

## **BELARUS: WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...**

**EUGENE RUMER, BOGDAN BELEI**

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 put an end to the post-Cold War phase in European politics and security affairs. Russian actions dispelled any remaining doubts that the vision of Europe whole, free, and at peace with itself and its neighbors would no longer serve as the foundation of European security. The breakdown of the post-Cold War European security model based on the assumption that Russia would eventually develop into the easternmost pillar of this security order signaled the need for a fundamental reassessment in NATO's and the EU's approach to Russia. The relationship from that point on would become adversarial.

The consequences of that shift have been profound, none more serious than the realization that NATO would have to adopt a new posture vis-à-vis Russia. In the quarter century since the Cold War, many of its deterrent and defensive capabilities for the European theater had atrophied and would need to be rebuilt. Russia suddenly emerged as a renewed threat to the alliance and its partners, to which NATO had grown unaccustomed during the preceding decades.

However, along with the renewed Russian threat and the weaknesses in the alliance's defenses, the three years since the annexation of Crimea have revealed a number of significant gaps in Russia's own capabilities and position on the European continent. Having claimed a "sphere of privileged interests" around its periphery and gone to war twice—in Georgia and in Ukraine—Russia has a number of clear advantages when it comes to projecting power and influence there. But its grip on the vast region its leaders have cavalierly called their "near abroad" is far less certain than often assumed. In fact, the experiences of several countries on the periphery of Russia suggest that it cannot count them as allies. It appears the statement attributed to Czar Alexander III that Russia has only two allies—its army and its navy—has not lost its salience nearly a century and a half later.

No country on the periphery of Russia has a more ambiguous relationship with it than Belarus. Long considered to be Moscow's closest ally among all the former Soviet states, Minsk has, arguably, been the most frustrating for Russian leaders to deal with. It is likely to remain a difficult and unpredictable partner—one that cannot be counted on in times of crisis—yet it will likely continue to be indispensable to Russia in the post-2014 era.

### **A SHARED LEGACY**

Minsk's relationship with Moscow appears to be rock solid, as the two countries share a strong historical affinity and are similar in nature. The two neighbors have been in a common state since 1996, followed by a formal agreement on the establishment of a union state that was signed in 1999.<sup>1</sup> Belarus is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) championed by Russia as its principal vehicle for gathering the states of the former Soviet Union into its sphere of influence.

Belarus's domestic arrangements are also similar to those of Russia. Both countries have been ruled by longtime leaders who have dominated domestic politics and tolerated no opposition. Both have developed highly personality-dependent

### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Eugene Rumer** is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program.

**Bogdan Bele** is a James C. Gaither Junior Fellow in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program.

political systems. Both Belarus and Russia are authoritarian regimes with few, if any, prospects for change for the foreseeable future. Both countries' economies are dominated by state-owned or state-controlled enterprises (SOEs).

These similarities and close ties between the two neighbors are a product of Belarusian history and the legacy of the Soviet era. Without a history of statehood in modern times and having been long dominated by its more powerful neighbors, the Belarusian state is the heir to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belorussia, with borders established as a result of the Soviet recarving of Eastern Europe after World War II.

During the war, owing to its critical location between Europe and Russia, Belarus was one of the principal routes of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, retracing the footsteps of Napoleon's army in 1812. Belarus was the scene of some of the heaviest fighting in World War II and was liberated only in 1944. The fighting at the Brest Fortress in Belarus at the outset of the German invasion in 1941 remains one of the most storied chapters of World War II in Soviet and post-Soviet historiography and literature. Belarus suffered extremely heavy losses during the war. Just as in Russia, the war and the victory over Nazi Germany remain the most important legacy of the twentieth century for Belarus. The anniversary of this victory is commemorated in Belarus, just as it is in Russia, each year on May 9 as one of the most important national holidays.

Belarus benefited from a major post-war reconstruction effort by the Soviet government that committed vast resources to the task of rebuilding its devastated cities and towns, turning the republic into a major bastion of Soviet heavy industry.<sup>2</sup> By the 1980s, it was one of the most prosperous Soviet republics. Perhaps as a result of the republic's relatively privileged position in the Soviet Union, combined with the legacy of World War II and heavy indoctrination, no popular mass movement calling for reform or independence from the Soviet Union emerged in Belarus during the period of perestroika. The republic suffered heavily as a result of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster in neighboring Ukraine, but unlike there, this incident did not lead to a political renaissance in Belarus. The March 1991 referendum revealed that over 80 percent of Belarusians wanted to preserve the Soviet Union and remain in it.<sup>3</sup>

On December 8, 1991, Belarus joined Russia and Ukraine in the decision to dissolve the Soviet Union and form the Commonwealth of Independent States with its headquarters in Minsk. However, change in newly independent Belarus

promised to be slow, with domestic politics still dominated by the conservative Soviet-era establishment, which was reluctant to embrace economic and political reforms.<sup>4</sup> The country's economy and its heavy industrial base were oriented mostly toward the Soviet market, which had disintegrated with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the implosion of first the Soviet economy and then the Russian one. The task of economic reform would be exceedingly difficult and carry the risk of mass social dislocations. Few, if any, political leaders would knowingly take on this risk, which remains one of the principal challenges facing the Belarusian economy a quarter century later.

In this atmosphere of stagnating reform and economic uncertainty, the 1994 election for the newly created presidency of Belarus propelled to the top of the country's political structure a relative newcomer, a minor Soviet-era official named Alexander Lukashenko.<sup>5</sup> He has dominated the country's political and economic life ever since.

## A LONG, HARD SLOG

Lukashenko's long tenure as president of Belarus has defied conventional wisdom and his many critics. From the very beginning of his first term in office, he publicly embraced the idea of rebuilding close ties to Moscow. He advocated a monetary union with Russia and even unification. With his domestic economic policies, he rejected the wisdom of the Washington Consensus and maintained state control of the commanding heights of the Belarusian economy. And he proceeded to strengthen the role of the presidency in domestic politics and chip away at the democratic gains of the previous decade.<sup>6</sup>

All this apparently struck a responsive chord with the largely conservative population of the country. The chaotic early post-Soviet years had produced considerable nostalgia in Belarus for the relative prosperity and stability of Soviet times. A 1995 referendum empowered the president to dissolve the parliament, restored the old Soviet-era flag, endorsed the idea of economic integration with Russia, and approved Russian as an official language.<sup>7</sup> These results would have been hard to replicate in any other former Soviet republic even at the height of the early post-Soviet transition with its countless political and economic difficulties.

The story of Belarus has since been a tale of a country and a government that has been described variously as "frozen in time," "the last dictatorship in Europe," and a "Soviet

theme park.”<sup>8</sup> Many basic freedoms have been gradually curtailed. Opposition activists have been sent to prison or into exile, with some disappearing never to be heard from again; civil society has come under strong, sustained pressure with very little space to continue operating. Lukashenko has been reelected repeatedly in elections that have been consistently neither free nor fair. Presently, Belarus qualifies as a “consolidated authoritarian regime” in the rankings maintained by Freedom House. Its democracy score for 2016 is 6.61 out of 7, with 7 being an absolute dictatorship. It is more authoritarian than Russia (6.57), albeit not by much.<sup>9</sup>

Belarus has been frequently referred to as a relic of the Soviet past, “the last enclave of non-market economy,” and “the least reformed post-Communist economy” in Europe.<sup>10</sup> But these unflattering descriptions conceal a more successful record of economic performance over the past quarter century than imagined. The economy of Belarus has grown during most of those years, at times even at rather impressive—double digit—rates.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the Belarusian economy’s lack of reform and Soviet legacy enabled it to survive during the early post-Soviet years. It benefited from Soviet-era investment and the relatively modern—by the standards of that day—state of its industry, which the Lukashenko government tried to maintain and which positioned it well to compete among the former Soviet states.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, the Belarusian economy has benefited from a different aspect of its lack of reform—its close ties to the Russian economy. Lukashenko has skillfully managed the relationship with Russia and leveraged that relationship to make Moscow the principal source of vital subsidies for the Belarusian economy. These subsidies have for many years taken the form of Russian oil and gas deliveries at heavily discounted prices, which Belarus has re-exported at much higher prices to markets in Europe. For example, in 2015, refined petroleum products accounted for 26 percent of exports from Belarus, although the country does not produce oil of its own. Crude petroleum accounted for nearly 20 percent of Belarusian imports and petroleum gas for nearly 10 percent.<sup>13</sup>

According to some estimates, these subsidies amounted to approximately \$100 billion between 2005 and 2015, and in some years accounted for as much as a quarter of Belarus’s GDP.<sup>14</sup> With such heavy dependence on the state of the Russian economy, Belarus’s fortunes have been linked closely to those of Russia and have followed its ups and downs.<sup>15</sup>

But the Belarusian economy is not entirely an unreformed, Soviet-era industrial dinosaur. Estimates of the size of its private

sector vary from 20 to 30 percent of the country’s GDP.<sup>16</sup> In a sense—ironically—Minsk once again has derived some benefits from the legacy of Soviet industrial policies. One of the important elements of the private economy in Belarus has been the information technology (IT) sector, which has its roots in the science and engineering base of the country’s machine-building sector first developed during the Soviet period. Perhaps surprisingly for an authoritarian regime intent on preserving its hold on the commanding heights of the economy, the Belarusian government has apparently not only tolerated but even encouraged the development of the IT sector.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, the performance of the Belarusian economy for most of the country’s quarter century of independence has been better than could be expected. Starting from approximately the same level in the early 1990s, by 2015, Belarus’s GDP per capita figure of over \$16,000 (in purchasing power parity [PPP] dollars) was a third smaller than Russia’s roughly \$24,000 figure, but more than twice as high as Ukraine’s approximately \$7,800 figure.<sup>18</sup> This relatively successful economic performance, arguably, is one of the reasons behind the considerable degree of domestic political stability that has prevailed in Belarus for most of the past quarter century.

## A (MOSTLY) STABLE RECORD

Aside from its relative economic security, Belarus may owe its track record of political stability to favorable comparisons with less stable neighbors and tight political control. In the early post-Soviet years, the conservative attitudes of Belarus’s population reflected in the 1995 referendum were reinforced by the turmoil that engulfed Russia, which struggled with democratic and market reforms, experienced a violent confrontation in Moscow in October 1993, and launched a war in the North Caucasus to restore Moscow’s control over the breakaway region of Chechnya. By comparison, Lukashenko’s firm grip on Belarusian politics must have been a welcome development that promised stability and a measure of economic security.

Political stability in Belarus also has been achieved through the intimidation and suppression of political opposition, including by brutal means when necessary. Belarus has experienced significant unrest on a number of occasions, especially after the 2010 presidential election, when thousands of people went out into the streets of Minsk to protest Lukashenko’s reelection in a vote marred by multiple violations.<sup>19</sup> Another significant demonstration took place in 2017, this one triggered by deteriorating economic conditions.<sup>20</sup> Protesters took to the

streets again in opposition to the government's passing of tax legislation that was widely seen as unfair.<sup>21</sup> However, due to the government's sustained campaign to suppress critics and prevent the emergence of an organized political opposition movement, these protests have been effectively contained by Belarusian law enforcement loyal to Lukashenko and have not posed a significant threat to his rule.

While engaging in systematic suppression of the country's small political opposition, the Belarusian government has allowed a number of important safety valves to channel popular discontent. Belarus has open borders and anyone who wants to travel or emigrate is free to do so. Belarusian citizens have access to the Internet with few, if any, apparent restrictions. For a country described as the last dictatorship in Europe, there is a surprising degree of freedom in Belarusian web-based media. And elements of civil society survive—in academe, the think tank community, and private sector organizations—that all apparently calibrate their actions carefully but nonetheless engage in a discourse not normally associated with dictatorships.

The Belarusian public appears to be content, or at least accepting of this state of affairs. Although public opinion data from Belarus cannot be seen as fully reliable, surveys deemed to be reasonably credible suggest that Lukashenko is not facing major challenges to his rule, even as his approval ratings have slipped in sync with the country's mounting economic difficulties.<sup>22</sup> The absence of alternatives to Lukashenko—thanks to the regime's consolidated nature and successful suppression of the opposition—is one reason for this.

Belarusians want to maintain good relations with Russia and see it as the most likely partner for solving their country's economic problems, but they still want to keep Moscow at arm's length. Overall, they appear to favor closer relations with Russia than with Europe.<sup>23</sup>

The Belarusian public's acceptance of the status quo and reluctance to depart from it may be a sign that, on balance, favors continuity in the country's domestic politics and economy. However, Belarus has reached a stage in its internal development where continuity is likely to be increasingly difficult to sustain even for someone as experienced as Lukashenko.

## **BEAR HUG AS SECURITY POLICY**

Continuity has also been one of the key features of Belarusian foreign policy throughout Lukashenko's tenure. His embrace of Russia on the one hand, and his rejection of Western advice and encouragement to pursue domestic economic and political

reforms on the other hand, have long translated into a univector foreign policy; the sole purpose of this has been a uniquely close embrace of Russia. That, in turn, has been the critical element of Lukashenko's political longevity, as it has enabled him to extract a steady stream of subsidies from Russia to maintain stability at home.

Because of its complicated relationship with Europe and the United States, unlike some other post-Soviet states, Belarus has not entertained the idea of joining NATO or the EU. For most of its quarter century of independence, it has pursued a policy of close integration with Russia on defense matters. Some critics have referred to the Belarusian armed forces as a branch of the Russian army.<sup>24</sup> Building on the legacy of the Soviet era, many Belarusian military officers have been trained in Russia, and the two militaries have conducted regular, large-scale military exercises, which have left few doubts about Belarus's critical role in Russian defense planning in the European theater.<sup>25</sup>

This is not to say, however, that Lukashenko has not allowed himself to challenge Moscow. On multiple occasions, he has done so on commercial matters and even resorted to literal hostage taking to extract concessions or at the very least create an appearance of standing up to Russia.<sup>26</sup> Few if any former Soviet leaders have dared to take a politically well-connected Russian executive hostage and hold him for ransom from the Kremlin. Having carved out for himself a position of unique closeness to Russia, Lukashenko has exploited it repeatedly, and he seemingly has hardly paid a price for doing so. At home, even if not abroad, he has succeeded in projecting an image of a leader who is independent from Moscow and is equal to whoever is occupying the Kremlin.

On several foreign policy matters too, Lukashenko has maneuvered to avoid following Russia's lead. For example, after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, he refused to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, even though Moscow clearly wanted Minsk to do so.<sup>27</sup> Having criticized Russia's annexation of Crimea as a "bad precedent,"<sup>28</sup> he has not formally recognized it and has only acknowledged that it is now a "de facto" part of Russia.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout his tenure, then, Lukashenko appears to have skillfully exploited Moscow's desire to be seen as a major power with a following. Having embraced Russia in a bear hug and established himself as its most loyal partner, he has also gained a certain amount of leverage vis-à-vis Russia, which has grown dependent on him as a follower who can always be counted on. For if Moscow cannot count on Lukashenko, on whom else can it count?

## A FORK IN THE ROAD

Yet despite some nontrivial accomplishments in its domestic economics, politics, and foreign policy, Belarus is facing bleak prospects. A combination of low oil prices and complications in the relationship with Russia has pushed the Belarusian economy into a recession.<sup>30</sup> The biggest challenge before Minsk is the fate of the large SOEs that have served as the backbone of the economy. With vast infusions of Russian-funded subsidies from the Belarusian government, these enterprises have provided employment, economic security, and political stability to millions of Belarusian citizens. Their privatization is a long-postponed requirement for the Belarusian economy to resume growth and to wean itself off of Russian subsidies.<sup>31</sup>

But privatization would signify more than a mere step toward economic rationalization and growth. For the government, it would mean relinquishing control of the commanding heights of the economy. Moreover, doing so inevitably would trigger a great deal of social dislocation, as thousands of SOE workers would lose the security of their employment and income. For a country and a regime that have seen very little change for the past quarter century and that have chosen to hold on to the status quo for as long as possible for fear of major dislocations, this is indeed a daunting prospect.

To make this prospect even more daunting, privatization would carry with it the threat of undermining the sovereignty and independence of Belarus and disrupt its carefully calibrated relationship with Russia. Russian companies, many of them state-controlled and few that would dare to disregard the Kremlin's instructions, would probably be the most likely buyers of privatized Belarusian enterprises. Minsk's ability to attract buyers from Europe or the United States to compete with Russian interests is doubtful for a variety of political, geopolitical, and commercial reasons.

The political and socioeconomic challenges associated with privatizing Belarusian SOEs have long been known. They have become more daunting with the passage of time. These difficulties have been further complicated by the breakdown of the post-Cold War order in Europe in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and undeclared war against Ukraine.

## BELARUS AFTER 2014: A DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGY

The aftermath of these events has had a profound impact on Belarus and its relationship with Russia. The result for Belarus has been a much more challenging economic, political, and

geopolitical environment that makes the task of managing the country's domestic affairs and foreign policy much more difficult for its leadership.

A series of Russian actions—the annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine, the arm-twisting of Armenia to keep it from signing its Association Agreement with the EU, and the escalation of tensions along the entire line of contact between Russia and NATO—has sent a powerful signal to its neighbors that Moscow intends to dominate its neighborhood and prevent its satellite states from leaving its orbit, by force if necessary. Russian actions also have signaled that Moscow is serious about promoting its integrationist scheme—the EAEU—and intends to be the lead decisionmaker<sup>32</sup> in the organization.

Moreover, Russia's own diminished circumstances—as a result of much lower oil prices and Western sanctions—are likely to limit its generosity toward its neighbors. The limited resources at its disposal likely mean that Moscow will demand more political concessions from its satellite states in exchange for economic assistance.

Belarus has felt the effects arguably more than most of Russia's neighbors because of its unique dependence on Moscow. The negative impact on Belarus has been twofold—Russia reduced its oil deliveries ostensibly to force Belarus to pay off previous gas debts, and meanwhile lower oil prices in world markets further cut into Minsk's profits from re-exporting fuel.<sup>32</sup> The resulting dispute was eventually settled by Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko personally with references to “mutual compromises,” but the episode illustrated the difficult position of the Belarusian leader and raised questions about his ability to maintain his nuanced stance vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, Lukashenko has sought to diversify Belarus's diplomatic options. Nothing demonstrates his desire for a course correction in his univector foreign policy more than his outreach to the West in the wake of the 2014 crisis in Ukraine.

He has taken a number of careful steps to signal his willingness to re-engage with both the EU and the United States and to get out from under the sanctions regime that was imposed on him for his authoritarian politics. These steps included pardoning and releasing six political prisoners, relaxing restrictions on Belarus's political opposition and two opposition newspapers, and allowing two opposition candidates to get elected to the legislature.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the government of Belarus eliminated the visa requirement for short-term visits for citizens of many countries, including EU member states and the United States.<sup>35</sup> In early 2015, Lukashenko hosted the leaders of France,

Germany, Russia, and Ukraine in an effort to put an end to fighting in eastern Ukraine—an important opportunity for the Belarusian president to engage with key European leaders and raise his and his country's international profile. A series of visits to Minsk by U.S. and EU officials has signaled the West's openness to Lukashenko's attempts at course correction.

The Ukraine crisis has put Lukashenko's dilemma into sharp relief. It has underscored the necessity of internal reforms if Belarus is to avoid a major crisis. However, such reforms carry with them multiple risks, including socioeconomic dislocation and political unrest, which could threaten the stability of the regime and trigger intervention by Russia. Successful reforms, which would require Western assistance, would also carry the risk of Russian intervention to keep Belarus in its orbit and prevent Minsk from drifting toward the West.

But the alternative—no reforms—too carries major risks for Belarus. It would lead to more economic difficulties, greater societal tensions, and a growing likelihood of political instability. That, in turn, would potentially risk Russian intervention or force the government of Belarus to turn to Moscow for a bailout, which would mean greater dependence on Russia and the erosion of Belarusian sovereignty and independence.

For now, Lukashenko has chosen to maintain his distance from Russia and has even struck a defiant pose on several occasions. He has repeatedly turned down Russian requests to establish an air base in western Belarus.<sup>36</sup> He criticized Russia sharply for introducing border controls with Belarus after Minsk did away with visa requirements for short-term visitors from many countries.<sup>37</sup> He accused Russia of applying undue pressure against Belarus in the aforementioned oil and gas dispute and claimed that Russia was taking Belarus "by the throat."<sup>38</sup>

Most significantly, perhaps, Lukashenko introduced a new military doctrine in 2016.<sup>39</sup> Predictably, it underscores the strictly defensive nature of Belarusian defense policy. It also defines as its goal the defense of the country against military threats, which include not only outright invasions by hostile forces but also other forms of encroachment on the independence and sovereignty, territorial integrity, and constitutional order of Belarus. The new doctrine reportedly is intended to protect Belarus from hybrid threats, even if it does not directly refer to them by name. Belarusian armed forces have reportedly incorporated operations to defend against hybrid threats into their regular training and exercises.<sup>40</sup>

The doctrine seems to suggest implicitly, but quite transparently, that not only NATO but also Russia poses a major threat to Belarusian security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Belarusian authors have also noted that, in accordance with this new document, Belarus is seeking to maintain ties with NATO and the EU and to increase transparency in the interest of improving regional security.<sup>41</sup>

Taken together, these changes point to a new phase in the relationship between Belarus and Russia. The Kremlin has never been in a position to take Minsk for granted, and Belarus has always been a complicated ally that requires special handling by Russia's top leadership. But post-2014 Belarus appears to be an even less reliable satellite for Russia—carefully but deliberately moving toward a more multivector foreign policy, while diversifying its international engagement away from near-exclusive reliance on Moscow.

## WHAT COMES NEXT?

While special and historically close, the relationship between Russia and Belarus has been very uneven, one that Russia has never been able to take for granted and has spent a great deal of political and financial capital to manage. The years since the break in East-West relations as a result of Russian aggression against Ukraine have revealed a number of serious fissures between Moscow and Minsk, as well as several new important developments in the domestic course and foreign policy of Lukashenko's Belarus. The emerging gap between Moscow and Minsk has brought into sharper relief than before the fact that, even on Lukashenko's watch, Belarus has not fully lived up to the label of Europe's last surviving dictatorship. The country's domestic arrangements defy easy characterizations and represent a more varied societal and economic landscape than that label implies.

The political, economic, and societal makeup of Belarus suggests that rapid change in its domestic arrangements is not likely. Moreover, such change would not even be welcome, for it would be fraught with severe internal dislocations and could possibly even prompt intervention from Russia—developments that would carry dire consequences for all concerned.

Nevertheless, the implications of Russia's complicated relationship with Belarus are profound. Since the breakdown of the post-Cold War security order and the rise in tensions between NATO and Russia, Belarus has occupied an especially prominent place in European security as the critical territory

between Russia and NATO. Its geographic location gives it a crucial role in potential Russian operations against NATO intended to disrupt and close off the only overland link between the Baltic states and the rest of the alliance.

In a hypothetical conflict between Russia and NATO, escalating tensions and moves to mobilize and reinforce the two opposing militaries would inevitably put Belarus at the center of the action. From NATO's point of view, the overland link between the Baltics and the rest of the alliance would constitute one of the key vulnerabilities in its defenses.

From Russia's perspective too, Belarus would be crucial to any operation against the Baltic states.

But could Russian military planners still count on Belarus to be the loyal ally and cooperative partner in that military operation? The record of the Belarusian leadership, especially since 2014, suggests that Russian military planners cannot take such cooperation for granted. If the new Belarusian military doctrine is to be understood according to the information about it that has been leaked in Belarusian sources and abroad, the country is unlikely to participate in any future Russian operation against NATO.

In any case, should tensions between Russia and the West escalate into an outright military confrontation, this would have catastrophic consequences for Minsk. No country in Europe has suffered more than Belarus in previous European wars, and none stands to lose more in that hypothetical future conflict.

Thus, it appears that the only logical course of action for the Belarusian leadership is to create ambiguity on both sides and walk a carefully charted course between the two opponents in the renewed East-West confrontation. Any deviation from that course toward one side or the other carries with it serious risks for Belarus.

For the United States and the EU, meanwhile, the post-2014 experience suggests that previous policies of isolating Belarus and imposing sanctions to punish Minsk and move it toward a more open and inclusive domestic political system have outlived their utility at most, or have not been effective at least. Washington and Brussels have ushered in a new set of policies that emphasize engagement, while at the same time encouraging internal change—a development that appears far more promising and grounded in reality than past policies.

For the United States and its allies, this calls for an appropriate response to Minsk's recent opening to the West. This means

accepting that Belarus has deep and critically important ties to Russia that will endure, while also recognizing that change in Belarus—if it comes—will be slow, incremental, and may be reversed at times at least temporarily. Washington and its partners must understand the complexities of Belarusian internal societal dynamics, recognizing that the ambiguities in Belarusian foreign and security policy can serve the interests of the United States and its allies. Western actors should encourage carefully calibrated bilateral and multilateral engagement, structuring this engagement so that it is demand- rather than supply-driven, on the assumption that Minsk is better positioned to calibrate its engagement with the West and the price it is willing to pay for it in Moscow. In the absence of better Western policy options, slow and steady may well be sufficient not to lose this race.

*This material was based on work supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

## NOTES

1. "Russia and Union State," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, <http://mfa.gov.by/en/courtiers/russia/>.
2. David R. Marples, *Belarus: From Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).
3. Helen Fedor, *Belarus: A Country Study*, (Washington, DC: GPO for the U.S. Library of Congress, 1995), [countrystudies.us/belarus/39.htm](http://countrystudies.us/belarus/39.htm).
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. "Soviet Theme Park," *Baltic Times*, September 13, 2001, [www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/5464/](http://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/5464/); Glenn Ellis, "Belarus: Europe's Last Dictatorship," *Al Jazeera*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2016/01/belarus-europe-dictator-160120104016003.html>.
9. "Nations in Transit 2017: The False Promise of Populism," Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2017>.
10. Marek Dabrowski, "Belarussian Economy: An Overview" (presentation to the European Parliament, Brussels, March 3, 2016), Bruegel, [http://bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Belarus\\_EuropeanParliament\\_20160303.pdf](http://bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Belarus_EuropeanParliament_20160303.pdf).
11. "GDP Growth (Annual %)," World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>.
12. Dabrowski, "Belarussian Economy."
13. "Belarus," MIT Media Lab Macro Connections, <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/blr/#Imports>.
14. "Hidden Expense on \$100 Billion: How Russia Provides Belarusian Economy," *FreeNews English*, April 2, 2017, <http://freenews-en.tk/2017/04/02/hidden-expense-on-100-billion-how-russia-provides-belarusian-economy/>.
15. "Republic of Belarus: Staff Report for the 2016 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for the Republic of Belarus," International Monetary Fund, September 2016, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2016/cr16298.pdf>.

16. Mariya Akulova, "Rol chastnovo sektora Belarusi: problema podscheta" [Role of the private sector in Belarus: A calculation problem], *BEROC*, 2015, [http://eng.beroc.by/webroot/delivery/files/PP\\_24\\_\\_\\_Akulova.pdf](http://eng.beroc.by/webroot/delivery/files/PP_24___Akulova.pdf)
17. Kanstantsin Lashkevich, "Why Is Belarus Tech Booming?," *Emerging Europe*, July 12, 2016, <http://emerging-europe.com/regions/belarus/why-is-belarus-tech-booming/>.
18. "GNI Per Capita, PPP (Current International \$), World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=BY-RU-UA>.
19. "Shattering Hopes: Post-Election Crackdown in Belarus," Freedom House, March 14, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/03/14/shattering-hopes/post-election-crackdown-belarus>.
20. Andrei Makhovsky, "Belarus Police Crack Down on Minsk Protest," Reuters, June 22, 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-belarus-protests-idUKTRE75L65720110622>.
21. Amanda Erickson, "Belarus Had a Large Protest Today. Is it the Beginning of a Movement or the End?," *Washington Post*, March 25, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/25/belarus-had-a-huge-protest-today-is-it-the-beginning-of-a-movement-or-the-end/?utm\\_term=.2d2eab292246](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/25/belarus-had-a-huge-protest-today-is-it-the-beginning-of-a-movement-or-the-end/?utm_term=.2d2eab292246).
22. Grigory Ioffe, "Peculiarities of Public Opinion in Belarus," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 13, no. 71 (April 12, 2016): <https://jamestown.org/program/peculiarities-of-public-opinion-in-belarus/>
23. Ioffe, "Peculiarities of Public Opinion in Belarus."
24. "Opposition Leader: The Belarusian Army Is a Branch of Russia's Army," Associated Press, November 28, 2016, <http://uawire.org/news/mikola-statkevich-the-belarusian-army-is-a-branch-of-russia-s-army>; Anais Marin, "Trading Off Sovereignty: The Outcome of Belarus's Integration With Russia in the Security and Defence Field," Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), April 29, 2013, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-04-29/trading-sovereignty-outcome-belarus-integration-russia>.
25. Stephen Blank, "What Do the Zapad 2013 Exercises Reveal (Part One)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 10, no. 177 (October 4, 2013): <https://jamestown.org/program/what-do-the-zapad-2013-exercises-reveal-part-one/>.
26. Tim Fernholz, "Belarus Took a Russian Mining Executive Hostage to Get Some Leverage Against Putin," *Quartz*, August 28, 2013, <https://qz.com/119190/belarus-took-a-russian-mining-executive-hostage-to-get-some-leverage-against-putin/>; Alexander Rogan, "Minsk V. Moscow – Another Trade War," Russia Supply Chain, <http://www.russiasupplychain.com/minsk-v-moscow-another-trade-war/>; "Fertilizer Feud Nears End as 'Potash Hostage' Back to Russia," RT, November 22, 2013, <https://www.rt.com/business/uralkali-baumgertner-extradite-russia-120/>.
27. Simon Shuster, "Energy Wars. Russia's Neighbors Get Even," *Time*, January 25, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1956501,00.html>.
28. "Belarus Says Russia's Annexation of Crimea Sets a 'Bad Precedent,'" *Moscow Times*, March 23, 2014, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/belarus-says-russias-annexation-of-crimea-sets-a-bad-precedent-33216>.
29. "Lukashenko Recognised Crimea 'De Facto' Part of Russia," *Belarus In Focus*, April 22, 2016, <https://belarusinfocus.info/society-and-politics/lukashenko-recognised-crimea-de-facto-part-russia>; Vadzim Smok, "Belarus Refuses to Support Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Belarus Digest*, March 6, 2014, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-refuses-support-russias-invasion-ukraine-17082>.
30. Aleh Mazol, "Surviving Year Two of Recession—Digest of the Belarusian Economy," *Belarus Digest*, February 3, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/surviving-year-two-recession—digest-belarusian-economy-28897>.
31. Aleh Mazol, "Privitization: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back—Digest of the Belarus Economy," *Belarus Digest*, May 5, 2017, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/privitization-one-step-forward-two-steps-back—digest-belarus-economy-29866>.
32. "Russia to Cut Oil Deliveries as Belarus in Debt for Gas," *Belsat*, January 9, 2017, <http://belsat.eu/en/news/z-za-nyavyplachanaga-douga-za-gaz-raseya-skarotsits-pastauki-nafty-u-belarus-kommersant/>; "Kremlin to Avoid Full-Scale Oil and Gas War With Minsk," *Belarus in Focus*, July 25, 2016, <https://belarusinfocus.info/international-relations/kremlin-avoid-full-scale-oil-and-gas-war-minsk>; "Obidu nakopilis, gradys napryazheniya vuros. Chto obsudyat v ponedelnik Putin i Lukashenko" [Grievances have accumulated, tensions have risen. What Putin and Lukashenko will discuss on Monday], *TYT.BY*, April 3, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/economics/537690.html>.
33. "Lukashenko i Putin: Mezhdyy nashumi stranami ne ostalos nereshennukh voprosov" [Lukashenko and Putin: There are no unsettled questions between our countries], *TYT.BY*, April 3, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/economics/537978.html>.
34. Alec Luhn, "Belarus Activists Unmoved by Election of Two Opposition MPs," *Guardian*, September 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/12/belarus-activists-unmoved-election-two-opposition-mps-lukashenko>; Tatsiana Kulakevich, "Belarus-EU Thaw: Will It Last This Time?," *UDF.by*, August 14, 2015, <http://udf.by/english/featured-stories/126573-belarus-eu-thaw-will-it-last-this-time.html>.
35. "Visa-Free Travel," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, <http://mfa.gov.by/en/visa/>.
36. Siarhei Bohdan, "Thwarting Plans For a Russian Airbase, Minsk Strengthens Its Air Force," *Belarus Digest*, October 12, 2016, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/thwarting-plans-russian-airbase-minsk-strengthens-its-air-force-27550>; "Lukashenko: No Need for a Russian Air Base in Belarus," *BelTA.by*, March 2, 2017, <http://eng.belta.by/politics/view/lukashenko-no-need-for-a-russian-air-base-in-belarus-98468-2017/>.
37. Max Seddon, "Belarus's Lukashenko Slams Russia Over Border Controls," *Financial Times*, February 3, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/4eeeb5ca-ea1f-11e6-893c-082c54a7f539>.
38. Yuras Karmanau and Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia-Belarus Rift Grows as Putin Loses Patience," Associated Press, February 18, 2017, <https://apnews.com/04fc05845d3b449aa202c7a01cecccfb/russia-belarus-rift-grows-putin-loses-patience>.
39. "Voyennaya doktrina Respubliki Belarus" [Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus], Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, July 20, 2016, [http://www.mil.by/ru/military\\_policy/doktrina/](http://www.mil.by/ru/military_policy/doktrina/).
40. Arseni Sivitski, "Belarus's New Military Doctrine: What's the Message?," *Belarus Digest*, September 1, 2016, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-new-military-doctrine-whats-message-27047>.
41. *Ibid.*

---

## CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

*The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, India, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.*

© 2017 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.



@CarnegieEndow



facebook.com/CarnegieEndowment