

A Deal with the Devil: Lukashenko Navigates Domestic and External Vulnerabilities in Managing Relations with Russia

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Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Belarus-Russia relations have been an issue of rather little interest for outside observers. The new parameters of the bilateral alliance that emerged as a result of their "co-aggression" against Ukraine qualitatively solidified Russia's dominance in Belarus. Yet Alexander Lukashenko's autonomy in domestic decision-making has been preserved. This was not the first time Lukashenko has successfully traded Minsk's political allegiance to the Kremlin, as well as more elements of its already weakened sovereignty, in exchange for extending the life of Lukashenko's personalist regime.

Yet, from 2024 at the latest, Minsk's claim to the status of Russia's closest ally has been less and less convincing. Economic subsidies for Minsk are no longer lavish, while Moscow is increasingly encroaching on Lukashenko's domestic turf. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's apparent willingness to deconflict U.S. relations with Moscow only further complicate the task of establishing a new balance in the Belarus-Russia relationship.

This memo will take stock of recent developments in Belarus-Russia relations and Minsk's reactions to them. We argue that the regime's current activity in domestic and foreign policy in general, and as seen in the chaotic external maneuvering in 2024-2025 in particular, represents an attempt to exploit the current stabilization of the situation inside Belarus to bring Lukashenko's grip on power back to the level at which it stood prior to the Belarusian Revolution in 2020. Its success is far from guaranteed, however, as the challenges the regime is facing are urgent and serious.

Toward a New Domestic Equilibrium

By February 2022, several structural pillars of Lukashenko's regime had collapsed. The regime's domestic legitimacy was largely lost. Mass repression came to replace the social and security contracts that had been the backbone of the regime's stability for three decades. Relations with the West, once cultivated to

counterbalance risks of “excessive” Belarus-Russia integration, became highly conflictual. The migration crisis on the EU-Belarus border, orchestrated by Minsk in the summer of 2021 to demonstrate its leverage and persuade the European Union to negotiate with and make concessions to Lukashenko, on the contrary, led to the end of any ambivalence in Western policy toward Belarus. The new EU approach employs economic sanctions as the core component and de facto rules out any normalization of relations with Minsk as long as Lukashenko remains in office. Russia has emerged as the main beneficiary of the political crisis instigated by the Belarusian leadership. Lukashenko had no choice but to accept Moscow’s offer to guarantee the regime’s survival. It reportedly contained main conditions on Minsk. The model of the Belarus-Russia relationship, which for decades had allowed Lukashenko to cherry-pick, dodge the Kremlin’s most painful demands, and withstand its ultimatums, became a thing of the past.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, combined with the role of the Belarusian regime as its enabler, only [entrenched](#) these developments. For as long as it participates in the Russian aggression, or materially supports it, Minsk cannot be viewed even as a hypothetical partner by the West. At the same time, the context of the war has opened up new opportunities for the regime inside the country and, to an extent, facilitated the task of concentrating power internally. While persecution eliminated any possibility for dissent within the country, and a wave of emigration—nearly 1 million people left—changed the internal balance in the regime’s favor, the war in Ukraine has significantly affected and potentially shifted public attitudes of Belarusian society toward the regime. Lukashenko managed to anchor and diffuse the narrative of his ability, as the national leader, to protect the country from the war spilling over to Belarusian soil. Certain quarters of Belarusian society, while remaining implicitly oppositional, began seeing the regime as the lesser evil.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian emigrant opposition lost much of its domestic credibility. Its structures abroad failed to reengage with their compatriots in Belarus on a platform of Belarusians’ rejection of the war and principled commitment to peace—unlike the case in Russia—and to convey the message that Lukashenko was a major part of the problem. Opposition leaders, quite naturally yet still counterproductively, concentrated their attention on establishing rapport with their donors and emigrant constituencies. In the most benign interpretation, they chose to focus on building a democratic infrastructure abroad and conceptualizing how the post-Lukashenko Belarus may look, but this was alien to Belarusians inside the country. A more critical interpretation would point at corruption scandals, vivid examples of incompetence, and internal strife for power and resources within the opposition, which gradually disillusioned even some of its once devoted supporters in exile, let alone those who stayed in Belarus.

In addition, Lukashenko used the opportunity to tighten discipline within the ranks and shrink his ruling circle. Overly ambitious, untrustworthy, or disgruntled bureaucrats, mostly at the middle level, left the system. Russia's open support, along with the above-described domestic political developments, allowed Lukashenko to abandon his earlier pledge on more power sharing with his own elite. Albeit his claims of "not running for another term" were repeated once again in the context of the fifth anniversary of the 2020 protests, his handpicked nomenklatura "insists" that he should continue in the job—even "against his wishes."

Managing New Uncertainties

The emerging benefits, however, were largely outweighed by new vulnerabilities, starting with a novel *modus operandi* in Belarus-Russia relations. As said above, Lukashenko had to fully accept his subordinated status and essentially yield foreign and security policy prerogatives to Moscow. At the beginning of the war in Ukraine, he repeatedly boasted of being "a co-aggressor"—perhaps Lukashenko thus saw his own status as equal to that of Vladimir Putin—and of standing shoulder to shoulder with Russia against the West. Later on, however, he changed his tune and started claiming he was not—and, by extension, is not—in a position to bargain with Moscow, especially on issues involving security. As the most telling example, Lukashenko confirmed several times that he was not in charge of the decision to let Russia use Belarusian territory for the invasion. As he [told](#) U.S. journalist Simon Shuster in an interview in August 2025, he was not informed of Putin's plan to start the invasion and learned about it only when the Russian troops entered Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the state of the national economy must be an obvious concern. Reliance on Moscow exposes the regime to huge financial and economic risks. Belarus's financial stability, its exports, and the transit of goods are now fully dependent on Moscow's benevolence. Moreover, any problems in the Russian economy will now spill over to Belarus, but Moscow cannot be expected to subsidize its ally beyond what is strictly necessary.

Lukashenko's control of the Belarusian information space is restrained by the need to follow Moscow's ideological initiatives. Today, Russia dominates the Belarusian cultural, informational, and ideological spheres. During their meeting in Volgograd in April 2025, Lukashenko was forced to explain to Putin—or rather make excuses—as to why St. George's ribbons—which in the last decades became in Russia not only and not so much a symbol of remembrance of the Soviet victory in World War II, but an expression of Russian imperialism and support for the war in Ukraine—are not used in Belarus. *Rossotrudnichestvo*, which now hosts four "Russian houses" in Minsk, Brest, Hrodna, and Homyel, is actively funding pro-Russia societal groups and disseminating pro-Russia narratives in the country.

Twenty-seven “compatriots” organizations operate today in Belarus. Local authorities [organize events](#) that feature prowar artists and promote Russian propaganda. A Joint Russian-Belarusian Commission on History – tasked with synchronizing the teaching of history at schools in Russia and Belarus, merging interpretations of historical events, and preparing standard textbooks – was established in 2023. It is cochaired by Putin’s close ideological associate and, as of this writing, the head of the Russian delegation in Ukraine war negotiations, Vladimir Medinsky. The Belarusian authorities permit the spreading of “Russkiy Mir” influence in schools and universities. The number of scholarships for Belarusian students provided by Russia has reached an all-time high. Upon the demands of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Belarusian Orthodox Church returned the mention of the Moscow Patriarchate in its full title, which it had ignored for years.

Russia is tightening its control over the Belarusian military as well. The war has deepened bilateral military cooperation and coordination, which is most visible in the military-industrial complex and in additional Russian military deployments in Belarus. A publicized agreement to station Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus, though its implementation has not been confirmed by Western or independent sources, provides Moscow with a *carte blanche* to establish a permanent military presence in a neighboring state. In addition, the war has further anchored Belarus as a crucial element of Russia’s strategic positioning. Amid the Russia-West confrontation, frequent military exercises on Belarusian territory (such as Zapad 2025 in September) bear additional risks like Russian troops not leaving the country and/or becoming engaged in hybrid operations to make sure Minsk does not produce any “surprises” for Moscow.

In 2024–2025, these and other vulnerabilities, together with risks stemming from excessive dependence on Russia, have forced Belarus to go back to “foreign-policy activism.” Minsk rolled out its traditional tools to get the West’s attention – releasing political prisoners and sounding peaceful rhetoric toward Ukraine and EU neighboring states. Belarusian diplomacy puts forward Lukashenko as a potential mediator between Russia and Ukraine. In a major “gift,” Lukashenko released Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a presidential candidate in 2020, as a follow-up to the visit of Keith Kellogg, Trump’s special envoy on Ukraine, to Minsk in June 2025. Reportedly, Lukashenko [offered](#) to release all political prisoners in exchange for the removal of U.S. sanctions against Belavia and Belaruskali. However, despite the recent activity in U.S.-Belarus relations, with events like a release of 123 political prisoners in December 2025, Lukashenko’s attempts to re-engage with the West have been futile. The West either continues to follow a principled approach toward the regime or treats Belarus as a westward extension of Russia that cannot play any independent role. The European Union states have further increased their economic pressure on the regime.

Trump's phone call to Lukashenko in August 2025, possibly to discuss Putin on the eve of the Russia-U.S. summit in Alaska, or Lukashenko's invitation to the Board of Peace in January 2026, surprised everyone, yet it could not change the previous trend, and U.S. policy toward Belarus remains intact. The Trump administration employs one-time steps to maintain the visibility of an open dialogue with the Belarusian regime as opposed to a consistent and purposeful process, aimed at consolidating the change in Belarus and the behavior of the regime. Moreover, even if the U.S. administration at some point in the future decides to normalize relations with Minsk and fully suspend its sanctions – which is quite unlikely – this will not lead to significant economic effects without a simultaneous change in EU policy, which is even less likely.

Lukashenko's engagement with non-Western powers has borne little fruit either. Despite the rhetoric of "reaching new heights of cooperation" with several Asian and African states, the regime has failed to demonstrate any breakthroughs. For the so-called "Global South," Belarus remains in the shadow of Moscow. Beijing, perceived and characterized in Minsk as the closest partner, has rather distanced itself. It barely offers Lukashenko any political capital. Lukashenko's visit to China, which was announced as part of his reelection campaign, did not take place, as originally planned, in January 2025, and no explanation for the postponement was provided. The trip to Beijing took place only in June and was deemed "strange" by observers due to the protocol status as "a friendly family meeting," with the Chinese media ignoring it. Economic cooperation with China has stumbled as well. In summer 2021, China froze its credit line for a major potash mining and processing complex in Belarus. While bilateral trade intensified, it is largely driven by [accelerated imports from China](#). Efforts to foster new economic ties with Pakistan and Iran, core Chinese allies, have not yielded any significant results either.

Conclusion

Arguably, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is turning from a blessing into a nightmare for Lukashenko. The bargain that the Belarusian regime made with Moscow has colossal costs for Belarus. Lukashenko traded away his foreign and security policy independence to Russia in exchange for the survival of his personalist regime. But now the parameters of the bargain have begun to worry the regime quite profoundly. Excessive dependence on Russia will keep generating economic and security risks, while Russia's control over Belarus's economy, security, and culture, as well as its ability to influence the functioning of the country's institutions, already restricts Minsk's room for maneuver both domestically and, even more, externally. The long-term future of the Belarusian state is at stake.

Foreign policy is a major concern for Minsk. Its status as Russia's prime and only ally has ceased to be self-evident after North Korean troops came to fight alongside the Russians in 2024, which Belarusian troops have never done. While the Western approach inflicts economic losses on the Lukashenko regime, Russia's other allies and partners show little interest in deepening cooperation with Minsk. The recent surge in activity to probe new foreign-policy opportunities in the West and non-West has ended in failure. In these circumstances, the West ought to toughen its stance further. Increasing sanctions on Lukashenko's regime would make sense because it works. At the same time, more sanctions should be accompanied by a clear strategy of engaging with Belarusian society to counteract Russia's growing dominance in the country and boost Belarus's chances of preserving its sovereignty in the long run.