

Belarus and the War: Gradual De-Sovereignization of the Country

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Alyaksandr Lukashenka's active participation in Russia's aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally weakened his regime and intensified the erosion of Belarusian sovereignty. Already in domestic political crisis following the popular uprising of 2020, the regime is also now internationally isolated. In that context, Russia's influence has increased beyond the critical threshold for maintaining independence. Minsk has doubled down on its unilateral dependence on Moscow and dramatically reshaped state- and nation-building policies. The Belarusian regime is securitizing and militarizing the state while also proactively synchronizing its sectoral policies with those of Russia. Furthermore, it is subjecting Belarusian society to Russian propaganda, with Belarusian identity becoming part and parcel of the "Russian World" ideology.

Ultimately, Belarus' increasing exposure to Russian dominance and foreign policy adventurism has accelerated the country's de-sovereignization. Meanwhile, the West lacks both the will and a viable strategy to engage in a geopolitical competition with Russia and exploit the Lukashenka regime's weaknesses. Thus, the new status quo is likely to be maintained until the end of the war, the outcome of which will determine Belarus' future. In the meantime, the West should aim to connect and ally itself with Belarusian society, which does not support the regime, opposes the war, and is largely European in its values and attitudes. Finding new ways to build the resilience of domestic Belarusian society should be the backbone of Western policy.

The Decline of the Regime's Foundations

In the eyes of some observers, Lukashenka is back on his feet. This year's local and parliamentary "elections" went off without a hitch. His "re-election" in 2025 is

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guaranteed. Any dissent is crushed; neither domestic opposition nor the West present any viable challenge. Moscow duly offers the political and economic means to sustain the Lukashenka regime. The West and Ukraine are systematically threatened with a military retaliation.

Nevertheless, Lukashenka's power has never been more brittle. The main reason for this is the collapse of the structural pillars that have historically sustained the regime. For over 25 years, his rule was built on three interdependent elements: a monopoly on domestic power, an (informal) contract with Belarusian society, and a special model of relations with Moscow. The political system guaranteed full control over the elite and the state institutions. The state-society contract, which combined a mix of social and security promises, was a bedrock of the regime's popular legitimacy. The model of Belarus-Russia relations not only generated a steady flow of political and economic resources in exchange for geopolitical loyalty, but also insulated Minsk from the Kremlin's propensity for meddling in the domestic politics of its neighbors.

All in all, this gave the regime the (albeit limited) ability to maneuver domestically and internationally. A balanced foreign policy was crucial to preserving the model of Belarus-Russia relations. The merest hint of multivectorism and possibility of improving ties with the West served as a safeguard against increased pressure from Moscow. Meanwhile, Lukashenka's tight control over political and economic institutions allowed him to shuffle cadres, persecute opposition figures and elite representatives alike, and set elite groups up against each other. The ambivalence of Lukashenka's nation-building project, which championed pan-Slavic unification in the 1990s before embracing bottom-up nation-building in the 2010s, enabled it to adjust to societal modernization.

The popular uprising of 2020 and the Russia-Ukraine war have shattered this equilibrium. To begin with, they have left the state-society relationship beyond repair. After the initial shock of summer-autumn 2020, large-scale repressions were combined with a marginal promise of reconciliation, which included an overhaul of the constitution to increase power-sharing. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sounded the death knell to such attempts. Repressions and fear that the war might spill over onto Belarusian soil have become a tool of societal de-mobilization and control. The regime is no longer trying to restore its public legitimacy and shows no intention of making any concessions to or deals with society. Civil society is in tatters and exiled. Any dissent or disloyalty is punished, and each social group is preemptively targeted.

Furthermore, Lukashenka's monopoly on power is broken. The regime no longer enjoys unilateral control over institutions and elites. *De jure*, the constitutional overhaul delegates significant powers—including control over executive decisions and appointments—to the All-People's Assembly and its Politburo. Even if a new formal power-sharing is unlikely to make any immediate impact, the system's informal checks on the elite have been undercut.

The lustration of the state apparatus, the securitization of the state, and the centrality of repressions to the state's survival have substantially elevated the role of the *siloviki* within the system. Cooperation among security agencies, which were originally set up to control each other, has become more coherent and [automatic](#). More importantly, the elite has found a new patron in Russia. Moscow is actively working to expand direct political and economic contacts, integrate elite representatives into its networks, and strengthen both informal and intra-institutional cooperation between key agencies.

Finally, the war against Ukraine and its foreign policy consequences have [destabilized](#) the existing model of Belarus-Russia relations. The West has overhauled its approach to Belarus in response to Lukashenka's triple escalation against the West: an act of air piracy in the EU's air space in May 2021, the creation of the migration crisis on the EU border, and his co-aggression against Ukraine. It has not only imposed heavy financial, economic, and trade sanctions, but also fully ruled out any prospect of appeasement or re-engagement with the Lukashenka regime. The collapse of Belarus-West relations and the erosion of the regime's domestic foundations have deprived Lukashenka of even the theoretical possibility of going against Moscow, thereby facilitating the rapid expansion of Russian influence in Belarus.

Military-Political Subordination

Moscow's role as the main sponsor and guarantor of Lukashenka's political survival allows it to dictate the pace and the scope of Belarus' subjection. Although Russia has thus far chosen not to radically review the political tenets of bilateral cooperation, it has dramatically increased its strategic hold on Belarus.

First, Minsk has lost the ability to pursue an independent foreign policy. It has failed to find a substitute for its collapsed relations with the West. Its ties not only with Ukraine, but also with traditional post-Soviet allies (including Armenia and Kazakhstan) are damaged. Meanwhile, none of the non-Western powers have expressed an interest in developing ties with Minsk that would circumvent Moscow's interests. As a result, Minsk actively bandwagons Russia. Besides traditional [threats](#) to "inflict crippling damage," Lukashenka's regime participates in hybrid attacks against the West. Attempts to deepen cooperation with Tehran or Beijing are in full accord with Russia's strategic interests. Lukashenka personally admits that his foreign visits are agreed upon and [coordinated](#) with Russia. Minsk also engages with the Russian authorities in occupied Donetsk and Abkhazia.

Second, Russia has deepened its military control over Belarus. Since 2022, Minsk has made a U-turn on core aspects of its defense policies. In January 2022, following the unrest in Kazakhstan, Belarusian troops were deployed abroad for the first time. Besides giving his full support to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Lukashenka has overhauled the

constitution to remove any mention of Belarusian neutrality and [permit](#) the stationing of foreign troops and nuclear weapons on its territory. Russia has *de facto* gained a long-sought permanent military presence in the country. The stationing of Russian combat-capable military forces and nuclear-capable weapons in Belarus enables Russia to increase its military and information pressure on NATO and the EU. Even Belarusian military and national security [doctrines](#) now [echo](#) Russia's strategic thinking. Moscow *de facto* controls the extent of the Belarusian army's involvement in the war.

Third, security cooperation has been qualitatively upgraded. Belarusian security officials actively endorse and promote Russian narratives: They defend Moscow's interests and values, admire Vladimir Putin, and support the war. Joint operations have reached an unprecedented scale. Security agencies coordinate and unify their lists of "extremists." Belarusian cyber forces [participate](#) in Russia's cyberattacks on Ukraine. The Wagner mutiny and the Crocus terrorist attack provided further evidence of this collaboration, as Belarusian security forces were [mobilized](#) immediately upon direct order from Moscow.

Finally, the Lukashenka regime is not economically viable without Moscow. It is now wholly dependent on Russia for economic growth and macroeconomic stability. Russia is the only market, creditor, investor, and energy provider. Bilateral trade has [grown](#) from \$35 billion in 2019 to \$53 billion in 2023. Two-thirds of Belarusian foreign trade goes directly to Russia. Fully 90 percent of Belarusian [exports](#) now either depend on Russia's logistics or have Russia as their final destination.

De-Sovereignization of the State

The regime has been evolving in response to these new conditions. It has effectively aborted nation-building in the country. Belarusian identity is confined to the "Russkii Mir" framework and its Soviet roots. Belarusian language and culture, as well as the agencies that historically promoted them, now face significant restrictions. Major cultural symbols are banned. The Belarusian regime actively borrows Russian conservative policies, [emphasizing](#) traditional values and patriotic education. The Belarusian authorities' new memory policies are built upon the Kremlin's narratives on events such as the Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust, as well as its views on historical figures such as Stepan Bandera. As in Russia, the authorities actively [exploit](#) the alleged "genocide" of the Belarusian people during the war, which has been [enshrined](#) in law. Joint Russian-Belarusian history school and university textbooks are in the making.

State-building has also been altered significantly. Naturally, the war has accelerated the trend toward securitization of the state and its institutions. An active lustration of state and public institutions has cleansed them of anti-regime and anti-Russian groups. This has led, in particular, to the demolition of public institutions, including [scientific](#) and educational ones, that were heavily involved in protests. The army is now [permitted](#) to

fire at civilians without warning, while the security agencies enjoy vast powers to fight extremist organizations and individuals.

As arrests and detentions become an everyday occurrence, *siloviki* are taking up a disproportionate number of civil positions in the country's bureaucracy. Judges and public sector employees [face](#) numerous restrictions, including special checks, travel limitations, and rules against holding foreign documents or having relatives abroad. A new law forbids civil servants from expressing a dissenting opinion on any element of a state policy. Furthermore, the state is actively militarizing, as if preparing for war to break out tomorrow: A new mobilization law, regular drills, checks of military preparedness, new military lessons at schools and propaganda campaigns are combined with the arming of pro-government groups.

State policies dictate deeper integration with Russia even in the absence of formal pressure. Russian propaganda dominates the Belarusian media and information space. The special [commission](#), set up in October 2023, is tasked with planning the expansion of exports to Russia and monitoring and incentivizing the realization of these plans. Belarusian private businesses are rapidly [expanding](#) in Russia, which market generated 80 percent of their profits in 2022. Minsk has voluntarily relinquished its tax sovereignty, agreeing to set up a new supranational tax committee to unify the Belarusian VAT and excise tax standards with the Russian ones. Russian companies [acquired](#) 70 percent of those business assets that chose to leave the Belarusian market due to the Western sanctions in 2021-2023.

Conclusion

Gradual de-sovereignization of Belarus to guarantee his political survival is the new modus operandi of the Lukashenka regime. The Lukashenka-Putin tandem's control over Belarus will largely remain intact until the end of the war. Meanwhile, Western ability to influence developments in Belarus remains limited. Nevertheless, the West has a strong potential ally in Belarusian society. The latter does not support the regime, opposes the war, and is largely European in its values and attitudes. Western policy should therefore aim at allying with Belarusian society and increasing society's resilience. The West should enhance pressure on the regime and, specifically, create new means of counteracting Russian information dominance inside the country. Finding ways to engage Belarusian society and offering an alternative to Moscow should be the backbone of Western policy.

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