

Trading off sovereignty. The outcome of Belarus's integration with Russia in the security and defence field

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Although the Republic of Belarus is constitutionally designated as a neutral country¹, it is in fact closely connected with Russia's own security and defence architecture. Within the Union State of Belarus and Russia, the armed forces are integrated to an extent unequalled in the world. A legacy of the Soviet division of labour, the Belarusian defence industry complex remains structurally dependent on Russia, which is its main raw material provider, outlet for exports and intermediary on world markets. Bilateral military cooperation also builds on the perception of common threats and partly shared security interests. Hence it unfolds regardless of the disputes that sporadically sour relations between Minsk and Moscow, standing out as the main achievement of the Union State – if not the only one.

Integration with Russia objectively brings Belarus security guarantees and financial benefits: in arguing that the *military* security of the Union State is conditional upon Belarus's *economic* stability, Lukashenka manages to extract significant income in rent from his country's buffer situation. In portraying Belarus as a defence shield against perceived Western threats he believes he is making himself and his army indispensable for Russian security. From a strategic viewpoint, however, Belarus is pivotal merely as a *territory* on which Russia could station additional military objects and missile divisions; Russia certainly needs Belarus as an ally to defend its Western air borders. Capacity-wise, though, the Belarusian army is negligible. Henceforth, the main purpose of joint military exercises "West 2009" and "West 2013" (to be held in Belarus next September) is image-building, to sustain the myth of a strong Russia able to intimidate its EU neighbours. Given that Moscow does not treat Belarus as an autonomous subject in European geo-

politics, Belarus's return to (self-)isolation from the West since December 2010 has increased the regime's dependence on Russia, thus narrowing its room for manoeuvre within the Moscow-led Eurasian Union and CSTO integration projects. In fact, Belarus retains little autonomy in matters of *external* security and it could well see the most strategic assets of its defence-industrial complex taken over by Russian companies as well. Lukashenka's bargaining game – trading off sovereignty for subsidies – is not sustainable in the long run; while it is a winning survival tactic for him personally, it is not a sound strategy for securing Belarus's independence. Given the interconnectedness between geopolitics and economics in Vladimir Putin's foreign policy, integration in the security and defence field is likely to result in Belarus being irreversibly subjugated to Russia in a structural sense.

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Belarus was and remains the least independence-prone republic born from the implosion of the USSR in 1991. The military is particularly crit-

¹ According to article 18 of the Belarusian Constitution: "The Republic of Belarus aims at making its territory a nuclear-free zone, and the state – neutral".

ical of post-Soviet disintegration, remaining as it does devoted to Grand Russian traditions and Cold War perceptions of the West as an enemy. Thus, relying on Russia as a security-provider is more logical for Belarus than following the Baltic States into NATO². Lukashenka made the formation of “a single defence space with the Russian Federation” a top priority, as confirmed by the Military Doctrine Belarus adopted on 3 December 2002.

Integration – completed

The 1994 Constitution proclaimed that Belarus aims to be a neutral and denuclearised country, non-aligned with any military bloc. Yet Belarusian “neutrality” is as much a myth as the “multi-vectorness” of Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s foreign policy is. In fact, since 1997-1999 Belarus and Russia have been reintegrating within the Union State. Integration proceeded most smoothly and comprehensively in the military sphere.

This stems from a shared perception of security threats in the region. Since Poland joined NATO in 1999 (when the alliance was simultaneously bombing Serbia), containing NATO became a strategic priority for Moscow and Minsk. Several joint declarations were adopted³ which echoed the engagements contained in national conceptual and doctrinal documents. As a result, the Union State functions like a military alliance: an external attack on one of its members would be treated as an act of aggression on the Union

as a whole, as confirmed in article 5 of Russia’s New Military Doctrine adopted on 5 February 2010. Over 30 known binding agreements engage the two countries in a close cooperation in the military-technical field, for coordinating border troops – put under joint command in 1995⁴ – as well as R&D activities and operations on the battlefield. Pursuant to the 1995 Collective Security Concept of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), in October 1999 Russia and Belarus also established a Regional Group of Forces (RGF). In peace time, the RGF combines the troops stationed in Belarus and in Russia’s Western Military District. For lack of a national strategic doctrine and operation-

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al commanding capacity, in wartime the two brigades that Belarus contributes to the RGF (about 5,000 men each) would operate under Russian command, as part of the 20th Nizhny-Novgorod Army. Meanwhile, joint exercises are held to enhance interoperability among the armed forces. The most significant of these military exercises were held in September 2009 in Belarus (“West-2009”)⁵ and in 2011 in Russia (“Union Shield-2011”).

It is fair to say that the Union State of Belarus and Russia represents a single security space.

² This does not imply that Belarus’s choice of military alliance is irreversible, but it does structurally hamper it. Cf. Dzianis Mieljancoŭ, “Defence Systems in Lithuania and Belarus: Comparative Perspective”, *Belarusian Political Science Review*, vol. 1, 2011, p. 210. http://palityka.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/09_article.pdf

³ A Joint Defence Policy Concept (22 January 1998), a Security Concept (28 April 1999) and a Military Doctrine (26 December 2001) of the Union State. Since 2010 Belarusian parliamentarians to the Assembly of the Union State lobby the adoption of a joint Security Strategy, in vain though: Russia seems more interested in developing the ideological pillars of the CSTO than those of the moribund Union State.

⁴ Kaare Dahl Martinsen, “The Russian Takeover of Belarus”, *Comparative Strategy*, No. 21, 2002, p. 405.

⁵ The scenario of West-2009 raised hackles and caused fear in Poland as it involved mobilising 12,000 soldiers over 3 weeks to simultaneously contain an act of military aggression from the NATO bloc on Belarus and mass disorders orchestrated by a “5th column” (read: Polish minority) in Belarus’s border regions, and ended with the simulation of a “defensive” nuclear strike on Warsaw.

Whereas integration is achieved practically, measures taken by the Belarusian regime frequently contradict the official rhetoric regarding its *political* outcome.

Lukashenka's conception of cooperation

In fact, Lukashenka consistently rejects Russia's attempts to dominate the Union State. From the Kremlin's viewpoint, his diplomatic free-riding (refusing to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and his brusque burial of the common currency project in the name of Belarusian sovereignty hamper the potential for further integration. Hence, for the past decade Vladimir Putin has attempted to "marketise" Russia's relations with Belarus.

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Minsk retaliated by boycotting the meeting that established the CSTO's Collective Fast Reaction Forces (at the height of the June 2009 "milk war"). He also delayed negotiations over their joint regional air defence system (ADS), knowing that Moscow viewed its formalisation as a top priority⁶. For years, Lukashenka withheld the establishment of this *legal* basis. An agreement was finally reached in February 2009, which he signed only three years later. The joint ADS has *de facto* been operational since 2008, and is continuously upgraded due to generous Russian contributions for modernising Belarus's

⁶ After 1991, Russia did not develop its own ADS to protect its North-Western borders, meaning that the Belarusian ADS *de facto* continued to fulfil this task. Moscow also wishes the joint ADS to become a model for other ADS in the CIS space.

air defence⁷. However, it still lacks a commander-in-chief due to the fact that Lukashenka obstructs the appointment of a Russian officer to this post.

By delaying integration Lukashenka sees a way to raise the bids for his geopolitical allegiance. This is part of a wider bargaining tactic and Belarus experts are all too familiar with it. For Lukashenka, the price of Russia's security is Belarus's *economic* capacity to play the role of a defence shield for the Union State. This rhetoric aims at justifying the need for Russia to contribute to sustaining Belarusian militaries and to equip them with modern weapons, either for free or at discount prices. Belarus, with its limited defence budget (circa \$700 million, which is about 100 times less than Russia's) cannot afford such outlays⁸. So far this blackmail has proven successful, mainly due to the support Lukashenka still enjoys in the Russian military establishment and among the provincial *nomenklatura* of the Moscow 'Rustbelt' – where most of the officers in the Belarusian army actually come from. This helps Belarus secure subsidies for its army, albeit *indirectly*. The Russian budget does not directly spend money on maintaining Belarus's infrastructure, but there is no question it supports its manpower. For example, due to the lack of equivalent institutions in Belarus, all officers are educated in Russian military academies and faculties. Russia remains the ordering party in all military deals within the Union State however, so it gets its fair share of concessions as well. For example

⁷ For example, in 2006 Russia transferred 4 divisions of S-300 long-range surface-to-air missile systems to Belarus for a ridiculously low price (\$13 million each, i.e. 14 times below market price). Cf. Ryhor Astapienka "Belarus and Russia Prepare for the West-2013 Military Drill", *Belarus Digest*, 27 February 2013, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-and-russia-prepare-west-2013-military-drill-13185>

⁸ Владимир Мухин «Оборона Союзного Государства крепнет российским рублем», *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 25 October 2012, www.ng.ru/regions/2012-10-25/5_belorussia.html

in 1995 it obtained the lease until 2020 of two strategic military objects in Belarus – the early warning radar station near Baranovichi (Brest region) and a radio-electronic communication centre in Vileyka – *free of charge*.

The “shield” slogan surely helps sustain the myth, in the eyes of the Russian military and other groups which Lukashenka addresses himself to, that Belarus makes an essential contribution to Russia’s security. This is make-believe however, as Belarus now appears to fulfil symbolic rather than core strategic purposes for its neighbour’s security.

Belarus in Russia’s strategic thought: vital for prestige purposes, but no more pivotal

In the late 2000s many experts predicted that Belarus’s importance for Russian security would diminish. The geopolitical context had evolved compared to the previous decade: with the US-Russia “reset” and Barack Obama’s scrapping of George Bush’s anti-missile shield project, Belarus had become less pivotal as Russia’s bridgehead into Western Europe. Moreover, Russia was to rely less on military objects stationed on Belarusian territory after it upgraded similar installations or built new ones on its own territory. Whereas the Vileyka radio-electronic centre remained useful to the Russian army for communication spying and jamming against NATO neighbours, the early-warning radar built near Baranovichi became less important after a new radar station became operational in 2011 in Pionersky (Kaliningrad oblast’). As for the Belarusian armed forces, their input in the Union State’s military might is insignificant⁹. The at-

⁹ Compared with Russia’s armed forces (1.26 million) and especially NATO’s combined forces (3.93 million), Belarus’s army of 60,000 (which certain estimates believe to be nearer to 48,000) is rather modest. Cf. Александр Алесин «Учения Запад-2013 не переположили Польшу и Литву», *Белорусские Новости*, 18 February 2013, http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2013/02/18/ic_articles_112_180876/. Moreover, Belarus’s ratio of active military (7.6 per 1000 capita according to IISS data, i.e. three times more on average than for neighbouring EU countries) is a handicap rather than an asset due to the costs implied.

tachment of Belarus to territorial defence principles and conscription, and the alleged availability of 500,000 reservists throughout the country, would be a plus in case of a conventional attack. In this highly improbable scenario, the combat readiness of Belarusian forces would however certainly default: the only well-armed forces in Belarus which are well enough trained and decently paid are the contracted military in its modest contingent to the Regional Group of Forces. Nevertheless, even these troops could not support Russia on an external battlefield since Belarus’s Constitution bans the deployment of Belarusian soldiers abroad.

Against this background, Belarus remains pivotal for the Union State’s security merely as a *territory* on which Russia could deploy additional anti-missile defence systems (S-300 and S-400 launchers). As for the deployment of Iskander mobile theatre ballistic missiles in Belarus, a threat regularly made for the same purpose of intimidating Western European neighbours,

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it is even less likely to happen than in Kaliningrad because it would violate Belarus’s CFE engagements.

Russian strategic thought on Belarus is best summarised by the triptych “keep Russia in, Belarus down, and the West out”¹⁰. Strongholds of “paternalist” narratives argue that Belarus remains an indispensable ally for enhancing Russia’s neo-imperial pride in its “natural sphere of interests”¹¹. An irreplaceable partner – for lack

¹⁰ Vyachaslau Pazdnyak “The Rise and Fall of Belarus’ Geopolitical Strategy”, *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review 2010-2011*, Vilnius, 2011, p. 189.

¹¹ For a conceptual presentation of the role of the military in Russian schools of thought regarding Belarus, see the seminal work of Ian Klinke, “Geopolitical Narratives on Belarus in Contemporary Russia”, *Perspectives*, vol. 16, No. 1, 2008, p. 109-131.

of a more loyal “puppet” – Lukashenka thus remains instrumental to *symbolically* sustaining Russia’s regional power-projection. Military cooperation with such a bogeyman helps exacerbate Polish and Baltic insecurity perceptions – a consistent, paying-off goal of Russia’s foreign policy in the region. Pouring oil on the embers of Polish and Lithuanian anxieties is actually one of the geopolitical purposes of the “West-2013” joint military exercises¹². In addition, Lukashenka’s governance model is a strong deterrent against the contagion of Western values and “colour revolutions” in the Eurasian space. With his Cold War mentality, Lukashenka serves as a foil in comparison to which even Putin appears as a moderate autocrat and thus effectively obstructs the constitution of a concurrent Baltic-Black Sea axis in Russia’s backyard.

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However the Russian leadership has grown weary of this ally who in the name of equality wants Belarus to be treated as a sovereign state, though he himself behaves like a provincial leader blackmailing Moscow for cheaper gas and subsidies. Even though he zealously advocates Putin’s Eurasian Union project, in 2012 Lukashenka proved to be a less than reliable geopolitical partner for Russia. Evidence of this include the July 4th “teddy bear” attack, which the Belarusian KGB failed to prevent and border guards failed to report on; the persistence of the “solvents” smuggling scheme, whereby Belarus evaded returning oil export duties

¹² In January 2013 the announcement that war games will be held in Belarus the following autumn provoked panic in neighbouring EU countries, notably Poland, where the media were prompt to speculate on the heightened threat “West-2013” would represent for regional security. This overreaction marked the success of stage one of Moscow’s “offensive” against NATO: a propaganda war.

to Russia (entailing a loss of over \$1.5 billion for the Russian budget in 2011-2012); and the continuous postponing of privatisation promises, in violation of the conditions attached to Russian and EurAsEC crediting of Belarus’s insolvent economy. Given that Lukashenka cannot beg for alternative (Western) loans until he releases and rehabilitates political prisoners, Moscow may be tempted to use this opportunity to pressure him into complying with the *geo-economic* component of its Eurasian integration agenda. This includes granting Russian capital privileged access to, if not full control over, a number of industrial assets in Belarus. Flagship factories of the defence-industrial complex (OPK) will obviously rank high on Moscow’s wish list.

From dependence to take-over: news from the defence-industrial complex

The Belarusian and Russian OPK have always been tightly interlocked. In Soviet times, Belarus specialised in the manufacture of high tech components (mainly optics and electronics) and served as a repair and modernisation centre for military equipment produced in other republics. Under Lukashenka there has been no attempt at diversifying this production capacity. Instead, Belarusian factories have furthered their specialisation in these niches. They can afford to modernise their production and gain in competitiveness only in limited segments (manufacturing drones for example). Dependence on Russia, though, remains great and is now a synonym for increased vulnerability.

Belarus has no indigenous capacity for equipping its own army with tanks, planes and rifles, so it must rely on outdated equipment from its Soviet stockpiles or import Russian military equipment second hand or at discount prices, in exchange for concessions or in the frame of barter deals. The Belarusian OPK remains dependent on state procurement orders placed mainly by Russia, including as a sub-supplier in contracts with third countries that use Soviet

or Russian weaponry such as Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Angola, Uganda, Nigeria, etc. Following the adoption of a Russian-Belarusian program aimed at enhancing cooperation between both defence industries¹³, on 24 December 2012 Moscow granted Belarusian companies the same bidding rights as Russian ones to all government tenders including defence procurement. Experts forecast that the expected compensation for this apparent altruistic move is an engagement from the Belarusian leadership to open the national defence industry to Russian shareholders¹⁴. An additional factor of dependence for the Belarusian OPK is its reliance on Russian connections in the search for outlets for its products on the world market. Belarusian companies have made attempts to develop direct connections with alternative buyers, mostly African and MENA countries, but even there they are sub-contractors in deals dominated by Russian OPK companies¹⁵. In other words, most of the arms sales that Belarus can perform autonomously on the world market consist in reselling surplus Soviet production – an activity which from 1999 through 2006 earned Belarus 15th place in the world's top arms suppliers to developing nations¹⁶. Although its stockpile of Soviet-era equipment

should already be dilapidated by now, Belarus, with its limited domestic production, remains an important player on the world market. This breeds the suspicion that Belarus could in fact be acting as middleman for Russia in shady deals with infamous customers. Over the past decade numerous reports¹⁷ have alleged, but seldom documented, that Belarus is implied in conventional arms sales to countries placed under UN embargo or US sanctions (Iraq in 2003, Sudan in 2005, Libya and Gbagbo's Cote d'Ivoire in 2011, recently Syria)¹⁸.

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Even though most of Belarus's 60 plus strategic defence companies and research institutes remain in Belarusian hands¹⁹, whether public or (semi-)private, the whole defence-industrial complex remains structurally dependent on Russia. In the current geopolitical context, this makes the Belarusian OPK all the more vulnerable to Russian whims. Should Russia stop subsidising it (with cheap raw materials and

¹³ Accelerating integration in this field was decided at a presidential-level meeting in Sochi in September 2012, and a joint programmatic document stepping up cooperation in priority fields until 2015 was adopted already on 23 October. The fact that deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin came to Minsk for this meeting at working group level is a sign that Russia highly values this integration process.

¹⁴ «Россия готова купить белорусскую 'оборонку'», *Belarmy news*, 10 February 2013, <http://belarmy.by/novosti/rossiya-gotova-skupit-belorusskuyu-oboronku>

¹⁵ Михаил Барабанов «Оборонно-промышленный комплекс Белоруссии», *Военно-промышленный курьер*, № 23, 13 June 2012.

¹⁶ For an official value exceeding \$1 billion, according to the 2009 Report produced by the US Congressional Research Service under the 'Belarus Arms Transfers Accountability Act' (www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/hr4436/text). The Trend Indicator Values database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), corroborates this figure, putting Belarus in 21st position among the top arms exporters in 2006-2012 with \$536 million of export deliveries (<http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/toplist.php>).

¹⁷ See for example LTC John R. Piloni "The Belarusian-Russian Joint Defense Agreement", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, No. 22, 2009, p. 543-548.

¹⁸ Given the opacity of arms trade flows, the lack of reliable trade data from Belarus, and the dual nature of the exported equipment, there is not enough evidence substantiating allegations that weapons would have been delivered in violation of these embargoes however. Cf. Siarhei Bohdan "Arms Trade Charges against Belarus: Speculations and Facts", *Belarus Digest*, 13 March 2013, <http://belarusdigest.com/print/13320>.

¹⁹ The most notable exception is Beltech Holding, which includes BelTechExport – the Belarusian leader in the import-export of defence products. In May 2012, Beltech's ownership was transferred from Vladimir Peftiev – on the visa ban and assets freeze list of the EU, which considers him to be Lukashenka's main "bagman" – to a certain Dmitry Gurinovich, a Russian businessman allegedly enrolled in the Russian Presidential Administration's personnel reserve and whom some experts believe is a front party. Cf. "Beltechexport Gives No Commentary on its Sale to Mythical Russian Citizen", *Telegraf*, 30 May 2012, <http://telegraf.by/en/2012/05/beltehexport-ne-komentiruet-svoyu-prodaju-mificheskomu-rossiyaninu>.

electricity) or refrain from buying its products (as it is already threatening to do), the Belarusian OPK would probably collapse. This is a critical trump card in the hands of Russian defence companies interested in buying the most strategic Belarusian assets in order to fully control the whole assembly line process. Among the juiciest companies whose capital Russia readily pressures Lukashenka to open up are MAZ (Minsk Automobile Plant) and MZKT (Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant, planned to be merged with KAMAZ). These dual-end factories manufacture trucks and chassis, including missile launching platforms with no market equivalent. Among the other leading Belarusian companies that interest the Russian OPK are sub-suppliers

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of semiconductors for use in nuclear weaponry (Integral), high tech displays (Horizont), optical components for control systems of radars and lasers (Peleng) and optoelectronics for missile systems (Tetraedr). Russian constructors of military aircrafts and armoured vehicles are also eyeing Belarusian repair and modernisation factories that readily service the equipment which they produce. A process of unification of Russian and Belarusian flagship companies is under way in some sectors, as evidenced by the establishment of Oboronnye Initsiativy, a consortium meant to play a leading role in the production of electronic warfare suites for the Russian armed forces²⁰.

²⁰ HIS Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment "Defence Production and R&D – Belarus", Russia and the CIS brief, 21 February 2013.

Conclusion: sombre prospects

In his role as a "sovereignty entrepreneur" eager to sell Belarus's assets at the highest price and at his own pace, Lukashenka might not however be in a geopolitical position to resist Russian ambitions to control the Belarusian defence sector. One of the many paradoxes in Lukashenka's style of government is that it uses most of the canons of a military dictatorship, while at the same time trading off the country's sovereignty, its security system and military to a foreign, ex-colonial power. Part of the Belarusian military is probably happy with this state of affairs, as it meets their demand for restoring a strong alliance reminiscent of past Red Army glory. The outcome of the ongoing integration processes is however without question concerning for a growing share of Belarusians. If the human factor is critical for guaranteeing the loyalty of an army – whether to the country, its leader, or a foreign power – then the "morale of the troops" in Belarus surely deserves further investigation. In Belarus the military feel disfavoured compared to the "siloviki" – the militia, special security forces and KGB – the segment of the security apparatus which Lukashenka is relying on as his main support base and the only one worthy of privileges.

Another source for concern is the gap between the discourses of Belarusian and Russian officials regarding the purpose, modalities and outcome of accelerated cooperation in the military field. The Belarusian regime pretends to keep the upper hand in the integration process, and confidently refuses to envisage selling strategic industrial assets to Russia in spite of the insolvability risk weighing upon Belarus's economy. In Moscow, however, the tone is radically different. In fact, from a strictly military viewpoint, Belarus has indeed no existence as a separate entity from Russia. An ideological kin and a military appendage prolonging Russian territory, Belarus is doomed to also give up control of its defence-industrial complex. The takeover

of the Belarusian OPK is just a matter of time. Irrespective of Lukashenka's lifespan in power, the end-result of the Moscow-led integration in the military field is the consolidation of a struc-

tural dependence on Russia which makes the prospect of Belarus shifting its geopolitical alliance and turning to the West to guarantee its security ever less probable.

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