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The End of Swing Politics - Belarus in the Russian Trap

In June 2025, the most prominent Belarusian political prisoner Siarhei Tsikhanouski was released, together with 13 further prisoners, including journalists and activists.¹ The blogger who wanted to run for president was arrested in the run-up to the presidential elections in August 2020 and sentenced to prison for 19 years and six months. The widely disputed elections, but also the massive dissatisfaction of the people with the authorities' mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, had provoked nationwide mass protests in the summer of 2020.

Long-term president Alexander Lukashenko suppressed these protests and just recently secured himself another prolongation of his rule in January 2025. Since his coming to office in 1994, Belarus has regressed from an early-stage democracy to an authoritarian if not totalitarian regime, with Lukashenko being referred to as "Europe's last dictator". The situation has significantly deteriorated since 2020 with a large wave of arrests and the departure into exile of all significant opposition forces and democratic activists. Following Tsikhanouski's arrest, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya came forward to take over her husband's work, running for president herself and uniting the opposition forces behind her, with a transitional cabinet that has since been operating from Vilnius.² Meanwhile, opposition parties and independent media can no longer operate in Belarus.

On top of the disastrous human rights situation, Belarus has mainly attracted attention recently as Russia's military accomplice in the Ukraine war³ and as a provocateur of European asylum and migration policy, which has prompted the EU to impose similar sanctions on Belarus to those on Russia. The country seems to have disappeared behind Russia's shadow, both politically and formally, within the Russian-Belarusian Union State, under construction since 1999 and lately being advanced enormously. However, even if many remain behind bars and political repression continues with new arrests, the Belarusian regime has released 314 political prisoners since the summer of 2024,⁴ Tsikhanouski being the latest and

most prominent example. How should we interpret this? Given the de facto Russian-Belarusian merger, is there still a chance for a political opening of the country towards Europe? Or rather: Does Belarus still exist as a sovereign state with which the EU could engage?

Belarus' Swing Politics Between East and West

Since gaining independence in 1991, Belarus has been lurching between Russia and Europe, although historically and culturally more closely tied to Russia. After a short period of democratic development and opening up to the West, the country clearly turned away from Western and Central Europe, halted the economic reform policy, and favoured post-Soviet re-integration with Lukashenko coming into office in 1994. Going beyond the cooperation within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Russia and Belarus intensified their cooperation in the years that followed and signed a "Treaty establishing a Union State" in 1999. It was based on earlier treaties that covered issues such as military cooperation, customs regulations, the creation of common structures and a common currency, budget, taxes and investment laws. Most of these undertakings have never been implemented and didn't lead to real integration owing to underlying ambiguities regarding national sovereignty, equality and dependencies. The 1999 Union Treaty didn't bring much new content but rather bundled previous commitments and was an attempt to actually advance integration. It is important to note that the Union state project was less driven by Russia but more by the Belarusian leader who sought Soviet reintegration in whatever form it took.⁵

The subsequent years were shaped by diverging motivations and the project was characterised by a constant shifting back and forth. The new Russian president Vladimir Putin wanted Belarus to join the Russian Federation and pursued economic pragmatism, while Lukashenko insisted on equal conditions for economic entities - which essentially meant the pro-

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vision of oil and gas at preferential prices - and on political parity.⁶ Putin's offer to annex Belarus to Russia as the 90th federal subject was rejected by Lukashenko in 2002 and caused relations to cool down. A short revival in 2005 during which a tiny common budget and a merger of the air forces was realized, was then replaced by new dissonance over the equality of the partners, the introduction of the rouble, and conditions of gas prices and oil transit. In 2008 a short moment of (more rhetorical) revival abruptly came to an end when Belarus denied recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence, and after it accepted the EU's invitation to join the Eastern Partnership in 2009. The summer of 2009 was marked by Russia's boycott of Belarusian milk and Belarus' boycott of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.⁷

At that time Belarus turned westwards, a course abruptly terminated by the brutal suppression of peaceful protests following the December 2010 presidential election. In the run-up to the elections the Kremlin had discredited Lukashenko and financed opposition candidates, thereby making it clear that Lukashenko was only president through Russia's consent. That way Russia seems to have managed to coerce him into signing a Customs Union treaty shortly before the elections. Whereas some see these events as a clear proof of Lukashenko's dependency on Russia, others claim that, once again, he had betrayed the West, playing bargaining games. However, after the 2010 elections Russia was able to assert its interests in Belarus, above all to achieve a greater integration into the Russian sphere of influence and the takeover of strategic economic sectors by Russian capital,⁸ gaining new means for blackmail and control. This materialised in a new revival of the Russian-Belarusian Union between 2010 and 2012. Seen in this light, the break with the West in 2010 reinforced Belarus' dependency on Russia, the latter being aware of its increased influence.

Nevertheless, around 2012, the Union project was considered to have finally failed. Since Lukashenko did not want to submit to Russian dominance and was unable to secure equal representation, further integration was once again in tatters.⁹ Renewed concerns about its national sovereignty, triggered by Russia's intervention in Eastern Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea in 2014, brought Belarus closer to Europe again from 2015 onwards. The EU lifted sanctions, Belarusian authorities allowed peaceful pro-

test against a pensions reform, and the annual Minsk Forum, an important gathering of civil society organisations, was revived. The new opening was seen as an attempt by Belarus to escape Russia's dependency under a growing conviction that its large neighbour would not support them in the long run.¹⁰

It was precisely this rapprochement which fuelled concerns in Moscow that Belarus would fall apart from its influence. Russia urged more strongly to advance the implementation of the Union project. The negotiations proved difficult for obvious reasons, and the process was interrupted by the political crisis in Belarus in the summer of 2020. As a sort of repetition of what happened ten years before, Putin helped to suppress the protests and supported Belarus with money so that it could cushion the impact of EU sanctions. Unsurprisingly, the negotiations could be successfully concluded shortly after, in 2021, with a treaty specifying the implementation of the Union State from 2021 to 2023. With so-called roadmaps in 28 areas, the Union made considerable progress regarding a common economic area, a deeper military interaction and a common migration policy.¹¹ According to observers, the planned integration steps in macroeconomic control, customs and tax policy must be seen as particularly risky to Belarus' national sovereignty. The Russian side has linked these integration steps to the subsidised supply of oil and gas, which is supposedly why Lukashenko agreed to them.¹²

One standout project is certainly the Common Military Doctrine of the Union State (2021). Although not entirely new in its substance, it 'legalised' and eased Russian-Belarusian military cooperation on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Just three days after the invasion, on 27 February 2022, a constitutional amendment allowed for the permanent stationing of Russian troops and nuclear weapons after strategic neutrality and nuclear-free status were removed from the Belarusian constitution.¹³ Russian nuclear weapons have been stationed in Belarus since the summer of 2023. The "Agreement on Security Guarantees in the Union State," ratified in Moscow in early 2025, is a logical follow-up. It sets the scene for a potential military escalation, allowing for Russia to use Belarus as a military ally and as a staging area and missile launch pad toward Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. It can be assumed that the relationship of dependency enabled Russia to compel Belarus to cooperate in the invasion of Ukraine.¹⁴ Incidentally,

Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus also guarantee that the regime (either on its own or through Moscow) will suppress protests and prevent the country from moving closer to the West.

The Persistence of the Lukashenko Regime

Nuclear security would not even be necessary, as Lukashenko's hold on power has been the decisive lever through which Russia has controlled Belarus for years: In return for loyalty to the Kremlin, Lukashenko receives political and financial support to secure his power and offer stability to the people. Russia has subsidised its neighbour with credits and cheap energy supplies, which finances the security apparatus and state propaganda and, more importantly, enables Lukashenko to secure a modest level of prosperity for his population.¹⁵ It goes without saying that some Belarusians see Ukraine's victory over Russia as the greatest hope for change in Belarus, as they believe that a weakened Putin would no longer be able to support Lukashenko's regime.¹⁶

Lukashenko has long served a need for the stability of the Belarusian people that stems from the country's turbulent history – from centuries of subjugation by neighbouring powers, World War II, Stalin's terror, to the disaster of the Chernobyl accident and, last but not least, the social upheaval and turbo-capitalism experience of the early 1990s. Lukashenko owes his long reign not only to Russian backing, but also to the fact that he prevented the country from "Russia's unrestrained oligarchic capitalism, Ukraine's political chaos, the violent conflicts in the Caucasus, and the painful reforms of the new EU member states".¹⁷ Fear of instability is a major factor that works in Lukashenko's favour.¹⁸

At the same time, the socio-political stability in Belarus secured by paternalist economic and welfare policies is eroding, since a growing proportion of the population blames the authorities for the deteriorating economy, the perceived decline of the country's social welfare system, and the poor performance in addressing problems such as stagnating salaries and pensions, unemployment and labour migration.¹⁹ This social divide runs deeper than the rift between Lukashenko's supporters and opponents, and is related to a new generation of an emancipated citizenry who see themselves confronted with a rigid regime, incapable of reform.²⁰

Belarus in Russia's Hands

In any case, Putin is (still) firmly in control, and Russia has gained tremendous political and economic influence over the country in return for its political investment in Belarus and the Union state. Observers agree that since the 2020 election, Lukashenko has surrendered his country to the Kremlin in order to secure his claim to power.²¹ With the political alignment in defence, foreign policy, large parts of economic governance and common supranational institutions, Belarus is gradually being integrated into Russia and de facto governed in part by Moscow. It can be regarded as a formally independent country but largely without sovereignty, or as Gabriele Baumann puts it, as "Putin's most successful integration project".²² With this in mind, the emergence of a 2021 Kremlin strategy paper about the Belarus take-over by Russia that reached the Western media in 2023 is hardly surprising.

For Russia, Belarus' vassalage is also a sort of insurance, given its loyal ally's advanced age and the uncertain political future of a post-Lukashenko Belarus. Since the 2000s the country has become a building block for Putin in a strategy to avert what Moscow feared would be an "encirclement" by Western-oriented democracies, as perceived in the "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and elsewhere. Russia's strategy has always been to keep Belarus firmly tied in all respects, while respecting its formal independence, in order to prevent it from drifting towards Europe and to serve as a buffer for Russia towards the West. What looks like brotherly unity from a distance is, in reality, a relationship of dependency characterised by mutual distrust.²³

And the European Union?

It is therefore quite possible that Belarus' fate will now be decided in Moscow and Ukraine. All that remains for the EU to do is to stand by as a dialogue partner. However, the EU seems to be deprived of any means to reach out to the regime in Minsk. A recent example: The release of political prisoners in June 2025 was apparently a US diplomatic effort and not a European one.²⁴ Therefore, the EU should reconsider the restoration of communication channels to the regime that it still had in the 2000s when it pursued a strategy of "dual dialogue", talking both to those in power and to opposition circles. In the meantime, the EU should consider two things:

First, the EU must be aware that Lukashenko will not sacrifice his rule to the EU's demands for democratic reforms. Since 1995 the EU has criticised human rights violations and democratic deficits and imposed sanctions²⁵ on the country, but this has not brought about change in Belarus. In retrospect, the development in relationships over this whole period have proved to be unsuccessful. While the EU talks about values, Belarusians have little access to train and air connections to Europe, whereas they can travel, work and study in Russia without any problems. The EU should consider meaningful measures to strengthen people-to-people contacts, for example by undoing the suspension of the visa facilitation agreement with Belarus.

And second, it is important to note that Lukashenko's overtures to Europe have largely been tactical manoeuvres in the past. Whenever pressure from Russia became too great, Belarus responded by turning to Western Europe and playing the role of a more moderate, constructive partner, in order to improve its reputation in Brussels and the European capitals. This is what Belarus did after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and then after the Crimea annexation in 2014. Since 2020 and even more so since 2022, this manoeuvre has turned out to be more difficult, and

Lukashenko hasn't even considered it - supposedly due to the now critical extent of dependence on its powerful neighbour. Lukashenko is forced to fulfil practically every request from Russia, thereby repaying the favour of the support he received in 2020. He is even making concessions on fundamental issues that he had stubbornly and successfully resisted in previous years.²⁶ Lukashenko is trapped, Belarus has cut off the path to the "Western Europe option". This is not only politically disastrous for Belarus, but also economically. Lukashenko knows that only with Europe will it be possible to modernise his country economically and technically and make the necessary investments, while Russia is primarily relevant as an energy supplier who will not advance the country in the long term.

It is likely that Lukashenko is once again acting tactically, bargaining with political prisoners such as Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and he still has many of them.²⁷ While waiting for better conditions for a new Belarusian-European rapprochement in the future, the EU should neither abandon the country nor hide behind a debate on values, but rather keep a close eye on the situation and be available in case a window of opportunity opens.

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