



## Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Modern History of Belarusian Statehood

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**Abstract:** This article examines the evolution of Belarusian statehood, highlighting the transition from its independence in 1991 to the increasingly authoritarian regime under President Aleksandr Lukashenka. It scrutinizes the complex relationship between Lukashenka and Russian President Vladimir Putin and the repeated breaches and renegotiations of their political contract. The analysis covers Belarus' oscillation between integration with Russia and attempts at Western engagement, particularly noting the period of soft Belarusification from 2014 to 2020 as a response to fears of Russian annexation. The 2020 presidential elections marked a turning point, with mass protests against Lukashenka's claimed victory leading to severe crackdowns and the erosion of Belarusian sovereignty. The article argues that Belarus' support for Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine signifies a further decline in its autonomy. It advocates for a strategic approach by the West, bolstering the Belarusian opposition, supporting independent media, and exploiting moments of Russian weakness to restore and secure Belarusian democracy and independence. The author suggests that through comprehensive support for Ukraine and a proactive stance on Belarus, the West can counteract the Kremlin's influence and prevent Russia's complete absorption of Belarus.

**Keywords:** Belarusian statehood, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Belarus-Russia relations, Belarusian sovereignty, 2020 Belarus protests, Soft Belarusification, Western sanctions on Belarus, Russo-Ukraine war.

### Introduction

Belarus is an Eastern European country that could have played a significant role in ensuring European stability and security. However, since February 2022, it has actively supported Moscow in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Only four years ago, the

then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, was shaking hands with his European colleagues during visits to EU capitals.<sup>1,2</sup> At that time, Belarusian state-owned media and President Alyksandr Lukashenka portrayed the country as a net contributor to European security<sup>3</sup> and an oasis of peace and stability in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

After the signing of the Minsk Agreements in 2014, which suspended the war in Ukraine, the Belarusian president found himself in a favorable position. He effectively leveraged the location of the negotiation platform on Belarusian territory to advance Belarus' interests. Between 2014 and 2020, the Belarusian authorities actively promoted the need for détente and proposed the conclusion of the so-called Helsinki 2 pact.<sup>5</sup> At that time, Belarus even attempted to position itself as a neutral country, equidistant from Moscow and Brussels. Neutrality was officially declared in the Constitution of Belarus from its adoption in 1994 until 2021 when the provisions on neutrality were excluded from this integral document. This is paradoxical, given that Belarus has been part of the Russian-led military organization CSTO since 1992 and the Union State of Russia and Belarus since 1999.

Everything changed dramatically on August 9, 2020. On this day, mass protests erupted in Belarus following the presidential elections, the results of which were not recognized by the West and a significant part of Belarusian society. To maintain his regime, Lukashenka resorted to the harshest repressions in the history of independent Belarus, imprisoning tens of thousands of people behind bars and, according to several sources, being responsible for the deaths of at least 15 protesters.<sup>6</sup> In light of clear evidence of election fraud and the regime's violence against civil society, the EU, the U.S., and other Western countries had no choice but to suspend contacts with the Belarusian authorities. Neighboring Ukraine did the same, and new sanctions were introduced against Lukashenka

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<sup>1</sup> "Federica Mogherini met with the Foreign Minister of Belarus Vladimir Makei," *European Union External Action*, May 31, 2018, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/45658\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/45658_en).

<sup>2</sup> "On the Visit of Foreign Minister of Belarus to Vienna," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, November 25, 2014, [https://mfa.gov.by/press/news\\_mfa/fd06eeb6571a8070.html](https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/fd06eeb6571a8070.html).

<sup>3</sup> "Meeting with High-Ranking Officials of OSCE Parliamentary Assembly," *President of the Republic of Belarus*, July 5, 2017, <https://president.gov.by/en/events/meeting-with-high-ranking-officials-of-osce-parliamentary-assembly-16621>.

<sup>4</sup> "Belarus Described as Regional Security Donor," *Belarusian State Information Agency (BELTA)*, October 6, 2017, <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-described-as-regional-security-donor-105657-2017>.

<sup>5</sup> "Makei: Belarus' Helsinki-2 Initiative Seeks to Boost Global Security," *Belarusian State Information Agency (BELTA)*, May 23, 2018, <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/makei-belarus-helsinki-2-initiative-seeks-to-boost-global-security-111959-2018>.

<sup>6</sup> "At Least 15: Deaths Linked to Post-Election Protests in Belarus," *Belsat*, May 27, 2021, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/27-05-2021-at-least-15-deaths-linked-to-post-election-protests-in-belarus>.

and his associates. At the same time, the West left a window for the Belarusian authorities to maneuver, calling for an all-encompassing dialogue with the opposition and the release of political prisoners.<sup>7</sup>

Previously, Lukashenka often employed what Stephen Hall termed “Adaptive Authoritarianism,”<sup>8</sup> a blend of violence with elements of political, economic, and cultural liberalization. However, this time, he reacted differently. Instead of gradually mitigating the conflict, he escalated attacks on opposition politicians as well as on thousands of individuals and hundreds of public organizations that had nothing to do with politics.

February 24, 2022, marked another turning point, not only for Russia, which initiated a full-scale war against Ukraine but also for Belarus, which became involved in various ways in this armed conflict. How did this happen, and could Belarus have followed a different path? This article examines the historical trajectory and chain of events that led Belarus to its current situation.

### **Belarus' Historical Path from Democracy to Dictatorship and Involvement in the Russian Aggression against Ukraine**

Like other republics of the former USSR, Belarus gained independence in the early 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Empire. On the one hand, in ethnic terms, Belarus was more homogeneous than at any time in its history (the 1989 Soviet census recorded a healthy ethnic Belarusian majority of 77.9 %).<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, as Slavomir Serakovski mentioned, “Belarus in 1990 was to Soviet communism what the Vendée had once been to the ancien régime of France – a grand redoubt of belief in the old order.”<sup>10</sup> In the March 1991 referendum, 83 % of Belarusians voted against independence and expressed their preference to remain part of the Soviet Union. Moreover, in a poll conducted across the USSR in the same year, Belarusians were the most likely to identify themselves as “citizens of the USSR” (69 %)<sup>11</sup> rather than citizens of their Republic (24 %). Andrew Wilson believes that at that time, Belarus was analogous to Austria after 1918, “the rump state that did not want to be born.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Aliaksandr Kudrytski, “Belarus Raises Pressure on Opposition as EU Calls for Dialog,” *Bloomberg*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-19/belarus-opposition-leader-urges-eu-to-reject-lukashenko-poll-win>.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Hall, “The End of Adaptive Authoritarianism in Belarus?” *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 1 (January 2023): 1-27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2093332>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2011), 121.

<sup>10</sup> Sławomir Sierakowski, “Belarus Uprising: The Making of a Revolution,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 4 (October 2020): 5-16, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/belarus-uprising-the-making-of-a-revolution/>.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe*, 141.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe*, 141.

The results of the first democratic elections to the Parliament of the then Belarusian SSR clearly demonstrated the immaturity of Belarusian national identity and the insufficient popularity of the democratic movement. In the elections in the spring of 1990, the country's most well-known national democratic movement, the Belarusian Popular Front (the BNF), led by Zyanon Pazniak, received only 26 seats in the Parliament out of 328, while candidates affiliated in one way or another with the Communist Party received 289 seats.<sup>13</sup> Although Belarusian researcher Valer Bulgakov believes that up to 100 elected deputies of this parliament belonged to a broader "Democratic Club,"<sup>14</sup> most likely, these were just people who lacked clear ideological stances and were influenced by the political trends of that era. Consequently, the parliamentary group "Communists for Democracy" emerged, led by none other than the future president of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka.<sup>15</sup>

The real power in the country still resided with the communists. In fact, the republic was governed by a triumvirate composed of the Chairman of the Parliament, Mikalai Dementei, the Head of the Government, Vyacheslav Kebich, and the leader of the Communist Party of Belarus (Belarusian SSR), Anatol Malafeev. However, despite their dominance, the communists did not prevent the Belarusian parliament from adopting the Declaration of State Sovereignty on July 27, 1990.

An intriguing question arises: why did Belarus, unlike its neighboring countries, Ukraine and Russia, not establish a presidential position at the outset of its independence? This anomaly can be attributed to the support of the Belarusian leadership at the time for the coup attempt aimed at preserving the USSR. In August 1991, during the final days of the Soviet Union, there was an attempted coup d'état by the State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP). The then head of the Belarusian Communist Party, Malafeev, supported the coup<sup>16</sup> and, as some reports suggest, intended to declare himself President of the Belarusian SSR.<sup>17</sup> According to Wilson, it was precisely Malafeev's intention that dis-

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander Feduta, Oleg Bogutsky, and Viktor Martinovich, *Political Parties of Belarus Are an Essential Part of Civil Society. Workshop Results* (Minsk, Belarus: Friederich Ebert Stiftung, 2003), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueeros/belarus/07073.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Valer Bulgakov, *Belarus, 1994-2004: Development of the State and Persecution of the Nation* (Vilnius: Belarusian Collegium, 2012), <https://kamunikat.org/belarus-1994-2004-gg-bulgakaw-valer>. – in Belarusian

<sup>15</sup> Zakhar Shybeka, *An Outline of the History of Belarus, 1975-2002* (Minsk: Ętytsyklapedyks, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Olga Shestakova and Olga Ulevich, "GKChP Retained Power in Moscow, but Changed Leadership in Minsk," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, August 19, 2009, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/24345/535209/>. – in Russian

<sup>17</sup> Anatoliy E. Taras, *History of Imperial Relations. Belarusians and Russians, 1772-1991* (Smolensk, Russia: Posokh, 2008). – in Russian

credited the idea of establishing a presidential post in Belarus for a certain period.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Ukraine and Russia, where such a position was established in 1991 to safeguard democracy, Belarus postponed its creation for the same purpose.

Shortly after the coup's failure, a wave of declarations of independence swept across the Soviet Union. Belarus, however, exercised caution by not declaring independence through a separate act but instead elevating the Declaration of State Sovereignty (1990) to the status of a constitutional act. On September 19, 1991, the Belarusian Parliament also changed the state's name from BSSR to the Republic of Belarus. It is important to note that Belarus, unlike neighboring countries, never held a referendum on independence. This omission could still pose a threat in the context of Russia's potential intentions to "rebuild" the USSR.

Since the position of President was not introduced in Belarus, the new Chairman of the Parliament, Stanislav Shushkevich, was considered the nominal head of state. Shushkevich signed the famous Belovezha Accords in December 1991 on behalf of Belarus, which ended the existence of the USSR. Vyacheslav Kebich, the Prime Minister of Belarus, also signed the Accords.

The dualism of power and the struggle between Shushkevich and Kebich shaped the political landscape of Belarus for the next three years. The former university teacher, Shushkevich, soon began to yield to his more experienced colleague in bureaucratic gamesmanship. Belarusian political scientist Viktor Charnov characterized the form of government in Belarus from 1991 to 1994 as a quasi-parliamentary, prime-ministerial republic.<sup>19</sup>

The introduction of the white-red-white flag, which the Belarusian People's Republic used in 1918-1919, and the ancient coat of arms "Pahonia" as the state symbols of Belarus in 1991 marked the most significant victory for the Belarusian national democratic forces at that time. In the subsequent years, these forces, particularly the BNF, fought to awaken national identity, advocating for the development and popularization of the Belarusian language. However, these issues did not resonate with the electorate, which was more focused on the adverse socio-economic conditions of the country.

Many Belarusians and the political leadership saw the restoration of economic ties and a general rapprochement with Moscow as solutions to the country's problems. It is important to note that the integration of Belarus with Russia began even before Lukashenka came to power. In 1993, thanks to the efforts of Kebich, Belarus joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance created a year earlier by Russia and several other former Soviet re-

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson, *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe*, 150.

<sup>19</sup> Viktor Chernov, "Form of Government in Post-Communist Belarus: Evolution and the Problem of Choosing the Optimal Constitutional Model," September 24, 2004.

publics. Shushkevich, representatives of the BNF, and several other political parties opposed this move unsuccessfully,<sup>20</sup> insisting on the need to adhere to the neutrality outlined in the 1990 Declaration on State Sovereignty.

Due to internal political intrigues, Shushkevich was dismissed in January 1994. Notably, this occurred two weeks after the first, and so far only, visit of a U.S. President to Belarus.<sup>21</sup> After Shushkevich's resignation, Myechyslav Hryb, considered close to Kebich, became the speaker of the Belarusian parliament. This allowed Kebich to concentrate significant power in his hands. According to many experts, Kebich felt politically confident at that time. Consequently, he supported the adoption of the constitution of Belarus in March 1994, which introduced the country's presidential post.

The first presidential elections in Belarus were held on June 23, 1994. Even a few months before the election, experts considered Kebich the apparent favorite. However, the results were unexpected. In what may be the only truly democratic presidential election in Belarusian history, Lukashenka took first place with 44.82 % of the vote, while the acting Prime Minister Kebich received only 14.17 %. The second round was a mere formality, in which Lukashenka, according to official data, received 80.34 % of the votes, thus becoming the first president of Belarus.

Experts identify different reasons for Lukashenka's victory. Alyksandr Fyaduta, then a political strategist for Lukashenka, mentions the covert support of many representatives of large businesses.<sup>22</sup> Wilson also notes possible veiled Russian support, particularly recalling Lukashenka's speech in 1994 in the State Duma, which added to his political weight and publicity.<sup>23</sup> Lukashenka's victory appears to have been largely predetermined by the population's fatigue with the old, corrupt nomenklatura and the simultaneous lack of a strong demand for national revival. Using populist slogans promising a return to "everything that was good in the USSR" and capitalizing on the insufficient political strength of Kebich, Lukashenka managed to come to power. According to well-known Belarusian journalist Pavel Sharamet, Lukashenka's victory represented a delayed democratic revolution and embodied the Belarusian dream.<sup>24</sup> However, even if we

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<sup>20</sup> Alicia Ivanova, "Belarus and the CSTO," Memorable Notes No. 15, *Minsk Dialogue*, April 5, 2021, <https://minskdialogue.by/research/memorable-notes/belarus-i-odkb>.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Williams and Ann Devroy, "Clinton Provokes Dispute in Visit to Belarus Purge Memorial," *The Washington Post*, January 16, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/01/16/clinton-provokes-dispute-in-visit-to-belarus-purge-memorial/906fb2c2-1238-45cb-8c0e-d9c81184be25/>.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Feduta, *Lukashenka. Political Biography* (Moscow, Russia: Referendum, 2005), 130, 176. – in Russian

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe*, 165.

<sup>24</sup> Vitaly Portnikov, "20 Years: Period of Decay or Half-life? Belarus without the USSR," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 23, 2011, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24398317.html>. – in Russian

consider this perspective, it is worth noting that very soon, for many Belarusians, the “dream” turned into a “dystopia.”

In May 1995, at the initiative of Lukashenka, Belarus held the first referendum in its history. According to the voting results, new state symbols were adopted, which differed from the Soviet ones only in minor details. Additionally, the Russian language was granted the status of a state language alongside Belarusian. The president also gained the authority to dissolve parliament early. The referendum also supported the integration of Belarus with Russia.

Soon, the situation with political and economic freedoms in the country deteriorated sharply. Lukashenka, who initially considered economic reforms, cooperation with the West, and even attempted to reduce dependence on Russian energy resources,<sup>25</sup> confirmed his intention to cement personal power, strengthen the alliance with Russia, curtail reforms, and return to a planned economy.

In the fall of 1996, Lukashenka initiated another referendum, resulting in changes to the Belarusian constitution that significantly strengthened presidential power. The vote was preceded by a new confrontation, not only with the Parliament but also with the Constitutional Court of Belarus, which deemed the president's actions illegal. In November 1996, the Parliament and the Constitutional Court considered the possibility of impeaching Lukashenka. However, primarily due to the mediation efforts of Russia,<sup>26</sup> he managed to deflect this threat. The acting Belarusian Parliament was dissolved as a result of the referendum. A new bicameral Parliament was formed from among the pro-presidential deputies: the National Assembly, consisting of the Council of the Republic and the House of Representatives. Lukashenka also gained control of the country's Constitutional Court and virtually unlimited power.

Russia congratulated Lukashenka on his success, while several Western states and international bodies, including the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the European Union, did not officially recognize the results of the referendum and declared them illegal, citing serious procedural violations. Some politicians and researchers consider the November 1996 events in Belarus a *coup d'état*.<sup>27</sup>

As for integration with Russia, Lukashenka was not a pioneer here. After brief attempts to flirt with the West,<sup>28</sup> he continued the path already outlined by his actual predecessor, Kebich. On January 6, 1995, an agreement on the Customs Union with Russia was signed. On February 21, 1995, the Treaty of Friendship,

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<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe*, 169.

<sup>26</sup> Tatiana Snitko, “Russian PM to Meet Belarus President,” *United Press International*, November 21, 1996, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/11/21/Russian-PM-to-meet-Belarus-president/4585848552400/>.

<sup>27</sup> Fabian Burkhardt, “The Standoff over Constitutional Reform in Belarus Leaves the EU and Russia on Opposite Sides of the Barricades,” *Russian Analytical Digest* 257 (October 23, 2020): 5-7, <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000446834>.

<sup>28</sup> David R. Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), 111.

Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation<sup>29</sup> was established, allowing Russia to maintain its military presence in Belarus until at least 2010.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting to note that at a certain stage, Lukashenka was the driving force behind integration with Russia, and it was the Russian side that slowed down the process. On April 2, 1996, Lukashenka and then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed an agreement establishing the Community of Belarus and Russia. The agreement provided for the creation of a Parliamentary Assembly in which Minsk and Moscow were to have equal representation.<sup>31</sup> During 1996-1997, an agreement was developed to transform the Community into a Union and create a de-facto unified state. At Lukashenka's suggestion, the union agreement could have included very broad integration provisions. Thus, the formation of the Supreme Council of the Union was envisaged with the participation of the presidents of Belarus and Russia and a joint parliament with equal representation of deputies from Belarus and Russia. This was despite the fact that Russia's population at the time was 148 million people, while Belarus had 9.5 million.<sup>32</sup> The provisions of the proposed agreement gave Lukashenka a strong chance to become the de facto ruler of the joint state of Russia and Belarus. Moreover, at that time, he enjoyed good media recognition in Russia and the support of certain Russian local political groups.

According to the memoirs of Boris Yeltsin's daughter Tatyana Yumasheva, the signing of the union agreement in this desired by Lukashenka form was halted only at the last moment in March 1997, thanks to the efforts of the then First Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, Anatoly Chubais. Chubais convinced Yeltsin to change the terms of the agreement.<sup>33</sup> As a result, on April 2, 1997, the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union of Russia and Belarus was nevertheless signed – but not in the form desired by Minsk. Disagreements between Lukashenka and Yeltsin led to a deterioration of the relations between Belarus and Russia for some time.

Nevertheless, the integration processes between Minsk and Moscow soon resumed. On December 25, 1998, Lukashenka and Yeltsin signed the Declaration on the Further Unity of States, which outlined the creation of a Union State and the introduction of a single currency with a centralized emission center. Then, on December 8, 1999, a full-fledged Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State was finally signed. This agreement entails the creation of several supranational bodies, the implementation of coordinated foreign and defense policies,

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<sup>29</sup> Commonwealth of Independent States, "Agreements between the Governments of CIS Member States," <https://e-cis.info/cooperation/3748/86880/>.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe*, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Audrius Žulys, "Towards a Union State of Russia and Belarus," *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, no. 15-16 (2005): 148-169.

<sup>32</sup> Denis Stadji, "Mustache on the Throne. How Lukashenko Tried to Become President of Russia," *DSNews.ua*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.dsnews.ua/society/usy-na-trone-kak-aleksandr-lukashenko-pytalsya-stat-prezidentom-03072018220000>. – in Russian

<sup>33</sup> Personal blog of Tatyana Yumasheva, <https://t-yumasheva.livejournal.com/>.



the introduction of a single currency, and other measures aimed at closer integration.

Experts cite various reasons for Lukashenka's efforts aimed at integration with Moscow. These include his desire to lead the union state himself, the advantages of economic cooperation with Russia, and the perceived support of the Belarusian population for such a political course. Nevertheless, regardless of the motivations, the legal documents regarding the creation of a joint Belarusian-Russian (or rather Russian-Belarusian) state were signed, laying a time bomb under Belarusian independence.

The end of the Twentieth and the beginning of the Twenty-first century marked the final establishment of the Belarusian authoritarian regime. During this time, a series of well-known Belarusian opposition politicians disappeared. Many Belarusian and foreign experts blamed the Belarusian authorities for these disappearances. In 2001-2002, following publications in the press that implicated the authorities in these disappearances,<sup>34</sup> protests took place in some Belarusian cities. However, these protests were limited in number and did not lead to any visible results.

In September 2001, according to official data, Lukashenka won the presidential elections for the second time, securing 75.65 % of the vote. However, the United States and the European Union did not recognize the results. Small protests ensued after the elections. In the fall of 2004, Lukashenka initiated and held the third referendum in the history of Belarus, granting himself the opportunity to participate in presidential elections an unlimited number of times. Subsequently, according to official data, Lukashenka also confidently won the third presidential election in 2006 (with 82.97 % of the vote) and 2010 (with 79.65 %). Once again, the results were not recognized by the West. This time, the elections were accompanied by significant civil protests.

The confrontation following the 2010 elections proved to be particularly intense. On December 19 of that year, an estimated 30,000 to 60,000 people gathered in the center of Minsk to express their disagreement with the official election results. The police and internal troops brutally dispersed the protest action. During the crackdown, more than 630 people were charged, including numerous opposition politicians and journalists. These events entered the history of Belarus as "Ploshcha 2010" or simply "Ploshcha"<sup>35</sup> (Square). The 2010 Belarusian elections and the forceful dispersal of protests afterward symbolized the defeat of the opposition and the consolidation of a dictatorship in the country. However, as the events of 2020 have shown, the resilience of civil society should never be underestimated.

Meanwhile, relations between Belarus and Russia were like a rollercoaster, experiencing various ups and downs. By the early 2000s, Lukashenka realized

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<sup>34</sup> Asya Tretyuk, "SOBR Commander Pavlyuchenko Is Back on the Job," *BelGazeta*, July 30, 2001, [http://www.belgazeta.by/ru/2001\\_07\\_30/sobytiya\\_otsenki/2847](http://www.belgazeta.by/ru/2001_07_30/sobytiya_otsenki/2847).—in Russian

<sup>35</sup> Andrei O. Sannikov, *My Story: Belarusian Amerikanka or Elections under Dictatorship* (Minneapolis, MN: East View Press, 2016).

that after Putin came to power in Moscow, his chances of leading the union state of Belarus and Russia were nil. Recognizing this, he began to deliberately slow down the integration processes, now viewing them as a threat to Belarusian sovereignty and, thus, to his personal power.

This, in turn, did not suit Putin, who already focused on recreating the Russian/Soviet Empire. Lukashenka's reluctance to advance further along the path of integration, coupled with economic issues such as the price of Russian oil and gas for Belarus, remained problematic. At that time, so-called gas, oil, and even milk<sup>36</sup> and meat<sup>37</sup> "wars" characterized Belarusian-Russian relations. In 2010-2011, a series of films titled "Krestniy Backa" was shown on the popular Russian TV channel NTV. According to many experts, these films were produced and broadcast at the Kremlin's order<sup>38</sup> and depicted Lukashenka in an extremely negative light.<sup>39</sup> This may have been an attempt to pressure Lukashenka into further integration with Russia, especially as his relations with the West continued to deteriorate.

Lukashenka's relations with the West remained relatively low throughout this period. Only during escalations with Russia did the Belarusian president rhetorically hint at the possibility of reestablishing ties with the EU and the U.S., attempting to demonstrate to Moscow that his foreign policy still had some maneuvering capabilities. Until 2014, Lukashenka had no genuine intention of earnestly improving relations between Belarus and the West, believing that this would require too much liberalization of the country, which he viewed as a threat to his personal reign.

The situation changed significantly in 2014 after Russia seized Crimea and started a proxy war in eastern Ukraine. By the summer of that year, Lukashenka initiated a symbolic shift towards Belarusification (promoting the Belarusian language, culture, and folk traditions) by delivering a speech in the Belarusian language on Belarus' Independence Day.<sup>40</sup> Many experts, including those from the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, established by Lukashenka, viewed this policy as Belarus's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. They directly stated that Belarusian interests are not identical to Russia's.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ellen Barry, "'Milk War' Strains Russia-Belarus Ties," *New York Times*, June 14, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/15/world/europe/15belarus.html>.

<sup>37</sup> "Russia to Toughen Rules on Meat Transit from Belarus," *Reuters*, November 24, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-meat-idUKKCN0J818A20141124>.

<sup>38</sup> Olga Demidova, "Minsk Accused Moscow of Information War against Lukashenko," *Deutsche Welle*, July 5, 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/4wnvke9k>; Pilar Bonet, "El Kremlin Humilla al Presidente de Bielorrusia," *El Pais*.

<sup>39</sup> "The Godfather 1996-2011 All Episodes of the NTV Russia Channel," Russian TV Documentary, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDeQj8SGB40>.

<sup>40</sup> "Belarus Leader Switches to State Language from Russian," *BBC*, July 10, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-28246782>.

<sup>41</sup> Piotr Rudkouski, "Soft Belarusianisation. The Ideology of Belarus in the Era of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict," *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (OSW) im. Marka Karpia (Centre for Eastern Studies), OSW Analytical Commentary No. 253, November 3, 2017,*

During 2014–2015, Lukashenka strengthened his position and ties with the West by hosting negotiations to end the war in eastern Ukraine. These talks led to the signing of documents known as the Minsk Agreements. In February 2015, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel arrived in Minsk to participate in the Ukrainian peace talks. Given Lukashenka's well-established image as Europe's last dictator, this development was hard to imagine just a year earlier.

Unlike previous elections, the 2015 presidential elections were relatively calm, with no mass opposition rallies. As expected, Lukashenka retained power, claiming a comfortable win with 83.47% of the vote. Although the OSCE reiterated the lack of democracy during the electoral process,<sup>42</sup> there were no harsh US or EU statements following the election results. Moreover, shortly after the elections, some US<sup>43</sup> and European sanctions against Belarus were lifted in response to the release of several political prisoners by the authorities.

During this period, Belarus began positioning itself as a neutral country and "a donor of security in Europe." Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei traveled to European capitals and hosted EU colleagues in Minsk. High-ranking American officials also visited the country. In August 2019, US National Security Adviser John Bolton met with Lukashenka in Minsk. At that time, the United States and Belarus planned to resume their diplomatic presence at the ambassadorial level, which had been interrupted since 2008. In December 2020, the Senate confirmed Julie Fisher as the first U.S. Ambassador to Belarus since 2008.<sup>44</sup>

After 2014, the rhetoric of the Belarusian authorities towards the West became much friendlier, and ideological changes were noticeable. In March 2018, the authorities allowed a mass rally with long-banned white-red-white flags to commemorate the centenary of the founding of the Belarusian People's Republic.<sup>45</sup> In November 2019, Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus Ihar Petrishenka par-

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<https://belinstitute.com/be/article/myagkaya-belorusizaciya-ideologiya-beloruskogo-gosudarstva-v-period-rossiysko-ukrainskogo>.

<sup>42</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), "Republic of Belarus Presidential Election, 11 October 2015," OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report (Warsaw, January 28, 2016), <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/belarus/218981>.

<sup>43</sup> Artyom Shraibman, "Official Visit Symbolizes New U.S. Attitude to Belarus," Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 3, 2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/79765>.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European And Eurasian Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Belarus: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," August 30, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-belarus/>.

<sup>45</sup> Valérie Gauriat, "Belarus: Stifled Freedoms and Glimmers of Hope," *Euronews*, April 6, 2018, [www.euronews.com/my-europe/2018/04/06/belarus-stifled-freedoms-and-glimmers-of-hope](http://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2018/04/06/belarus-stifled-freedoms-and-glimmers-of-hope).

icipated in the reburial ceremony of the remains of Kastuś Kalinoŭski, a Belarusian national hero and one of the leaders of the anti-Russian uprising of 1863, which took place in Vilnius.<sup>46</sup>

Unfortunately, all hopes for further democratization and an alternative development path for Belarus, separate from integration with Russia, were shattered by the dramatic events of the following year.

In 2019, another aggravation of relations between Minsk and Moscow happened. Lukashenka was extremely dissatisfied with the activities of the Russian ambassador to Belarus, Mikhail Babich, who apparently tried to establish direct contacts between the leadership of Belarusian regions, large enterprises, and the Kremlin. Babich was sharply criticized even by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>47</sup> and, as a result, was forced to leave Minsk after serving in the country for just over six months.

The presidential elections in Belarus, scheduled for 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic—which Lukashenka dismissed as “psychosis”—initially carried a sense of intrigue. Firstly, the exact date of the elections was uncertain, with rumors suggesting it might be postponed due to the coronavirus. Secondly, several strong non-establishment candidates, including the popular blogger Siarhieŭ Tsikhanousky, banker Viktor Babarika, and ex-diplomat Valery Tsepkala, announced their intention to run.

Interestingly, all three candidates had connections with Russia. Tsikhanousky visited the temporarily occupied Crimea in 2017, violating Ukrainian laws.<sup>48</sup> Babarika was the head of the board of Belgazprombank, a subsidiary of the Russian state-owned energy corporation Gazprom, for over twenty years.<sup>49</sup> Tsepkala organized Lukashenka’s trip to Moscow when he was a candidate for the presidency of Belarus in 1994.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Belarus’ Vice Premier: Kastus Kalinovsky’s Figure Should Unite Nations,” *Belarus State Telegraph Agency (BELTA)*, November 22, 2019, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-vice-premier-kastus-kalinovskys-figure-should-unite-nations-126138-2019>.

<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, “Answer of the Head of the Information and Digital Diplomacy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus A. Glaz to the Question of RIA Novosti,” March 15, 2019, [https://mfa.gov.by/print/press/news\\_mfa/f117caa7096d06f8.html](https://mfa.gov.by/print/press/news_mfa/f117caa7096d06f8.html).

<sup>48</sup> “Informnapalm: In 2017, Tikhonovsky visited annexed Crimea,” *Nasha Niva*, July 24, 2020, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=255893&lang=ru>.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Ilyushina, “Belarus Strongman Faces Mass Protests after Jailing of His Main Rivals,” *CNN*, June 21, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/21/europe/belarus-protests-intl/index.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Mikhail Broshin, “‘Cunning Man’, Former Ambassador to the USA, Creator of the HTP... Who Is Valery Tsepkalo,” *UDF.BY*, May 9, 2020, <https://ex-press.by/rubrics/politika/2020/05/09/xitryj-chelovek-byvshij-posol-v-ssha-sozdatel-pvt-kto-takoj-valerij-czepakalo.-in-Russian>

The first indications of trouble for Lukashenka appeared already in the spring. Tsikhanousky quickly gained popularity and organized mass rallies where he accused Lukashenka of various transgressions, even comparing him to a cockroach.<sup>51</sup> Such a de-sacralisation of power clearly posed a threat to Lukashenka's regime. Additionally, several Telegram channels began to gain popularity by sharply criticizing Lukashenka and the current situation in the country. Some of these channels, among which NEXTA is the most famous, were oriented towards the West, while several others were clearly pro-Russian. DFRLab, a research lab at the American think tank Atlantic Council, identified eight popular pro-Russian Telegram channels that were spreading disinformation amid the ongoing elections.<sup>52</sup>

Lukashenka addressed the problem posed by Tsikhanousky and another popular candidate, banker Viktor Babarika, using his proven methods. Both were arrested and subsequently barred from registering as candidates for the elections. Tsikhanousky faced charges of assaulting police officers, while Babarika was accused of bribery and tax evasion. Valery Tsepkala managed to avoid arrest, but he was also denied candidate registration and forced to leave Belarus.

Lukashenka may have thought the electoral field cleared, but unexpectedly, Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya decided to run for president in place of her husband. Initially, Lukashenka did not see Tsikhanouskaya as a serious threat, publicly mocking her as a "girl"<sup>53</sup> and a "housewife."<sup>54</sup> Despite his dismissive attitude, Tsikhanouskaya was registered as a candidate for the elections. Perhaps Lukashenka soon regretted this decision. Pre-election meetings for Tsikhanouskaya drew tens of thousands of supporters, and polls conducted by independent online media suggested she would win by a landslide.

Before the elections scheduled for August 9, 2020, the situation in the country escalated to a critical point. Lukashenka suspected everyone, including Russia, of wanting to take power away from him. The widely publicized story of the detention of members of the Russian PMC Wagner near Minsk added to the tension.<sup>55</sup> Initially, Lukashenka suggested that they had been sent to Belarus to overthrow him.

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<sup>51</sup> Andrei Makhovsky, "Stop the Cockroach': Protests Rattle Belarus President Lukashenko before Election," *Reuters*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN23923P/>.

<sup>52</sup> "Anonymous pro-Russian Telegram Channels Target Protests in Belarus," *Medium.com*, February 25, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/anonymous-pro-russian-telegram-channels-target-protests-in-belarus-16ac3d0a1a12>.

<sup>53</sup> "Lukashenka Called Tikhonovskaya and Her Associates Miserable Girls," *Reform.by*, accessed August 15, 2023, <https://reform.by/152790-lukashenko-nazval-tihanovskuju-i-ee-sorathnic-neschastnymi-devchonkami>.

<sup>54</sup> "'The Housewife Forgot That I Saved Her.' Lukashenko Said That Tikhonovskaya Herself Asked the Security Forces to Take Her to Lithuania," *Currenttime.tv*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/lukashenko-tikhonovskaya/30884592.html>.

<sup>55</sup> "Belarus Accuses 'Russian Mercenaries' of Election Plot," *BBC*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53592854>.

After the announcement of the preliminary official results, which claimed that Lukashenka won with 80 % of the votes, mass protests erupted in many cities across Belarus. In the first days of the protests, thousands of people were detained. The media and human rights groups reported widespread beatings and torture of protesters.<sup>56</sup> The confrontation on the streets of Belarusian cities lasted several months, but the protest movement never came to fruition. Tens of thousands of people, including many opposition leaders, were imprisoned, and many were maimed or even killed. Tsikhanouskaya, under pressure, was forced to leave Belarus and settle in neighboring Lithuania.<sup>57</sup> During the most difficult moments of the confrontation, Lukashenka repeatedly hinted that he might turn to Russia for help.

The U.S., EU, many Western countries, and neighboring Ukraine did not recognize the election results and condemned the violence by the Belarusian authorities. New packages of US and EU sanctions were introduced against Lukashenka and his entourage, destroying in an instant the relationships that had been building over the previous six years. Subsequently, Lukashenka still had some room for maneuver. He could have gradually eased the pressure on civil society, released some political prisoners, and started a dialogue with the opposition mediated by the EU or the OSCE. However, apparently fearing the resumption of large-scale protests in 2021, he continued to tighten the screws.

The May 2021 incident involving the forced landing of a Ryanair aircraft in Minsk gained particular resonance. On board was one of the administrators of the NEXTA Telegram channel, Raman Pratasevich. The incident, which was widely viewed as a hijacking<sup>58</sup> and piracy<sup>59</sup> conducted by the Belarusian authorities, resulted in the interruption of Belarus' air traffic with the EU and neighboring Ukraine. In response to the deteriorating civil rights situation, personal and sectoral sanctions against the Belarusian economy were introduced.<sup>60</sup>

With limited room for maneuvering and facing serious economic challenges, Lukashenka increasingly leaned toward Russia. This move made the country's

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<sup>56</sup> "Belarus: Systematic Beatings, Torture of Protesters. OSCE, UN Human Rights Council Inquiries Needed," *Human Rights Watch*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>.

<sup>57</sup> Mary Ilyushina and Tara John, "Belarus Opposition Candidate Flees to Lithuania amid Crackdown on Election Protests," *CNN*, August 11, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/11/europe/belarus-opposition-leader-flees-intl/index.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Roth, "Belarus Accused of 'Hijacking' Ryanair Flight Diverted to Arrest Blogger," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/23/belarus-diverts-ryanair-plane-to-arrest-blogger-says-opposition>.

<sup>59</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, "Belarusian Government Officials Charged with Aircraft Piracy for Diverting Ryanair Flight 4978 to Arrest Dissident Journalist in May 2021," January 20, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/belarusian-government-officials-charged-aircraft-piracy-diverting-ryanair-flight-4978-arrest>.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, "Belarus Sanctions," <https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/belarus-sanctions>.

economy increasingly dependent on Russian aid and allowed for a greater presence, including military, of Moscow on Belarusian territory. However, this path ultimately led Belarus to support Russia, which in February 2022 launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

## **Conclusions**

In 1991, Belarus gained independence with a population that largely lacked a strong sense of national consciousness. From 1990 to 1994, this consciousness began to emerge, but due to the prevailing “Soviet” identity among the majority, the country gradually slid into authoritarianism and closer integration with Russia. Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s nearly 30-year rule perpetuated this trend, resulting in contradictory consequences.

Belarus followed some of the worst practices of the Soviet era, characterized by a lack of genuine electoral competition, disregard for human rights and freedoms, and a diminishing role for the Belarusian language and culture. Lukashenka was determined to maintain his supremacy in Belarus rather than becoming just another regional governor under Moscow’s authority. The period from 2014 to 2020 played a significant role in shaping the national consciousness of Belarusians. Fearing the possibility of annexation by Moscow, Lukashenka pursued a policy of soft Belarusification during this time.

The mass protests in August 2020 were likely partly influenced by Moscow, presenting a win-win situation for Russia. Understanding that Lukashenka would not relinquish power easily, Russia could benefit regardless of the outcome. By suppressing the protests, Lukashenka risked losing an alternative path for the country’s development, severing ties with the West, and limiting his room for maneuver. The West, compelled to respond harshly to evident election fraud and excessive violence, left Lukashenka with few options. Furthermore, even if the opposition gained momentum, Russia could intervene, either at Lukashenka’s request or unilaterally, under the guise of “restoring constitutional order.”

The history of relations between Lukashenka and Putin suggests the existence of a political contract aimed at keeping Belarus within Russia’s sphere of influence. However, both parties have, at times, violated or attempted to violate this agreement. Lukashenka may perceive Russian information campaigns against him, trade disputes instigated by Moscow, Ambassador Babich’s efforts to exert direct control in Belarus, and Kremlin-backed candidates participating in Belarusian elections as breaches of the contract. Conversely, from Russia’s perspective, Lukashenka’s attempts to forge relations with the West and promote Belarusian identity (soft Belarusification) from 2014 to 2020 likely contravened the terms of the agreement.

The events of 2020 and the subsequent Russian aggression in Ukraine have undoubtedly altered the terms of the contract between Minsk and Moscow (Lukashenka and Putin). The nature of this revised agreement has been explored in the third section of this article.

Lukashenka's nearly 30-year tenure has plunged Belarus into an incredibly challenging political, economic, and military predicament. By permitting a substantial presence of Russian troops and enabling armed aggression from Belarusian soil, Lukashenka has endangered not only his own future but also the independence of the entire country. However, as Giselle Bosse pointed out, part of the responsibility for the situation in Belarus rests with the West, which often chose reactive measures over proactive ones in its relations with the country.<sup>61</sup>

The war between Russia and Ukraine may persist for an extended period or come to an abrupt end due to various factors, such as a successful offensive by one of the sides or a collapse in the Russian leadership caused by the death of the ruler and/or military defeats.

Without significant success on either side, the continuation of the war could lead to further erosion of Belarusian sovereignty, with the country increasingly falling under the Kremlin's jurisdiction. Over time, Lukashenka may be compelled to make additional concessions to Moscow, relinquishing certain aspects of his authority and permitting greater presence of Kremlin agents in Minsk's corridors of power in exchange for Russia's economic, political, and military support.

In the foreseeable future, this trajectory could culminate in the complete absorption of Belarus by Russia, resulting in the loss of its formal independence. Minsk might emerge as a consolation prize for the Kremlin in the event of unfavorable developments in Ukraine or as an easy target following a potential Russian victory in Ukraine.

Regrettably, many scenarios offer scant hope for Western intervention to save Belarus. With Russian troops stationed on Belarusian soil, Moscow has the capabilities to employ them not just against Ukraine but also to seize control in Minsk and annex the country. Such a move would extend Russia's immediate border with NATO, posing a substantial threat to Europe and the wider world and may lead to a new, even larger-scale war.

Nevertheless, scenarios and potential inflection points exist where a change of leadership in Belarus, its democratization, and its disentanglement from Moscow become plausible. These scenarios all hinge on various outcomes favoring Ukraine and the restoration of its internationally recognized borders as they stood in 1991. Thus, to safeguard Belarus from Russian influence, it is imperative to take every conceivable measure to secure Ukraine's victory. The West must reject any compromise solutions to the conflict, as doing so would signal weakness to the Kremlin and possibly embolden Russia to seek compensation for its losses in Ukraine at the expense of Belarusian sovereignty.

There are no magic recipes to pull Belarus out of Russia's sphere of influence immediately, nor is it the aim of this article to provide such recipes. Nevertheless, it is possible to highlight a few fundamental steps that could be beneficial in this regard.

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<sup>61</sup> Giselle Bosse, "Authoritarian Consolidation in Belarus: What Role for the EU?" *European View* 20, no. 2 (2021): 201-210, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17816858211061839>.



Securing a military or diplomatic victory for Ukraine in the ongoing war is essential for preserving Belarusian statehood. Furthermore, to ensure the preservation of Belarusian statehood and facilitate its democratization, such a victory should lead to dismantling or significantly weakening the Putin regime.

Simultaneously, alongside providing military assistance to Ukraine, a comprehensive strategy for Belarus should be urgently developed and implemented. This strategy should focus on strengthening engagement with the Belarusian opposition, making concerted efforts to unite its political and military factions. A united opposition would be better positioned to assume power when the opportune moment arises. Additionally, there is a need to significantly bolster informational efforts in this direction by enhancing support for independent Belarusian media outlets. There may even be merit in establishing an analog of “Voice of America” specifically tailored for the Belarusian audience.

The West must also be prepared to act decisively when the Russian government is weakened and can no longer support its Belarusian ally. At such times, there is a real possibility that the Belarusian people, the majority of whom aspire to democracy and freedom, will have their opportunity to prevail.

## **Disclaimer**

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