecessor, the KGB of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, is the presence in the former of a special centre tasked with monitoring the Internet. There are similarities at the ideological and cultural level as well. For instance, Belarus retained many of the old names for security and law enforcement agencies like the State Security Committee, militia, etc. Anyway, it is not only Soviet but also the Russian political system that is taken as a model to borrow institutional features from. As examples, we can quote the Presidential Guard Service and the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Belarus which were set up in the wake of the creation of similar structures in Russia (the Federal Guard Service and the RF Investigative Committee, respectively) (Żochowski, 2021).

Another issue is the influence that the security and law enforcement agencies have on the staffing policy in the overall system of State authorities. Alexander Lukashenko, obviously, has a greater trust in the security services cadres and believes in the effectiveness of their involvement in making decisions on domestic policy matters. Moreover, in certain cases, special services officers directly end up in various positions within the executive branch of power. For instance, Igor Sergeyenko, who for a long time was a Deputy Head of the KGB in charge of counterintelligence operations, became the Head of the Presidential Administration in 2019. In March 2024, he was elected Chairman of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly (the Belarusian Parliament). And such a biography is by no means unique.

The loyalty of security and law enforcement agencies is acquired, among other things, through generous funding. The share of the Belarusian State budget allocated to tackle internal security issues is larger than the external security expenditures. Amounts of money received by the corresponding bodies grow with every year (Żochowski, 2021). However, Belarusian security and law enforcement agencies cannot be seen as a single whole in ideological and political terms. This became evident with the creation of the Association of Belarusian Security and Law Enforcement Officers (BYPOL) – a Belarusian initiative undertaken by former officers of these structure in emigration to oppose the Belarusian authorities, they consider Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to be the lawfully elected President. In 2021, this organization was branded extremist (RBK, 2021), and in 2022 terrorist on the territory of Belarus (Nastoyascheye Vremya (The Present Time) 2022). Its leaders have been sentenced in absentia to long terms in prison (BBC Russian Service, 2024).

4.2 Development of relations between security and law enforcement bodies of the two countries

Information about the actual activities of secret and security services is classified and constitutes the state secret. So, it is extremely difficult to assess the level of their cooperation, as well as the overall volume and areas of their operations, using only publicly available sources. So, much of the publicly available data and information should be perceived with a degree of scepticism as to their credibility.

Nevertheless, based on individual facts and references, one can glean a general picture of the situations where such relations do exist and how they manifest themselves, without claiming that such information is applicable to the whole spectrum of the relevant agencies' operations. This cooperation covers circumstances related to guarding the borders with the NATO and EU countries, intelligence and counterintelligence ties, the protection of the two countries' joint armed forces group (Żochowski, 2021).

The legal framework for such cooperation of security and law enforcement structure includes, apart from restricted and unpublished agreements, the following documents:

- Agreement on cooperation between the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus of September 30, 1997;
- Agreement on cooperation of the state parties of the Commonwealth of Independent States in the fight against crime of November 25, 1998;
- Agreement on the creation of the Union State of December 8, 1999;
- Agreement on enhancing cooperation in the fight against crime of September 15, 2014;
- Agreement on cooperation between the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus of November 19, 2020 (Nasuyev, 2020);

The importance attached to the cooperation between the secret services of the two countries is seen, among other things, in the regularity of meetings between the Heads of the RB KGB and the RF SVR, as well as panel meetings of the RF FSB and the RB KGB (TASS, 2023c). In September 2023, the SVR (External Intelligence Service) Director Sergei Naryshkin described the ties between Russian and Belarusian special services as a strategic partnership with an exceptional level of cooperation (TASS, 2023c). Similar statements have come from the Internal Affairs Ministers of the two countries (Union State, 2010).

Such contacts become particularly meaningful in the course of momentous public events in both countries. For instance, the SVR Director Sergei Naryshkin visited Belarus within 24 hours after the Belarusian authorities forced the aircraft with the opposition activist Roman Protasevich on board to land in Minsk. After a meeting with

his Belarusian counterpart, Naryshkin stated that the secret services of both countries worked together against the “destructive West” (The Moscow Times, 2021).

Emerging as another important aspect of the interaction are the activities of the Main Intelligence Department (GRU) of the RF General Staff. This secret service division engages in counterintelligence operations in military structures. And here, in the context of Belarus, the joint regional group of armed forces appears on its radar. So, GRU becomes partially responsible for counterintelligence work in the Belarusian units of the grouping as well (Żochowski, 2021).

Naturally, the interaction takes place on a reciprocal basis. Belarusian security agencies assisted their Russian counterparts on the territory of Belarus, and the Russian ones provided assistance to their Belarusian colleagues on the territory of the Russian Federation. One of the more vivid examples is the detention by the RF FSB and the RB KGB of Yury Zyankovich and Alexander Feduta in Moscow who, in the opinion of the Belarusian secret services, were planning a coup d’Etat in Belarus and met in Moscow for that purpose (RF FSB, 2021). All in all, 9 people stood accused in this case, and only few of them were able to leave the territory of the Union State (Alexandrovskaya, 2021). The majority of independent experts argued, though, that the case was a joint provocation of the Russian and Belarusian secret services with the view of discrediting and putting behind bars a large number of opposition activists (Lambrecht 2021; Nevedomskaya, 2021). The “cooperation” of the Russian security agencies is not limited to detentions only. In certain cases they assassinate Belarusian opposition activists as it happened to Nikolai Alekseyev in Karelia in March 2024 (Vyasna, 2024).

In their turn, the Belarusian security and law enforcement agencies periodically detain and arrest Russian political activists. For instance, during the period of August 10 through 15, 2020, Artem Vazhenkov, an activist of “Free Russia”, was detained and beaten up in Minsk (Barysheva, 2020). And while his detention, probably, could still be explained as a chance occurrence against the backdrop of mass protests, other cases, like the detention in Minsk of a Russian citizen with a “white-blue-white” sticker of the Russian opposition flag on his car, is clearly an example of a common and coordinated approach of the secret services (Zerkalo (The Mirror), 2023)). Also, there are grounds to believe that Belarusian security and law enforcement agencies provided some serious assistance in the capture of the terrorists who killed and wounded several hundred people in the Crocus City Hall in Moscow. According to the Ambassador of the Republic of Belarus in Moscow, it was the Belarusian side that did not allow the terrorists to cross the state border (Komolov, 2024).

One of the latest stages in the development of relations in the area of security was the attempt to create a single register of extremists. This statement came from the Belarusian Ambassador in February 2024. According to him, negotiations on this issue had already taken place at the level of the Ministers of Internal Affairs. The Ambassador said «...it was bewildering when some resources that were declared to be extremist in, say, Russia go on and publish their reports in our country and vice versa, those that we see as extremist publish reports in Russia”. (Vedomosti, 2024). Anyway, a system of mutual recognition of associations declared to be extremist already

operates in practice even now both in governmental agencies and in courts. For instance, in Russia, a local activist was fined RUR 2,000 for the flag of free Belarus which, for the sake of appearances, was connected to the “Free Russia Legion” that is banned in Russia (BRIEF, 2024i). In January 2024, Belarus declared extremist the Telegram channel of an employee of the Russian Higher School of Economics (BRIEF 2024k). In February 2024, the Belarusian Ministry of Information indicated that they planned to declare a whole number of Russian resources extremist, such as “Dozhd”, “New Journal - Europe”, “The Living Nail” (Zhivoi Gvozd), “Watch out for News” (Ostorozhno: Novosti”), “Sota”, “Nezygar”, “Important Stories” (Vazhnye Istorii) (BRIEF, 2024j).

Given the closeness of the interaction, there is a separate issue of the extent to which Russian secret service agents are a part of the Belarusian State apparatus, holding various positions. Available information allows to believe that such leverage can be restricted by the Belarusian side and contacts between Belarusian officials and Russian businessmen and officials can be perceived by Lukashenko as a sign of disloyalty. In his research, Piotr Żochowski quotes a situation which took place not long before the 2020 protests when the Russian Ambassador Mikhail Babich was recalled from Belarus and, simultaneously, the Deputy Secretary of the Belarusian Security Council Andrei Utyurin was arrested for allegedly taking a bribe of USD 150,000 from a certain Russian businessman. That said, the expert points out that after the Russian support of the Belarusian regime in 2020 Lukashenko became much more tolerant to contacts between Russian and Belarusian officials (Żochowski, 2021).

The interaction of the two countries’ security and law enforcement agencies is not limited to ties between their secret services alone. Other structures are equally involved. In particular, following the negotiations between the Russian and Belarusian regimes in August 2020 where the RF FSB was directly involved, Lukashenko directly asked Moscow for support to suppress protests in the future. On August 27, 2020, a special pool of law enforcement officers was set up on the border with Belarus; it was disbanded in the autumn of the same year (Interfax, 2020). In December 2021, the countries signed a special agreement on cooperation between the Belarusian Interior Ministry troops and the National Guard of the Russian Federation (Rosgvardiya), special interior troops created in the RF to maintain public order.

At the institutional level, relations between such structures are organized through the Union State mechanisms. Marianna Schetkina, Head of the Delegation of the Union State Standing Committee in Minsk and the representative of the State Secretary of the Union State, declares: “For a number of years, fruitful cooperation between the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation has been taking place. A Joint Panel of the interior ministries has been set up and operates successfully. Thus, in the course of the ordinary 27th meeting of the Joint Panel of the MFAs of Belarus and Russia held in Moscow in April 2023, the participants focused primarily on issues pertaining to the organization of interaction between the internal affairs agencies of Belarus and Russia in stopping drugs trafficking on the territory of the Union State, the two agencies’ cooperation in the area of detective activities, in the area of the counteraction to illegal migration, as well as the interaction of the transport militia in

monitoring compliance with sojourn regulations by foreign citizens traveling by railroad or by air” (Information Analysis Portal of the Union State 2023). This panel was set up as far back as 1998 and remains the most important mechanism for the collaboration of the interior affairs ministries in combating transborder crime (Nasuyev, 2020).

The political kinship of the two regimes, authoritarian personalistic tyrannies, is a natural precondition for the special role awarded to secret services and security agencies in both countries. A shared history, similar operational principles and similar positions in the state authorities system are prerequisites for the close ties between them. These ties are strengthened and incentivized by the direct endorsement of the rulers in both countries, as well as the need for transborder control over political opponents of both regimes.

Lukashenko himself is gradually becoming a hostage to his own policies, limiting the incoming information to only that which is supplied by the security and law enforcement agencies. Pursuing their own interests - primarily, budgetary ones - they are inclined to exaggerate the existing dangers. The predominance of information coming from specific sources can be indirectly confirmed by language patterns voiced by Alexander Lukashenko in his public speeches, for instance, comparing Belarus to a “besieged fortress” or describing actual events as a “hybrid war” (Khachatryan 2021). The 2020 protests only accelerated the process of militarizing the State apparatus and Lukashenko’ growing dependence on its cadres. In August he stopped criticizing actions of the security and law enforcement agencies bloc and actively contributed to the promotion of those officers who proposed the most uncompromising and bloodthirsty methods of fighting the protestors (Żochowski, 2021). A similar trend is still in place and working.

SECTION V: EVALUATION OF BELARUSIAN STATEHOOD IN THE RUSSIAN PUBLIC AND POLITICAL DOMAIN

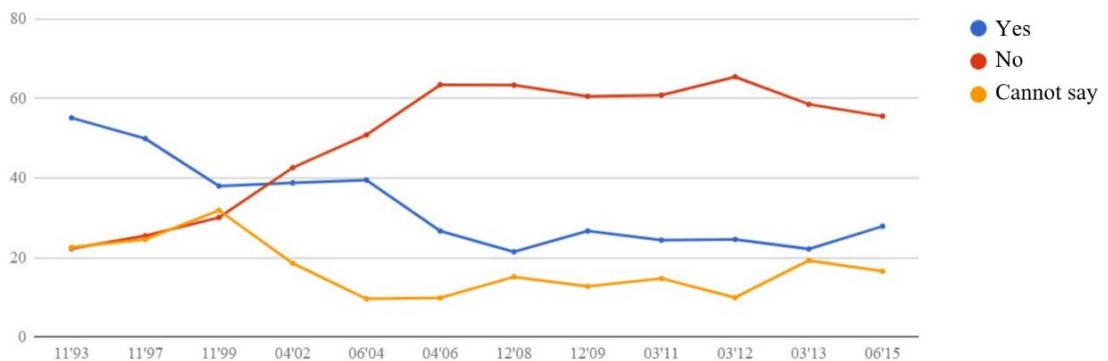
5.1 Sociological evaluation of the integration by the Belarusian society

The analysis of the attitude of the Russian and Belarusian societies to integration should go as far back as 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. But what is more important is the fact that six months before it happened an all-Union referendum on preserving the USSR was held. In the Belarusian SSR, the voters' turnout was 83.3%, of whom 82.7% spoke in favour of preserving the USSR, while in the RSFSR, with the turnout of 75.4%, the preservation of the single state was supported by 71.3% of the voters (Izvestiya, 1991).

This attitude of Belarusian citizens to the issue, however, did not last long. Already in 1993, only 55.1% of citizens voted in favour of preserving the USSR (Korshunau, 2023). Nevertheless, the idea of economic integration had a broad base among the population. The results of the 1995 national referendum showed that 83.3% of citizens supported the President's actions towards the economic integration (Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus, 1995).

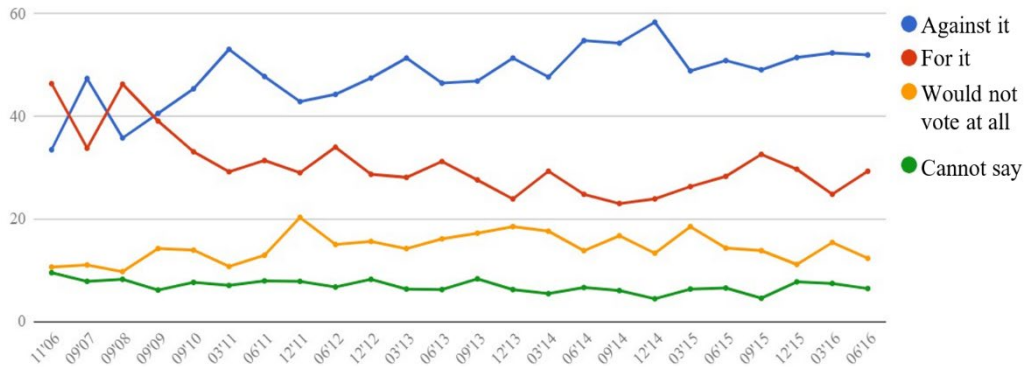
As years went by, these trends remained in place. The number of citizens supporting the restoration of the USSR was dwindling, while the number of those who supported economic integration with the national sovereignty intact remained largely unchanged.

Would you want the restoration of the USSR? (%)



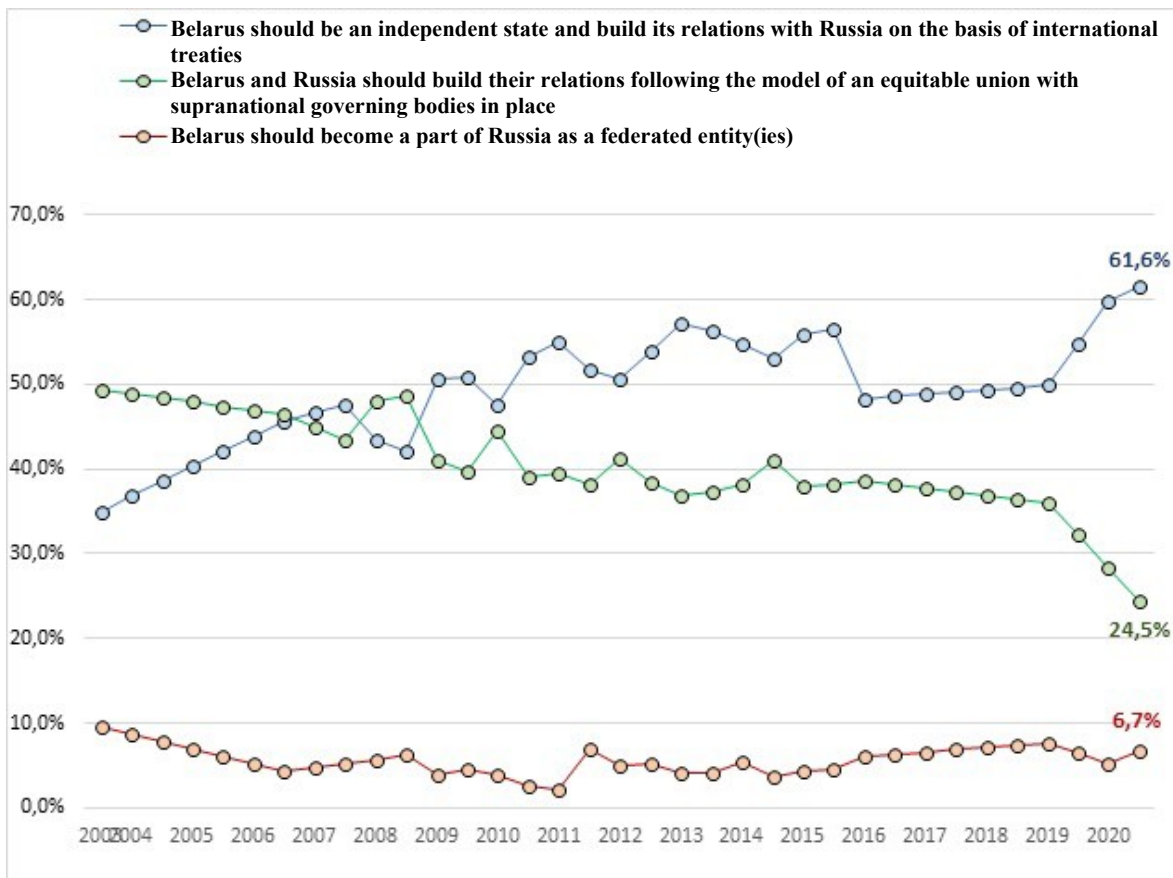
Source: NISEPI 2016.

If we had a referendum on unification of Russia and Belarus, how would you vote? (%)



Source: NISEPI 2016.

Starting from 2006, the most popular among all forms of integration was the path towards cooperation of two independent and sovereign states on the basis of international treaties, while the idea of creating a national union of Russia and Belarus with its governing structure built on a parity basis was steadily losing its popularity with time. The viewpoint of Belarus becoming a part of Russia has always been exceptionally marginal.

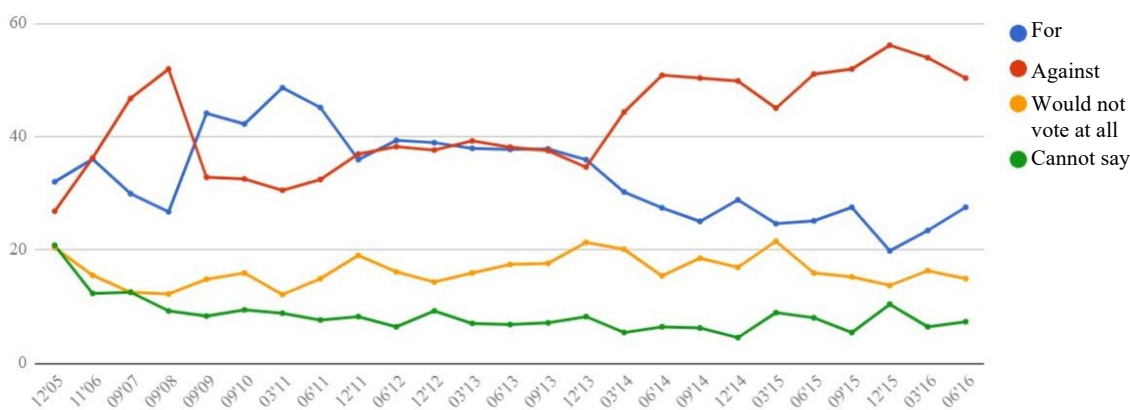


Source: Institute of Sociology, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus 2020.

Expert opinion is that for the younger generation born after the disintegration of the Soviet Union the collapse of the Soviet Union and its history are not a meaningful part of their identity to begin with. Boring paragraphs in school textbooks on the history of the XX century are displaced by the more romanticized Middle Ages and Modern Age where the dominant role was played by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polotsk Principality (Korshunau, 2019).

The reluctance of Belarusians to create a union state or become a part of Russia should not be automatically interpreted by analysts as their readiness for cooperation and accession to the European Union. As independent research conducted before 2016 would show, the majority of Russia usually aim for European integration.

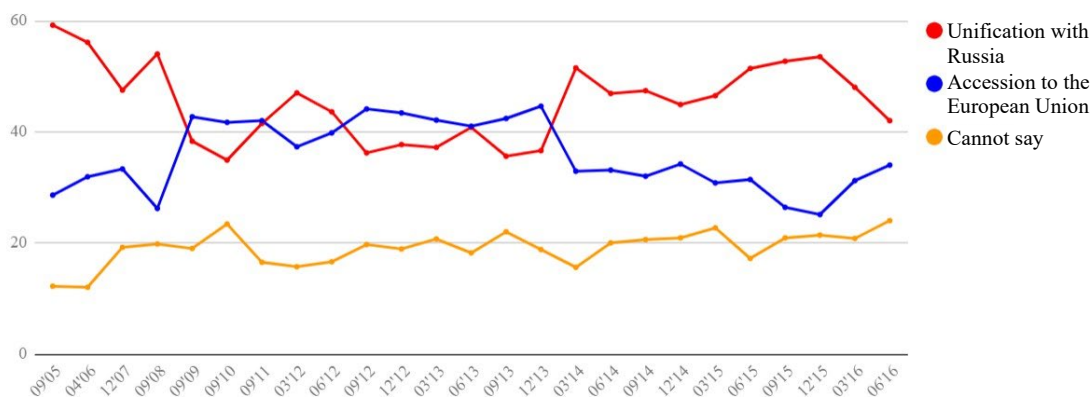
If tomorrow we had a referendum on Belarus' accession to the European Union, how would you vote?



Source: NISEPI 2016

Moreover, starting from 2013 and at least till 2016, the majority of Belarusian citizens favoured economic integration specifically with Russia, provided Belarus remained a fully sovereign state.

If you were to choose between unification with Russia and accession to the European Union, what would be your choice? (%)



Source: NISEPI 2016.

Unfortunately, after 2016, conducting detailed and independent sociological surveys in the territory of Belarus became significantly more difficult. The Independent Institute of Social, Economic, and Political Research (NISEPI) whose data collected before 2016 substantially informed this analysis declared that it could no longer continue its research activities because the national authorities' actions destroyed its survey network. This was accompanied with an active campaign to discredit independent sociologists on TV, in particular, in the stories of the propaganda film "The NISEPI Primacy" which accused the Institute of falsifying sociological data and misappropriating the donors' funds (Manayev, 2016; Korovenkova, 2016).

How was this picture affected by the Russian authorities' actions in 2020 and 2022? Already in 2018-2019 the number of Belarusians supporting integration with Russia dropped by one third (from 63.9% to 40.4%), while the number of the EU integration supporters grew by half (from 20.2% to 32.0%) (BelSat, 2020). However, paradoxically, the support provided by the Russian regime to Lukashenko in 2020 had no significant effect on the trend. Experts note that Belarusians were more focused on domestic affairs and did not much change their perspectives of external policy relations with the neighbouring countries (Korshunau, 2023).

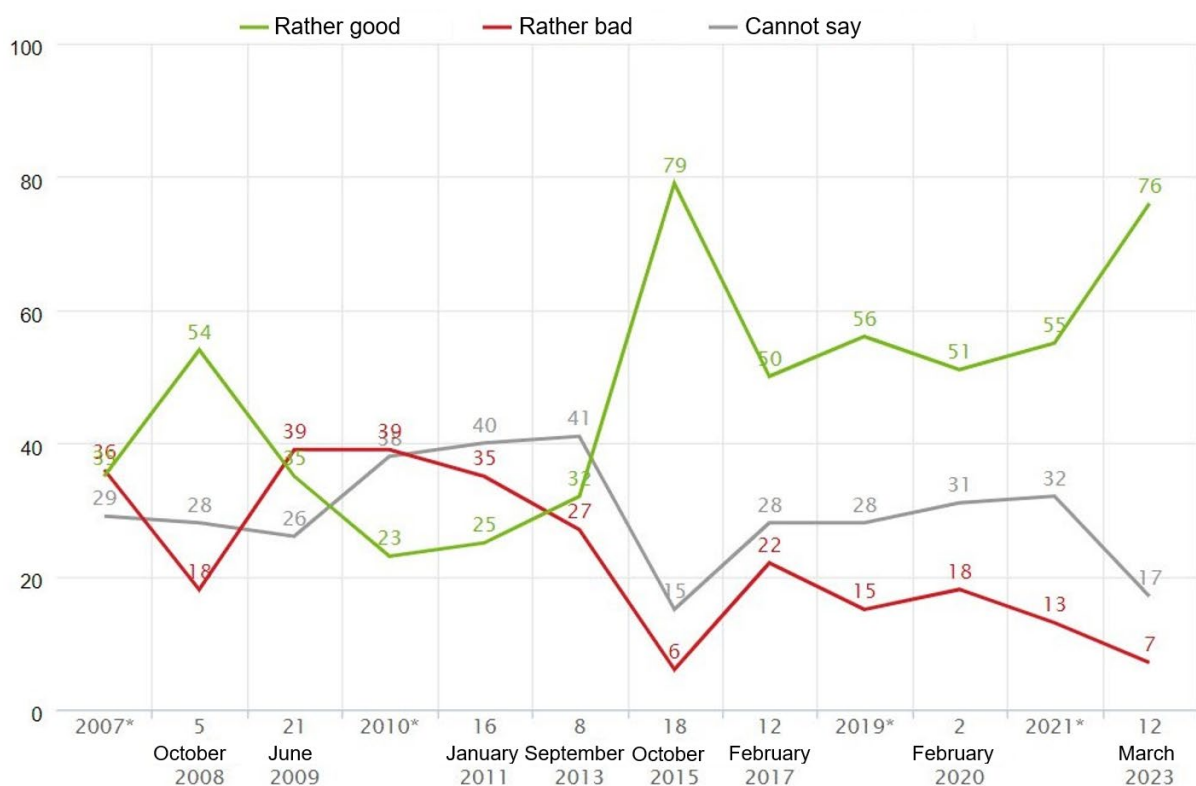
When it was clear that Lukashenko's regime was sufficiently stable, Belarusians started trying to find allies for their actions in other countries. Primarily, in Russia. This resulted in a simultaneous growth of support for a union with both Russia and the EU (OSW, 2021). However, this growth was short-lived and already in the spring of 2021 the number of supporters of the union with Russia and the union with the EU started going down (Korshunau, 2023).

The commencement of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine did not produce any significant changes in the Belarusian citizens' preferences. Some surveys conducted as early as the second half of 2022 showed a drop in popularity among the supporters of an independent path along with an insignificant growth in the number of those who favoured a union with the EU and a significant growth of those who would prefer a union with Russia (Chatham House 2022). Explaining these changes, experts argue that some Belarusians were losing faith in Europe's capability to effectively resist and oppose Russia. However, they add that there are no signs in the Belarusian society of a growing number of supporters of a military and political union with Russia or a complete unification with Russia (Korshunau, 2023).

5.2 Sociological evaluation of the integration by the Russian society

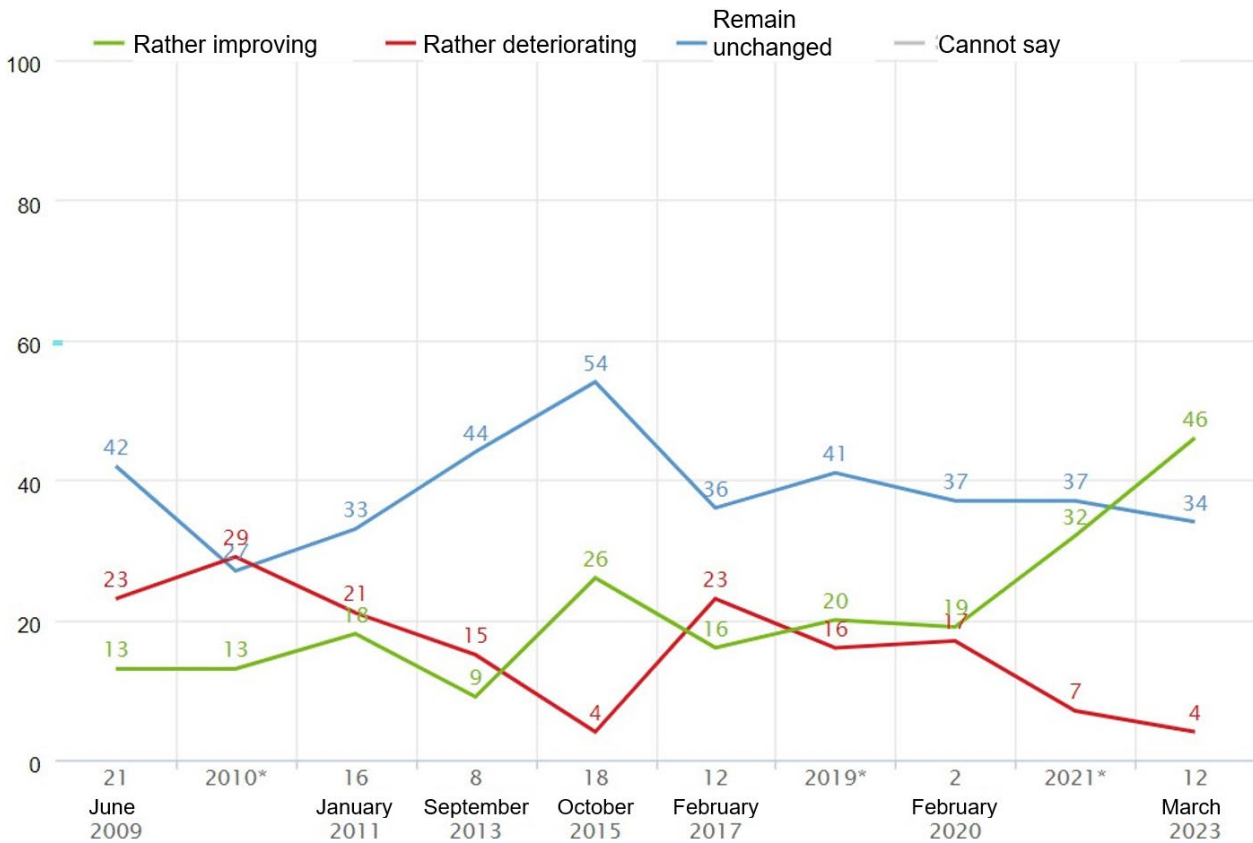
A detailed sociological analysis of the Russians' position vis-à-vis Belarus has not been so thoroughly conducted, particularly, through the prism of changes in the 1990s and 2000s. The data of the all-Union referendum on the preservation of the USSR show that a somewhat lesser share of Russians supported the preservation of the single state compared to Belarus (Izvestiya, 1991). At the same time, for a decade there was no substantial drop on the number of unification supporters. The survey conducted by the VCIOM (All-Russia Public Opinion Research Centre) in 2002 showed that 74% of Russian supported a complete unification with Belarus, 41% favoured a union with the two countries' sovereignty intact modelled after the European Union, while 48% supported accession to the EU. (Shilov, 2003)

In early 2000s, the Russians went through a certain crisis in terms of assessing the quality of relations between Russia and Belarus; the crisis was particularly acute during the period of 2009 through 2013. It was one of the few periods when the number of those who viewed the relations negatively surpassed the number of those with a positive view of the situation. Yet, the picture changed after 2013. During the period between 2015 and 2023, the number of citizens whose evaluation of the relations with Belarus was positive fluctuated between 50% and 79%, while the number of those who viewed the relations negatively stayed between 6% and 22%.



Source: FOM 2023.

Talking about future prospects for the relations, the number of Russians believing that the relations between the two countries were improving and the number of Russians believing that the relations were deteriorating fluctuated for a much longer period. Except for the surge among the “optimists” in 2015, the opinions were somewhat balanced. However, starting from 2020, a certain trend emerged in favour of the positively inclined citizens. That said, until very recently, the most popular response option in surveys was “Remain unchanged”.



Source: FOM 2023.

The VCIOM surveys in 2019 and 2020, in their turn, showed that the majority of Russian citizens describe relations with Belarus as “normal, undisturbed”, “friendly”, or “good, neighbourly”. That said, the period between January 2019 and August 2020 saw a growth in the share of those who believed the relations between the two countries were rather deteriorating from 22% to 32%.

Interestingly, Russians thought little about the concrete forms that relations between Belarus and Russia took at the time. Only 10-15% of Russian citizens knew well what the Union State was and around 40% of the respondents only heard about it, while the rest heard about it for the first time.

Concerning the ideal partnership format for the two states, the majority of Russian citizens agreed that the relations should simply be neighbourly (48% in 2019 and 43% in 2020), without unification in any form, be it a single state (18% in 2019 and 22% in

2020) or Belarus becoming a part of Russia (17% in 2019 and 2020) (VCIOM, 2020). That said, the FOM (Public Opinion Foundation) survey shows that, if there was a referendum on unification with Belarus, 60-70% of Russians would still vote for such unification. This situation has remained largely unchanged during the past 20 years (FOM, 2023).

As the main signs of improving relations Russian citizens quoted better Russian-Belarusian relations, enhancement of trade and economic ties, and Belarus' support of the so-called SMO (Special Military Operation, also SVO). And about 44% of the citizens pointed out that both countries were interested in their integration. 14% of respondents said that Russia was the more interested party, while 17% believed that Belarus was (FOM, 2023).

This aligns quite well with the outcomes of another survey conducted in 2017. According to this research, 93% of Russians thought positively of Belarus, pointing out, in particular, the similarity of the two peoples, the country's unpolluted nature and good quality of Belarusian food. At the same time, the Belarusian authorities were not viewed so positively: only 46% of respondents approved of their actions, while 38%, had a negative opinion, with Alexander Lukashenko being recognizable to one hundred per cent of them. Despite the mixed evaluation of the Belarusian ruler himself, the Belarusian statehood was seen by the respondents in a rather positive light. However, Russians were sceptic about Belarus' position on the international arena, naming the armed forces, science, and education as the country's greatest weaknesses. The most popular positive associations that Belarus evoked were related to its nature and agriculture and a good level of economic development (Sarkisyan, 2017).

5.3 Public evaluation of Russian-Belarusian relations

The Russian political elite were never unanimous in their position on relations with Belarus, neither in the 1990s, nor in the XXI century. Yevgeny Primakov, the former Chairman of the Russian Government, identified the following groups of opponents to cooperation in his book:

- neo-isolationists who opposed political integration with any country at all;
- pro-Western liberals who opposed Lukashenko's authoritarian regime;
- those who had no personal interest in the integration of the two countries (Primakov, 2015).

Those who supported the rapprochement between Russia and Belarus also had their arguments to back their viewpoints: military and strategic, political, or economic ones. Thus, the following groups of integration proponents could be singled out:

- nationalists who believed that Russia and Belarus were one country;
- communists who supported Alexander Lukashenko's policies and the idea of maintaining close ties with post-Soviet countries;

- centrist groupings with predominantly pro-Belarusian sentiments (Nikonov 2009);
- in certain cases, there were proponents of all approaches at once (Kosov, 2017).

In the 1990s, the greatest clout in Russia was wielded by a group of pro-Western liberals who had considerable weight in the executive branch of power and were close to the figure of Boris Yeltsin, along with nationalists and communists who were backed by the majority in the national Parliament. The President himself had to change tack, navigating among those political forces. At the same time, he had to curb radical pro-integration proposals of Alexander Lukashenko (Kosov, 2017). This prolonged opposition resulted in Boris Yeltsin signing the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State just a few days before he stepped down from his Presidency ahead of time.

The Treaty itself was an example of a compromise never found. On the one hand, the document was prepared and it outlined rather profound processes of the two countries' integration. On the other hand, its provisions, most of the time, were never put into practice. At the same time, even such curtailed results gained positive evaluations of the leading political speakers from the Russian side. For instance, Valentina Matvienko claimed that the integration was under way, deepening and yielding palpable results (Belarus Today, 2015). However, until recently, the reality has been failing to support the position of the Speaker of the Russian Parliament. Among the reasons behind the fact that the integration did not produce any clear results and faced resistance from the political elites, experts would name Russia's insufficient economic attractiveness, the lack of guarantees for the Belarusian elite, as well as personal incompatibility of Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko (Delyagin, 2008).

Radical changes in the composition of elites on both sides and the events of 2020 and 2022 significantly increasing Belarus' dependence on Russia brought about changes in the rhetoric on both sides. These could be observed in a most representative and public way during the special session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on the topic of Russian-Belarusian integration which took place after Russia had already started the war against Ukraine.

High-ranking public speakers stressed that the main reason for the close relations between the two countries was not their economic interests, it was their common history, language and cultural space that brought the two nations together. Nikolai Snopkov, the first deputy of the Belarusian prime minister, remarked:

“There is a popular opinion that it is economy propelling Belarus towards integration with Russia. <...> I cannot agree with this premise. Today, it is evident to everyone that there are only two fully Russian-speaking states on the planet, Russia and Belarus. And that during all these years the building of sovereign Belarus and the Belarusian nation has been implemented in Russian. <...> Intuitively, we all understand that we share a common mental space”.

The Deputy Chairman of the RF Government Alexei Overchuk and the deputy minister for economic development of the RF Dmitry Volvach agreed with him (Roscongress, 2022).

The already mentioned Dmitry Volvach, as well as the Head of the Federal Tax Service of the RF Daniil Yegorov and the deputy minister for industry of Belarus Dmitry Kharitonchik pointed out that the countries' integration was no longer limited to economy alone but involved taxation issues, the transport system, the joining of their pharmaceutical and industrial production sectors. So, currently, it has been revitalized in all the main spheres of economy (Roskongress, 2022).

Nevertheless, the officials of both countries noted that a complete synchronization of economy was yet to be reached. As a reason for that, Nikolai Snopkov mentioned the difference in energy tariffs, subsidy mechanisms, numerous exceptions and restrictions, particularly, in the area of state procurement. Dmitry Mezentsev, State Secretary of the Union State, named another reason: the mismatch of the economy structures of the two countries and the difference in their investment capacities.

The slow rate of the rapprochement and insufficient expeditiousness of the integration process were noted by Nilolai Snopkov and Alexander Shokhin, President of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. Here, Vladimir Koltovich, deputy head of staff of the Belarusian Council of Ministers, mentioned that many issues could only be resolved in a "manual mode" as the paperwork lagged behind the need of the real life (Roscongress, 2022).

The countries' officials also highlighted the need for joint strategic economic planning and development of industrial and agro-industrial complexes. Alexei Overchuk expressed this thought in the following manner:

"Our aspiration is to really organize the joint development of our economies, as Nikolai Gennadievich [Snopkov – Ed.] has said. And, ultimately, if you look at our economies, they are very closely interlinked. If you look at the volume of Belarusian exports in 2020, around 49% [of it – Ed.] are tied with Russia". (Roscongress, 2022).

Speaking of directions for further integration, they mentioned a Union State investment contract with distribution of components among enterprises of both countries and sales within the framework of state programs (the idea of Nikolai Snopkov) and the establishment of a Business Cooperation Council to ensure closer collaboration of the two countries' businesses in the implementation of the 28 integration programs (the idea of Alexander Shokhin) (Roscongress, 2022).

Changes in the wording and phrases used after 2020 can be observed in the speeches of the Belarusian ruler himself. If in 2019 he would occasionally allow himself aggressive rhetoric and accusations against Russia, alleging to their attempts to overthrow or assassinate him, in 2022 Alexander Lukashenko spoke of Russia as a helper, protector, ally, and brother. That said, unlike Vladimir Putin, he intones largely economic and historical aspects of the commonality rather than political ones. Lukashenko puts an emphasis on Russia being a major international and regional player rather than Belarus and Russia being parties to a single integration project. However, Belarus in his speeches still sounds like an equal partner of Russia with the same level of development (Lavitskyi et al., 2023; BRIEF, 2024m; BRIEF, 2024n). Thus, in February 2024, Lukashenko claimed that Russia and Belarus as two independent states are stronger than if they were one, stressing that Minsk would never endorse the idea of merging the countries together (BRIEF, 2024l).

Belarusian public opinion on relations with Russia has undergone many changes in the past 30 years. The overwhelming majority of those who supported a complete unification with Russia was quickly replaced by a majority of those who would rather embrace an economic integration of the two countries. And later on, a position of neutrality in relations with both Russia and the European Union gained a place of influence in the public opinion.

The Russian society shows a growing sympathy for Belarus as an ally. That said, opinions concerning the format of such collaboration vary. Some categories of citizens believe that economic partnership is enough; others, a minority, insist on the creation of a single state or Belarus becoming a part of Russia. With all that, the 2020 protests have had no significant effect on public opinion in Russia as the idea of a union of Russia and Belarus is most popular with the older generations who see Lukashenko as a strong leader of the Soviet make and Putin's ally (Levada-center, 2020).

The countries' political elites, in their turn, have undergone significant unification in the past decades and become locked inside themselves both in terms of their cadres and in terms of their ideology. After 2020, both Russian and Belarusian high-ranking figures speak exclusively of the need to continue the integration into the future. Yet, while the Belarusian side constantly stresses the equal nature of the process and the preservation of national sovereignty, the Russian side does not bother itself with remarks of this kind, speaking only on the contents of the integration processes.

VI Conclusion

Relations between Russia and Belarus after the collapse of the USSR had a foundation of economic, political, and ideological pre-conditions. At the same time, the parties to this rapprochement pursued different interests and goals within this process. The initial political interest of Alexander Lukashenko quickly waned after the new RF President came to power, leaving only economic pre-conditions to work. Reversely, Russia's economic interest that existed under Boris Yeltsin was gradually replaced by geopolitical interests of Vladimir Putin.

Evidently, Russia and Belarus as parties to this partnership had different economic and political opportunities to impose their own opinions and positions on their partner. Russia's economic and military preponderance in the region and the energy dependence of Belarus have always served as arguments for Russia [during the negotiations]. Arguments for Belarus were its transport and energy system used to deliver Russian energy resources to Europe, as well as its political tacking among the European Union, Russia, and Asia represented, primarily, by China.

The balance of power was seriously upset by the popular protests of 2020, the sanctions that followed the forced landing of the Ryanair flight with Roman Protasevich on board, and the indirect involvement of Belarus in the war against

Ukraine. The underlying reason for all that was the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko. His actions to suppress any political opposition, imprison or assassinate his competition were pushing European democratic leaders farther and farther away from him. In a situation where the role of the Asian factor was rather small, there was no other counterweight to the Russian influence on the country's foreign and domestic policy left.

However, the regime was not moving towards greater integration of its own free will as Lukashenko, undoubtedly, feared for his own position because Moscow's plans turned out to be reaching too far. Yet, in those circumstances, he was forced to make ever bigger concessions which ultimately made him an indirect party to a military conflict on the side of Putin rather than secure him in the role of a "guarantor of regional security", "peacemaker", and "negotiator" that he played in Eastern Europe in the 2000s and 2010s.

In this sense, the Belarusian economy was totally subordinated to the political course. The ever expanding sanctions regime left Belarus with only one major import and export market available, the Russian one. All this was exacerbated by a virtually total dependence on Russian gas, oil, and the peaceful atom. It is also worth mentioning that the budgetary burden of the country's debt to Russia that was gravely affected by the huge loans procured during the period of nation-wide protests was growing year in year out.

In the course of these years, the Belarusian Army has become completely integrated into Russia's defence profile. Although, initially, its ties with the Russian armed forces were limited to a shared history and the side-by-side training of the officer corps, it ended up being a part of the regional military group under Russian command. Of course, Belarus had strategic military facilities dating back to the Soviet times; they were all operated and maintained by the Russian armed forces and did not provide for any direct control of the Belarusian Army units. The creation of the regional group of forces meant a radical change in the situation.

Belarusian security and law enforcement agencies find themselves in an equally difficult situation. On the one hand, they are bound by personal loyalty requirements to Alexander Lukashenko. On the other hand, they need to cooperate and work with their Russian counterparts who are constantly trying to bring them under their control. Finally, there is also an intra-institutional crisis that has to do with Belarusian security and law enforcement officers' loyalty to the country's own people that was tested during the suppression of the 2020 protests, the crisis that even succeeded in bringing about an open, externally observed split among the officers of these agencies when some of them, for the first time in the history of security and law enforcement agencies, created an opposing alternative structure, BYPOL.

In terms of the attitude of the countries' citizens and political elites to the integration process, completely opposite trends have been observed. While, immediately after the collapse of the USSR, the majority of Russians and Belarusians were in favour of a most expeditious unification of the two countries - first, in a political, and then in an economic format, - later on, this majority started breaking into an ever growing number of groups, each with its own position: opponents to integration, proponents

of strictly economic integration, proponents of neighbourly relations, supporters of a single state, and even those who insisted on one country becoming a part of the other. At the same time, unlike many other post-Soviet countries, the gradual decrease of pro-Russian sentiments in the Belarusian public opinion did not result in gravitation towards the European Union. On the contrary, the idea of neutrality or a “third path” was gaining popularity. Analysing the Belarusian public opinion, one should not forget that, in the absence of an open discussion of foreign policy issues in the country, its citizens were unable to form a sustainable and well-argued position on the country’s geopolitical vector. The numerous changes and fluctuations in people’s preferences are best explained by their spontaneous reactions rather than well thought-through choices, which is typical for public opinion polls in the majority of authoritarian states, anyway.

Unlike this, the political elites of Russia and Belarus showed a reverse process. The presence of proponents of different approaches to integration in the two countries’ political elites in the 1990s has been replaced with dull unanimity to gradually drag Belarus into the Russian zone of influence and control as a “junior partner”.

So, in all aspects of economic and political life we observe a distinct trend of Belarus gradually losing its sovereignty and the right to take independent decisions shaping its destiny. The country ended up, first, in an economic and energy trap and then in a political one as well, when Alexander Lukashenko’s regime sacrificed emerging democracy for the survival and perpetuation of his rule. It is difficult to imagine that this trend could be reversed without radical and substantial changes in the political system of both states.

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