



The Unclaimed Buffer: Limits of the EU's Democratic Conditionality and Belarus's Path

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Abstract

This article scrutinizes the structural underpinnings of Belarus's enduring reluctance to alignment with EU norms and values. It ascertains three primary drivers: the absence of an autonomous national identity, the regime's economic legitimacy among the working classes, and the entrenched nature of the EU's democratic conditionality, which together caused the loss of this key geopolitical foothold to Russia. In response, the article argues for a more flexible EU strategy centred on gradually eroding Russia's strong grip on Belarus's economic wellbeing. By relaxing some trade restrictions, the EU may foster a domestic capitalist stratum with vested interests in realigning Belarus's long-term trajectory.

Keywords

Belarus – the EU – Lukashenka – Russia – democratic conditionality – Post-Soviet Political Economy

1 Introduction

The post-Cold War diffusion of the European Union (EU) into Central and Eastern Europe is one of the most noteworthy successes in cultivating political and economic integration.¹ Inspired by this achievement, the EU initiated the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) with the hope of extending its economic and political shadow beyond its newly expanded eastern borders.² Belarus stands as the greatest challenge to Europe's designs for the region. Aliaksandr Lukashenka has remained impervious to both domestic and international calls for change, exposing the vulnerabilities in the EU's democracy promotion agenda.

Against this backstory, the objective of this article is two-fold. First, it contends that neither the international ecology nor the domestic (agentic) environment in which Belarus is situated is conducive to a democratic transformation in the foreseeable future. Even the mounting economic punishment and political pressure are unlikely to induce a cooperative response from Lukashenka.³ To get to the bottom of such intransigence, the article identifies three variables—two embedded in domestic context and an external one—that anchor Belarus to its present undemocratic/pro-Russian trajectory.

The absence of a distinct Belarusian national self is the first domestic factor propping up what has been called 'the last dictatorship of Europe.' Across the post-Soviet space, the national awakenings led to demands for

1 F. Schimmelfennig and U. Sedelmeier, 'Governance by Conditionality: EU Rule Transfer to the Candidate Countries of Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2004, pp. 661–679.

2 W. Wallace, 'Looking After the Neighbourhood: Responsibilities for the EU-25', *Notre Europe Policy Papers*, 2003.

3 J. Gray, 'The Challenges and Successes of EU Democracy Promotion Policies', *E-International Relations*, 2015; I. Krivosheev, 'Belarus's external relations', in E. A. Korosteleva, C. W. Lawson, and R. J. Marsh eds., *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, London: Routledge Curzon, 2003, p. 166; A. Shraibman, 'Getting Off the Back Foot: Guiding Principles for a Proactive Western Strategy on Belarus', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/02/getting-off-the-back-foot-guiding-principles-for-a-proactive-western-strategy-on-belarus>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

self-determination and the subsequent purging of the remnants of the nomenclature.⁴ Belarus, however, stands as a remarkable outlier. Here, the old guard found a second lease on life and preserved the key elements of the *ancien regime*, thanks to the enduring public nostalgia for the Soviet times.⁵ This continuity enabled Lukashenka to foster a clientelist relationship with the Kremlin without provoking nationalistic resistance on the home front.⁶ As a result, this complacency toward the Soviet past has helped seal the regime off from legitimacy crises and diminished the EU's leverage to pull Belarus out of Moscow's geopolitical orbit.

The second domestic variable is the role of Belarusian state as a provider of basic economic needs to the working class. Belarusian workers are symbiotically tied to the political economy that sustains Lukashenka's rule.⁷ They have been the primary beneficiaries of the regime's anti-neoliberal redistribution of national wealth.⁸ As a result, they harbor little interest in a wholesale transformation of the social order—especially if such change liberalizes not only the political order but also the established Soviet-style economic system.

Though external to Belarus, the third factor forging its path has been the EU's perception of the country. Brussels judges the states in its near abroad through the prism of democracy: it designates them as either part of the European 'we' or the illiberal 'other' according to the degree to which they embrace Europe's pluralistic political and economic outlook. This mental filter aims to exclude authoritarian regimes of Lukashenka's kind from European zone of prosperity and protection. Yet, as this article argues, this democracy-first optic on Europe's international relations, instead of fortifying its borders to the east, further exposed them to one of the most revisionist states of the

4 Ja. Shimov, 'Belarus: Eastern-European Paradox', www.belaruspartisan.org, cited in L. Titarenko, 'Post-Soviet Belarus: The Transformation of National Identity', *International Studies Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, p. 9.

5 V. Silitski, 'Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2005, p. 86; A. Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, p. 133.

6 V. Fritz, *State-building: A Comparative Study of Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007, p. 212.

7 D. R. Marples, 'Changing Belarus', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 63, no. 3–4, 2021, pp. 283, 288; G. Blank, *The Moral Economy of Ordinary Belarussians and a Critical Examination and Re-Evaluation of the 2020 Post-Electoral Uprising*, PhD thesis, City University of New York, 2022, ch. 5; O. Onuch and G. Sasse, 'The Dynamics of Mass Mobilization in Belarus', *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2023, p. 740.

8 V. Fritz, *State-building: A Comparative Study of Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia*, pp. 304–305; G. Ioffe, 'Nation-Building in Belarus: A Rebuttal', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2007, pp. 68–70.

present world order—Russia. By isolating and marginalizing Belarus, Europe's democracy-first paradigm unwittingly nudged Minsk further into Moscow's embrace.

The second objective of the article is to depict that the EU's security is better served by embracing a more transactional approach in its interactions with Minsk. Due to its profound exposure to Russia, Belarus has been reluctant to fully integrate itself into European security architecture—on the grounds that such move will likely risk provoking a belligerent response from its powerful neighbor to the east. Meanwhile, Minsk also deems closer economic relations with Europe as a potential counterweight to its growing reliance on Russian credit, export markets and subsidized energy supplies. This pragmatic pursuit represents Brussels' only realistic and workable opportunity to distance Minsk from Russia's geostrategic orbit. A Belarusian capitalist class that owes its wealth and power to intensified economic relations with Europe may, in time, emerge to oppose the Lukashenka-led status quo.

This article begins with an analytical section that seeks to frame its core themes through broader theoretical lenses. It then argues that the EU's democratic gatekeeping stance, however noble, has proved counterproductive as it failed to foster separation between Russia and Belarus. The second section connects Belarus's current state of affairs to the absence of a cohesive national narrative and the taming of the working class through a model that trades Keynesian full employment for political compliance. The final section contends that the EU's normative approach, placing compliance with European norms as a precondition for deeper ties, has compromised its capacity to learn and evolve in an increasingly precarious world. In sum, redirecting Belarus's trajectory demands an incremental, pragmatical and flexible approach to EU-Belarus relations.

2 The Limits of Normative Power: a Theoretical Framework

This section seeks to formulate a coherent answer to three connected questions. The first aims to explicate what this article understands by democratic conditionality by drawing on the liberal school of thought. The second reflects on the pressing need to which democratic conditionality responds. Last but not least, the question arises as to whether, and to what extent, democratic conditionality remains relevant in the present era, where the norms and institutions of international society have to navigate a world with an ever-increasing number of revisionist states, with Russia only being one of them.

This article defines democratic conditionality as a form of external governance. Accordingly, governments' willingness to internalize liberal norms—including free elections, the rule of law, and respect for human rights—governs their eligibility for tangible benefits such as trade concessions, aid, or technical assistance.⁹ The term “negotiated compliance” perfectly captures the essence of the relationship here: the weaker party willingly reorients its political and economic affairs to conform to those of the stronger partner in a bid to obtain greater access to export markets and financial resources. There are, though, also cases in which the last statement does not hold, and one such case is the focus of this article.

To place democratic conditionality within a broader theoretical landscape, it can be read as a specific instance of neoliberal institutionalism. This perspective claims that liberal institutions regularize and orchestrate the behavior of otherwise detached sovereigns by placing them on a shared normative plane that acts as a catalyst for peace and harmony. As Stephen Krasner famously puts it, they are “... principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area”.¹⁰ Once states consent to bind themselves to multilaterally agreed-upon rules of acceptable behaviour, they find themselves embedded in a system of institutions that exercise restraint on the use of state power.¹¹ In other words, these liberal norms act as the *sine qua non* against which states must anchor their domestic and international choices.

As for the second inquiry of the section, democratic conditionality is driven by a dual imperative: maintaining the communal order inside, while buffering against the anarchic and always treacherous world outside.

For the first imperative, the pairing between the democratic institutions and the soundness of a multi-state bloc originates from a well-established liberal belief, which holds that the internal cohesion of a group of states is conditional on the degree to which each constituent state upholds civic liberties as an essential tenet of its domestic order (Doyle 1983; Keohane 1984).¹² Karl W.

9 R. Youngs, ‘Democratic Conditionality’, 2012; K. E. Smith, ‘The Use of Political Conditionality in the EU’s Relations with Third Countries: How Effective?’, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1998, pp. 253–274; C. Baylies, ‘“Political Conditionality” and Democratisation’, *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 22, no. 65, 1995, pp. 321–337.

10 S. D. Krasner, ‘Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables’, *International Organization*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1982, p. 185.

11 G. J. Ikenberry, ‘Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order’, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2009, pp. 72, 80.

12 M. W. Doyle, ‘Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1983, pp. 205–235. See R. O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in*

Deutsch's notion of "security community"¹³ is also pertinent to this discussion. A communal sense of security necessitates a group of states so tightly bonded in economic and security realms that can "assure dependable expectations of peaceful change among its population".¹⁴ This sense of community is in return contingent on the existence of high degree of uniformity in how constituent nations govern their domestic political and economic discourses. It is this degree of uniformity that not only relaxes the borders among these sovereign states, but it also inoculates the fellowship against internal fragmentation and conflict.

Democratic conditionality's second imperative is to maintain a selectively permeable frontier toward the world outside. The European consensus on 'democracy' as the foundational principle for a safe and cohesive union of states emerged directly from the tragedies of the Second World War. This event marked the beginning of a new era in which European states chose decisively to pursue a peace sustained by the fellowship of democratic governments, rather than betting on the uncertainties inherent in a systemic anarchy. An intangible boundary gradually materialized—separating Europe's increasingly homogeneous and peaceful core from an outer realm that has yet to be 'Europeanized'.¹⁵

"Conditionality" is the mechanism through which the Union calibrates these boundaries, wishing neither to alienate its periphery nor to allow indiscriminate openness.¹⁶ By demanding that third-party countries fully adopt Europe's political codes, Brussels endeavors to realize one or both of the following objectives: to ensure that candidate countries are sufficiently compatible with the community of states they aspire to join and to surround itself with a geographic strip of neighborly non-member states.

Turning to the third inquiry of this section, the solidarist-pluralist debate within the English School offers a suitable theoretical home for the article's reflection on this matter. The essential divide between these sister approaches is the way each defines international society. In the solidarist definition, a society

the World Political Economy, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, for the foundational argument regarding the structural role of international regimes.

13 K. W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

14 K. W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area*, p. 15.

15 W. Walters, 'The Frontiers of the European Union: A Geostrategic Perspective', *Geopolitics*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2004, p. 676.

16 B. Dimitrova, 'Cultural Bordering and Re-Bordering in the EU's Neighbourhood: Members, Strangers or Neighbours?', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2010, pp. 463–481.

of states is a tightly bonded community of like-minded members, which share the same purpose and abide by the same rules (Jackson 2000; Wheeler 2000).¹⁷ Pluralists, on the other hand, allow for greater diversity in constituent states' normative dispositions. In their view, the necessary glue that binds international society is a shared commitment to a minimal set of rules.¹⁸ Concisely, in pluralist view, the rule-based coexistence—not norm-based uniformity—is the premise of international society.

Hedley Bull, albeit the source for both camps, heavily weighs in pluralist side of the debate. He, leading from a pragmatic standpoint, concluded that, given the near impossibility of reaching a universal consensus on issues such as justice or human rights, a stable international society presupposes normative heterogeneity.¹⁹ In his view, it is over-ambitious and even dangerous to enforce adherence to political uniformity, as such would risk internal dissension and eventual disintegration through conflict.

It is reasonable to suggest that the EU's strict conditionality principle echoes the solidarist branch of English school, insofar as its prioritization of norm acquisition limits pragmatic flexibility. There have been multiple opportunities for Brussels to integrate Belarus into its security architecture, but they were systematically overlooked in pursuit of a greater goal. In other words, the EU sacrificed incremental progress while awaiting the opportunity to seize a more consequential target. It is clear that democratic conditionality as a solidarist project may deliver the overarching goal of peaceful transformation in any case where the host country is willing to embrace European norms and values. Otherwise, it is bound to meet its structural limits whenever the counterpart has the means and the will to oppose normative convergence.

Indeed, democratic conditionality in terms of its performance posits a mixed record. Estonia and the Czech Republic are paradigmatic examples that powerfully validate the effectiveness of democratic conditionality. In the run-up to the 2004 'big bang' enlargement, these nations embarked on a full-spectrum political and legal transformation in order to satisfy the

17 R. Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; N. J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

18 H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, London: Macmillan, 1977; B. Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

19 N. J. Wheeler and T. Dunne, 'Hedley Bull's Pluralism of the Intellect and Solidarism of the Will', *International Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 1, 1996, p. 96.

membership requirements.²⁰ Though not members yet, North Macedonia and Montenegro have already restructured their electoral systems and legal frameworks in congruence with Brussels's vision.²¹

Nevertheless, there exist instances in which Brussels failed to lure third party countries into transforming their political institutions. Despite some initial success in revamping Turkey's legal/political order, as a direct result of the centralization of power under Erdogan, Ankara has already shifted its focus away from seeking compliance with the European norms and values. In case of Moldova, oligarchic influence ultimately rendered democratic conditionality ineffective.²² Likewise, in spite of the significant economic incentives proposed to Belarus, Minsk seems to be unresponsive to repetitive calls for reforming its political order.

The EU failed to catalyse political transformation in these cases, as well as in several others, arguably because the recipient regimes, namely Erdoğan in Turkey or Lukashenka in Belarus, managed to nurture and expand a popular coalition against the idea of Europeanizing internal political order. What is at stake is a new genre of authoritarianism that employs both the symbolic influence and economic means to delay or defy authentic democratization through, paradoxically, popular consent.

Johannes Gerschewski gives a similar account of how these regimes could deny the EU's normative power. They entrench their domestic authority either by rewarding key groups with material benefits (e.g. through co-optation) or by shaping the ideological landscape (e.g. through legitimization), which naturalizes their dominant position.²³ Here this portrayal runs in parallel with what Henry Hale termed "patronal elite networks"²⁴ that—owing to their pervasiveness and success in ensuring the loyalty of clients in economic, political and security spheres—may both redirect and neutralize external pressures. They hold the upper hand over formal institutions of power by maintaining

20 N. Wunsch and N. Olszewska, 'From projection to introspection: enlargement discourses since the "big bang" accession', *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 44, no. 7, 2022, p. 921.

21 A. Zhelyazkova et al., 'European Union Conditionality in the Western Balkans: External Incentives and Europeanisation', in J. Džankić, S. Keil and M. Kmezić (eds), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 35.

22 G. C. Gherasim, 'The Republic of Moldova's Civil Society and Democratic Resilience in the Context of the EU Integration Process', *Civil Szemle*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2025, p. 25.

23 J. Gerschewski, 'The three pillars of stability: legitimization, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes', *Democratization*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2013, p. 18.

24 H. E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 9–10, 19–47.

influence through informal channels of resource and status distribution within a narrowly based network of loyalists. Under these conditions, a reform project has negligible chances of succeeding if perceived by the entrenched group as incompatible with the established power hierarchy, which underpins their privileges.

3 Conditionality and Consequences: the EU and Belarus

According to the widely accepted narrative, Europe was just as prepared to embracing Belarus as it was Ukraine when the two gained their independence after the Soviet Union's dissolution.²⁵ As early as 1991, the European Economic Community (EEC) initiated the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) to adjust both post-Soviet states' economic and political foundations to European standards.²⁶ From this shared vision came the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA), signalling the shared trust and unity of vision for the future.

However, from that point forward, the path of the two countries unfolded along opposite tracks. Ukraine continually strengthened its relations with the EU, advancing its prospects for membership. In contrast, Belarus's ties to the EU began to unravel swiftly once the newly elected Lukashenka began to roll back democratic momentum. In 1995, Minsk applied for full membership in the Council of Europe, but negotiations were put on hold over concerns about the conduct of parliamentary elections. Relations deteriorated further in 1997 after a controversial amendment extended Lukashenka's time in office and amended the constitution. The Constitutional Court responded by rightfully declaring the changes as unconstitutional, and the EU condemned the new regime as both illegitimate and undemocratic. Subsequently, Belarus's status in the Council of Europe was suspended.²⁷ Despite the mounting pressure on Belarus from the EU, Lukashenka, supported by Russia, held firm and refused to back down.²⁸

25 V. Leukavets, *The Integration Policies of Belarus and Ukraine vis-à-vis the EU and Russia: A Comparative Case Study Through the Prism of a Two-Level Game Approach*, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2023.

26 R. E. Baldwin, 'The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union,' *European Economic Review*, vol. 39, no. 3-4, 1995, pp. 474-481.

27 J. Blocker, 'Council of Europe: Assembly Suspends Belarus Indefinitely,' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 9 January 1997.

28 C. Portela, 'The European Union and Belarus: Sanctions and Partnership?', *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2011.

According to this prevailing narrative,²⁹ the democratic regression under Lukashenka was the primary wedge driven between Brussels and Minsk. It treats contemporary Belarus as a lost country that left its place in the European project unclaimed and instead slid into entrenched authoritarianism. As Ramunas Davidonis notes, Belarus “would remain almost totally forgotten in Western capitals if NATO and the EU candidate countries did not share borders with it”.³⁰

Yet, Europe’s withdrawal from pursuing closer ties with Belarus was neither a one-off reaction nor an atypical punitive stance. It stems from a well-known and precisely articulated understanding of European identity—one that conditions Europe’s economic and political assistance on the recipient government’s willingness to reform. In fact, since 1995, Brussels included democracy clauses in each cooperation and trade agreement concluded with third countries.³¹

Europe prioritizes candidate countries’ democratic maturity as a foremost condition for full membership status. A candidate’s commitment to rule of law, political pluralism, or a free press situates it within the EU’s circle of proximity.³² In contrast, President Lukashenka has shown no willingness to forgo his monopolistic control over state and society.³³ Given the circumstances, it is unsurprising that Belarus with its current regime—an awkward mixture of Soviet-style political economy and one-man rule—did not receive a favorable response from Brussels. This outcome is neither unreasonable nor unexpected, with responsibility belonging squarely to the incumbent elites in Minsk.³⁴ Brussels’s established frameworks to distinguish allies from adversaries are meant to view Belarus as less than a trustworthy partner.

This paper opposes this mental template on a valid and straightforward ground: excluding Belarus simply subverted the very security European governments sought to protect. Belarus’s near-complete surrender to Russia, up to

29 See, for example, J. Borrell, ‘The EU Continues to Stand for a Free and Democratic Belarus’, *EEAS*, 8 August 2024.

30 R. Davidonis, *The Challenge of Belarus, and European Responses*, Occasional Paper no. 29, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2001, p. 9.

31 J. Gray, ‘The Challenges and Successes of EU Democracy Promotion Policies’, *E-International Relations*, 24 November 2015.

32 F. Schimmelfennig and U. Sedelmeier, ‘Governance by conditionality’, p. 669.

33 E. Korosteleva, C. Lawson, and R. Marsh, *Contemporary Belarus*, p. 104.

34 For how Brussels’ interventions unaware stabilized the regime by isolating the opposition, see A. Pikulik and S. Bedford, ‘Aid Paradox: Strengthening Belarusian Non-democracy through Democracy Promotion’, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019, pp. 378–399.

serving as a military outpost, is inseparable from Brussels's fading interest in bringing Minsk to the Western fold.³⁵ Since the Soviet Union's demise, Europe's self-proclaimed role as a democracy promoter has become an entrenched mental template that, however reasonable and principled, narrows European perception of the world to tunnel vision. Consequently, securing Europe requires a broader outlook that better balances the ideal of a Deutschan democracy with Mackinderian geopolitics.³⁶ It was the absence of one such balance that drove Belarus away, toward the Russian sphere of influence. Thus, to this extent, this framing failed the EU no less than Belarus failed itself. The following offers further reflection on these practical considerations overlooked by Europe's engagement codes—driven by conditionality.

This failure to balance normative concerns with pressing security imperatives becomes even more obvious when considering the major part that Belarus played in Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine. Lukashenka greatly contributed to Moscow's war efforts by replenishing a critically low stockpile of artillery rounds.³⁷ Minsk has also been a strategic conduit through which the Kremlin accessed essential military supplies. Large cargo aircraft inbound from China delivered much-needed commodities with dual-use technology.³⁸ In the early phases of the campaign, Ukraine managed to cripple Russia's energy supply lines through the clever use of its drone fleets, a looming logistical nightmare was averted thanks to the back-up oil reserves from Belarus.³⁹

Belarus's support for the invasion of Ukraine is just one facet of a wider geopolitical reality: its location now acts as a geographic corridor for Moscow's renewed military threats to the heart of the Europe. Russia's ability to project military power toward Baltics and beyond requires full cooperation from

35 A. Leukavets, 'Russia's game in Belarus: 2020 presidential elections as a checkmate for Lukashenka?', *New Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2021, pp. 98–99; K. Pucek and B. Deen, *Belarus on Thin Ice: Future Scenarios and European Policy Dilemmas*, Clingendael Report, The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2025, p. 6.

36 A. Shraibman, 'Getting Off the Back Foot.'

37 'Investigation: Belarus sent over 130,000 tons of munitions to Russia in first year of full-scale war', *The Kyiv Independent*, 10 June 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/investigation-belarus-sent-over-130-000-tons-of-munitions-to-russia/>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

38 M. Bondar, 'Belarusian Monitoring Group suspects Chinese military deliveries to Minsk by Air China cargo jets', *Euromaidan Press*, 31 January 2024, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/01/31/belarusian-monitoring-group-suspects-chinese-military-deliveries-to-minsk-by-air-china-cargo-jets/>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

39 L. Kiennemann, 'Russia: Energy infrastructures targeted by Ukrainian drones', *France 24: The Observers*, 15 March 2024, <https://observers.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-observers/20240315-russia-energy-infrastructures-targeted-by-ukrainian-drones>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

Minsk. Subject to its allegiances, Belarus can either enhance or hinder Russia's operational reach.⁴⁰ A Belarus that shared European security concerns would create a diversion, making it harder for Moscow to employ its entire might in one direction—thus diminishing its offensive military capacity. Instead, by offering no counterforce, Minsk allowed Putin to yield an undivided assault on Ukraine.

Since Belarusian territory has been repurposed from a strategic shield into a military launchpad, it is dangerously close to becoming a “Russian balcony”⁴¹ for the Kremlin to project threats towards neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe. One cannot completely dismiss an uncertain yet conceivable scenario in which Latvia or Lithuania becomes Moscow's next target (Lansing Institute, 2025; Galeotti, 2019).⁴² Given that Belarusian territory offers the most expansive and strategically vital corridor for a large-scale military offensive toward the Baltic countries, keeping Belarus as a geographic buffer might be the most dependable security assurance available to them. But a Belarus fully subordinated to Russia's foreign policy goals would eliminate even this assurance. By utilizing Belarus as a staging ground, Russia could effectively bypass direct frontier defenses and sever the Suwałki Gap—the narrow land strip connecting the Baltics to their NATO allies. If Latvia and Lithuania were to fall, such would open a wide path for a two-pronged attack on Poland—putting to test NATO's core commitment to collective defense.⁴³ Any measure of failure to uphold this promise would severely undermine the bloc's internal cohesion, stimulating bloc members to resort to self-help—or even seek a side-deal with Russia to avoid harm. The mere possibility of denying Russia access to Belarusian territory should therefore have been enough of a reason to cause a major recalibration in how Belarus is viewed in connection to security.

40 K. Pucek and B. Deen, *Belarus on Thin Ice*, p. 6; A. Shraibman, *Getting Off the Back Foot*, p. 7.

41 R. Astapenia, *Transforming Belarus from a Russian asset to a buffer state for European security: How the West should engage with Minsk*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2026, p. 8.

42 Robert Lansing Institute, ‘The Suwałki Corridor Crisis: An Analysis of a Possible Russian Offensive and NATO Response Scenarios’, 27 May 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/05/27/the-suwalki-corridor-crisis-an-analysis-of-a-possible-russian-offensive-and-nato-response-scenarios/>. Accessed April 10, 2026; M. Galeotti, ‘The Baltic States as Targets and Levers: The Role of the Region in Russian Strategy’, *Security Insights* No. 27, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, April 2019.

43 D. Cole, ‘German troops start first permanent foreign deployment since second world war’, *The Guardian*, 22 May 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/22/german-troops-lithuania-permanent-foreign-deployment-second-world-war>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

However, an equally significant yet unacknowledged reality lies behind this bleak portrayal of Belarus as a tool for Russia's geopolitical ambitions: Lukashenka himself was motivated to resist Moscow's looming dominance and saw in Europe a potential counterweight—a strategic opportunity European policy makers unfortunately failed to seize. Belarus's fear of being entirely subsumed under Moscow's influence is the opportunity being referred to here. Lukashenka, driven by this fear, tried to stall the negotiations on Russia-Belarus Union,⁴⁴ which had been continuing since 1997, delaying the progress until 2021.

The root cause of Minsk's hesitation resulted from the parties' divergent interpretations of this union. Belarus was willing for the role of a junior partner but powerfully opposed the liquidation of political sovereignty,⁴⁵ while Putin demanded nothing short of a complete surrender.⁴⁶ Belarusian elites vehemently opposed Russian take-over of large industrial fields and, until 2021, pushed against a permanent Russian military presence on their soil. Between 2014 and 2021, Minsk continued to acknowledge Crimea as part of Ukraine and even promoted itself as a neutral mediator for the peace talks.⁴⁷ Even in 2020, Lukashenka was still pedaling against his much bigger neighbor, accusing it of "trying to drag Belarus into a Federation".⁴⁸

Despite these manifestations of resistance, Belarus's gestures to the Western capitals elicited no reaction. Until 2021, Minsk signaled its interest in securing a role for the EU as an economic counterbalance to Russia's growing clout in Belarusian trade and industry—but to no avail.⁴⁹ Brussels made clear that any

44 Y. Preiherman, 'Belarus Finds its Foreign Policy Stride', *Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations*, 8 February 2019, available at <https://minskdialogue.by/en/research/opinions/belarus-finds-its-foreign-policy-stride>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

45 A. Sivitski, 'Belarus-Russia: From a Strategic Deal to an Integration Ultimatum', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 16 December 2019, available at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/12/belarus-russia-from-a-strategic-deal-to-an-integration-ultimatum/>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

46 R. Astapenia, 'West Needs a Bigger Toolkit for Belarus', *Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)*, 22 June 2023, available at <https://cepa.org/article/west-needs-a-bigger-toolkit-for-belarus/>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

47 A. Eberhardt, 'Belarus and the Russo-Ukrainian War: The Consolidation of Strategic Dependence in 2022–2025', *Stosunki Międzynarodowe—International Relations*, vol. 5, no. 23, 2025, p. 4, <https://internationalrelations-publishing.org/articles/5-23>.

48 'Lukashenka Accuses Moscow Of Pressuring Belarus Into Russian Merger', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 25 January 2020, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/lukashenka-belarus-accuses-russia-pressuring-merger/30396235.html>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

49 E. Ferris, 'Belarus and Russia: Brothers in Arms?', *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, 7 March 2022, available at <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/belarus-and-russia-brothers-arms>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

economic and security assistance was subject to Lukashenka's final departure from the political scene⁵⁰—a demand he had no intention of fulfilling. As a result, Europe failed to keep Belarus in its circle of proximity, thereby unaware solidifying Lukashenka's reliance on Russian patronage. The EU so doing placed an undue significance on Lukashenka as the central factor in Belarus's derailment from the European, as well as democratic, route. Ioffe explicitly takes issue with the West's heavy reliance on the 'last dictator of Europe' trope: "The personalization of the Belarusian political regime by outside observers has reached absurd proportions".⁵¹ As the next section will explore, Belarus's domestic conditions were neither then—nor are they now—conducive to nurturing European style political economy.

4 The Domestic Foundations of Lukashenka's Regime

Belarus's post-communist journey differs from that of the other post-Soviet states in the Baltic, Eastern Europe or Central Asia. While no former Soviet republic, not even Russia, could resist the tides of change, Belarus alone has upheld the signature traits of the Soviet political economy.⁵²

Critics often ascribe Belarus's departure from the 'norm' to Lukashenka, portraying him as a 'self-serving ruler' who turned his back on the neoliberal turn, choosing instead to rely on subsidized energy imports from Russia to keep the unreformed economy from collapsing.⁵³ This view labels him as a comprador who is in constant need of the Kremlin's assistance to curb what would otherwise be an immutable democratic force. Clearly, western perceptions see Lukashenka as the principal obstacle to Belarus's incorporation into European institutions. The underlying justification for the EU abandoning Belarus as a 'lost cause' gains traction from this perspective, which reduces a complex, multi-faceted reality to Lukashenka's anti-democratic disposition.

50 European External Action Service (EEAS), 'European Union outlines €3 billion economic support package for a future democratic Belarus', *European Commission*, 27 May 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-outlines-%E2%82%AC3-billion-economic-support-package-future-democratic-belarus_en.

51 G. Ioffe, *Reassessing Lukashenka: Belarus in Cultural and Geopolitical Context*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 5.

52 D. R. Marples, 'Outpost of tyranny? The failure of democratization in Belarus', *Democratization*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2009, p. 758.

53 V. Yarashevich, 'Political Economy of Modern Belarus: Going Against Mainstream?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 66, no. 10, 2014, p. 1704.

As to why Belarus diverged so fundamentally from the European route, this article employs a broader framework that considers structural factors to be just as vital as Lukashenka's autocratic tendencies. Internally, a set of structural factors—the success of Belarus's state-led economy and the absence of a distinctive Belarusian identity—facilitated his autocratic rule. Externally, Europe's own approach, called democratic conditionality, restrained him from assuming a more equidistant position between Brussels and Moscow. The following is an analysis on the two internal factors that mapped the deviant trajectory of Belarus.

A defining attribute of this trajectory is Belarus's economic structure, which has for the most part preserved its Soviet-era architecture well beyond the 1990s. From the outset, Minsk retained the main pillars of a centrally planned economy: prioritizing full employment, minimizing privatization and maintaining state-funded welfare programs—all of which stand in direct opposition to IMF's well-known 'shock therapy' prescriptions.⁵⁴

Remarkably, this departure from the neoliberal paradigm initially yielded a counterintuitive economic success. Contrary to earlier predictions, Belarus's unreformed economy outperformed nearly all other former Soviet states that went with privatization, fiscal austerity, and price liberalization. According to the IMF, from 1996 to 2008, Belarus's annual GDP growth averaged approximately 7.5%, surpassing that of Ukraine (~3.5%), energy-rich Russia (~5.0%), and even Poland (~4.5%), whose steady structural growth gained momentum from its integration into the EU.⁵⁵

The state's ownership of the means of production has been at the heart of Belarus's peculiar path. For instance, Belarus's unemployment rate averaged around 5% from 1997 to 2023—noticeably lower than Lithuania's 12%, Poland's 10%, Ukraine's 9% and Russia's 7% for the same period.⁵⁶ In an economy where the state acts as the primary employer, Belarus has also attained the lowest income inequality vis a vis the other post-Soviet Republics. According to the

54 D. M. Nuti, 'The Belarus economy: suspended animation between state and markets', in S. White, E. Korosteleva and J. Löwenhardt (eds), *Postcommunist Belarus*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 98.

55 International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Republic of Belarus: 2014 Article IV Consultation*, IMF Country Report No. 14/226, Washington, D.C.: IMF Publication Services, 2014, p. 4; M. Piatkowski, *Europe's Growth Champion: Insights from the Economic Rise of Poland*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 142.

56 World Bank, *Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)—Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Russian Federation*, Washington, D.C.: The World Bank Group, 2024.

World Bank,⁵⁷ the Gini Coefficient for Belarus stands at 24, one of the lowest scores globally. In contrast, the Gini coefficients for Ukraine, Russia, Poland and Lithuania are 26, 36, 29 and 37, respectively. This relatively lower level of income inequality is reinforced by Belarus's high level of government revenue, which claims 40% of GDP—10 percentage point above the regional average.

This formidable state presence in the economy has, in turn, allowed Minsk to sustain high levels of human development. According to the World Bank, Belarus's Human Capital Index (0.70) has consistently exceeded the average for upper-middle-income countries throughout the post-Soviet era.⁵⁸ Similarly, Belarus's universal health coverage index stands at 76, a figure that rivals or surpasses those of several Eastern European and Baltic states.⁵⁹ Crucially, the state's distributive capacity ensures that 65% of the poorest quintile of Belarusian society is covered by the social safety net, compared to a regional post-Soviet average of just 46%.⁶⁰

Overall, the state's control over the means of production paved the way for an economy with low unemployment and inequality rates, while sustaining strikingly high human development indicators and expansive social safety nets—surpassing most of its post-Soviet peers by a great margin. For decades, the working class and state-dependent employees, who greatly benefited from this political economy, held substantial stakes in the perseverance of the status quo. Comprising the vast majority of the Belarusian workforce during the regime's consolidation, this demographic traditionally underpinned Lukashenka's rule, sharing his opposition to the painful, market-friendly reforms promoted by the EU and the West.⁶¹

As Grigory Ioffe (2007) remarks, "Lukashenka can speak on behalf of roughly two-thirds of Belarusians because he and they agree on some critical issues defining Belarus as a country and Belarusians as a community" (69). They equally "dislike entrepreneurs and the West, prefer state-owned enterprises, and value low but steady over high but unsteady earnings" (Ioffe 2007). According to Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina, "the majority of the population accepted the

57 World Bank, *World Development Indicators: Gini index and Revenue, excluding grants (% of GDP)*, Washington, D.C.: The World Bank Group, 2024.

58 World Bank, *World Development Indicators: Human Capital Index*, Washington, D.C.: The World Bank Group, 2025.

59 World United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), *Universal Health Coverage Index*, Geneva: UNECE Statistical Database, 2025.

60 World Bank, *The State of Social Safety Nets*, Washington, D.C.: The World Bank Group, 2021.

61 Way, L., *Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

social contract proposed by Lukashenko, which can be ... expressed as receiving social rights ... in exchange for limited civil liberties" (2020).

Yet, it would be inaccurate to surmise that the working class's backing translates into uncritical allegiance to Lukashenka's self-styled rule, or that the absence of democratic channels is without its own challenges. In fact, the working class's participation in the 2020 and 2021 protests vividly illustrated the conditionality of their loyalty to Lukashenka's 'Schmittian' order.⁶² Critically, their grievances appear to have focused more on the coercive nature of the political order rather than the neo-Soviet characteristics of the Belarusian economy.⁶³ It is highly debatable whether the Belarusian workers would prefer reforms that would advance capitalist property relations.⁶⁴ After all, they are fully aware that such reforms would likely undermine their economic primacy.⁶⁵ It was not lost on Belarusians how millions of Russians walked into abject poverty in the 1990s due to shock therapy.

The domestic balance of power has long been underpinned by this shared opposition to reforming Belarus's economic foundations. As part of this implicit social contract, the working class constituted a durable basis of support for Lukashenka's regime in exchange for the latter's commitment to stable employment, state funded health care, and education. Consequently, Lukashenka's 'socialist market economy' worked to subdue the most significant social opposition to his pro-Russian orientation.⁶⁶ In this context, European calls for market-friendly reforms were seen by Belarusian workers—the only majority with power to change Belarus's domestic and international direction—as a threat to the established, labor-friendly social environment.⁶⁷

62 E. McLaughlin and A. Roth, 'Workers and students in Belarus launch anti-Alexander Lukashenko strike', *The Guardian*, 26 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/26/workers-and-student-in-belarus-launch-anti-alexander-lukashenko-strike>. Accessed April 10, 2026; E. A. Korosteleva, I. Petrova, and A. Kudlenko (eds.), *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century: Between Dictatorship and Democracy*, London: Routledge, 2022, p. 7.

63 V. Artiukh, 'The Anatomy of the Belarusian Protest: Class in Itself, Protest for Others?', *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, 4 November 2020; C. Ryzak, 'Belarus's Season of Discontent', *Dissent Magazine*, Summer 2021.

64 G. Ioffe, 'Belarusian Westernizers: Their debacle and perpetual bewilderment', *Russia. Post*, 2023.

65 G. Carboni, 'A guideline to Belarusian repressive methods: Dealing with structural roots of dissent', *New Eastern Europe*, 28 September 2021.

66 M. Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka: Adaptive Authoritarianism*, London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 45, 72.

67 G. Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, pp. 60–65; D. R. Marples, *The Lukashenka Phenomenon: Elections, Propaganda, and the Foundations of Political Authority in Belarus*, Trondheim: NTNU, 2007; Wilson, *Belarus*, p. 92.

Belarusians' partial and conditional support for the idea of reform has long diminished the EU's ability to trigger a democratic momentum in Belarus. Indeed, the EU's most significant challenge has been the lack of a domestic ally capable of mobilizing people against Lukashenka. This was apparent in the Belarusian opposition's most recent failed attempt to form a government-in-exile, known as the Coordination Council. This endeavor ended in disappointment, with only one out of every thousand Belarusians abroad voting, and roughly 175 candidates competing for eighty seats in the proto-parliament in exile.⁶⁸ According to Ioffe, those favoring a pro-European direction represent the fringes of the people of Belarus.⁶⁹ This observation aligns with contemporary sociological trends: a significant segment of the population continues to support the Russian orientation, while only a tiny fraction perceives the Western sanctions regime and treatment of the country's leadership as fair.⁷⁰

This close identification with the Russian worldview, in return, stems from another structural element: the absence of a distinct nation-state identity. The Belarusian view of the self in relation to Russia is analogous to the notion of *kindred spirits*—two tightly bonded communities cohabitating within the same sovereign space. It is this sense of kinship with Russia that has obstructed the formation of a unique self-conception.⁷¹ As a result, the idea of self-rule—indispensable for a genuine push toward democratic governance and independent statehood—has failed to materialize.⁷² Ja Shimov asserts that “instead of fighting for liberal freedoms, Belarusians prefer social and economic stability in the country, instead of developing nationalism Belarusians are almost indifferent to ethnic-national discourses.”⁷³ Similarly, Verena Fritz regards “the lack of a Belarusian national identity ... as a cause of Belarus's [unique] path”⁷⁴ and holds that it “account[s] both for Belarus's pro-Russian

68 ‘Belarusian Coordination Council: 7 key questions and answers’, *Belsat*, 8 April 2026.

69 Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus*, p. 151.

70 R. Astapenia, *Belarusians' views on the conflict with Ukraine*, London: Chatham House, 2023, p. 12; G. Ioffe, ‘The West's Belarus Policy: Does it Make Sense?’, *Russia.Post*, 28 July 2023.

71 A. Kazharski and M. Kubová, ‘Belarus as a liminal space for Russia's ontological security before and after the 2020 protests’, *New Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2021, pp. 255–257; N. Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: The Official and the Alternative ‘Belarusianness’*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010, pp. 142–143, 216–217.

72 V. Smok, ‘Belarusian National Identity: Still Not Prevalent?’, *Ostrogorski Centre Analysis*, 14 November 2013.

73 Shimov, cited in Titarenko, ‘Post-Soviet Belarus’, p. 116.

74 Fritz, *State-Building*, p. 212.

orientation, and for society's acceptance of an authoritarian regime which continues the communist social contract".⁷⁵

Belarusian national identity, in its current form, took shape through subjective re-reading of the preceding Soviet era. Contrary to Poland or Latvia, where the demise of the Soviet Union was widely welcomed as a moment of liberation from an oppressive metropolis, Belarusians saw it as the end of an era that, despite its numerous flaws, still ensured a socially and economically predictable environment for the greatest majority.⁷⁶ Belarus walked out of the Soviet Union with economic structure that, compared to other post-Soviet states, enjoyed a diversified industrial sector, an advanced research infrastructure, and a well-educated workforce.⁷⁷ Thus, Belarusians—perhaps even more so than Russians—saw the liquidation of the Soviet economic system in 1991 as a cause for major apprehension. In fact, according to a survey held in 2017, 54% of Belarusian society claimed that life had been better under the USSR.⁷⁸ This level of contentment with the Soviet past set the stage for a domestic landscape in which the forces favoring status quo retained dominance over Belarus's post-independence direction.⁷⁹

In consequence, right from the start, the Soviet-era nomenclature swiftly cemented its control over the country's political and economic life, easily marginalizing the pro-reform opposition. The latter was handicapped by the fact that, for many, social and political stability within the Soviet framework resonated far more powerfully than the desire for radical change. This deep-seated preference for institutional continuity helps explain why the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) earned only 7.5% of the mandates in the 1990 elections for the Supreme Soviet of the Byelorussian SSR.⁸⁰ Within this political ecology, the appeal for a rhetoric advocating a pro-European path lost even further ground, which is also the core reason why Lukashenka could sustain a subordinate

75 Ibid.

76 Smok, *Belarusian Identity*, pp. 18–19.

77 S. Lukin and A. Smolski, 'Work and Production in Post-Soviet Belarus', *Oikonomia*, October 2007.

78 Pew Research Center, *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe*, Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2017.

79 D. R. Marples, *The Lukashenka Phenomenon: Elections, Propaganda, and the Foundations of Political Authority in Belarus*, Trondheim: Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures and Societies, 2007; T. Kuzio, 'Belarus and Ukraine: Democracy-Building in a Grey Security Zone', in J. Zielonka and A. Pravda (eds.), *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe: Volume 2, International and Transnational Factors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 403–427.

80 Fritz S. White, G. J. Gill, and D. Slider, *The Politics of Transition: Shaping a Post-Soviet Future*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 32.

position toward Moscow with minor domestic resistance. Indeed, the sustenance of the clientele relations with the former patrons in Moscow—well into the post-independence period—might have been expected to provoke a democratic and nationalistic blowback. Yet, such counter-move never materialized. According to Artyom Shraibman, “Belarusians admire the EU because life is better there, but love Russia because it is ‘theirs’: i.e., close to their hearts”.⁸¹

In sum, the sentimental attachments to the Soviet past and the material legitimacy of the regime have in a profound manner inhibited Belarus’s post-independence evolution. Contemporary Belarus’s entrenched authoritarianism has its origins in the Soviet past, which—with its coercive institutions—managed to adapt and reproduce itself under completely new conditions. As a direct consequence of this inertia, there is little real impetus for Lukashenka pursue the path advised by the EU, whereas he has every incentive to preserve the pro-Russian status quo.

Even so, Lukashenka has, on several occasions, tried to reach out to Brussels in an effort to dilute his dependence on Russia. Yet these overtures to Europe were pragmatic moves rather than genuine attempts at realignment. The EU, for its part, allowed no flexibility in its response to these gestures. The EU’s strategic lenses—democratic conditionality—left Belarus with no opening. Thus, this section ends by setting the stage for the last part of this article, which will examine the last structural factor contributing to the persistence of Belarus’s pro-Russian alignment.

5 Reassessing the EU’s Belarus Policy: External Sources of Belarus’s International Mode of Conduct

In the previous section, it was argued that the EU’s leverage over Lukashenka is more limited than initially assessed by the policymakers in Brussels. No form of economic or political isolation has succeeded in disorienting him from his undemocratic and/or pro-Moscow discourse. In this section, focus shifts away from domestic politics to the geopolitical factors that steer the course of Belarus. Specifically, it will demonstrate that by prioritizing democratic transformation, Brussels might be ignoring the possibility of engaging Belarus on a more pragmatic basis—even without seeking regime change in Minsk.

An exclusive emphasis on democracy promotion has always grounded diplomatic and strategic relations between Brussels and Minsk. Underlying this

81 A. Shraibman, ‘Why Belarusians Are Turning Against Russia’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 16 December 2020.

approach is the assumption that anything short of a completely transformed Belarus—refashioned as a liberal political and economic entity—is unworthy of recognition as a reliable ally. Having long been anchored in this worldview, the EU has continually overlooked alternative pathways, particularly transactional ones, for integrating Belarus into the European security architecture.

Moreover, this one-track logic treats Belarus's pro-Russian behavior as a direct outgrowth of Lukashenka's undemocratic tendencies and maintains that a pro-European turn in Belarus's international behavior is not achievable before the demise of his rule.⁸² The following discussion shows that such disproportionate significance assigned to Belarus's domestic realm has created critical blind-spots, causing the EU to both ignore realist/structural drivers of Belarus's foreign relations, and to dismiss the possibility of engaging Lukashenka more pragmatically—even without a regime change in Minsk.

To wit, it takes an appreciation of the structural limits imposed on Belarus by its unique geopolitical context. Belarus constitutes Europe's eastern frontier, bordering one of the most revisionist powers in today's world politics: Putin's Russia. The direct exposure associated with this proximity is so acute that a closer partnership with NATO would likely not deter, but paradoxically invite, Russian aggression.⁸³ Aliaksei Kazharski clearly shows Belarus's 'in-between' position as stating, "regardless of ... the ... 'wars of position' that regularly sour relations between Minsk and Moscow, there was little that the former could do strategically to escape the [Kremlin]".⁸⁴ Ukraine offers a cautionary example for Belarus; its deepening engagement with Western institutions became the catalyst for Russia's repeated military interventions.⁸⁵

Consequently, it is crucial for Belarus to adopt a foreign policy outlook known as 'strategic hedging'.⁸⁶ Commonly embraced by smaller states situated

82 Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Belarus*, Brussels: General Secretariat of the Council, 19 February 2024; European Commission, *Economic Support Plan to Democratic Belarus*, Brussels: European Commission, 2025.

83 Preiherman, 'Belarus Finds its Foreign Policy Stride'. For a comprehensive reflection on this matter, see T. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018). He argues that Moscow views Western presence in its "near abroad" as an "amputation" of its civilizational space that must be met with pre-emptive strike.

84 A. Kazharski, 'Inside the Bear Hug: Belarus and its Geopolitical Predicament after the Ukraine Crisis', *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 554*, Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, December 2018, p. 2.

85 J. J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 5, 2014.

86 Y. Preiherman, 'The foreign policy of "small states" in-between: Belarus's "hedging" between Russia and the EU (2008–2020)', PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2021, pp. 73–80.

between rivaling powerhouses, this policy is based on navigating the demands of both blocs while avoiding total submission to any. As for the Belarusian state, preserving self-rule depends on attaining two inherently conflicting objectives. On one hand, it must appease Russia to a degree sufficient to diffuse the risk of aggression. Given Russia's well-defined hostility toward western presence in its near abroad—and the obvious power asymmetry—observance of Moscow's sensitivities is not just prudent; it is indispensable. This posture of deference does not source from regime's political character, but from the geographic locale of this vulnerable buffer state.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, even as playing this delicate balance-of-power game, Minsk has never stopped proclaiming itself as a sovereign actor capable of steering independently of its powerful neighbor.⁸⁸ These gestures reflect a fundamental concern: that an overtly one-sided alignment with Russia may one day drag Belarus into a costly conflict that serves no national interest.⁸⁹ Therefore, seeking Europe's counterbalancing weight is as integral to the Belarusian foreign policy as paying heed to Russia's priorities. Yauheni Preiherman observed that:

the Belarusian authorities declared a so-called '30–30–30' formula of sovereignty, which implies that the country's economy and security will only become sustainable if a third of its exports goes to Russia, another third to the EU and yet another—to the rest of the world. In other words, if Belarus's dependence on Russian markets is lowered, and the EU is crucial for that.⁹⁰

What is striking, however, is that the EU has never been invested in an augmented commercial and financial partnership as an alternative venue to viewing Belarus's democratic transformation as the only way forward. As Elena Korosteleva noted, "a more interest-driven technical cooperation ... [could] ... increase Belarus' commitment and socialization into the international system of norms and standards".⁹¹ Although Minsk never intended to replace Russia

87 W. W. Konończuk, 'Difficult talks between Russia and Belarus', *Analyses*, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 27 December 2018; Astapenia, *Transforming Belarus*; T. Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World*, London: Elliott & Thompson, 2015, pp. 11–15, 21.

88 Pucek and Deen, *Belarus on Thin Ice*, pp. 6–7.

89 A. Lanoszka, 'The Belarus Factor in European Security', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2018, p. 325.

90 Preiherman, 'The foreign policy of "small states" in-between', p. 161.

91 E. Korosteleva, 'The European Union and Belarus: democracy promotion by technocratic means?', *Democratization*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2016, p. 681.

with a European security identity, it always greatly valued cultivating commercial and financial relations with the EU. A strong economic bond with Europe, Minsk believed, could reduce its reliance on Russian export markets, thereby creating a modicum of autonomy. One notable step in this direction took place in 2008 when Belarus diverged from Russia's official position by refusing to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The EU in response extended to Belarus an invitation to its newest regional initiative, the Eastern Partnership (EaP).⁹² However, the EU froze the initiative in 2010 as a reaction to the violent police crackdown after the national election.⁹³ Belarus, despite this setback, did not leave the EaP—signaling once again that its relations with Europe were not expendable. The 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict, in this context, presented the right opportunity for Belarus to melt the ice with Brussels. In response to the conflict:

the Belarusian government started to pursue a policy of situational neutrality regarding both the conflict itself as well as the resulting broader confrontation between Russia and the West. Quite quickly, Belarus offered up its capital city as a neutral venue for peace talks, where the Minsk ceasefire agreements were negotiated and signed ... In addition, Belarus refused to host a Russian military airbase on its territory, arguing that the base would only worsen the situation in the region.⁹⁴

That said, the full restoration of diplomatic relations had to wait until Brussels decided to annul sanctions previously imposed on Minsk in 2016.

According to Yauheni Preiherman,⁹⁵ Belarus's relations with Europe, in terms of the intensity of bilateral contacts, steadily improved from that point onward, rivaling its relations even with Moscow in the post-2016 period. This however does not indicate a shift in the pro-Russian foreign policy axis of the country. On the contrary, given Belarus's geopolitical vulnerabilities, the Kremlin remains the primary pillar of Minsk's international behavior. It nonetheless signifies a major effort on Minsk's part to narrow the gap with European capitals in the stated period. Indeed, longstanding and emerging tensions in relations with Moscow were what pushed Belarus to broaden its

92 E. Korosteleva, *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours: Towards a more ambitious partnership?*, London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 60–65.

93 Ibid.

94 Y. Preiherman, 'Can Belarus become a success story of European security?', *Commentary*, London: European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 21 February 2019.

95 Ibid.

menu of foreign policy choices, making Brussels a natural partner for strategic partnership. This economic motive represented the key opening with Belarus. Yet, despite this opening, Brussels failed to turn this into a lasting advantage.

As a direct result of this failure, Minsk's hopes for stronger economic ties to Europe have never been fully realized. This article propounds that the prospect of an entrepreneurial class whose prosperity hinged on trade with Europe could have been that key channel which the EU ever needed to influence the domestic discourse from within. Despite Belarus's efforts, the scale and the depth of economic interactions achieved no quantitative significance sufficient to nurture a nascent Belarusian capitalist class with a pro-EU stance. Even at its peak in 2018, Belarusian exports to Europe amounted to roughly two third of the volume exported to Russia.⁹⁶ Even more problematic was the composition of this trade: petro-chemicals derived from discounted Russian oil constituted the dominant share of the exports to European markets, standing nearly at 40%.⁹⁷ This suggests that Belarus's economic exchanges with Europe were less of a genuine diversification than an extension of its ongoing dependence on Russian energy wealth.

Given the sheer size of Europe as a consumer market, Brussels obviously possessed formidable leverage to loosen Russia's grip on Belarus's material wellbeing. It was then no coincidence that the Kremlin reacted swiftly and vocally to the launch of the Eastern Partnership—an initiative aiming at expanding Brussels's footprint in the post-Soviet space. Russia's rivalling economic integration model, Eurasian Customs Union (the ECU), offers candidate governments two unique advantages that sharply contrast with the EU's method.

First, while the ECU is presented as a purely economic platform, it operates on a fundamentally different set of expectations than the EU. Unlike Brussels, which demands domestic democratic reform, Moscow prioritizes geopolitical alignment. In this framework, economic incentives—such as privileged access to the Russian market—function as a lever for ensuring diplomatic loyalty. Second, while the EU withholds immediate membership, Russia allows for direct representation within the governing bodies of the common market. Furthermore, the EU is well-known for its protectionist attitude in relation to agricultural goods—a sector in which Belarus holds a clear comparative advantage. This tendency is not new—the EU often privileges its own needs and priorities over the concerns of the negotiating parties. A compelling example is

96 National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Belarus*, 2018, Minsk: Belstat, 2018, p. 439.

97 National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, *Foreign Trade of the Republic of Belarus: Statistical Book*, 2019, Minsk: Belstat, 2019, p. 89.

Brussels' approach to negotiations with Ukraine, where it took on a unilateral path—setting expectations for Ukraine's alignment with the Union yet doing so “with little acknowledgment of the importance of its economic ties with Russia and the CIS, thereby ignoring the particular economic (let alone political) costs of moving away from Russia”.⁹⁸

In light of this, opening European markets to non-oil related products—such as agriculture or IT services—would have been a modest and inexpensive initiative with the potential to produce far-reaching outcomes, had the EU embarked on that path. Yet neither then nor now Brussels appeared willing to soften its restrictions on products beyond petro-chemicals. Due to this fact, total trade with Europe saw a 23 percent decline from 2014 to 2019 and fell to new lows following the new sanctions from 2020 onwards.⁹⁹ For the date, exports to the Union have dwindled to just 1.5 billion dollars, about one-sixth the value of exports to Russia.¹⁰⁰ This disappointing landscape, far from empowering political currents promoting greater freedom from the Kremlin, has instead lent credibility to the sustenance of special relations with Moscow.

Note that the 2020 election and the brutal crackdown of the subsequent mass protests signify a radical shift in Brussels' relations with Belarus. Until 2020, the EU combined normative pressure through democratic conditionality with incremental engagement. With the 2020 events, the EU seemed to lose all of its patience with Minsk, officially ceased to recognize Lukashenka's government and made moves to economically insulate the regime. The EU's post-2020 policy toward his rule has reflected a sharp turn toward greater alignment with solidarist principles, giving priority to norms over pragmatism. This recalibration apparently springs from the fear that continued cooperation might be misread as tolerating oppression.

Albeit perfectly in tune with the logic of solidarist brand of English School, this position is not without its issues. First, the EU's strict adherence to democratic conditionality in the case of Belarus appears inconsistent, provided that the EU preserved its relations with countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Azerbaijan and even Russia on purely pragmatic grounds, from energy flows to border security. Second, the EU has conditioned the establishment of closer ties with Belarus on latter one's willingness to first embrace a long list of reform

98 R. Dragneva and K. Wolczuk, *Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry?*, Chatham House Briefing Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2012, p. 7.

99 National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, *Foreign Trade of the Republic of Belarus: Statistical Book, 2019*, Minsk: Belstat, 2019, p. 19.

100 K. Kłysiński and S. Matuszak, 'Dynamic imports vs. dwindling exports. Belarus–EU trade in 2023', *Analyses*, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 11 March 2024.

proposals. This approach left Minsk with a tough choice: take the offer under stringent terms or reject it altogether. Such strict conditionality this time came at a steep price for Europe, costing a critical security asset—Belarus itself—which could be the key buffer against Russia. After all, what logic is there in expecting an authoritarian regime to undermine its own foundations to the cause of reassuring Brussels? As Yuliya Miadzvetskaya¹⁰¹ aptly responds, “it is not realistic ... to expect that the regime [aka. Lukashenka] will commit political suicide.”

6 Conclusion

Belarus has served as perhaps the most notable litmus test of the EU’s vision of geopolitics. The European brand of geopolitics represents a clear departure from the ‘Ratzellian’ interpretation of the term, which conceptualizes states as projecting power through force in a competitive struggle over a finite, chessboard-like space. Brussels, by contrast, designates its geopolitical role as one of a normative power that positions its economic and political model as a reference point for states in its immediate neighborhood to emulate. European security, therefore, is reliant on the willingness of other states to internalize the EU’s foundational values. This is the geopolitical vision that Belarus has put to the test.

As discussed in this article, due to domestic and international constraints, hopes for an across-the-board transformation of Belarus through partnership programs are unattainable. Lukashenka’s repressive political machinery still, arguably, relies on a significant base of passive acquiescence or stability-seeking sectors within Belarusian society. This article identified two reasons for this, both of which arise from Belarus’s unique domestic profile. One of them relates to the implicit social contract that has long defined Belarus’s political economy. Accordingly, in exchange for continued welfare provisions and economic stability, the working class has provided a foundation of support for Lukashenka’s pro-Russian orientation. The other factor is related to the underdevelopment of the Belarusian conception of national self. It is argued that Lukashenka’s pro-Russian foreign policy caused no prominent nationalist resistance due in large part to the nostalgia felt for the Soviet era.

Finally, Belarus’s geopolitically precarious state, stemming from its total exposure to Russian military might, renders a clean break from the Kremlin

101 Y. Miadzvetskaya, *Designing Sanctions: Lessons from EU Restrictive Measures against Belarus*, Policy Paper, Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), 16 June 2022, p. 3.

unlikely. Even so, Belarus has attempted to check Russia's ever-growing control over its economic structure by engaging with European commercial and financial networks. As argued in this article, Europe has so far failed to capitalize on this opportunity. Brussels' emphasis on democratic conditionality has effectively marginalized Belarus from the European fold. Rather than fostering change, this approach has left Minsk further exposed to Russian influence, as Europe's idealistic stance overlooks the pragmatic security realities of the region.

We can make two key inferences from this landscape. First, Belarus did not actually need to go through a full-scale transformation to become more responsive to Europe's concerns. Even with these constraints, Minsk has never aborted its counterbalancing act against Moscow. From 2014 to 2020, it signalled its intent to bolster European security by embracing a multi-vector foreign policy. In other words, to the extent that European security necessitates a frontier state with both the will and ability to resist Moscow, Belarus was ready to take on that responsibility.

Another conclusion to draw from this picture is about Europe's need to reconsider its normative foreign policy. An alternative to the conditionality principle could have involved utilizing the Union's immense economic power to subvert Moscow's monopolistic control over Belarusian trade and finance. This path—by encouraging the development of an inner circle that subscribes to political and economic pluralism—could have helped remedy the most fundamental deficit of Brussels in its engagement with Belarus. It is true that such an approach may not produce immediate political change. Yet, its incremental nature still offers the European Union a solid opportunity to partially reorient Belarus's international allegiances in more favourable directions.

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