

Testimony of Brian Whitmore, Senior Fellow and Russia Program Director, Center for European Policy Analysis

U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearings

NOT-SO-GOOD NEIGHBORS: Russian Influence in Belarus

Wednesday, November 20, 2019

Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2200

Chairman Hastings, Co-Chairman Wicker and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to join this distinguished panel to discuss Russian influence in Belarus, the broader relationship between Moscow and Minsk, and the strategic implications for the United States and its allies. It is truly an honor to be here.

As you may be aware, the security of our frontline NATO allies such as Poland and the Baltic states is at the heart of CEPA's mission. Developments in Belarus and the dynamic between Minsk and Moscow are highly relevant to this concern.

I would like to use my time before you today to broaden the aperture and take a look at the importance of Belarus for the security of our allies, the complex and very nuanced relationship between Russia and Belarus and how it is changing, and the shifting political dynamic within Belarus regarding the relationship with Russia.

The Strategic Importance of Belarus

I would like to begin by stating something that is obvious, but which nevertheless merits stressing: strategically speaking Belarus matters a lot. The position and behavior of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's authoritarian regime, as distasteful as we may find that regime, is a key factor in the security balance on NATO's eastern flank. It could also become the linchpin in the event of any kinetic conflict between Russia and the West.

Bordering NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland -- as well as Ukraine -- Belarus looms large in any Russian war plan against the West. It would be an essential element in efforts by Moscow to seal the Suwalki Corridor and cut off the Baltic states from the Atlantic alliance. It would provide a platform from which Moscow could threaten our allies on NATO's eastern flank.¹

¹ See "Securing the Suwalki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence, and Defense," by Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, and Peter Doran, CEPA, July 2018 (<https://www.cepa.org/securing-the-suwalki-corridor>).

It is not by accident that many wargames scenarios -- whether conducted by Russia or the West -- begin with Russian troops entering and effectively occupying Belarus and using it as a staging ground to attack NATO members Poland and the Baltic states.

In one scenario, conducted in 2017 by the Potomac Foundation, a Russian attack on the Baltic states was preceded by the overthrow of Lukashenka after the Belarusian leader refused to allow a new Russian military base on Belarusian territory.²

Likewise, Russia's Zapad-2018 military exercises used the scenario of a pro-Western colored revolution in Minsk as the launch point for a conflict with NATO.

For these reasons, far from being a sideshow, Belarus needs to occupy a central place in Western strategic thinking. Due to its abysmal record on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, it is unlikely, if not impossible, for Lukashenka's Belarus to be an ally of the United States. But at the same time, it is in the interest of the United States and its allies that Belarus maintain its independence and sovereignty and that its economic and military dependence on Russia be minimized.

Imperial or Transactional? The Russian-Belarusian Relationship

The relationship between Moscow and Minsk is much more nuanced than the stereotype suggests. For Russia, Belarus is a problematic ally at best. Despite being part of a nominal union state, the ostensibly close relationship between Russia and Belarus is actually among the most dysfunctional partnerships in the former Soviet space.

Belarus occupies a central place in Russian strategic thinking and is an essential part of what Moscow considers "strategic depth," that is, the existence of satellite buffer states on its Western border. The Kremlin effectively wants to turn Belarus into a de facto extension of Russia's Western Military District at the very least -- and at the most, to absorb Belarusian territory into Russia. Vladimir Putin, therefore, views the relationship with Minsk as primarily imperial.

Lukashenka on the other hand, is not interested in sacrificing Belarusian sovereignty and he has little to gain from a military showdown or standoff with the West in which his country would be on the frontline. For these reasons, he has resisted Russia's efforts to

² See "Belarus at the centre of Russia-NATO wargame simulation," by Arseni Sivitski, Belarus Digest, February 13, 2017

(<https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-at-the-centre-of-russia-nato-wargame-simulation/>).

establish a new air base in Belarusian territory, has dismissed Putin's idea of Belarus being part of a so-called "Russian World," has stated that he would not allow Belarusian territory to be used to attack a third party, has maintained good relations with the post-Maidan leadership in Ukraine, and has tried to keep the door open to better relations with the West.

Lukashenka effectively views the relationship between Moscow and Minsk as purely transactional. He is happy to go through the motions of being Russia's ally, as long as Russia pays him for his trouble. Belarus' economy is effectively propped up by importing heavily subsidized Russian oil and exporting refined petroleum products as well as the export of potash fertilizers. Recently Lukashenka has been trying to expand the country's economic base and lessen his dependence on Moscow by establishing a new high-tech sector. This has enjoyed limited success due to Belarus' highly skilled and educated workforce as well as targeted tax incentives. But it is insufficient to break -- or even put a significant dent in -- Minsk's economic dependence on Moscow.

The result of all of this is a strained marriage of convenience between two wary partners whose leaders can barely hide their disdain for each other. On the one hand there is Putin, the would-be emperor and on the other is Lukashenka, the crafty and manipulative gamer. It's an asymmetrical dance between a powerful patron with imperial ambitions that needs to effectively bribe an unruly client to keep it in line, and a wily client willing and able to leverage this to extort as much from its patron as possible.³

The Post-2014 Environment

The founding document of the Russian-Belarusian relationship was the 1999 Union Treaty, which, albeit largely symbolic, forged something of a grand bargain that has defined relations between Moscow and Minsk ever since.

The essence of the deal was simple: Belarus would renounce its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, make integration with Russia its main foreign policy priority, and act as a buffer state as NATO and the European Union enlarged eastward. In exchange, Russia would provide subsidized energy, financial assistance, and grant privileged access for Belarusian goods on the Russian market. It was effectively an exchange of economic assistance for geopolitical loyalty.

³ See "The Emperor Meets the Gamer," by Brian Whitmore, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 25, 2017 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/the-emperor-meets-the-gamer/28696233.html>).

But in recent years -- and especially since Russia's forceful and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent armed intervention in the Donbas -- the grand bargain between Moscow and Minsk has broken down. Russia's aggression in Ukraine has led to fears on the part of Lukashenka and much of the Belarusian elite that the country's fragile sovereignty could be in jeopardy.⁴

Russia, meanwhile, facing sanctions and a flailing economy, has scaled back its subsidies and economic assistance to Belarus. Moscow has also sought to pressure Belarus into hosting a new Russian military base on its territory, integrating the country's armed forces more deeply, and accepting a revived economic integration project that would effectively end its sovereignty.

According to the International Monetary Fund, between 2005–15, combined Russian subsidies amounted to between 11 and 27 percent of Belarus' GDP. In 2016, it accounted for just five percent.⁵ Moreover, prior to 2015, Belarus bought Russian oil at half the market price. Currently, Belarus is receiving a discount of between 25-30 percent of the market price. Russia is also seeking to end Belarus' exemption from oil export duties, which could amount to a loss of \$10 billion in revenue between 2019-25.⁶ Russian gas subsidies also decreased from \$2.2 billion in 2015 to \$350 million in 2016.

As it reduced its economic assistance, Russia simultaneously increased pressure on Belarus for greater military cooperation and integration. Since 2015, the Kremlin has been pressuring Belarus to host a new Russian airbase on its territory. The base would be located in Babruysk, in eastern Belarus, and would station SU-27 fighter jets manned by Russian pilots.⁷

The commander of Russia's Western Military District, Anatoly Sidorov, has also suggested reassigning Belarusian soldiers who are part of the Regional Group of Forces for the Union State to the command of Russia's Western Military District.⁸ And at the end of 2015, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu proposed integrating the defense and security apparatus of Belarus and Russia into a joint decision-making

⁴ See "Belarus and the Ghosts of 2014," by Brian Whitmore, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 17, 2017 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-and-the-ghosts-of-2014/28375750.html>).

⁵ See International Monetary Fund, IMF Country Report No. 17/383, Republic of Belarus, December 2017.

⁶ See report by Vygon Consulting, November 2018 (http://vygon.consulting/upload/iblock/7e7/vygon_consulting_end_of_tax_manueur_ep1.pdf).

⁷ See "Why Belarus is About to Get Interesting," Brian Whitmore, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 9, 2015 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/why-belarus-is-about-to-get-interesting/27234694.html>).

⁸ See RIA-Novosti, October 21, 2015 (<https://ria.ru/20151021/1305697600.html>).

center in Moscow -- a model that has already been implemented in Georgia's Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁹

And in case Lukashenka did not get the message, Moscow began sending not-so-subtle hints. In 2016, for example, Russia began deploying mechanized military units near the Belarusian border.¹⁰ Moscow also deployed units of the Federal Security Service and Federal Customs Service to the border in 2016, despite the fact that there are officially no customs and border controls between the two countries.¹¹

Lukashenka has reacted to Russia's moves by seeking closer ties with the West while at the same time remaining nominally open to Moscow's efforts to force him into deeper economic integration. Lukashenka and Putin are scheduled to discuss a Russian-supported plan for deeper economic integration in December.

The Belarusian elite, meanwhile, remains divided between a pro-Moscow faction led by KGB Chairman Valery Vakulchyk and Defense Minister Andrei Ravkov and a more independence-minded group led by Foreign Minister Uladzimer Makey and Security Council Secretary Stanislau Zas.¹²

Moreover, these dynamics are playing out as Belarus, which just held parliamentary elections on November 17, prepares for presidential elections in August 2020.

What Next?

There are indications that Russia's military intelligence, the GRU, and its Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR, are alarmed by Lukashenka's efforts to preserve Belarusian independence by attempting to move closer to the West.¹³ Given the

⁹ See Belarus Security Blog, October 26, 2015 (<https://bsblog.info/moskva-zainteresovana-minsk-net/>).

¹⁰ See RBK, June 2, 2016 (<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/06/2016/5750035d9a7947a4b3b8a2c0>).

¹¹ See RBK, February 2, 2017 (<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/02/2017/589300f49a79471d0bc4add9>).

¹² The pro-Russian faction lost a key player this year when Lukashenka dismissed Interior Minister Ihar Shunevich, replacing him with his deputy, Yury Karayeu, who also leans toward Moscow but lacks Shunevich's bureaucratic gravitas. The pro-independence faction lost an important member last year when Deputy Prime Minister Vasil Matsyusheuski resigned and will lose another key member next year when Zas becomes Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in January.

¹³ See Arseni Sivitski, "Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Alarmed by Belarusian-Western Normalization," July 31, 2019 (<http://csfps.by/en/posts/20190731>). See also "Belarus's Relations With the West Receive Growing Scrutiny From Russian Military Intelligence," by Arseni Sivitski, Eurasia Daily Monitor, February 22, 2019 (<https://jamestown.org/program/belaruss-relations-with-the-west-receive-growing-scrutiny-from-russian-military-intelligence/>).

centrality of Belarus to Russia's perceived security interests -- and perhaps only Ukraine is seen as more central -- Moscow will likely view Belarus as a zero-sum game and will be willing to take risks to maintaining it as a client. Russia will most likely continue to pressure the Lukashenka regime into deeper military and economic integration. But if that fails, we should not rule out that the Kremlin could attempt regime change or even a military solution to keep Belarus in its sphere of influence.

In conclusion, as I stated at the outset, it is in the security interests of the United States and our allies, for Belarus to maintain its independence and for its economic and military dependence on Russia to be minimized.

Given the high priority Moscow places on keeping Minsk as a client, Russia clearly has escalation dominance in Belarus. But this does not mean the United States and its allies are helpless.

We can take steps to help make Belarus to become less dependent on Russia economically, such as helping develop its fledgling high-tech sector. This would have the added benefit of changing the political environment and potentially laying the groundwork for a more pluralistic system in the future.

As the first generation born in an independent Belarus comes of age, we can also intensify our work with civil society and media. In the face of intensifying Russian disinformation campaigns claiming that Belarus is nothing but a part of Russia, this would help shore up the Belarus' sense of nationhood and make the country more indigestible in the event of Russian aggression.

And we could send clear and unambiguous signals to Moscow that any forceful effort to violate Belarus sovereignty would incur costs, including -- but not limited to -- additional sanctions.

Thank you for your attention and I will be happy to answer any questions.