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Transforming Belarus from a Russian asset to a buffer state for European security

How the West should engage with Minsk

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Summary

- As negotiations on peace in Ukraine continue without results, Belarus is often overlooked. This paper argues that this is a mistake with important repercussions for Europe and the West. Belarus's location means that it plays a pivotal role in regional security. It can either serve as a platform for Russian threats towards Ukraine and NATO countries in Eastern Europe, or it can act as a 'buffer' that helps to reduce regional tensions.
- In terms of military planning, Russia's ongoing assault on Ukraine and its threats to other European states mean the West has no choice but to view Belarus as a potential 'Russian balcony' for launching attacks on NATO, given Lukashenka's role during the initial phase of the 2022 invasion. However, consigning Belarus to that role permanently would reinforce Russia's position and heighten the security risks to Europe.
- While Belarus is neither an issue for, nor a party to, current peace negotiations over Ukraine, the regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka has recently pursued a separate diplomatic track with the US. This initiative has had some success. Minsk has received limited sanctions relief and has provided Washington with evidence suggesting that Belarus's role in regional security may be subject to change, including the release of prominent pro-democracy figures, the conduct of the Zapad-2025 drills in a more transparent manner, and the release of Ukrainian nationals imprisoned for pro-Ukraine activities in Belarus.
- While acting as a diversion for Ukrainian military resources and providing economic support for Russia's war effort, the Lukashenka regime seeks to project ambiguity about its involvement in the war by offering occasional 'good offices', using peace-oriented rhetoric to appeal to US president Donald Trump, proposing to host ceasefire negotiations, and pitching itself to the White House as a potential backchannel to the Kremlin. In the broader context of regional security, Belarus pursues a similar dual approach. While showing loyalty to the Kremlin and hosting Russia's weapons, the regime also tries to demonstrate that it has its own agenda, distinct from that of Russia.
- Lukashenka's attempts to gradually expand his room for manoeuvre have a precedent in Belarus's earlier role as a buffer between Russia and the West in the 2000s and 2010s. That period ended in 2020, when Lukashenka lost the presidential election and his regime survived mainly due to support from Russia. Current US–Belarusian attempts to revive elements of that earlier relationship are likely to have further success, as Lukashenka fears being dragged into another potential Russian war. If so, other Western states should adopt a similar policy to maximize the chances of making Belarusian neutrality sustainable in the long term.
- To encourage Belarus's return to a buffer role, Western policy should adopt measures to deter Russia from using Belarus as a military staging ground and seek to rebalance Belarusian foreign policy through conditional engagement, including further sanctions relief. In the longer term, the West should provide additional support for those working towards a more independent Belarus, both within the regime and the democratic movement, and increase Western soft power influence in Belarus.

Introduction

Belarus holds notable significance for Europe's security, as it could serve as a potential staging ground for a renewed attack on Ukraine from the north or even a future Russian offensive against NATO. Even in the absence of open military conflict between Russia and NATO countries, the growing Russian military presence in Belarus, the potential deployment of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons in the country, and the Kremlin's use of Belarusian resources all have an impact on European security.

For several years, Western discussions of Belarus's role in regional security have largely considered Minsk as part of broader approaches towards Moscow, rather than as a policy strand in its own right. However, in 2025, the second administration of US president Donald Trump disrupted that trend by initiating a direct dialogue with Belarusian head of state Aliaksandr Lukashenka, with the most publicly visible result being the release in December of 123 political prisoners held in Belarus, including leaders of the 2020 protests and a Nobel Peace Prize winner.¹ This change in approach has helped reopen debate on what other actors such as the European Union (EU) and NATO countries, including the UK, should do with regard to Belarus.

Negotiations on peace in Ukraine and on the broader architecture of European security continue – thus far without tangible results. Belarus surfaces in war-related discussions only occasionally and usually as a secondary issue. This is understandable given the more pressing concern of securing a workable peace agreement for Ukraine. However, the lack of attention paid to Belarus could have negative consequences for the security of both Ukraine and NATO countries in the longer term. This paper therefore argues for a clear-sighted, distinct policy on Belarus, particularly since the West possesses tools it has yet to fully use and there is an opening for Western countries to advance their interests.

About this paper

Drawing on existing literature and expert interviews, this paper begins by identifying the key factors that shape Belarus's role in the regional security system. It then examines the roles that Belarus could realistically play in regional security, along with the risks and opportunities associated with each. Finally, it examines the precedents for a more neutral role and proposes ways for European and NATO policymakers to reduce the danger that Belarus could pose to Ukraine and the West.

¹ Rainsford, S. (2025), 'Never give up': Belarusian prisoners celebrate release after US lifts sanctions', BBC News, 14 December 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg1r89m6g7o>.

What are the main influences on Belarus's role in European security?

Belarus's significance for regional security depends somewhat on the intensity of the confrontation between the major powers surrounding it. However, the current Russia–West confrontation does not necessarily mean that Belarus has to serve as an instrument of the Kremlin. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain the Lukashenka regime's behaviour during the 2008 war in Georgia or the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Belarus's role is therefore also shaped by the state of the regime's foreign policy. This section considers how both these factors affect Belarus's role.

Relations between Russia and the West

Historically, both the location and geography of Belarus, with its flat terrain and lack of natural barriers, have repeatedly made it a corridor for conflict, including in both the First World War and the Second World War. For Russia, this offers an opportunity for escalation, while for neighbouring states, it heightens their vulnerability to Russian aggression.² Conversely, if the West could leverage Belarus's position for its own strategic aims, it also could constrain Russia's ambitions regarding Europe.

Figure 1. Belarus's proximity to Eastern European capitals gives Russia a potential strategic advantage



Note: Approximate road distances, measured from the nearest road border crossing to each capital.
Source: Compiled by the author via using Google Maps.

² Dyner, A. M. and Terlikowski, M. (2023), *The Belarusian Vector of the Russian Threat to NATO*, strategic file, Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/the-belarusian-vector-of-the-russian-threat-to-nato>.

Belarus's geography makes the country a potential useful tool for Russian military strategy (Figure 1). This geographical position is further enhanced by Belarus's developed transport infrastructure, which enables it to function as a logistical hub for potential Russian threats. As a result, Belarus's neighbours most exposed to Russian pressure – Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia – have been reinforcing their borders with the country, through measures such as the deployment of landmines, the construction of defensive lines and the building of physical barriers.³

If Russia sought direct confrontation with NATO,⁴ one often cited, if unlikely, scenario involves an offensive through the Suwałki corridor, a strategically sensitive area shared by Poland and Lithuania, situated between the Belarusian border and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. Using the corridor could allow Moscow to isolate the Baltic states to the north from their Eastern European neighbours (or, as the Kremlin might put it, to 'deblockade' Kaliningrad).⁵ An interviewee for this paper notes another scenario, stating that if 'Russia launched drones and missiles from the Belarusian–Lithuanian border as intensively as in Ukraine, the Kremlin could quickly and at minimal cost inflict damage no one wants to imagine'.⁶

In its broader confrontation with the West, the Kremlin views Belarus not only as an instrument of pressure, but also as a geopolitical prize.

In its broader confrontation with the West, the Kremlin views Belarus not only as an instrument of pressure, but also as a geopolitical prize. Consequently, Russia allocates vastly greater resources to its policy on Belarus than the West does to its own. Equally importantly, for Russian president Vladimir Putin, Belarusians – like Ukrainians – are part of a 'triune nation'.⁷ This means that Belarus is embedded within the Kremlin's constructed notion of its own security.⁸ Belarus's proximity to Russia's core territories also encourages the Russian belief that, in order to feel secure, it must keep Belarus within its orbit. The principal mechanisms for doing so are political and military integration.⁹

Under these conditions, the Lukashenka regime has only limited room for manoeuvre, though it still retains some latitude in determining its position within the Russian sphere of influence.

³ von Nahmen, A. (2025), 'Poland's Belarus border fence: A controversial deterrent', Deutsche Welle, 18 January 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/polands-belarus-border-fence-a-controversial-deterrent/a-71333184>;

⁴ Fornusek, M. (2025), 'Lithuania sets up 'dragon teeth' barriers at borders with Belarus, Russia's Kaliningrad exclave', *Kyiv Independent*, 30 August 2025, <https://kyivindependent.com/lithuania-sets-up-dragon-teeth-barriers-at-russia-belarus-borders>.

⁵ Giles, K. (2024), *Who Will Defend Europe? An Awakened Russia and a Sleeping Continent*, London: Hurst & Co.

⁶ Hodges, B., Bugajski, J. and Doran, P. (2018), *Securing the Suwałki Corridor: strategy, statecraft, deterrence, and defense*, Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, <https://cepa.org/article/securing-the-suwalki-corridor>.

⁷ Interview with a former army officer, under the condition of anonymity, October 2025, offline.

⁸ Putin, V. (2021), 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', Kremlin.ru, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁹ Bohdan, S. (2018), 'Якія рычагі Беларусь мае ў дачыненнях з Расеяй?' [What leverage does Belarus have in its relations with Russia?], *Our Opinion*, 23 October 2018, <https://nmmn.media/articles/6730>.

¹⁰ Лукьянов, Ф. (2021), 'Что надо сделать Москве, чтобы привязанность к ней Белоруссии не зависела от Лукашенко?' [What must Moscow do to ensure that Belarus's attachment to it does not depend on Lukashenka?], *Russia in Global Affairs*, 10 August 2021, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/chto-delat-moskve>.

Belarus's own priorities in foreign and security policy

Despite the country's formal status as a close ally of the Kremlin, Belarus's foreign policy under Lukashenka has never been fully aligned with that of Russia. Lukashenka was willing to engage in conflict with the West during the Russian presidencies of Boris Yeltsin and Dmitry Medvedev, yet sought to normalize relations with Western countries after Putin annexed Crimea in 2014. During that period, it was difficult to find a single example of a threat emanating from Belarusian territory towards the West or Ukraine. This distancing shows that Belarus has more agency than its geopolitical position and formal relations with Russia may imply.

Belarus's foreign policy is now tilted catastrophically towards Moscow. This movement is the result of the convergence between Russia's confrontational stance with the West and the Lukashenka regime's own recent conflict with Western governments over his regime's crackdown on domestic opposition following the 2020 presidential election.

The use of Belarusian territory in the war against Ukraine since 2022 has not only demonstrated Minsk's dependence on Moscow but has deepened it. This dependency is evident across all spheres, including the economic and military domains, which now encompasses the potential deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on its territory – something Lukashenka himself had long desired as a safeguard against a perceived threat of foreign invasion. Belarus's military command-and-control systems have become increasingly integrated with those of Russia, and the Belarusian defence industry continues to serve the needs of the Russian army.¹⁰ Belarus's economic dependence on Russia, meanwhile, has reached a critical level, with two-thirds of its exports now going to the Russian market.¹¹

These dependencies erode Belarusian sovereignty further, but they also help sustain economic growth rates surpassing those of some EU member states,¹² making it harder for those in Belarus who are favourable to the West to make their case.

The catastrophic turn in Belarus's foreign policy towards Russia first emerged after the 2020 presidential election,¹³ the results of which both internal opponents of Lukashenka and international observers stated were falsified.¹⁴ Domestic repression and the regime's subsequent foreign policy actions led to a sharp deterioration in relations with the West and to the imposition of sanctions by Western states. Broader sanctions were imposed once Minsk began to take actions that undermined regional security, as evidenced by the forced landing in Belarus of a flight carrying an opposition activist,¹⁵ the use of irregular migration as a tool against neighbouring NATO countries,¹⁶ and the facilitation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

¹⁰ Racz, A. (2023), 'Russia's Defense Policy and Belarus after 2020', in Moshes, A. and Nizhnikau, R. (eds) (2023), *Russian Policy toward Belarus after 2020: At a Turning Point?*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

¹¹ Kruk, D. (2024), 'Belarus's Progressing Economic Dependence on Russia and Its Implications', Policy Brief Series, FREE Network, 21 October 2024, <https://freepolicybriefs.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/20241021.pdf>.

¹² Astapenia, R. (2023), 'Russia's war on Ukraine has strengthened Lukashenka but undermined Belarus', Chatham House Expert Comment, 4 December 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/russias-war-ukraine-has-strengthened-lukashenka-undermined-belarus>.

¹³ Astapenia, R. and Matsukevich, P. (2022), *The Degradation of Belarusian Foreign Policy: a Proposed Course Correction*, briefing paper, Center for New Ideas, https://newbelarus.vision/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022_11_IdeaBY_en.pdf.

¹⁴ BBC News (2020), 'Belarus: Lukashenko's new mandate lacks democratic legitimacy, EU says', 24 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54277228>.

¹⁵ Giles, K. (2021), 'Belarus plane action eases Russian military restraints', Chatham House Expert Comment, 26 May 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/belarus-plane-action-eases-russian-military-restraints>.

¹⁶ Marin, A. and de Bendern, S. (2021), 'Belarus-EU border crisis reveals wider security threat', Chatham House Expert Comment, 8 December 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/12/belarus-eu-border-crisis-reveals-wider-security-threat>.

At present, two main approaches to Belarus prevail in the West. US president Trump has reversed his predecessor's policy and begun to explore opportunities for dialogue with the Lukashenka regime. Meanwhile, the EU still considers such engagement inadvisable.

With current EU policy not bringing positive results, nor likely to do so in the foreseeable future, the US approach is becoming an option for European politicians to consider – especially if the US is willing to take leadership and responsibility for the outcome. The EU's stance is more significant in the long term, as Europe's proximity as a market and the wider set of economic tools at its disposal give the EU the potential for leverage and could allow a stronger influence on Belarusian policy than the US. Indeed, the EU was Belarus's second largest economic partner after Russia until 2022.¹⁷

The US approach assumes that Belarusian foreign policy is less dependent on Russia than it might first appear, and that Belarus could be encouraged to become more independent based on Lukashenka's recent steps. Even amid the limited contact between Western (particularly European) governments and the regime since 2022, Minsk has sought to demonstrate an awareness of Western concerns – at least rhetorically. For example, the Zapad-2025 joint military exercise between Belarus and Russia emphasized transparency, was held away from NATO borders, involved a reduced number of troops,¹⁸ and, surprisingly, welcomed US observers.¹⁹ In November, in response to a US request, Lukashenka released and deported 31 Ukrainian prisoners held in Belarus – some of whom had worked against Russian military interests on Belarusian territory, as indicated by the fact that they were personally met by the then head of Ukrainian military intelligence.²⁰ It is difficult to imagine that this release was the Kremlin's idea.

There is a willingness among Belarusian elites to expand their room for manoeuvre and to reduce, or at least stall, the growth of Russian influence. Those who seek to promote such ideas are usually described as the 'pro-Belarus' faction within the system. Previously, it was easier for the West to engage with this faction as it had a clear leader – Uladzimir Makei, Belarus's foreign minister, who died in November 2022.²¹ Nevertheless, the regime's recent actions, including resistance in some spheres to Belarus–Russia integration,²² indicate that few of its representatives are keen on becoming even more dependent.

¹⁷ World Integrated Trade Solution (2022), 'Belarus trade balance, exports and imports by country 2021', <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/BLR/Year/2021/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>.

¹⁸ Astapenia, R. (2025), 'Zapad 2025: What the Russia–Belarus military exercise will reveal about Lukashenka's intentions', Chatham House Expert Comment, 4 September 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/09/zapad-2025-what-russia-belarus-military-exercise-will-reveal-about-lukashenkas-intentions>.

¹⁹ Reuters (2025), 'US military officers observe Russia-Belarus war games as Trump gets closer to Minsk', 15 September 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-military-officers-observe-russia-belarus-war-games-trump-gets-closer-minsk-2025-09-15>.

²⁰ Radio Svoboda UkraineTV via YouTube (2025), 'Зустрічав особисто Буданов: кадри з нового обміну та емоції звільнених з Білорусі українців', ['Budanov personally met them: footage from the new exchange and the emotions of the Ukrainians released from Belarus], video, 22 November 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtSutOF4Y28>.

²¹ Sky News (2022), 'Belarus foreign minister Vladimir Makei dies suddenly, state news agency says', 27 November 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/belarus-foreign-minister-vladimir-makei-dies-suddenly-state-news-agency-says-12756042>.

²² Turarbekova, R. (2025), *Союзное государство для Беларуси: проблема целостности суверенитета и роста зависимости от России (2024–2025)* [*The Union State for Belarus: challenges to the integrity of sovereignty and the growth of dependence on Russia (2024–2025)*], Warsaw: Ideas Bank, <https://ideasbank.vision/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/sajuznaja-dzjarzhava-dlja-belarusi.pdf>.

Box 1. What does the Lukashenka regime want to achieve?

When analysing the actions of the Belarusian authorities, it is important to distinguish between intentions and capabilities.

The regime's overriding objective is self-preservation, to be ensured through domestic stability, the avoidance of economic shocks and the minimization of external pressure.

Joining Russia's war on Ukraine therefore does not align with Lukashenka's interests and ambitions. In this context, the Kremlin is perceived ambivalently by the regime. On the one hand, Russia is a guarantor of stability and continuity. But on the other, it is a source of risk, since Moscow's regular military ventures threaten the very stability that it notionally provides.

Public opinion does not determine decision-making in Minsk, but it does to some extent reflect the dominant thinking among Belarusian ruling elites. Monitoring carried out by Chatham House over the past four years indicates that a stable majority of Belarusians is opposed to Russia's war against Ukraine, to the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus and any further escalation of regional tensions.²³

The question of capability is crucial. Minsk's autonomy in security decision-making still exists, but is limited. Most experts interviewed in-depth for this paper agree that Lukashenka can no longer afford to confront the Kremlin openly, as he did before 2020 (see below). Nevertheless, there were isolated attempts to 'play his own game' even in February 2022, and now Lukashenka is trying gradually to expand his room for manoeuvre.

The desire for greater autonomy has manifested itself in the regime's recent attempts to demonstrate openness to the West, through the release of political prisoners, the introduction of visa-free travel and the transparent conduct of the 2025 Zapad military exercise. It is also evident in Belarus's relations with China – which to some extent serves as a counterbalance to Russia, with Xi Jinping maintaining regular personal meetings with Lukashenka – as well as in the maintenance of communication channels with Ukraine.

Many foreign policy ideas currently circulating within the regime, such as inviting Pope Leo XIV to visit Minsk or offering Belarus's services as a host for peace talks, make little sense unless the regime is seeking to expand its geopolitical options beyond Russia.

²³ Throughout Russia's war on Ukraine, the Chatham House Belarus Initiative has commissioned public opinion polls in Belarus, the results of which are available via the Belarus Polls website (www.belaruspolls.org). Each study presents a detailed account of the polling methodology. Given the many challenges associated with conducting surveys in a highly repressive political environment, the results should be regarded as indicative. Nevertheless, consistency with those from other studies employing different methodologies supports the robustness and relevance of our findings.

What role could Belarus realistically play in future?

This section analyses the pro-Kremlin and ‘neutral’ roles that Belarus has played in the past or continues to play today. These two roles are examined in detail, as they hold the greatest practical relevance. Our analysis reveals that the Lukashenka regime has typically allowed for a degree of ambiguity in its actions, thereby minimizing risks to its own stability.

In its discussion of potential roles, our paper excludes an explicitly pro-Western role for Belarus – i.e. one in which it is integrated into Western security institutions in general and NATO in particular – for three reasons. First, there are no significant external actors currently advocating such a role. Second, no major Belarusian politician will raise the idea, as it is unpopular in Belarus for a variety of reasons.²⁴ And finally, to imagine Belarus fully exiting Russia’s sphere of influence requires envisioning Russia in a state of weakness that seems highly improbable.

Belarus as a platform for Russian aggression

Under Lukashenka, Belarus has been a consistent and close ally of Russia, with security integration between the two states developing almost continuously since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.²⁵ Belarus hosts two long-standing Russian military facilities,²⁶ and has permitted the development of additional shared-use military sites across the country. As a result, Belarus is often described by analysts as a ‘balcony’²⁷ from which the Kremlin can project threats towards neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe, with these facilities and Belarus’s geography providing the Kremlin with strategic opportunities to undermine Russian opponents’ capabilities and will.²⁸

The period of Belarus’s greatest use for Moscow’s interests coincided with the onset of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Lukashenka’s key contribution during the first months of that invasion was to provide Belarusian territory and infrastructure for Russian military training and operations.

²⁴ What Belarusians Think (2025), ‘Belarusians’ views on the war, and on domestic and foreign policy: the results of a public opinion poll conducted in August and November 2025’, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-21>.

²⁵ Wilk, A. (2021), *Russia’s Belarusian army: the practical aspects of Belarus and Russia’s military integration*, report, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW-Report_Russia’s-Belarusian-army_net_0.pdf; Muzyka, K. (2021), *The Belarusian armed forces: structures, capabilities, and defence relations with Russia*, analysis, Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, <https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Belarusian-Armed-Forces.pdf>.

²⁶ The first facility is the 43rd Navy Communication Center of the Russian Navy in Vileyka, which provides communications between the main staff of the Russian navy and nuclear submarines on combat duty, as well as conducting electronic warfare and signals intelligence. The second facility – the Volga radar station – is part of the missile attack early-warning system.

²⁷ The designation ‘Belarusian balcony’ emerged during the Second World War, denoting a German-held salient struck by the Soviet Army in ‘Operation Bagration’ in 1944. The term emphasized the salient’s operational significance in severing German lines of retreat and supply. See Imperial War Museums (2024), ‘Operation Bagration: The greatest military defeat of all time?’, video, 3 July 2024, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/operation-bagration-the-greatest-military-defeat-of-all-time>.

²⁸ Kofman, M. (2021), ‘The role of Belarus in Russian military planning and strategy’, in Deen, B., Roggeveen, B. and Zweers, W. (2021), *An Ever Closer Union? Ramifications of further integration between Belarus and Russia*, report, The Hague: Clingendael Institute, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/an-ever-closer-union/annex-3>.

Given that preparations for the invasion, such as the transport of ammunition, fuel and equipment, continued after the Russia–Belarus military exercises held on 10–20 February 2022,²⁹ it is almost certain that the Belarusian authorities were aware of the impending Russian offensive. The Russian army made extensive use of Belarusian military facilities, particularly airfields, logistics networks and hospitals, which were guarded by Belarusian troops and other security forces. Even after Russia’s withdrawal from the Kyiv region of Ukraine that borders Belarus, some Russian units remained stationed in Belarus and continued shelling Ukrainian territory from there until October 2022.³⁰

While the Russian withdrawal from the Kyiv region can be attributed to the failure of the Kremlin’s initial invasion plan, the Ukrainian military leadership has publicly linked the subsequent cessation of large-scale Russian military activity on Belarusian territory to Lukashenka.³¹ Since the withdrawal, Russian troops have on several occasions been sent to Belarus for training before being redeployed to the front.³² However, shelling from Belarusian territory has not resumed, which has meant an increase in missile flight times and, accordingly, the time available for Ukrainian forces to react.³³

The Ukrainian military leadership has publicly linked the cessation of large-scale Russian military activity on Belarusian territory to Lukashenka.

If the conflict escalates further and the current trend towards the de-sovereignization of Belarus continues, it is possible that the Belarusian army could be used in support of Russia’s military interests. It is commonly argued that the Belarusian armed forces are ill-suited for offensive operations, due to limited equipment and a lack of combat experience. But Belarusian service personnel appear significantly better trained than Russian army recruits and could still be used in support roles. Even if the Belarusian army is not formally deployed, close military integration with Russia enables the Russian defence ministry and Russian private military companies to recruit Belarusians to Russian forces – as has been the case since 2022.³⁴

The growing Russian military presence on Belarusian territory has significant political and strategic implications without the direct participation of Belarus in the war. The actions of the Lukashenka regime in allowing the Russian presence in Belarus have forced Ukraine to divert part of its military resources in anticipation

²⁹ Belpol (2025), *Доклад: Участье режима Лукашенко в російській агресії проти України* [Report: The Lukashenko Regime’s Involvement in Russia’s Aggression Against Ukraine], Warsaw: Belpol, <https://belpol.pro/doklad-uchastie-rezhima-lukashenko-v-rossijskoj-agressii-protiv-ukrainy>.

³⁰ The International Strategic Action Network for Security (2024), *Evidence of complicity of the Lukashenko regime in Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine*, Poland: iSANS, <https://isans.org/propaganda/propaganda-analytics/evidence-of-complicity-of-the-lukashenko-regime-in-russias-military-aggression-against-ukraine.html>.

³¹ Chebotnikova, I. (2022), ‘Буданов сказав, чи може статися так, що Лукашенко знову пропустить російські війська’ [Budanov discusses whether it is possible that Lukashenka will let Russian troops through again], 24TV, 2 August 2022, https://24tv.ua/budanov-rozpoviv-pro-potochnu-pozitsiyu-lukashenka-shhodo-ukrayini_n2884937.

³² Barros, G. (2025), *Russia’s Quiet Conquest: Belarus*, background paper, Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russias-quiet-conquest-belarus>.

³³ Interview with an Ukrainian analyst, under the condition of anonymity, October 2025, online.

³⁴ Chernysh, D. (2025), ‘Кількість білорусів у російській армії у 2025 році зросла майже у 100 разів’ [The number of Belarusians in the Russian army in 2025 has increased almost 100 times], 24TV, 13 September 2025, https://24tv.ua/viyna-rosiyi-proti-ukrayini-skilki-bilorusiv-voyuye-rosiyskiy_n2913498.

of an attack, with troops being held in reserve to guard Ukraine's northern border with Belarus rather than participating in combat operations against Russia in the eastern regions.

The expansion of Russia's military footprint in Belarus also shapes political perceptions among NATO member states. It serves as a demonstration of Moscow's enduring power and compels Western societies and policymakers to reassess their threat perceptions. The deployment of Russian *Iskander-M* missile systems in Belarus, the likely stationing of tactical nuclear weapons and the deployment of Oreshnik systems serve military purposes, but also function as instruments of psychological pressure on NATO decision-makers.³⁵

Another category of risk stems from hybrid warfare – most notably, the orchestration of irregular migration across Belarus's western borders. The impact of this form of pressure has been felt primarily by Poland, which shares the longest land border with Belarus among EU member states. In 2020, Polish border services intercepted just 129 attempts at illegal crossings of the Belarusian border. That number rose to nearly 40,000 in 2021.³⁶ These figures have stabilized since, but remained elevated at around 30,000 per year in 2024.³⁷ Further north, the launch of inexpensive weather balloons carrying contraband from Belarus towards Lithuania has repeatedly forced Lithuanian authorities to halt operations at Vilnius Airport.³⁸ At the time of writing, it appears that the Belarusian authorities are not counteracting such activities,³⁹ thereby demonstrating how easily Belarus's proximity to Vilnius can be exploited.

Despite becoming one of the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world after 24 February 2022 and losing 4.7 per cent of its GDP that year, Belarus has nevertheless benefited from its position regarding the war, with the economy growing by 4.1 per cent in 2023 and by 4.0 per cent in 2024.

The role of Belarus as a Russian 'balcony' also has an important economic dimension. Despite becoming one of the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world after 24 February 2022 and losing 4.7 per cent of its GDP that year, Belarus has nevertheless benefited from its position regarding the war, with the economy

³⁵ Interview with a Polish analyst, under the condition of anonymity, October 2025, online.

³⁶ Szczepańska, E. (2022), 'Nielegalne przekroczenia granicy z Białorusią w 2021 r.' [Illegal border crossings with Belarus in 2021], *Straż Graniczna*, 12 January 2022, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9689, Nielegalne-przekroczenia-granicy-z-Bialorusia-w-2021-r.html>.

³⁷ Due to changes in the methodology for recording attempted illegal border crossings in 2023, year-on-year comparisons may be inaccurate.

³⁸ Reuters (2025), 'Lithuania again shuts Vilnius airport, Belarus border over balloon sightings', 25 October 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lithuania-again-shuts-vilnius-airport-due-balloons-airspace-2025-10-25>.

³⁹ Buro Media (2025), 'Кантрабанда на шарах. Як арганізаваная нелегальная дастаўка цыгарэт з Беларусі ў Літву' [Smuggling on Balloons: How the Illegal Delivery of Cigarettes from Belarus to Lithuania Is Organized], 11 November 2025, <https://buromedia.io/be/news/kontrabanda-na-sharakh-kak-ustroena-nelegalnaya-dostavka-sigaret-iz-belarusi-v-litvu>.

growing by 4.1 per cent in 2023 and by 4.0 per cent in 2024.⁴⁰ This level of growth has been made possible by extensive support from the Kremlin and by the absorption of market niches freed up following the withdrawal of Western companies from Russia since 2022.

Against the backdrop of the war against Ukraine, Moscow's demand for Belarusian defence capabilities has reached unprecedented levels. Hundreds of Belarusian enterprises are currently engaged in fulfilling Russian defence contracts. Key firms include Integral, MZKT and Peleng, which produce microchips, chassis and fire-control systems, respectively.⁴¹ A joint Belarusian–Russian drone manufacturing plant is under construction in Minsk,⁴² and Belarusian facilities are actively used for the repair of Russian military equipment.⁴³

Domestically, the alliance with Moscow manifests itself in repression and propaganda: hundreds of Belarusians have been convicted for supporting Ukraine through acts ranging from railway sabotage and sharing intelligence on Russian troop movements, to direct service in the Ukrainian armed forces.⁴⁴

The political dimension of Belarus's 'balcony' role is the least significant. While Lukashenka remains the foreign leader who spends the most time with Putin, publicly supports Russia and aligns Belarus's voting record with Russia's in international organizations, he retains some standing in China and several developing countries, lending this support for Russia limited diplomatic weight.

Belarus as a 'buffer' state

Despite the Lukashenka regime's complicity in Russia's war against Ukraine, it continues to seek an alternative role to merely serving the Kremlin's military interests.

Within the Belarusian political class, there is a deeply rooted conviction that the best way to achieve this is by positioning the country as a platform for peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.⁴⁵ Even in the early stages of Russia's invasion in February and March 2022, Belarus hosted three rounds of Russian–Ukrainian talks, placing its official flag between those of Ukraine and Russia as a symbolic gesture intended to suggest that Belarus was not party to the conflict.

⁴⁰ World Bank (2025), 'GDP growth (annual %) – Belarus', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2024&locations=BY&start=2000&view=chart&year=2023>.

⁴¹ Polyanskaya, S. (2024), 'Рычаг давления на Запад: в Беларуси растет военное производство' [A lever of pressure on the West: military production is growing in Belarus], Deutsche Welle, 8 July 2024, <https://www.dw.com/ru/rycag-davlenia-na-zapad-v-belarusi-rastet-voennoe-proizvodstvo/a-71986466>; Racz (2023), 'Russia's Defense Policy and Belarus after 2020'; Dyner and Terlikowski (2023), *The Belarusian Vector of the Russian Threat to NATO*.

⁴² TASS (2025), 'Генерал-майор Король рассказал о работах над заводом дронов Белоруссии и РФ' [Major General Korol spoke about the work on a drone factory of Belarus and Russia], 1 June 2025, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/24105721>.

⁴³ Mazur, E. (2024), 'Санкции не мешают: как Беларусь ремонтирует российскую авиацию и что за это будет' [Sanctions don't get in the way: how Belarus repairs Russian aircraft and what the consequences might be], LiGA.net, 15 March 2024, <https://www.liga.net/politics/articles/sanktsii-ne-meshayut-kak-belarus-remontiruet-rossiyskuyu-aviatsiyu-i-chto-za-eto-budet>.

⁴⁴ Viasna Human Rights Center (2025), 'Three years of war. The persecution for supporting Ukraine', 24 February 2025, <https://spring96.org/en/news/117504>.

⁴⁵ Interview with a Belarusian analyst, under the condition of anonymity, September 2025, online.

Lukashenka regularly organizes conferences on Eurasian security and presents himself as a mediator capable of conveying arguments to Putin – which, to some extent, is how he has come to be perceived by the Trump administration.⁴⁶

His rhetoric likewise takes a pacifying tone: he consistently calls for a swift end to the war,⁴⁷ in line with public sentiment within Belarus. In a conversation with Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in 2022, Lukashenka reportedly apologized and claimed that he had urged Putin not to start the war.⁴⁸ Although Ukraine's leadership publicly expresses scepticism about this rhetoric, they are also keen to avoid further weakening Lukashenka in his relationship with Putin. That is why, for instance, the Ukrainian authorities were once reported to have lobbied for the EU not to impose sanctions against Belarus.⁴⁹

Lukashenka is not yet seen as a credible mediator and Ukraine has other intermediaries, but he has nevertheless provided certain 'good offices'. For example, Belarus has been used as a venue for prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine,⁵⁰ and for the return of Ukrainian children forcibly taken to Russia.⁵¹ Following an incident in September 2025 in which Russian drones entered Polish airspace, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence hastened to announce that it had shared flight data with its Polish and Lithuanian counterparts throughout the night.⁵² In a similar vein, Lukashenka presented the limited format of the Zapad-2025 exercises to the West as a 'de-escalatory' gesture. Significantly, Lukashenka is keen to keep communication channels with Ukraine and Europe open. A small number of Ukrainian diplomats continue to operate in Belarus, and Belarus was the last country to suspend its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.⁵³

Although they may meet with scepticism, these steps indicate that Lukashenka's flirtation with neutrality is part of a deliberate strategy and an attempt to signal to the West that Belarusian interests are not identical to Russia's. Lukashenka is trying to show that he retains a degree of autonomy – something that could be useful for neighbouring states seeking to bolster their security.

⁴⁶ Pushnov, Y. (2025), '«Зеркало» спросило генерала Келлога, зачем США переговоры с Лукашенко, если число политзаключенных растет. Вот его ответ' [Zerkalo asked General Kellogg why the US needs negotiations with Lukashenka if the number of political prisoners is increasing. Here is his answer], *Zerkalo*, 30 September 2025, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/109853.html>.

⁴⁷ BelTA (2022), 'Лукашенко: надо прекратить конфликт России и Украины, пока он не перешел на новую стадию' [Lukashenka: The conflict between Russia and Ukraine must be stopped before it escalates to a new stage], 22 May 2022, <https://belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-nado-prekratit-konflikt-rossii-i-ukrainy-poka-on-ne-pereshel-na-novuju-stadiju-499958-2022>.

⁴⁸ Freedom TV via Youtube (2025), 'Он извинялся, – Зеленский о разговоре с Лукашенко в первые дни войны', [He apologized] – Zelensky about his conversation with Lukashenka in the early days of the war], video, 6 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCZxUsoD5TI>.

⁴⁹ Jozwiak, R. (@RikardJozwiak) via Twitter (2023), 'one of the reasons why #Belarus hasn't been sanctioned together with #Russia in the EU's last sanctions packages is that #Ukraine has requested that Minsk is to be kept out', 12 January 2023, <https://twitter.com/RikardJozwiak/status/1613466506993565698>.

⁵⁰ BelTA (2025), 'KGB: Belarus assists 38 prisoner swaps between Russia, Ukraine', 22 June 2025, <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/kgb-belarus-assists-38-prisoner-swaps-between-russia-ukraine-169170-2025>.

⁵¹ Nasha Niva (2024), 'Ва Украіну праз тэрыторыю Беларусі вярнулі 11 дзяцей' [11 children were returned to Ukraine through the territory of Belarus], 21 February 2024, <https://nashaniva.com/be/336912>.

⁵² BelTA (2025), 'Мінобароны: Беларусь оповестіла Польшу і Літву о прыбліжэнні сёння ночью беспілотнікаў к іх тэрыторыі' [The Ministry of Defense: Belarus notified Poland and Lithuania of drones approaching their territory tonight], 10 September 2025, <https://belta.by/society/view/minoborony-belarus-opovestila-polshu-i-litvu-o-priblizhenii-segodnja-nochju-besplotnikov-k-ih-736464-2025>.

⁵³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus (2024), 'Заявление в связи с приостановлением Республикой Беларусь действия Договора об обычных вооруженных силах в Европе' [Statement regarding the suspension by the Republic of Belarus of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe], 29 May 2024, https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/eb5ffb15b6c4916b.html.

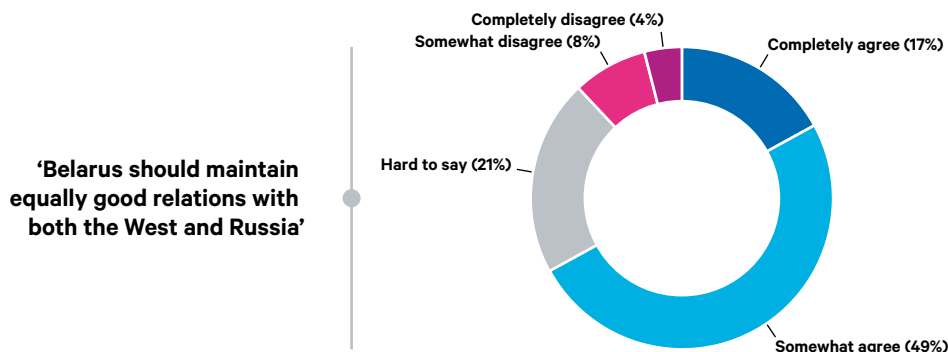
How Belarus could become a buffer state

Lukashenka's recent gestures towards neutrality have a precedent. As previously mentioned, they also have a circle of supporters among policymakers and Belarusian society more broadly.⁵⁴ Between 2014 and 2020, this tendency even had a visible promoter within the system in the form of foreign minister Makei, who was regarded as the leading figure in the regime's so called 'pro-Belarus' faction.

Belarusian experts close to the government have referred to this period between 2014 and 2020 as one of 'situational neutrality' – describing a state in which the country did not formally aspire to neutrality but in practice pursued it.⁵⁵ In the West, the idea of Belarusian neutrality was often interpreted as being closely related to the notion of asserting Belarusian sovereignty, a view expressed for example by a former commanding general of the US Army in Europe: 'It is in the interests of all that Belarus remain a sovereign country, able to play a critical role in ensuring security and stability in Europe'.⁵⁶

While relations between Belarus and the West have changed dramatically since then, Belarusian society still holds favourable attitudes toward the idea of neutrality (Figure 2).

Figure 2. A majority of urban Belarusians want their country to take a neutral stance between the West and Russia



Source: What Belarusians Think (2023), 'Belarusians' views on the war in Ukraine and foreign policy: the results of a public opinion poll conducted between 8 and 14 November 2023', <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-17>.

This phase of 'situational neutrality' began when Lukashenka distanced himself from the Kremlin's aggressive actions against Ukraine in 2014, notably by refusing to recognize Crimea as part of Russia following its annexation. A similar period of engagement between the regime and the West occurred between 2008 and 2010, when Lukashenka distanced himself from Russia's aggression against Georgia.

⁵⁴ Astapenia, R. and Matsukevich, P. (2021), *Is Neutrality Possible for Belarus?*, Research Paper, Center for New Ideas, <https://newbelarus.vision/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Is-Neutrality-Possible-for-Belarus.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Melyantsou, D. (2019), 'Situational neutrality: a conceptualization attempt', Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations, 11 December 2019, <https://minskdialogue.by/en/research/opinions/situational-neutrality-a-conceptualization-attempt>.

⁵⁶ General Ben Hodges, as quoted in Wemer, D. A. (2019), 'Belarus' balancing act', Atlantic Council blog, 31 January 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/belarus>.

For several years during the period of ‘situational neutrality’, the Lukashenka regime successfully resisted Russia’s plans to establish a permanent military base on Belarusian territory.⁵⁷ While a Russian military presence remained, there was an effort to contain its expansion, particularly at a time when states on NATO’s eastern flank were seeking to increase the number of allied troops stationed on their soil. As part of its ‘buffer’ posture during this time, Belarus sought to hold military exercises with international observers present, maintained dialogue with NATO and even conducted joint exercises with the UK in early 2020.⁵⁸

Border crossings between Belarus and neighbouring EU countries represented one of the most successful examples of cooperation between the sides. At one point, it was even possible to cross the border to Poland by kayak.⁵⁹

Just as Belarus today profits from serving the needs of the Russian economy, it once benefited economically by accommodating Russian, Western and Ukrainian interests simultaneously.

Just as Belarus today profits from serving the needs of the Russian economy, it once benefited economically by accommodating Russian, Western and Ukrainian interests simultaneously. For example, a common criticism voiced in Russia at that time was that Belarus supplied the Ukrainian armed forces with fuel refined from Russian crude oil.⁶⁰ Belarusian exports of shrimps and apples to Russia – the latter exceeding Belarus’s actual production five-fold – became emblematic of how Minsk helped circumvent Russia’s counter-sanctions on Western agricultural goods after the annexation of Crimea.⁶¹

Since the regime also agreed to scale back its repressive practices during that period, the West gradually restored relations with Minsk. Although the Minsk agreements have since been criticized,⁶² the Ukraine peace talks held in the Belarusian capital in 2014 and 2015 were at the time considered a symbol of Lukashenka’s multi-vector foreign policy. These talks were later followed by regular security conferences, relations with the Ukrainian leadership and other gestures of engagement.

⁵⁷ Reuters (2019), ‘Russia complains over Belarus’s refusal to host air base’, 26 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-belarus-airbase/russiacomplains-over-belaruss-refusal-to-host-air-base-idUSKBN1WB1NT>.

⁵⁸ Makhovsky, A. (2020), ‘With Russia ties under strain, Belarus holds drills with British Marines’, Reuters, 3 March 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/with-russia-ties-under-strain-belarus-holds-drills-with-british-marines-idUSKBN20Q2D6>.

⁵⁹ BeITA (2019), ‘Байдарочники стали чаще пересекать речную границу на Августовском канале’ [Kayakers have begun crossing the river border on the Augustów Canal more frequently], 11 October 2019, <https://belta.by/regions/view/bajdarochniki-stali-chasche-peresekat-rechnuju-granitsu-na-avgustovskom-kanale-365417-2019>.

⁶⁰ Khalip, I. (2014), ‘Война. Торг уместен, Украинские танки заправляют белорусской соляркой, произведенной из российской нефти’ [War. Bargaining is appropriate: Ukrainian tanks are fueled with Belarusian diesel made from Russian oil], *Novaya Gazeta*, 8 July 2014, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2014/07/08/60260-voyna-torg-umesten>.

⁶¹ Yeliseyev, A. (2017), *Belarusian shrimps, anyone? How EU food products make their way to Russia through Belarus*, Analysis, Bratislava: GLOBSEC, <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Belarus-Embargoed-Food-Re-export-EU-Russia.pdf>.

⁶² Allan, D. (2020), *The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia’s War in Eastern Ukraine*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-05-22-minsk-conundrum-allan.pdf>.

By the time of the 2020 presidential election, the regime's contacts with the West were both more frequent and more positive than those with Russia.⁶³ Lukashenka's re-election campaign was built on anti-Kremlin rhetoric,⁶⁴ and at the time he was importing oil from the US,⁶⁵ with imports having begun earlier that year after another energy conflict with Russia.

Why did 'situational neutrality' fail before?

The failure of Belarus to maintain its role as a buffer between Russia and the West after 2020 is explained differently by each side. The Lukashenka regime blames the West (and Ukraine), claiming that they provoked the conflict by supporting democratic protests against his regime and imposing sanctions. From the Western perspective, however, the scale of falsifications and repression following the 2020 presidential election was so severe that political dialogue with the regime became impossible.

Even during the relatively stable years between 2014 and 2020, relations between Minsk and the West faced an obvious constraint in the absence of systemic change. Despite its efforts to present itself as a neutral state, Belarus showed no clear intention of moving out of Russia's sphere of influence. For example, the Eurasian Economic Union was launched by Russia during that time and Belarus chose to join it, as it did all of Russia's other post-Soviet integration projects. Domestically, there were no significant pro-democracy or pro-market reforms, and there was little reason given to anticipate any in the future.

To some extent, certain aspects of Belarus's quasi-neutrality were compatible with Russia's interests. The Kremlin responded favourably to Minsk as a venue for negotiations, as a flight connector between Moscow and Kyiv, or Moscow and Tbilisi, and as a mediator in economic dealings between Russia and the West. While Lukashenka refused to meet the Kremlin's heightened military demands of Belarus, his regime tried to make itself useful in other ways and profit from it in the process. None of this clashed with Western interests, yet it still created a sense among Western policymakers that something was amiss.

But a certain degree of Belarusian independence still exists, as Lukashenka continues to govern the country and the armed forces remain under his control. More significantly, Belarusian interests differ from Russia's in one simple way: the Kremlin does not fear war, while Lukashenka does. This small measure of sovereignty means that neutrality remains an option for Belarus, despite the appearance of it being a Russian asset.

⁶³ Minsk Dialogue (2021), *Minsk Barometer: Monitoring of foreign policy and regional security*, https://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/reports/pdf/MB_18_en.pdf.

⁶⁴ Higgins, A. (2020), 'Political Grip Shaky, Belarus Leader Blames Longtime Ally: Russia', *New York Times*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/world/europe/belarus-lukashenko-russia.html>.

⁶⁵ Kardaś, S. and Kłysiński, K. (2020), 'Belarus: a difficult start to oil supply diversification', Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2020-05-22/belarus-a-difficult-start-to-oil-supply-diversification>.

After 24 February 2022, it no longer seems plausible to view Belarus as a fully sovereign state from the perspective of military planning. Russia's assault against Ukraine and its interference in neighbouring Eastern European countries mean that the West has to continue to regard Belarus as a potential 'balcony' from which Russia could launch an attack on Eastern Europe and the wider West. However, to consign Belarus to that role permanently would mean, in effect, strengthening Russia's position and thereby implicitly increasing the security risks to the West from the Kremlin's use of Belarusian territory.

The risks of allowing Belarus to become a strategic 'balcony' for Russia vs the opportunities of re-engagement

The potential risks of allowing Belarus to become further entrenched in the role of Russian asset are clear:

- Use of Belarusian territory, airspace, infrastructure and armed forces for military operations against Ukraine and Western countries;
- Expansion of Russia's military presence in Belarus aimed at stretching the resources of Ukraine and NATO, as well as reinforcing perceptions of Russia as a significant military power in the region;
- Employment of Belarus in 'grey zone' operations;
- Use of Belarus's economic potential to support Russia's war effort; and
- Advocacy and promotion of Kremlin positions in international forums.

For some Western states, there is also a limited upside to this scenario, in that the perception of threat emanating from Belarusian territory encourages the consolidation and mobilization of resources for NATO's defence and deterrence in border states – something that might have been less likely in the absence of a clear security challenge.

The opportunities for re-engagement and for encouraging Belarus to become more neutral are equally clear:

- Limiting Russia's ability to use Belarus as a platform for aggression against neighbouring states, thereby reducing the risks outlined above;
- Enabling Minsk to provide 'good offices' in mediation and conflict resolution, particularly on Ukraine; and
- Easing of political repression and a degree of normalization internally.

It is still necessary to acknowledge the risks, most obviously including the possibility that Belarusian neutrality may prove deceptive. The West and Ukraine could still face the consequences of a Russian 'balcony', while working under the assumption that Belarus will act as a genuine buffer. But the benefits of pursuing such a policy far outweigh this risk.

Policy recommendations

Regardless of how the Russia–Ukraine war or a potential confrontation between the Kremlin and NATO might unfold in the short and long terms,⁶⁶ the objective of Western governments therefore should be to encourage Belarus to adopt a more neutral stance, and to ensure that Belarusian neutrality becomes sustainable over an extended period of time.

The following recommendations are intended to help Western policymakers achieve these goals:

1. Reduce Russia’s ability to use Belarus through a strategy to deter the Kremlin

Neighbouring countries such as Latvia, Lithuania and Poland are strengthening their border infrastructure,⁶⁷ which may reduce opportunities for the exploitation of irregular migration to put pressure on NATO border states, but should also limit Russia’s capacity for escalation more broadly. However, parts of this border and its military infrastructure remain outdated in the context of modern warfare, especially in the case of drone warfare. Therefore, NATO must accelerate its development of effective and credible deterrence capabilities and defences, including air and missile defences.⁶⁸

Expanding defences along the borders with Belarus in this way does not necessarily escalate tensions. On the contrary, it can create opportunities for a more honest dialogue. More importantly, it may alter Russian and Belarusian perceptions of the West as a weak actor – which, in turn, increases the Lukashenka regime’s sense of the need to take Western interests into account and to be more cautious about aligning itself fully with Russia.

An alternative strategy centred on risk avoidance would not actually reduce the number of risks.⁶⁹ Without a credible level of deterrence by both punishment and denial, it is unrealistic to expect non-aggressive behaviour from the Kremlin. If relations between the West and Russia were to reach the stage of genuine negotiation, the reduction of Russia’s military presence in Belarus should be one of the West’s demands – both to protect against a repetition of February 2022’s invasion of Ukraine and to prevent a scenario in which Belarus is used to launch attacks against NATO countries.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Lough, J. (2024), *Four scenarios for the end of the war in Ukraine*, Briefing Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136260>.

⁶⁷ Bryjka, F. (2024), *EU and NATO States Investing in Protection of Borders with Russia and Belarus*, Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, <https://pism.pl/publications/eu-and-nato-states-investing-in-protection-of-borders-with-russia-and-belarus>.

⁶⁸ Chattell, T. (2025), ‘A ‘Drone Wall’ is needed for Europe to defend against a new threat’, Chatham House Expert Comment, 1 October 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/10/drone-wall-needed-europe-defend-against-new-threat>.

⁶⁹ Ash, T. et al. (2023), *How to end Russia’s war on Ukraine: Safeguarding Europe’s future, and the dangers of a false peace*, Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135782>.

⁷⁰ Shraibman, A. (2025), ‘Not So Quiet on the Eastern Front: Elements of a Risk Management Strategy Toward Belarus’, Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, 4 June 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/04/russia-belarus-role-new-war?lang=en>.

2. Rebalance Belarusian foreign policy through conditional engagement and some sanctions relief

Western policymakers must accept that ‘the West cannot achieve all its goals at once’.⁷¹ This realization will be difficult, but some progress in distancing Belarus from Russia and easing domestic repression could be achieved through conditional dialogue with the current regime.⁷² If the Trump administration succeeds in proving this, it will be less risky for other Western states to follow.

Western policymakers must accept that ‘the West cannot achieve all its goals at once’

Despite scepticism over the prospects for success and the general unpopularity of engaging with autocratic regimes, such a policy is still more likely to produce results than the available alternatives, which offer no prospect of positive outcomes – at least in the foreseeable future. Western sanctions policy towards Belarus is often perceived as a failure,⁷³ both by those who would like to see the sanctions strengthened and by those who would prefer them weakened.

Belarus remains subject to a substantial set of sanctions and restrictions, whose conditional removal would not strengthen Russia’s war machine. For example, the opening of two border crossings on the Belarus–Poland frontier in November 2025 benefits the Polish economy⁷⁴ with little or no effect on that of Russia. In essence, this is the path the Trump administration has sought to pursue in its talks with Lukashenka: servicing several Belarusian Boeing aircraft or lifting sanctions on Belarusian potash fertilizers would not increase Russia’s war capabilities. Through measures such as renewing contacts with the Lukashenka regime, restoring full diplomatic relations at ambassadorial level, reopening closed border crossings and transport routes, allowing Belarusian athletes to compete internationally and lifting certain economic sanctions, the West could obtain concessions from Minsk in the areas of security and repression reduction.⁷⁵ If so, that would represent a tangible success for Western policy.

The use of irregular migration, for example, is an area of security where the Kremlin’s influence is clearly weaker than in issues related to Ukraine. Consequently,

⁷¹ Astapenia, R. (2025), ‘How will the Kremlin frame the next invasion through Belarus? An interview by Ryhor Astapenia with Maksim Samorukov’, Ideas Bank, 5 August 2025, <https://ideasbank.vision/en/articles/how-will-the-kremlin-frame-the-next-invasion-through-belarus-an-interview-by-ryhor-astapenia-with-maksim-samorukov>.

⁷² Matsukevich, P. (2025), ‘Нормализация ради перемен: что делать ЕС с Беларусью’ [Normalization for the sake of change: what should the EU do with Belarus], Center for New Ideas, 1 July 2025, <https://newideas.center/artykuly/normalizacija-radi-peremen-chto-delat-es-s-belarusju>.

⁷³ Sabatini, C. and Isard, L. (2025), *Understanding and improving sanctions today: Why and how many sanctions fail, and what to do about it*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136550>.

⁷⁴ Polish Press Agency (2025), ‘Po kilku latach znów otwarte będą przejścia graniczne w Kuźnica i Bobrownikach’ [After several years, the border crossings in Kuźnica and Bobrowniki will be reopened], 16 November 2025, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/po-kilku-latach-znow-otwarte-beda-przejscia-graniczne-w-kuznica-i-bobrownikach>.

⁷⁵ Bushilo, A., Deikalo, E., Kruk, D. and Shraibman, A. (2025), *Roadmap of Reciprocal Steps for a Limited De-escalation between Belarus and the EU: An Expert View*, Vilnius: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, https://www.kas.de/documents/d/belarus/roadmap_limited_de_escalation.

the Lukashenka regime may have far greater room to make concessions on migration. Progress on that issue could also create openings for further reciprocal concessions elsewhere.

One step could involve the reintroduction of confidence-building measures between Belarus, NATO member states and, potentially, Ukraine. These measures could include regular information exchanges regarding military capabilities and major activities, invitations for observers to military exercises and restricting military operations near shared borders. The regime's concerted efforts to show transparency over the Zapad-2025 exercises showed that these ideas are far more realistic than it may have seemed even six months ago.

The format of confidence-building initiatives can remain minimal at first. What matters is that they facilitate the establishment of contacts that could prove crucial in a crisis. As one analyst interviewed for this paper noted, 'intelligence already provides a general picture of what each army is doing'.⁷⁶

Western support for Belarusian peace initiatives and 'good offices' in the security sphere also offers potential. There is an obvious contradiction in relying on Lukashenka for such services: his regime remains Europe's most repressive governments and is partly responsible for the war in Ukraine. Yet, if these efforts serve the wider interests of the West and Ukraine as well as Belarus's longer-term future, it would be short-sighted not to allow the regime a chance to atone.

The goal is to channel the regime's willingness to offer good offices into specific areas of interest to the West and Ukraine. Lukashenka could demonstrate his readiness to play a constructive role by, for example, granting amnesty to all individuals sentenced for pro-Ukrainian activities in Belarus, including the so-called 'railway partisans' who sabotaged Belarusian railway infrastructure in an effort to disrupt Russian military deliveries in 2022.⁷⁷

The goal is to channel the regime's willingness to offer good offices into specific areas of interest to the West and Ukraine.

Any participation by Western representatives in international conferences on regional security and negotiations held in Belarus should be conditioned on steps that enhance European security and incentivize an end to political repression within Belarus. But Western officials need not be concerned that engaging with Lukashenka will require frequent personal meetings. Once a general agreement is reached, he is likely to permit other officials to interact directly with Western counterparts, rather than seeking to cultivate personal relations at head of state level.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Interview with a Belarusian analyst, under the condition of anonymity, September 2025, online.

⁷⁷ Nevedomskaya, T. (2022), 'Белорусы ведут против российских войск «рельсовую войну»?' [Are Belarusians waging a "railway war" against Russian forces?], DW, 28 March 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ru/belorusy-vedut-protiv-rossijskih-vojsk-relsovuju-voynu/a-61283409>.

⁷⁸ A telling example from earlier periods of Belarus–West relations is the arrangement concerning Lukashenka's invitations to the EU's Eastern Partnership summits. Although it was agreed that Lukashenka would formally receive the invitations, the foreign minister would attend the meetings on Belarus's behalf.

3. Engage with those in the regime willing to pursue a neutral (or ‘pro-Belarus’) security policy

Critics of engagement with the Lukashenka regime may fairly point out that similar efforts have previously failed and that these efforts followed a pattern: eventually, fearing for his grip on power, Lukashenka resorts to mass repression internally, to which the West responds by refreezing relations. Therefore, although normalization serves the interests of both the West and the pro-democratic segment of Belarusian society, a perception that the West is being deceived by Lukashenka lingers.⁷⁹ This time, however, there is reason to believe that the outcome can be different. For the next few years, Lukashenka may have little need to repress society on a large scale, while the time when he is no longer president is getting closer due to his advancing years. For the latter reason alone, the West needs to be proactive in engaging the full spectrum of Belarus’s political class.

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Support for the democratic movement – such as political and financial backing for civil society and political opposition (whose situation has deteriorated significantly following the US decision to sharply reduce international assistance) – should be maintained. But Western governments also need to establish channels of communication with the ruling elite in Belarus, which is likely to inherit power from the 71-year-old Lukashenka in the not-too-distant future.⁸⁰ In addition, there must be a defined proposal outlining what support might be available if Belarus commits to a transformation. If the West seeks a lasting shift in Belarus’s role in regional security, its offer must be credible to Belarusian policymakers, who will risk a great deal by changing the status quo in Belarusian domestic politics and relations with Russia.

⁷⁹ Hall, B. (2025), ‘Belarus trying to ‘fool’ Trump into normalising ties, says opposition leader’, *Financial Times*, 19 November 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/e87cd013-cc4b-447b-8dd1-b68c99f00a35>.

⁸⁰ Astapenia, R. and Matsukevich, P. (2025), *The Belarusian Ruling Class at the Onset of a Transfer of Power*, Research Paper, Center for New Ideas, <https://newideas.center/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/in-the-shadow-of-lukashenka.pdf>.

4. Make greater use of Western soft power to shift public and elite attitudes

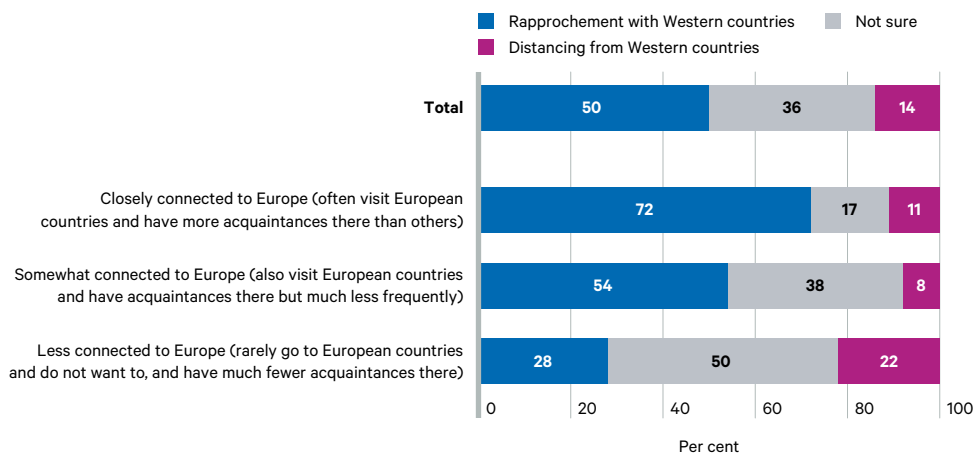
The West’s use of its soft power should likewise be increased, including through extra financial support for independent Belarusian media and the Belarusian services of major Western outlets to counter Russian disinformation. As an example, Chatham House surveys consistently demonstrate a strong link between patterns of media consumption and attitudes towards Russia’s war against Ukraine.⁸¹

The West also needs to foster interpersonal connections between Belarusians and neighbouring countries. Ways to achieve this could include increasing the number of visas issued to Belarusians and restoring transport links between Western countries and Belarus.⁸² Survey data show that Belarusians who travel to Western countries or have relatives and other personal ties there are the most pro-Western in their views.⁸³

Among the population as a whole, survey data make clear that only a small fraction supports further distancing from the West (Figure 3). This suggests that by bringing the majority of society closer to the West through adept use of soft power, Western states can further weaken Russia’s influence and make Belarus even less willing to participate in the Kremlin’s aggressive actions against its neighbours.

Figure 3. Only a minority of Belarusians want to distance the country from the West, regardless of their personal connections

Question: What kind of policy towards Western countries would you rather Belarus followed?



Source: Based on data from a Chatham House survey conducted in 2024. See *What Belarusians Think (2024), ‘Belarusians’ perception of the West and connections with it: the results of a public opinion poll conducted between 28 June and 3 July 2024*, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-19>.

⁸¹ *What Belarusians Think (2023), ‘Belarusians’ views on the war and the impact of the fear factor on online public opinion polling*, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/narratives-1>.

⁸² Astapenia, R. (2023), ‘Rethinking Western policy towards Belarus’, Briefing Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135638>.

⁸³ *What Belarusians Think (2024), ‘Belarusians’ perception of the West and connections with it: the results of a public opinion poll conducted between 28 June and 3 July 2024*, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-19>.

Conclusion

Belarus could become either one of the central elements of a new European regional security architecture or an enabler of a new conflict between Russia and NATO. The choice depends on Western policy to a far greater extent than is commonly assumed. The process of Belarus's 'bufferization' is not an easy task. But it is an essential one, given the country's potential to enable the Kremlin to project threats towards Europe.

It is not realistic to expect instant success. But gradual progress is possible, provided that Western efforts are multi-layered and consistent in the way this paper suggests.

The course of the Russia–Ukraine war and the broader international context may significantly affect the relevance and feasibility of the recommendations proposed in this paper. Nonetheless, the overriding objective of Western policy towards Belarus should remain unchanged: to create conditions that limit Russia's ability to use the country in its war against Ukraine in the shorter term and Eastern Europe and NATO countries in the longer term, while enabling both the regime and independent Belarusian actors to minimize Russia's opportunities for exploitation.

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Cover image: Belarusian troops enter a metro station near the Palace of the Republic in Minsk, 1 July 2017.

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