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# Russia's policy towards Belarus during Alyaksandr Lukashenka's fifth presidential term

## Introduction

Belarus and Ukraine compose the core of the « Russian world » (*Ruskiy Mir*), a geopolitical and ideologically constructed space centered around Moscow and based on common civilizational, historical, linguistic, and spiritual ties between the three countries<sup>1</sup>. Russia's depiction of this space as a united whole has been deeply shattered since 2014 and the beginning of the war in Ukraine opposing Russian-backed rebels to Ukrainian forces. In this context, Belarus holds a significant symbolic and strategic value for Russia's policy towards post-Soviet states. Indeed, because of the close historical and civilizational ties between Russia and Belarus, the Belarusian president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, is a show-case ally necessary for Moscow's status as a regional leader in the post-Soviet space<sup>2</sup>. Despite some tensions between Russia and Belarus in the 2000s, for instance around trade issues in 2009, a bargain was established between the two

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Putin has put forward the concept of « Russian world » during his second presidential term (2004-2008) with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church with a view to stressing the ties between Russia and its neighbors based on an essentialist representation of Russian language and culture. The concept serves to legitimize Russian foreign policy toward Ukraine and Belarus by relativizing the borders between the three state and stress Russia's role as a « natural » leader in the region. It also holds an instrumental function for Russia in its relationship with « the West » by constructing inherent differences between its values and « Western » ones (see Marlène Laruelle, « The Russian World: Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination », *Center on Global Interests*, May 2015, pp. 23-25).

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Rumer, Belei Bogdan, « [Belarus: With Friends like these...](#) », Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 May 2017.

states as Minsk was aligning to a large extent its preferences on Russia in return for economic and ideological support. These two provisions were necessary for Minsk to limit its international isolation amidst European sanctions imposed between 2004 and 2016 because of human rights and electoral standards violations. For instance, Belarus supported Russian actions in the 2008 Georgian war, and then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev congratulated Lukashenko for his reelection in 2010 while western states did not recognize the legitimacy of the elections and denounced the imprisonment of opposing candidates<sup>3</sup>.

However, Russia's use of force in Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea have raised concerns within the Belarusian leadership concerning the possibility of being « next in line » after Kyiv. As voiced by Lukashenko: « *only a fool will not draw conclusions from the events happening around (Belarus)* »<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, because of its declining economic growth, Moscow started to display less willingness to maintain a high-level of economic support for Minsk in return for Lukashenko's allegiance<sup>5</sup>. Thus, since 2014, Moscow has had to rethink the basis of its policy toward Minsk to maintain close ties with Lukashenko and some degree of unity in the *Russkiy Mir*. How successful has been Russia's policy towards Belarus since then?

The end of Lukashenko's fifth term, which started in the immediate aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis, and the presidential elections in Belarus of August 9<sup>th</sup> offer an occasion to scrutinize the evolution of Russo-Belarusian relations between 2014 and today. This article will argue that Russia is largely failing to maintain close ties with Minsk because it is trying to impose its power and influence without taking into account Lukashenko's concerns into consideration. Russia's strategy has largely backfired and led Minsk to be further wary of allying solely with Moscow. After presenting the theoretical background, this note will assess Russia's policy towards Belarus in the soft power, the economic and the military realms.

## Theoretical background

Russia's policy towards Belarus has historically received scarce attention outside Russia as it was believed that Minsk was « *as pro-Russia as Russia could wish* »<sup>6</sup>. However, after 2014 and Minsk's positioning as a neutral mediator in the Ukrainian war, Western analysts started to pay greater attention to Belarus and Russia's efforts to maintain strong ties with it. To explain Moscow's policy, commentators have frequently assumed that Russia aims at maintaining Belarus in its « *sphere of influence at all cost* »<sup>7</sup>. However, this concept of sphere of influence has generally been loosely defined in the literature concerned with Russia's relations to neighboring states<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, it obscures Belarus' role in the relationship and the ways in which it can shape ties with Russia.

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<sup>3</sup> « [Belarus Leader Applauds Russian Response to South Ossetia Crisis](#) », 19 July 2008; « [D. Medvedev pozdravil A. Lukashenko s pobedoy na vyborakh](#) » [D. Medvedev congratulated A. Lukashenko for his victory in the elections], RBK, 25 December 2010.

<sup>4</sup> « Aleksandr Lukashenko provel zasedaniye Soveta Bezopasnosti Respubliki Belarus » [Alexander Lukashenko Holds a Meeting of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus], [Security Council of the Republic of Belarus](#), 8 April 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Yaraslau Kryvoi, Andrew Wilson, « [From Sanctions to Summit: Belarus after the Ukraine Crisis](#) », European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Lowell H. Schwartz, Catherine Yusupov, « [Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications](#) », Rand Corporation, April 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, « [Will Belarus be the Next Ukraine?](#) », *Foreign Affairs*, 5 February 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Amitai Etzioni, « [Spheres of Influence: A Reconceptualization](#) », *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, vol. 29, n° 2, Summer 2015, p. 117.

Russia's ties with its « near abroad » can be better understood as a continuous negotiation process. In his study of Russia and Central Asia, Buranelli usefully deploys the concept of « *negotiated hegemony* »: a social structure where both the « *influencer and the influenced are engaged in practices that ultimately shape the character of the sphere itself* »<sup>9</sup>. A key element in this negotiation process is that of sovereignty: while the « subordinated state » retains its independence, it consents to place limits on its decision-making autonomy and to align its preferences with the hegemon in return for security guarantees and economic assistance. The hegemon benefits from the « subordinate's » limited sovereignty to increase its legitimacy and, as sought by Russia, to appear as a regional great power capable of acting at the international level on a par with the « West »<sup>10</sup>. This relation of « sovereign inequality » rests on a fragile process of mutual orchestration between the two actors<sup>11</sup>. The smaller state is not solely a victim as it can skillfully leverage the hegemon's status concerns to its advantage by extracting material and ideational gains<sup>12</sup>. It might also « *resist different conditions posed by the hegemon* »<sup>13</sup> if it perceives that the benefits it receives from the relation are insufficient or if it fears to become a dominion and fully lose its sovereignty on the hegemon's behalf<sup>14</sup>.

This theoretical framework allows grasping the issues at stake in the relations between Moscow and Minsk. The large economic and ideational support provided by Moscow for Lukashenka's authoritarian rule in the 2000s enabled Russia to negotiate Belarus' sovereignty. Russia's war in Ukraine undermined this informal bargain. Russia can hardly afford its previous level of economic assistance « *because of the parlous state of the Russian economy* »<sup>15</sup>. Additionally, Lukashenka has grown wary of Russia's actions and has tried to distance itself from Moscow by appearing as a neutral actor with respect to regional tensions<sup>16</sup>. In response, Russia has adopted a more assertive policy toward Belarus through soft power, economic and coercive means. However, these efforts have proven largely unsuccessful and have undermined the fragile process of negotiated hegemony between the two states.

## Soft power

Russia has increasingly relied on soft power tools (media, cultural centres, NGOs) to promote its interests in Belarus. Russia disposes of natural assets to ensure its attractivity as the two countries are culturally very close. However, at the opposite of the western understanding of soft power as the « *capacity to elicit positive attraction* »<sup>17</sup>, Russia has weaponized soft power tools as part of its sharp power strategy to oppose Belarus' policies. This has alienated Lukashenka and motivated him to restrict Russian channels of influence.

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<sup>9</sup> Filippo Costa Buranelli, « Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – the Case of Central Asia », *Geopolitics*, vol. 23, n° 2, 26 December 2017, p. 382.

<sup>10</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, « Preserving Influence in a Changing World », *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 58, n° 2, December 2011, pp. 28-44.

<sup>11</sup> Paul K. MacDonald, « Embedded Authority: a Relational Network Approach to Hierarchy in World Politics », *Review of International Studies*, vol. 44, n° 1, January 2018, pp. 128-150.

<sup>12</sup> Filippo Costa Buranelli, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

<sup>14</sup> Marlène Laruelle, Dylan Royce, Serik Beyssembayev, « Untangling the Puzzle of Russia's Influence in Kazakhstan », *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 60, n° 2, July 2019, pp. 211-224.

<sup>15</sup> Yaraslau Kryvoj, Andrew Wilson, « From Sanctions to Summit: Belarus after the Ukraine Crisis », *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, Dzmitry Balkunets, « Belarus-Russia Relations after the Ukraine Conflict », *Ostrogorski Centre Belarus Digest*, 1 August 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., « The Future of Power », *Public Affairs*, 2011, p. 20.

Russian media occupy a large space in the Belarusian information space. Russian production represents up to 65 % of the Belarusian media landscape and Belarusian internet-users are integrated to a great extent in the Runet, the cultural and linguistic Russian sphere on the global Internet<sup>18</sup>. The most popular TV channel in the country is ONT, which relies on contents from the Russian Pervyi Kanal, and internet-users rely primarily on Russian social media. Moscow has sought to further reinforce its place in the media landscape following Belarus' gradual distancing from Russia starting in 2014. It notably opened a Belarusian section of the Russian multi-media network Sputnik in Minsk's Moscow House, a Russian state-controlled organization supporting ties between the two capitals<sup>19</sup>. Such media presence offers great opportunities for Russia to promote its world view and positively attract the Belarusian audience.

However, Russian media have gradually adopted a more aggressive stance toward Belarus and its leadership. This was notably the case in well-known Russian programs retransmitted on Belarusian channels, such as « Evening with Vladimir Soloviev », which stressed the « *natural links* » between Russia and Belarus while openly denouncing Lukashenka's foreign policy regarding the Ukrainian war as a betrayal<sup>20</sup>. Russian online media popular in Belarus, such as Lenta or Regnum, have increasingly warned of a « Belarusian Maidan » and against NATO's encroachment in Belarus<sup>21</sup>. Additionally, since 2015, numerous regional websites registered in Russia and with unclear sources of funding have been created, mimicking authentic local platforms, to promote Russian nationalism and the ideology of « zapadnoruzism »<sup>22</sup>.

Local branches of Russian organizations have also multiplied in Belarus over the past years to promote “Russian world” values and tame Belarusian identity. Russian government-organized NGOs (such as the Russian Public Movement for the Spiritual Development of the People for the State and Spiritual Revival of Holy Rus'), youth movements and Cossack paramilitary structures linked to the Russian Orthodox Church have received increased funding to develop their activities<sup>23</sup>. Russian nationalist groups active in the country, such as the Russian National Unity, have also recruited Belarusian youths to train them in Russia and join rebels in Donbas<sup>24</sup>. These

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<sup>18</sup> Yury Tsarik, « [The Russian Media in Belarus](#) », *Riddle*, 30 October 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Kamil Kłysinski, Piotr Żochowski, « The End of the Myth of a Brotherly Belarus? Russian Soft Power in Belarus after 2014: the Background and its Manifestations », *OSW Studies*, n° 58, November 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Alesia Rudnik, « [Is Belarus Waging an Information War against Russia?](#) », *Belarus Digest*, 19 February 2018.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, the Telegram channel « [Nezygar](#) » (341,811 subscribers) warned that the purpose of U.S Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Minsk on February 2020 was to deliver in person a letter from Donald Trump inviting Belarus to join NATO. The news site « [Rambler](#) » also emphasized that the « *North Atlantic Alliance is becoming more and more aggressive toward our [Russia] country and that if Belarus accepts to participate in joint military training with the organization this would amount to 'stabbing Russia in the back'* ». Other outlets, such as « [Vsia pravda](#) » have mentioned a « *quiet rapprochement* » between Minsk and NATO, looking at various forms of cooperation (sometimes even cultural and unrelated to any security issues), and denounced that NATO is seeking to benefit from the tensions between Minsk and Russia to drive a wedge between them. Russian media, such as [Sputnik](#), also reacted aggressively to the presence of British Royal Marines in Belarus in February, arguing that « *From the standpoint of CSTO, military drills with NATO special forces in the Vitebsk oblast may be perceived as a way to conduct reconnaissance on a potential enemy [Russia]* ».

<sup>22</sup> « Zapadnoruzism » is the idea that Belarus is an artificial creation and intrinsically belongs to the triune Russian nation (see Yury Tsarik, « [The Russian media in Belarus](#) », *op. cit.*).

<sup>23</sup> Kamil Kłysinski, Piotr Żochowski, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> The Russian National Unity (*Russkoye Natsionalnoye Edinstvo*) is a neo-Nazi paramilitary organization which was particularly active between 1993 and 1997 to « defend Russia's national interests ». It was the 4<sup>th</sup> largest Russian organization at the time, with numerous local branches throughout Russia. While its popularity waned in the 2000s, it made a comeback amidst the Ukrainian war as its members fought in Donbas (Marlène Laruelle, « [Russia's Militia Groups and their Use at Home and Abroad](#) », *Russie.Nei. Visions Policy Papers*, n° 113, Institut français des relations internationales, April 2019; Sergey Sukhankin, « [Foreign Mercenaries, Irregulars and 'Volunteers': Non-Russians in Russia's Wars](#) », Jamestown Foundation, 9 October 2019.

initiatives are not directly controlled by the Russian state, but they often have indirect links with the Russian embassy and are supported by ideologically motivated individuals linked to informal structures of power.

This intensification of soft power initiatives has vastly failed to attract Belarusians and convince their political leaders of aligning their preferences with Moscow. Critics of Belarus in Russian media have tended to cause a decline in the popularity of Russian media in the population. The number of citizens who indicate that they do not watch Russian channels has doubled between 2014 and 2015 (from 10.9 % to 20.6 %)<sup>25</sup>. At the leadership level, Lukashenka has warned of « *Russian information warfare on Belarus* » and is gradually taking steps to increase his country's information security<sup>26</sup>. For instance, he has denounced fake news in Russian media concerning how Russians were beaten in Minsk<sup>27</sup>. Several of Sovolyev's shows have also been moved late in the night on Belarusian channels to limit audiences<sup>28</sup>. Additionally, Lukashenka has effectuated a reshuffle of the country's information sphere in 2017, replacing heads of TV channels suspected of being close to Russia and expanding the President spokesperson's oversight over all state media<sup>29</sup>. More recently, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs revoked the accreditations of two Russian employees, including one journalist, from the television channel « Pervyi Kanal » following their negative coverage of Lukashenka's handling of the coronavirus outbreak in the country and the doubts they raised concerning the official tally of confirmed cases<sup>30</sup>. Thus, Moscow's success in weaponizing information to ensure Minsk's allegiance seems to have backfired as it has increased Lukashenka's wariness and has led the Belarusian president to try reducing Russia's penetration of the Belarusian information sphere.

Similarly, Belarusian authorities have sought to tame the activities of the most radical nationalist Russian associations. Groups which actively support Donbas rebels have been directly targeted by the criminalization in 2016 of the recruitment and training of Belarusian citizens for the purpose of military operations in a different state<sup>31</sup>. Russian nationalist bloggers have also been jailed for discrediting the country's nationhood<sup>32</sup>. As a response to this belittling of the Belarusian identity, Lukashenka has engaged in a policy of « soft belarusification »: promoting the Belarusian language, Belarusian folkloric patterns, such as the vyshyvanka, and introducing elements of the Belarusian nationalist historiography by redefining its identity independently from Russia as a successor to the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania<sup>33</sup>. These nationalistic symbols were previously discarded by Lukashenka as he emphasized Belarus' Soviet past. Thus, instead of fostering Russia's attractiveness, Moscow's aggressive use of soft power tools, which can be thus defined as a form of « sharp power » strategy, has undermined trust between the two states and led Lukashenka to try reducing Russian channels of influence and promote Belarus' autonomy and sovereignty<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, Dzmitry Balkunets, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, « [Vstrecha v predverii 100-letiya belorusskoi diplomaticheskoi sluzhbi](#) » [Meeting on the eve of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Belarusian diplomatic service], 18 January 2019.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Yury Tsarik, « [The Russian media in Belarus](#) », *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Yury Tsarik, « [Lukashenka's Recent Appointments: in Search of Efficacy](#) », *Belarus Digest*, 19 March 2018.

<sup>30</sup> RBK, « [Belorussia Vyslala Zhurnalista Pervogo Kanala](#) » [Belarus expels journalist from Channel 1], 6 May 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Kamil Kłysinski, Piotr Żochowski, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Alesia Rudnik, *op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Wilson, « [Softly, Softly Belarus](#) », *New Eastern Europe*, vol. 33, n° 5, 2 September 2018, pp. 7-13.

<sup>34</sup> Christophe Walker, «What is 'Sharp Power'? », *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, n° 3, July 2018, pp. 9-23.

## Economic power

Russia's power projection in Belarus has greatly relied on economic means. Russian subsidies have been negotiated for Belarus' geopolitical loyalty<sup>35</sup>. Moscow delivered up to \$100 billion to Belarus in subsidies between 2005 and 2015 and its support represented as much as 25 % of Minsk's GDP certain years<sup>36</sup>. Additionally, more than half of Belarus' imports came from Russia in 2016. Its economic model is dependent upon the importation of subsidized Russian crude oil that it refines and exports at market prices to European states<sup>37</sup>. Russia has leveraged this economic and energetic dependence to gain control over Belarus' energy infrastructure and incentivize Lukashenka to support the formation of the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union in 2010 and its successor, the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014 (EEU)<sup>38</sup>. These economic integration projects have been designed for Moscow's power projection: they promote freedom of movement (capital, services, goods and labor) between member states to ensure Russia's centrality in the region<sup>39</sup>.

After 2014, Russian economic policies toward Belarus took a hardline turn. Russia's declining economy could no longer afford to subsidize Belarus. Economic tools have been gradually used as a stick to exert pressure over Minsk. Integration within the EEU was hindered by Russia's politicization of the organization and the introduction of trade restrictions over Minsk following Belarusian companies' efforts to bypass Russian sanctions on the import of food products from Western countries by re-stamping goods<sup>40</sup>. Additionally, Russia has revised agreements on oil and gas prices with Belarus by lowering subsidies worth about 3 % of Belarus' gross domestic product through the gradual reduction of duty-free oil shipments<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, Russia has engaged in a « tax maneuver » which consists in replacing crude oil export duty fees with a mineral extraction tax. This threatens Belarusian state finance, limits its ability to export oil to other countries at a higher price and destabilizes Lukashenka's authoritarianism system, which has relied on the provision of social goods to the population<sup>42</sup>. Russia has made further economic support and compensation for the « tax maneuver » conditional on the deepening of Belarus' integration in the Union State, a 1999 association agreement supposed to establish a full economic and political union between the two countries and which to this day has remained incomplete. While the exact details of a deeper integration of Belarus in the Union State have remained unclear, it would notably entail the adoption of a common currency and a fiscal policy indexed on Russia<sup>43</sup>. This would greatly limit Minsk's economic sovereignty. It should be noted that Russia already exerted pressure on Belarus by leveraging Minsk's economic dependence in the 2000s, for instance by banning imports of Belarusian dairy products in 2009 following Minsk's decision to follow European regulations of production. However, since the beginning of

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<sup>35</sup> Arseny Sivitsky, « Belarus-Russia: From a Strategic Deal to an Integration Ultimatum », Foreign Policy Research Institute, 16 December 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Eugene Rumer, Belei Bogdan, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> Artyom Shraibman, « [Oil Spoils the Russia-Belarus Romance](#) », Carnegie Moscow Center, 28 January 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Alena Vieira, « A Tale of Two Unions: Russia–Belarus Integration Experience and its Lessons for the Eurasian Economic Union », *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 32, n° 1, January 2017, pp. 41-53.

<sup>39</sup> Anna Matveeva, « Russia's Power Projection after the Ukraine Crisis », *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 70, n° 5, 27 June 2018, pp. 711-737.

<sup>40</sup> Yuri Tsarik, « [Against All Odds](#) », *Riddle*, 23 March 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Henry Foy, James Shotter, « [Russia Offers Belarus Oil Revenue Compensation](#) », *Financial Times*, 21 February 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Fredrik Wesslau, Andrew Wilson, « [So Far from God, so Close to Russia: Belarus and the Zapad Military Exercise](#) », European Council of Foreign Relations, 11 September 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Dzmitry Kruk, « [Double Jeopardy: Why Moscow's Demands Seem Unreasonable to Minsk](#) », Carnegie Moscow Center, 8 November 2019.

the Ukrainian war, Moscow has increasingly shifted away from its policy of subsidization coupled with occasional economic pressure to greater coercive use of economic tools over Lukashenko.

Russia's policy shift in the economic realm has been largely self-defeating. Belarus has rejected the new Russian prices for oil and gas and the political conditionalities for compensation as it would *de facto* end its independence. Instead, Lukashenka stopped buying oil from traditional Russian suppliers in January 2020, causing a brutal slowdown of Belarusian refineries, and he has started negotiating with relatively smaller private Russian companies (such as Mikhail Gutseriyev's RussNeft)<sup>44</sup>. The Belarusian president has indicated that he aims at reducing the volume of Russian oil in Belarusian imports from 90 % to 30 %. To do so, Minsk has engaged in the diversification of its energy suppliers. In January 2020, it has bought 80,000 tons of Norwegian oil, reached a purchasing agreement with Azerbaijan and has begun negotiations with Ukraine<sup>45</sup>. Additionally, in a highly symbolical demonstration of Belarus' efforts to diversify away from Russia, Lukashenka has welcomed US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's proposition to supply oil to Belarus<sup>46</sup>. The amount that Belarus will have to pay for these new suppliers is significantly higher than Russian prices, which testifies that Lukashenka's efforts for diversification are no longer solely about economic concerns. Thus, Russia's economic coercive strategy has backfired: while the extent to which Minsk can reduce its energy dependence on Russia is unclear in the short term, it is resolutely seeking to reduce Moscow's related political leverage in the future.

## Military power

Russia has not exercised direct use of military power over Belarus. Both countries are closely integrated in the military realm<sup>47</sup>. Belarus has been a member-state of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) since 1993 and it has deepened ties with Russia through the 1998 Joint Defense treaty, which established a mechanism for a joint leadership structure in cases of an immediate threat of war following a consensus decision of the Belarusian and Russian presidents<sup>48</sup>. The early 2000s were also marked by a deepening of ties in this sector between the two states<sup>49</sup>. However, after 2014, Russia has tried to push for deeper military integration to limit Belarus' veto power over Russian initiatives incompatible with Minsk's national interests. In September 2015, the Commander of the Russian Western Military District (ZVO) proposed to absorb the Regional Group of Forces (RGF) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation, which is composed of all ground and special operation forces units of the Belarusian Armed Forces, into the structure of the ZVO<sup>50</sup>. This would *de facto* give command to the ZVO over the Belarusian armed forces and allow Russia to bypass Lukashenka's approval for the deployment of the RGF. Similarly, the Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu declared

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<sup>44</sup> Yuri Tsarik, « [Against All Odds](#) », *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> Rauf Mamadov, « [Belarus Struggles to Find Alternative Oil Supplies as Standoff with Russia Lingers](#) », Jamestown Foundation, 5 March 2020.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Anaïs Marin, « [Trading off Sovereignty. The Outcome of Belarus's Integration with Russia in the Security and Defence Field](#) », OSW Center for Eastern Studies, 25 April 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Arseny Sivitsky, *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> Ruth Deyermond, « The State of the Union: Military Success, Economic and Political Failure in the Russia–Belarus Union », *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 56, n° 8, December 2004, pp. 1191-1205.

<sup>50</sup> « [ZVO: ucheniya 'Shchit Soyuzu' pokazali potrebnost' kontaktov RF i Belorussii](#) » [Western Military District: the 'Union Shield' exercises showed the need for contacts between the Russian Federation and Belarus], RIA Novosti, 21 October 2015.

without prior agreement from Minsk that a joint military organization would be created under the framework of the Union State to ensure in-depth integration of the Belarusian military and security apparatus under a joint decision-making centre situated in Moscow. Russia also repeatedly pressured Minsk into accepting the establishment of an airbase on its territory. These unilateral pushes for deeper military integration promoted by Russia would greatly limit Belarus' sovereignty as it would constrain its foreign and defense autonomy. It would also further eliminate its already limited capacity – because of its membership in the CSTO and Russian-led military treaties – to appear as a neutral actor between Ukraine and Russia.

Minsk has resisted Russia's propositions for deeper military integration as it has grown wary of its vulnerability after 2014. This is obvious from the inclusion in the 2016 Belarussian Military Doctrine of threats tied to a « *weakening of a sense of patriotism in the society* », « *information warfare* » and « *non-conventional armed forces* ». This can be considered as veiled references to Russia's effort to belittle the Belarusian nationhood and to Russian techniques employed in Ukraine. Like in the economic realm, Russia's increased pressure has led Belarus to cautiously demonstrate its independence from Russia by diversifying partners. For instance, while Minsk welcomed Russian troops on its territory during the joint military training Zapad-2017, it also pushed to invite Western military observers despite Vladimir Putin's opposition. In addition, Belarus has increasingly discussed the intensification of military cooperation with China. It has organized an anti-terrorism drill with Beijing in 2017, the Guard of Honor of the Chinese People's Liberation Army took part in the Belarus Independence Day military parade in Minsk in 2019, and China has helped Minsk build the home-made rocket system Polonez, allowing to reduce import from Russia. This is not to say that Belarus will be fully able to disentangle the deep interconnections with Russia in the military-industrial sector. As noted by Anaïs Marin, Russia remains Belarus' largest supplier of defense products, and the Belarusian military-industrial complex is deeply interlinked to its Russian counterpart. Furthermore, Minsk has engaged in several symbolic gestures to demonstrate to Moscow that it retains sovereignty in its defense strategy. In 2020, Minsk hosted British Marines for military exercises, and it has discussed establishing military contacts with the United States. These steps demonstrate Belarus's willingness to diversify its military ties and oppose Russia's push to curb its military autonomy.

## Conclusion

Russia has engaged in a more aggressive policy toward Belarus since 2014 to reinforce its power and influence over its neighbor at a time where Minsk was starting to be wary of deepening ties. Russia has tried to limit Belarus' sovereignty instead of negotiating it by taking into account Minsk's concerns. However, Moscow's strategy in the soft power, economic and

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<sup>51</sup> Margarete Klein, « [Russia's Military Policy in the Post-Soviet Space](#) », *SWP Research Paper*, January 2019.

<sup>52</sup> « [Voennaya Doktrina Respubliki Belarus](#) » [Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus], 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Arseny Sivitsky, *op. cit.*

<sup>54</sup> Keir Giles, « [Russia Hit Multiple Targets with ZAPAD 2017](#) », *US-Russia Insight*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 January 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Nicu Popescu, Stanislav Secieru, « [Third Powers in Europe's East](#) », European Union Institute for Security Studies, 13 March 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Anaïs Marin, « [The Union-State of Belarus and Russia. Myths and Realities of Political-Military Integration](#) », Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, June 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Ministry of Defense Republic of Belarus, « [Belorussko-britanskaya trenirovka Zimnii partisan](#) » [Belarusian-British Winter Partisan Exercise], 2 February 2020; Ministry of Defense, Republic of Belarus, « [V ramkakh mezhdunarodnogo voennogo sotrudnichestva](#) » [International Military Cooperation Issues], 23 March 2020.



military realms has been largely self-defeating. Lukashenka, as an authoritarian leader first and foremost concerned by his own survival, fears that giving up too much sovereignty in return for too few benefits provided by Russia would jeopardize his leadership. He has thus taken gradual steps to bolster his country independence and sovereignty by limiting its dependence on Russia through the diversification of the country's ties. While the extent to which Minsk can distance from Moscow is questionable, it is clear that the relations between the two states will remain conflictual during what is set to be Lukashenka' sixth presidential term, further undermining the unity of the « Russkiy mir » advocated by Moscow as long as it maintains a coercive approach and neglect Belarus' interests.

Taking into account this dynamic and the protests which occurred on the eve of the Belarusian 2020 presidential elections, Lukashenka might be looking to deepen ties with China to receive economical and ideological support for its authoritarian regime. In turn, the growing bipolarization of the international system between the United States and China amidst the coronavirus pandemic might create momentum for Beijing to expand its interests in engaging with Minsk as it seeks to expand its influence. This would increase Beijing's presence at the European Union's borders and pose a tough choice for the EU: it might have to gloss over Minsk's violations of electoral standards and avoid re-imposing sanctions as it might accelerate Belarus' turn to China. Belarus is undergoing a transition in its domestic and foreign relations and the European Union must be able to carefully balance its policy toward Minsk in the aftermath of the 2020 elections.

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