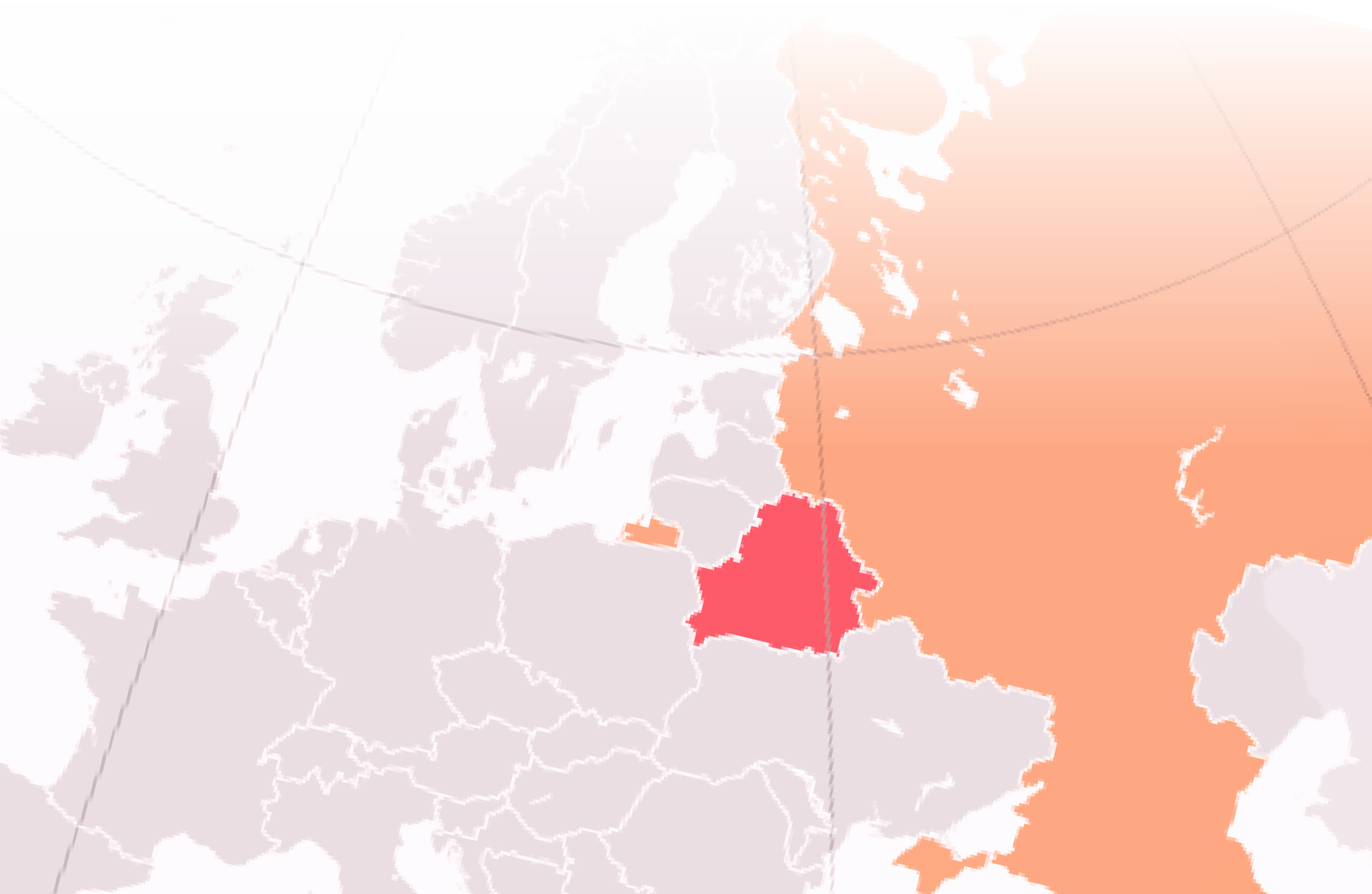




## GCRF COMPASS Policy Brief

# BELARUS' INTEGRATION WITH RUSSIA: ASSESSING THE CHALLENGES FOR THE COUNTRY

10 February, 2022



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## **Belarus' integration with Russia: assessing the challenges for the country**

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**Oxford Belarus Observatory:** The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policy-making, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

[GCRF COMPASS Project](#) (ES/P010849/1, 2017-21) is an ambitious UK government capacity-building funding initiative, aiming to extend UK research globally and to address the challenges of growth and sustainability in developing countries. Notably, the COMPASS project, led by the University of Kent, in partnership with the University of Cambridge, seeks to establish the ‘hubs of excellence’ at the top-level Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to enable them to become the centres for knowledge-sharing and transfer for *research integration, impact governance, and sustainable communities*. In 2021, the COMPASS project was HIGHLY COMMENDED under the category of the best international collaboration of the year, by the Times Higher Education, widely known to be ‘[The OSCARS of Higher Education in the UK](#)’.

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# Belarus’ integration with Russia: assessing the challenges for the country

## Executive Summary

*This policy brief offers a recap of the discussion held on 3 February 2022, at the webinar jointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) and the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST), with the support of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) COMPASS project. The discussion focused on the recently renewed process of unification between Belarus and Russia, as part of the Union State project, and its challenges for Belarus as a country. The speakers highlighted their concerns regarding the intensified pressure on Belarus to modify its military strategy, including the en-masse stationing of Russian troops and the storage of (nuclear) weaponry on its soil with ensuing implications for the neutrality status of Belarus as a country; the degree of independence with which Lukashenka is able to take decisions today; and the limited endorsement by the Belarusians of the renewed integration initiative. The brief offers some policy recommendations for domestic, regional and international stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** Belarus, integration, Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organisation, military doctrine, independence

**Abbreviations:** *EAEU* - Eurasian Economic Union; *CSTO* - Collective Security Treaty Organisation; *NATO* - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation; *EU* - European Union

## Background

On the state-run "Day of National Unity" September 17, 2021, Vladimir Putin and Aliaksandar Lukashenka held a Supreme State Council of the Union State via video conference. A decree on the revised *Union State* was signed, which approved 28 out of 31 integration programmes, including the *Concept of Migration Policy* and other important chapters. The documents aimed at intensifying and deepening the integration between the two states in the economy, politics, culture and military spheres. The *Military Doctrine* received separate attention implicating Belarus' closer involvement in joint military operations with Russia abroad. According to the representatives of the official Minsk and Moscow, it "is (now) conditioned by changes in the military-political situation in the region, the emergence of new security challenges and threats for Russia and Belarus".<sup>1</sup> To this end, Lukashenka acknowledged Crimea as part of Russia, and declared his support in the case of Ukrainian aggression.

How should we understand these developments? What are the meaning and security consequences of further integration between Belarus and Russia? Can signing the Military Doctrine be interpreted as a potential threat for regional security? These and other questions were discussed during the expert online webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of the [Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#) (OST Research Centre) and the [Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) (OBO), with the support of the [GCRF COMPASS project](#), on January 20, 2022.

The event was moderated by **Prof. Elena Korosteleva** and the speakers of the event included **Franak Viačorka**, Senior Advisor to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Head of the Foreign Policy Department; **Prof. Vladislav Inozemtsev**, Founder, Centre for Post-Industrial Studies, Professor at Moscow State University and the Higher School of Economics; **Dr Arkady Moshes**, Programme Director for the EU Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme, Finish Institute of International Affairs; and **Dr Ruth Deyermond**, Senior Lecturer, Department of War Studies, King's College London. What follows below is a recap of the discussion, including the analysis of the key issues, and recommendations on how to deal with the implications of the increased integration for Belarus especially, but also for the wider region, under the current circumstances of military tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

## Analysis of the issue

### An uncertain integration: what kind of developments are envisaged?

Promoted by Lukashenka and Putin, the renewed integration project of the Union State creates a situation of uncertainty, which is deepening even further (February 2021) with the Russian troops being stationed in Belarus for the "Allied Resolve" (RU – "Soyuznoje Edinstvo") and military drills. In the first instance, this uncertainty is emerging due to the lack of transparency, information and understanding of what the renewed Union State should be about. The roadmaps or programmes, which have been discussed for months if not years,

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<sup>1</sup> Tass.ru (4.11.2021). Mezentsev: the military doctrine of the Union State confirms that its borders are protected <https://tass.ru/politika/12847525>

were also subject to the same debate back in 1999, and the same alarms and concerns are raised now. On the one hand, Official Minsk and Moscow intend to find a way to collaborate and to build a stronger and closer relationship. On the other hand, there is no clear understanding within the Belarusian society of what this ‘deeper integration’ and ‘stronger relationship’ should mean and how this integration should progress further, particularly in light of the already existing membership of both countries in the Euraisan Economic Union (an economic dimension) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (the security dimension).

Additionally, these revised roadmaps or integration programmes, which were signed in 2021, raised a lot of questions and, to date, there has been no real progress made in providing satisfactory answers. Indeed, there are doubts even within the civil service that these roadmaps will ever be implemented. The bigger questions are *why now*, *what kind of Union*, and *what is at stake*, which were addressed in the webinar, and are examined further in this brief, with recommendations to follow. It is important to take a cautionary approach, and not be alarmist especially about the issue of Belarusian sovereignty, and instead analyse the renewed focus on the integration comprehensively and factually, to draw any further conclusions.

The very concept of ‘integration’ is questioned here, if compared, for example, to the integration project in the European Union (EU). While the latter seemed like a natural progression to fulfil the needs of the participating member states; the Belarus-Russia Union State, on the contrary, seems to be a bureaucratic exercise to purely satisfy the desire of its leaders rather than their own peoples economic, social or security needs. It is reflected in the extended nature of the negotiations between the officials, on behalf of their citizenry, who by and large do not believe or support this effort, and do not see their future in this union. There has been no real progress, or enthusiasm about it, and no practical outcomes, apart from the paper ones, have been achieved to move this project forward. In particular, 28 programmes recently signed, are only valid until the end of 2023, and in order to enact them, according to the Russian Prime Minister, they would need another several hundred laws to be passed by the respective parliaments.

All these odd actions and spurious bureaucratic commitments form the grounds for serious concerns about the effectiveness and the *purposefulness* of this exercise: what kind of union? why now? and what is at stake? To answer these questions, it is important to evaluate the progress of this process in full, and to estimate any possible risks this process may inadvertently create for the economic, military and other spheres for Belarus, and the wider region. This is particularly timely, in light of the growing number of Russian troops stationed on Belarusian soil, preparing for the military drills and possible NATO ‘aggression’ and a war with Ukraine. They will tentatively stay there until February 20, 2022, but their presence could be extended indefinitely, which would create a definitive risk and threat to Belarus’ independence and sovereignty.

## **What kind of Union and why now? Lukashenka's role in the process**

Lukashenka considers the Union State as an expedient channel through which he can syphon extra subsidies from Russia to sustain his failing state machinery. Although after 2020 Russia has become less generous than it used to be, now pursuing a policy of “less or the same for more (from Belarus)”, the government of Lukashenka is getting more and more in debt. In particular, contrary to the general view, it is Lukashenka who orchestrated and implemented a pro-Russian policy for Belarus in multiple spheres. First, it is the economy that has suffered the most, from receiving subsidies from Russia, in recent years, Russian total subsidies to Belarus have been assessed at USD 2 billion a year; selling/giving Gazprom the biggest national assets, i.e. gas transportation system; and anchoring/pegging national development to the use/resale of Russia's natural resources abroad.<sup>2</sup> In international relations, it was Lukashenka's choice to bring Belarus into the fold of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and other international projects, supported by Russia, once again pursuing a policy of cheap energy resources, which is yet to be negotiated. Lukashenka also undermined the national education system by pegging Belarus' standards to those of Russia (including university-level entry exams), levelling out to the lowest denominator the differentiation in state and private education, destroying education in Belarusian language (no University with Belarusian language of instruction exists in the country today) and making it a conformist and ideological instrument of state propaganda. Lukashenka also supports Russian media presence in the country, which expressly dominates the dull and state-controlled national television, broadcasting Russian propaganda. Finally, recently Lukashenka has traded the carefully-cultivated status of Belarus' neutrality for Russian military support, hosting hundreds of thousands of Russian troops and weapons on Belarusian soil, and betraying Ukraine by openly recognizing Crimea as Russian.

So, in other words, the Union is propelled by both Lukashenka, and Putin, to satisfy their own needs and desires: for the former - to obtain a lifeline to support his failing state and somehow secure his own future; and for the latter - to advance his long-term imperial ambitions for the restoration of Russia's power across the region. Why now - simply because there is urgency in erecting the scaffolding for Lukashenka's regime, without which he will not be able to 'feed' even his security forces, let alone the increasingly impoverished, and shrinking population. For Putin, it is simply a highly opportune moment, with instability in Europe, and the ailing USA, to restore the moment of glory and attention to himself and his power ambitions across the post-Soviet space.

The Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) and their strategic partners aim to restore balance in their approach towards Russia and pursue a multi-vector, multilateral regional and global foreign and security policy. In 2020 Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was given a mandate to lead the country to the new elections. Citizens who voted for her, represented both pro-Russian and pro-European electorates, also advocating for neutrality in government foreign policy. There is hope that rationality will prevail, and in the near future, when the

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<sup>2</sup> Anders Åslund. (2021) How sustainable is the Belarusian economy?  
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/how-sustainable-is-the-belarusian-economy/>

moment of negotiations comes, Russia along with other neighbours, and Western countries will agree to become mediators in the negotiations on the future of Belarus.

## **Belarus-Russia integration in the public eyes of the Belarusians**

Prior to the presidential election in 2020, Belarusians largely remained apolitical, did not have any strongly articulated geopolitical preferences, or indeed any major criticism of Lukashenka's regime. The number of those who were pro-Russian or pro-European before the August 2020 watershed point, was nearly the same over 15-20 years - with about a third looking west; a third looking east, a third being for both options, and the remainder undecided.<sup>3</sup> There has always been a geopolitical divide in public opinion with a share of those who believed that Belarus must become part of the EU and a share of those who favoured the pro-Russian Union, and yet, a stronger share of the population supporting either neutrality or an alliance with both power centres. The Belarusians seek to be in good relations with all the neighbours around them,<sup>4</sup> and this was indeed a solid foundation for fostering the policy of neutrality and good neighbourliness promoted by the government since the country's independence.

Since the August 2020 events, attitudes towards Russia changed dramatically, and there is a strong and growing anti-Russian sentiment<sup>5</sup> among Belarusians, due to the Kremlin's support of Lukashenka financially, militarily, and via communication and propaganda.

The Belarusians see the Union both with Russia and the EU as something mutually beneficial and transparent (freedom of travel, openness to business etc.). However, they reject an option of deeper political integration and prefer to maintain their neutral status in relation to their foreign, security and defence policies. In other words, for the Belarusians, while wishing to pursue the integrationist initiatives to benefit them economically, their priority also lies with their own sovereignty and independence. This is symbolised by the increasing desire within the population to keep and enhance their national attributes: language, territory, national identity, national symbols (flag; national patterns), democratic governance system, national currency, and education. The level of Belarusian nationalism rose dramatically since the August 2020 events.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see a comparative surveys in 2013 and 2016 undertaken by the Global Europe Centre, University of Kent:

<https://research.kent.ac.uk/global-europe-centre/wp-content/uploads/sites/1508/2019/04/gec-belarus-survey-brief-2013.pdf>;

<https://research.kent.ac.uk/global-europe-centre/wp-content/uploads/sites/1508/2019/04/gec-belarus-survey-brief-2016.pdf>; and more current research by Chatham House

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/01/belarusians-views-political-crisis>

<sup>4</sup> IISEPS (2015) <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=1501&lang=en> The Formula of Popular Geopolitics: For Russia and Independence (2017)

<https://ex-press.by/rubrics/politika/2017/05/23/formula-narodnoj-geopolitiki-za-rossiyu-i-nezavisimost>

<sup>5</sup> Sociologist: Belarusians negatively assessed the support of Lukashenka by the Kremlin (2020)

<https://www.dw.com/ru/sociolog-belorusy-negativno-ocenili-podderzhku-lukashenko-kremlen/a-55770686>

<sup>6</sup> For more information see Korosteleva, E. and I. Petrova (2021) 'Community Resilience and the EU Response', *Journal of common Market studies*, available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13248>;

Petrova, I. and E. Korosteleva (2021) 'Societal Fragilities and resilience: the emergence of peoplehood in

Belarus', available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/18793665211037835>; Kazharski, A. (2021)



## **A Western vision of Belarus – Russia integrational processes**

It is difficult to talk about a unified Western vision and understanding of the Belarus-Russia Union State due to the diversity of opinions and geostrategic attitudes towards Russia in the first place.

Often Belarus' domestic politics and foreign policy have been seen by Western states and key international institutions, as an extension of the Russian state. There has not been an attempt in many cases to properly engage with the idea of Belarus as a distinctive international actor, with a capacity to develop an independent policy, particularly in the security area. In the aftermath of the 2020 presidential elections, most Western analysts portrayed Lukashenka as entirely dependent on the Russian government and assumed that Belarus' government actions were solely determined by the Kremlin. Hence, the West has been seeking to resolve what was first seen as an internal crisis in Belarus, via their negotiations with Russia, rather than engaging directly with Belarus as an independent actor. When the situation became an external threat to the security of Europe and the world, with the hijacking of Ryanair, staging a migrant crisis on the EU border, and now with Russian troops being amassed on Belarus' territory - negotiations once again are held, with Russia, dismissing Belarus and its people as an actor 'worth talking to'. All these occurrences are still seen by the West as evidence of Putin's manipulation and ability to extract any price that he chooses, for shoring up for the Lukashenka presidency.<sup>7</sup>

Presently, we can see that for the first time in the post-Cold War period, Belarus is emerging as an important actor in the European security architecture. The two areas in which this is most visible are the migrant crisis at the border with NATO and the EU states, and the current significant build-up of Russian troops on Belarus' territory. In both cases, but particularly the latter, Belarus' role is often seen as no more than Russia's effective provocation of the West and a means for the Kremlin to extend its strategic space and to apply pressure on NATO and the EU to force them to negotiate.

There is however an emergent understanding that Russia is not acting alone in the post-Soviet space, and is part of a much broader authoritarian landscape against which the Western countries are set to negotiate and defend their values. In this context, any development in the Russia-Belarus Union to the extent that it is acknowledged and engaged with, does not just assume importance for the security of western and Central Europe, it is also significant for the future shape of European and international order.

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'Belarus' New Political Nation? 2020 Anti-Authoritarian Protests as Identity-Building'. *New Perspectives*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X20984340>.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Whitmore (2021). Lukashenka goes all in with Putin <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/lukashenka-goes-all-in-with-putin/>



## Conclusions

When it comes to Russia-Belarus integration processes, there might be some very negative developments, however, preservation of the status quo situation is also possible. As long as the Belarusian army remains neutral and is not involved in Russia's plans for the invasion of Ukraine, one can still argue that this critical line, 'the point of no return', has not yet been passed. Meanwhile, within any scenario, it is important to see a window of opportunity for the progressive development in Belarus and its relations with external stakeholders.

Belarusians and Belarusian society have transformed dramatically over the past two years<sup>8</sup> and there is no way for them to go back to the social contract they used to have with Lukashenka. Despite repressions, oppression, emigration, fear and other negative trends in the country, they will not return to the previous status-quo keeping Lukashenka in power. The crisis is unfolding in its latent form, and the amassed Russian army on Belarus' territory is a testimony to it.

## Policy recommendations

- Western sanction policies should be tightened and become smart, aiming at cutting all trade flows from and via Belarus, while Belarus remains a very important transit route for Russian goods to Europe and for European goods to Russia. If Western democratic governments can cut all the transit flows via Belarus, it would affect Russia too.
- It is important to make a clear statement that all sanctions may be automatically extended to Russia if Russia were to force Belarus to become part of its political structure. There should be a clear message to Putin that such developments are unacceptable, and they will be punished.
- If there is an escalation of war in Ukraine, and particularly if that involves invasion *from* the territory of Belarus, the discourse of Belarus' integration with Russia being the epicentre of the political struggle between democracy and authoritarianism should be strengthened, and appropriate actions taken.
- Belarusian democratic leadership and the West should demonstrate to the Belarusians that there is a different future for the country and for each one of them individually.
- Belarus and its democratic forces should no longer be taken for granted, and be involved in international negotiations about their future, and security prospects, to counterbalance Russia's influence and pressure.

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<sup>8</sup> Korosteleva, E. and Petrova, I. (2021) 'Community Resilience in Belarus and the EU response', *Journal of common Market Studies Annual Review*, 59(4), advanced online publication available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13248>

## Sources

1. Video recording of the discussion is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eZrNq8PfJM> (accessed January 27, 2022).

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