Belarus
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Cracks in the Iron Veil: Lukashenka's Belarus and the Illusion of Change

By

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Executive Summary

Following the 2025 Munich Security Conference, where US Vice President JD Vance delivered a provocative and widely discussed speech, questions have emerged regarding the unity of values and political principles between Europe and the United States. Is right-wing radicalism becoming the new ideological cornerstone of the Trump administration? Is a transatlantic rift inevitable? And more broadly, is the rise of right-wing populism contributing to the erosion of democratic norms in Europe, paving the way for authoritarianism to be perceived as the new normal?

This increasingly unpredictable and ambiguous Western political context may create new opportunities for authoritarian regimes – such as that of Aliaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus.

On the one hand, in the context of the ongoing war and evolving discussions around a potential ceasefire in Ukraine, Eastern Europe faces the prospect of prolonged instability. A ceasefire could either lead to substantive peace negotiations or serve as a pause for Moscow to rebuild its military capacity for future offensives. Both scenarios carry significant implications for the region, including Belarus.

Against this backdrop, Lukashenka appears to be pursuing an independent course, one that – contrary to popular belief – is not fully aligned with the Kremlin's strategy. This raises important questions about how his regime defines its military and political identity. Notably, negotiations with representatives of the US State Department in February 2025 may signal the beginning of a new phase in US–Belarus relations.

At the same time, Belarus's dependency on Russia has reached its highest point yet. Relations with China are also intensifying, and there is growing Chinese soft power within Belarusian institutions and infrastructure. By contrast, the European vector remains static – it is characterized by sanctions, border closures, and partial transport isolation. The border with Ukraine is nearly entirely shut and heavily militarised.

Domestically, the past six months have seen subtle but notable shifts. While mass repression continues, a limited number of political prisoners have been released in waves. The influence of the security services appears somewhat diminished, and some familiar faces have returned to public positions. Is this a tactical manoeuvre or the prelude to broader political change? Lukashenka's repeated references to stepping down and transferring power invite further questions: are these signals of genuine transition or merely calculated political theatre?

These questions and more were the subject of discussion at a roundtable convened by the **Belarus Research Network for Neighbourhood Policy** during the 2025 Munich Security Conference, as well as in an online workshop for a broader audience shortly thereafter. These conversations have informed and inspired this policy paper.

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New "Old" Faces in Government

Understanding the pragmatics of decision-making in Belarus requires a closer look at the country's legislative framework and its evolution under Aliaksandr Lukashenka. The current constitution – originally adopted on 15 March 1994 – has undergone numerous amendments, substantially altering its core provisions over the course of Lukashenka's three-decade presidency.

The most recent constitutional referendum took place on 27 February 2022, with early voting already underway when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite newly added wording in Article 18 on the "Inadmissibility of War", which declares that "the Republic of Belarus excludes military aggression from its territory against other states",[i] Belarus served as a key staging ground for Russian forces attacking Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities.

This clause, which was introduced in the 2022 amendments, replaced earlier language that emphasised Belarus's nuclear-free and neutral status[ii], a shift that clearly accommodated preparations for Russian military operations. The contradiction between constitutional declarations and the political reality underlines the performative nature of Belarus's constitutional system.

Elections in Belarus have long been marred by manipulation. For more than two decades, human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society actors have documented widespread electoral violations. Since the 2020 presidential election, independent monitoring has become virtually impossible, but reports consistently indicate that neither parliament nor local councils reflect the will of the people. Rather, these institutions are composed of individuals selected for their loyalty to the ruling regime.

After assuming power in 1994, Lukashenka quickly consolidated control over all branches of government. Through a series of contested referendums, he gained the authority to appoint judges (including to the Supreme Court), dissolve parliament, and issue decrees with the force of law. This process effectively dismantled the separation of powers, granting the president near-total control over Belarusian political life.

As a result, only two constitutional provisions appear to remain fully intact[iii]:

- Article 9 affirms that the territory of Belarus is "united and inalienable".
- Article 20 designates Minsk as the capital.

These articles remain technically true – Belarus's borders and the capital have not changed – though minor border disputes and the demarcation processes with neighbouring countries continue.

Under the 2022 amendments, the president formally appoints the government, a process that reinforces the supremacy of the presidency. The most recent presidential inauguration took place before the government was officially constituted, highlighting the subordinate status of other branches of power.

Political Parties and Parliament

Belarus saw a flourishing of political parties in the 1990s. However, starting in the early 2000s, the regime initiated a forced re-registration campaign, resulting in the liquidation of many parties. No new political parties have been registered since. After the 2020 protests, the authorities moved to completely clear the political arena: by the end of 2023, only four registered parties remained – all aligned with the regime.

Foreign Affairs: The Post-Makei Era

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs underwent a significant shift following the death of long-time Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei in 2022[iv]. Makei had maintained relatively constructive ties with Western diplomats, and his death marked the end of any serious attempts at dialogue with the West. After a short period of Siarhei Aleinik, a quiet and passive diplomat who replaced Makei as a foreign minister, Lukashenka appointed Maksim Ryzhenkou, a more assertive and loyal figure who had previously served as a senior official in the presidential administration. Known for his proactive and uncompromising approach, Ryzhenkou aligns more closely with Lukashenka's personal style. This appointment marked the symbolic end of the era of Uladzimir Makei, who had also been Aleinik's mentor. Ryzhenkou, who had long been a bureaucratic rival of Makei, was given full authority to reshape both the Foreign Ministry and Belarusian diplomacy in line with Lukashenka's preferences, purging disloyal diplomats and adopting a more aggressive tone[v].

The Role of the Media

In functioning democracies, the mass media acts as a check on political power and a conduit for public influence. In Belarus, the media has been weaponised as a tool of propaganda and control. State television and official channels now routinely broadcast so-called "repentance videos" –coerced statements from political prisoners, scripted under duress and intended to intimidate the wider public[vi]. Despite the pervasive nature of this content, its actual audience is shrinking, particularly among younger and urban populations.

New "Old" Faces

Recent months have seen the return of several high-profile figures to positions of influence. The most controversial of these has been Natallia Piatkevich, who reemerged in public life in 2024 after years out of the spotlight. Natallia Piatkevich was reappointed as Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration of Belarus – a position she had previously held more than a decade ago. Unlike many other senior officials, Piatkevich was not directly involved in the post-2020 wave of political repression. Her reappointment has sparked debate among analysts and commentators: does her return signal a recalibration toward the West and a desire to re-engage with European partners, or is it simply a reshuffling within an unreformed system?

According to opposition figure Pavel Latushka, this move signals that President Aliaksandr Lukashenka is entrusting Piatkevich with the task of ensuring his continued grip on power in the upcoming 2025 presidential election. Latushka interprets the appointment as a reflection of Lukashenka's dissatisfaction with the current Speaker of the Council of the

Republic, Natallia Kachanava, who in 2020 failed to secure what the regime had hoped would be an “elegant victory” at the polls. Piatkevich, Latushka argues, now faces a dual mandate: first, to ensure that the electoral process proceeds without visible incidents, and second, to facilitate a form of conditional international recognition of its results – tasks that are particularly demanding under the current political conditions[vii].

While no clear conclusions can yet be drawn, these developments – along with the partial release of political prisoners and signs of internal power rebalancing – suggest that the regime may be testing new tactics. Whether these are aimed at improving its international image, managing dynamics among the elite, or preparing for a managed succession remains unclear.

Russian Influence and the Union State: Is Belarus a Russian Protectorate?

The Union State project, an ongoing political and economic integration initiative between Russia and Belarus, has deepened since 2022, with Belarus becoming increasingly dependent on Russia both politically and militarily. Belarus has hosted Russian troops, provided logistical support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and allowed Russian military infrastructure to be stationed within its borders.

Contrary to general expectations, Aliaksandr Lukashenka appears to be pursuing his own agenda – one that does not fully align with the Kremlin's strategic objectives. This raises an important question: how does the Belarusian regime define itself in the political and military spheres vis-à-vis Russia, and what options remain for preserving Belarus's sovereignty?

Russia's economic influence over Belarus reached new heights in 2024–2025. According to a macroeconomic analysis published by BEROC in December 2024, Belarus's overall economic dependence on Russia – particularly in trade and industrial cooperation – constitutes a significant risk factor[viii]. Politically, this trend is reflected in the evolving implementation of the Union State project, which aims to unify governance mechanisms and strategic communications between the two countries.

Achieving this vision would require the development of joint governance structures, supranational institutions, and harmonized (or even unified) legal and administrative frameworks. At the heart of this process lies a critical question: is the ultimate goal of integration the establishment of a single state?

Since 2018[ix], the Russian Federation has pursued this objective by advocating for the creation of joint political institutions, including a unified parliament and a shared presidential administration, as outlined in the original Union State Treaty[x]. However, the Belarusian leadership has consistently resisted this trajectory, and as a result, the official integration roadmap has avoided references to "political integration".[xi] Nevertheless, the threat to Belarusian sovereignty persists. Moscow's strategy now involves a phased approach to integration.

The first phase, implemented between 2021 and 2023, consisted of 28 "roadmaps," some of which proposed the establishment of supranational entities such as a unified Tax Committee and Customs Committee – initiatives that would have significantly undermined Belarus's independence[xii]. Not all roadmaps were fully implemented, but those related to sensitive areas of public governance – such as taxation and customs – were prioritised by the Kremlin and moved forward.

Belarus's complicity in Russia's war against Ukraine, its role in triggering the migrant crisis, and the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in 2021 have led to broad sanctions imposed by the EU, the US, Canada, and Japan[xiii]. As a consequence, political and economic relations with its European neighbours were severely curtailed, and ties with Ukraine were severed entirely. In this context, Russia emerged as Belarus's sole strategic partner – economically,

politically, and militarily. Thus, Belarus's dependency deepened, not through overt coercion, but as a byproduct of international isolation.

Nonetheless, the Kremlin continues to pursue integration more actively. On 29 January 2024, during a high-level meeting in Moscow, Vladimir Putin and Aliaksandr Lukashenka signed a set of documents constituting the so-called *second integration plan*, covering the period from 2024 to 2026. The main text – the **Decree on the Key Directions for Implementing the Provisions of the Union State Treaty** – was preceded by a lengthy closed-door discussion between the two leaders[xiv].

The plan outlines 11 areas of cooperation, including, for the first time, sectors such as culture, education, healthcare, information policy, and the development of a shared legal space. While these additions suggest a deepening of integration, the content of many of the measures remains vague and limited in scope. More consequential, however, are the initiatives targeting financial integration and legal harmonisation, which signal a potential shift toward unifying key state functions.

Notably, the plan's section on tax coordination and customs cooperation does **not** propose a single authority for managing direct taxes. This omission suggests that Lukashenka refused to concede on this point during negotiations. As a consequence, progress toward creating unified gas and oil markets has also stalled, as Russia views these elements as part of a broader package deal.

Among the most concerning developments for Belarusian sovereignty is the integration of ideological and historical narratives. In 2024, efforts intensified to develop a coordinated historical policy[xv], including plans to produce joint history textbooks for schools and universities, aimed at reinforcing the narrative that Belarusian history is inherently part of Russian history[xvi]. While the Belarusian authorities have so far shown limited enthusiasm for these projects, and no concrete outcomes have been reported, some high-ranking officials in Belarus are actively promoting the ideology of the "Russian World".[xvii]

The area posing the greatest threat to sovereignty, however, remains military integration. In 2024, the **Treaty on Security Guarantees within the Union State** was discussed – and it was ultimately signed in December, despite initial hesitation from the Belarusian side. The treaty introduces concepts such as a "unified defence space" and an "external border of the Union State".[xviii] It formalises the deployment of Russian military assets – including bases and nuclear weapons – on Belarusian territory. Furthermore, Article 6, paragraph 2, of the treaty broadly defines conditions under which Russia may launch a retaliatory nuclear strike from Belarusian soil. The treaty is valid for ten years.

Following the presidential elections on 26 January 2025, Lukashenka visited Moscow, where he expressed cautious scepticism toward further political integration under the Union State framework[xix]. In contrast, Putin reiterated his commitment to deeper integration and emphasised the continuation of the process.

Despite retaining formal sovereignty, Belarus increasingly resembles a Russian protectorate. Lukashenka's political survival hinges on Moscow's support, and his public

stance on Russia's war in Ukraine and his suppression of dissent only deepens Belarus' alignment with the Kremlin.

In summary, from 2024 through early 2025, Belarus's dependence on Russia has reached unprecedented levels – spanning military, ideological, legal, and financial domains. While integration in the field of taxation has been paused at Lukashenka's initiative, other areas continue to move forward. Formally, interstate agreements continue to frame Belarus as a sovereign state and a strategic ally of Russia. However, the cumulative effect of these developments increasingly blurs the line between alliance and subordination.

Recommendations

- **Strengthen Belarusian sovereignty:** International actors should advocate for Belarusian sovereignty in diplomatic exchanges, countering Russia's growing influence.

- **Diversify Belarus's alliances:** Belarus must seek to build diversified partnerships outside of Russia, first and foremost with the European Union, to reduce its dependency.

Chinese Influence in Belarus: Soft Power and the Role of the "Second Pillar"

China's growing influence in Belarus is largely economic. The Chinese government has used soft power tactics to expand its cultural and economic footprint, including promoting Chinese language programmes and fostering trade relationships. China's role as a counterbalance to Russia offers a potential avenue for Belarus to assert more independent foreign policy moves.

In examining the "Chinese vector" of the Lukashenka administration's current foreign policy, several key questions arise among diplomats and analysts: Has Belarus truly managed to "replace" Europe with China in foreign trade? And can China serve as a balancing force to Russia in Belarus's external policy?

Political Relations

In the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' strategic document *Priority Directions of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus*, China is placed alongside Russia and the Union State as part of a so-called "all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership", described as one of the country's most important and promising relationships[xx].

One of the flagship projects of Belarus–China cooperation is the Great Stone industrial park. However, assessments of the park's function differ: Chinese experts see it primarily as a logistics hub, while Belarusian officials have positioned it as a high-tech innovation cluster[xxi]. In reality, due to war-related disruptions and sanctions, Minsk can no longer fulfil the role of a regional hub. Nonetheless, it continues to pursue closer ties with China – as a trade and technology partner, as an ideological ally, and, potentially, as a counterweight to Russian dominance.

In July 2022, Belarus submitted its application to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and membership was formally approved in 2024. This step was, in many ways, a strategic necessity amid near-total isolation from European neighbours and the imposition of extensive international sanctions following Belarus's role in Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Despite the formal rhetoric of deep partnership, there are notable limitations in Belarus–China relations. For instance, Lukashenka was not invited to the Belt and Road Forum in October 2023 – despite his vocal support of the initiative and attempts to position Belarus as a key participant[xxii]. Meetings between Lukashenka and Xi Jinping typically take place only on the sidelines of broader multilateral forums such as the SCO. This pattern reveals a significant gap between the publicly declared "strategic partnership" and the actual level of sustained political engagement.

Economy, Trade, and Technological Cooperation

In August 2024, Chinese Premier Li Qiang made an official visit to Minsk[xxiii]. A number of documents were signed to ease trade restrictions, including an *Action Plan for the Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative*, a *Trade in Services and Investment*

Agreement, and a *Memorandum of Understanding on Strategic Partnership in ICT*[xxiv]. Special attention was given to information and communication technologies, highlighting the growing export of Chinese tech infrastructure to Belarus.

Bilateral trade peaked in 2023 at USD 7.6 billion[xxv]. However, the trade relationship has long been structurally unbalanced. Belarus has posted a negative trade balance with China for over 15 years, and the deficit continues to grow. In 2024, Belarusian exports to China dropped by approximately 50%, largely due to the collapse in global potash fertiliser prices – a key Belarusian export[xxvi]. Precise figures remain unavailable due to increasing opacity from the Belarusian State Statistics Committee.

These trends indicate that China has not – and likely cannot – replace Europe as Belarus's primary economic partner. By comparison, in 2021, Belarus maintained a *positive* trade balance of USD 2.7 billion with the EU[xxvii]. In contrast, annual trade deficits with China have ranged between USD 3–5 billion. Thus, the notion that China could compensate for the loss of European markets is not supported by data. Instead, Belarus has entered into an economically asymmetric relationship, deepening its external dependency on terms unfavourable to Minsk.

Moreover, the depth of political ties with China does not reflect the proclaimed level of partnership. Despite official rhetoric and frequent propaganda – on both Belarusian and Chinese sides – suggesting a robust and ideological alliance, the reality of the relationship is considerably thinner. Thus, as indicated above, neither the depth of political nor economic ties reflects the proclaimed level of partnership. In this context, China functions as a "second pillar" of Belarus's foreign policy identity – though this is true primarily only in the eyes of the Belarusian leadership. The actual role of China in Belarus's international strategy remains limited, especially compared to Russia's dominant position.

Recommendations

- **Leverage economic partnerships:** Belarus should strengthen its economic ties with China towards more balanced trade, but avoid becoming overly reliant on Beijing and repeating the same patterns of dependency as with Russia.

Conclusions

While the regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka has intensified its alignment with Russia, and to a lesser extent China, it has simultaneously shown signs of internal recalibration – reintroducing familiar political figures, modestly rebalancing power structures, and engaging in limited diplomatic outreach.

Despite these developments, Belarus remains deeply authoritarian, with no meaningful separation of powers, independent political institutions, or free media. The post-2022 governance model is marked by centralised control, selective repression, and the performative appearance of constitutional legitimacy. Political transitions are discussed rhetorically but remain tightly controlled and opaque.

Externally, Belarus's sovereignty is under growing pressure. While the Lukashenka regime has resisted full political integration into the Union State with Russia, military and ideological entanglements have reached unprecedented levels. Meanwhile, China has emerged as a secondary partner, offering limited economic diversification but little in terms of political autonomy or strategic balance.

Belarus's isolation from the European Union and neighbouring Ukraine continues to deepen, with sanctions, border closures, and transport restrictions reinforcing its reliance on Moscow and Beijing. At the same time, Belarusian society – though silenced – remains wary of these alliances and sceptical of the regime's motives.

As authoritarian regimes increasingly exploit uncertainty in the transatlantic space, the case of Belarus underscores the urgency of renewed engagement. Supporting Belarusian sovereignty, defending democratic norms, and maintaining pressure over human rights violations remain vital components of any long-term regional strategy.

ENDNOTES

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