

Iron curtain on Belarus' western border:

**Does the crisis in Minsk's relations with its Baltic neighbors threaten
Belarusian independence?**

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Abstract

The vital importance of the Baltic Sea region for the political survival and economic development of the Belarusian lands was already apparent in the early Middle Ages. Without access to the Baltic trade routes, the functioning of the first forms of Belarusian statehood, such as the Principality of Polotsk and later the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, would have been severely hampered. At the same time, it is also worth remembering that it was the political and military situation in the Baltic region related to the expansion of the Teutonic Order that led to the unification of the Grand Duchy with Poland, resulting in the Polish-Lithuanian Union. Modern Belarus, as a landlocked state, also needed access to Baltic seaports from the beginning of its independence. The most beneficial cooperation was with the Baltic states, especially those bordering Belarus, Lithuania and Latvia. Poland also played an important role in the sphere of land transport, especially in the East-West transit. At the same time, the numerous disagreements between Minsk and Moscow over the integration of the two countries following Vladimir Putin's assumption of the Russian presidency made cooperation with western neighbors an important instrument for Belarus to weaken Russian domination. Interested in strengthening a sovereign Belarus, Warsaw, Vilnius and Riga have become valuable partners of Minsk during periods of Belarus-EU dialogue. It was from these capitals that proposals were made to diversify the supply of energy resources to Belarus, as well as to broaden political cooperation, for example within the framework of the Eastern Partnership program. At the same time, these countries reacted strongly to human rights violations and became promoters of sanctions when a political crisis occurred in Belarus. By deciding in 2020 on unprecedented repression of rebellious citizens, Alyaksandr Lukashenka led to a deep crisis in relations with the West, including Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. The regime's confrontational actions of recent years have further exacerbated the conflict and, as a result, Belarus has lost the support of its Western neighbors, condemning itself to a gradual loss of sovereignty to Russia.

The purpose of the article is to present the importance of cooperation with the countries of the Baltic Sea region for the independence of Belarus, and due to the particularly active policy in the Belarusian direction and the immediate neighborhood, the study primarily considers three countries: Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. Estonia was also mentioned, which, however, due to the lack of a common border with Belarus, did not play such an important role in strengthening Minsk economically and politically, on the international arena. The role of Russia, a country also located on the Baltic Sea, was presented in

a completely different light. Moscow, despite its allied relations with Minsk, invariably remains a threat to Belarusian statehood, and the strength of Russian pressure increases with the weakening or complete absence (as is currently the case) of dialogue behind its Western neighbors in the EU and NATO.

The text consists of a historical introduction, showing the centuries-old processes of building dependencies between the territory of modern Belarus and the southeastern region of the Baltic Sea. Then, in individual subsections, the contemporary conditions of cooperation between Belarus and Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, implemented - with variable success - since the early 1990s, i.e. since the collapse of the USSR, are presented. The study closes with an analysis of the consequences of the breakdown of Minsk's dialogue with the West and the related unprecedented isolation of Belarus in the international arena, with the simultaneous rise of Russian domination.

Key words: Belarus, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Baltic Sea, sovereignty, independence, sea port, neighbors, transit, geopolitical

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Window to the world: Historical significance of the Eastern and Southern Baltic Sea area for the survival and development of the territory of modern Belarus

The Baltic Sea area played an important role for Belarus from the very beginning of its statehood, i.e. in the 8th to 10th centuries, when, according to the information available in historical chronicles, the Polotsk principality emerged. One of the key factors in the unification of several eastern Slavonic tribes in the area of today's north-eastern Belarus was trade between the north, i.e. Scandinavia and other Baltic centers, and the south, i.e. Byzantium and the Arab states beyond. The Principality of Polotsk was located on this strategic and highly profitable trade route, known as the 'road from the Varangians to the Greeks'. It was around the navigable rivers connecting the Baltic Sea basin with the Black Sea area, such as the Dnieper, Neman and Dvina, that the foundations of Belarusian statehood were formed (Снапкоўскі 2003). Looking from today's perspective, one might be tempted to theorize that already at that time there were the first indications of the transit importance of the Belarusian lands, located between the north and south, between the prosperous Novgorod Republic and the powerful Kievan Rus. The role of a key 'link' in trade and transport was to reappear more than once in Belarusian history, largely due to its location near the Baltic Sea basin, on which large, prosperous port cities, mostly belonging to the Hanseatic League, had already been established in the Middle Ages. The most important of these for the Byelorussian lands was Riga and the later founded Königsberg, through which merchants from the Duchy of Polotsk and then, from the 13th century, from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, another state including the Byelorussian lands, traded with Northern and Western Europe. Just as the Polish nobility became rich from exporting grain and other agricultural products via Gdansk, Belarusian producers benefited from easy access to the nearby Inflants and the Teutonic State, and later, after the secularization of the Order, to Ducal Prussia. (Рэгіён балтыйскага мора 2005). The Baltic Sea region also played an important political role in the case of the Belarusian lands. This is because it was here, in the first half of the 13th century, that the German states of the knightly orders appeared, which, through their aggressive actions, led to a rapprochement between the Principality and Poland, which ultimately resulted in the Polish-Lithuanian Union in Krewa in 1385. Thus, the expansive neighbor from the coastal area in a way forced an alliance with another important actor in the region, i.e. the Polish Kingdom, which ultimately resulted in the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16th century, a strong regional power at that time (Bumblauskas 2013). It is worth mentioning that it was already in alliance with the Poles that the Grand Duchy's elite undertook extensive political and military rivalry with Moscow in the 16th century for control of Inflants, i.e. the area of present-day Latvia and Estonia. This was undoubtedly a clear demonstration of the strategic importance of these lands to the power and economic development of each of the regional actors of the time (Внешняя политика Беларусі 2002).

Summing up this historical retrospective, it must be said that until the annihilation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a result of the three partitions in the 18th century, the Byelorussian lands were strongly linked geopolitically and commercially with the Baltic Sea, which was an important regional factor and source of trade income (mainly from grain exports via Gdansk and other ports on the south-eastern coast). From the moment of the final liquidation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and with it the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Byelorussian territory came under the strict rule of Russia and then the USSR until 1991, which ruled out any possibility for the then Belarusian elites (largely polonized) to define their own role in the region. Tentative attempts to search for a place on the geopolitical map appeared only during the World War I, when the Russian Empire collapsed and a temporary vacuum within the wartime chaos appeared. At that time, in the milieu of Belarusian national activists, who proclaimed the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR) on 25 March 1918, the idea of a political bloc comprising the states created on the ruins of Tsarist Russia emerged, including, among others, an independent Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus and also Poland, seen as the strongest member of this alliance. Ultimately, however, the idea was not realized, which was certainly also helped by the failure of the BRL as a state project (Сідоревіч 2016).

Promoters of dialogue and sanctions: Determinants of the cooperation of the Baltic States and Poland with the Belarusian authorities after the disintegration of the USSR

The break-up of the Soviet Union under the 1991 Bialowieza Accords (also signed by Stanislav Shushkevich, who represented the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic) made possible the emergence of an independent Belarus, which from its inception recognized the importance of cooperation with the states of the Baltic Sea region. For Belarusian national circles, centered, inter alia, in the Belarusian National Front (BNF), still in the 1980s, the activity of the Solidarity trade union in Poland and the mass independence movement in the Baltic republics (symbolized, inter alia, by the so-called 'Baltic' movement) were the main reasons for the independence of Belarus. (symbolized, inter alia, by the so-called Baltic Chain, a demonstration organized on 23 August 1989 with the participation of some 2 million citizens of the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian SSR (SSR = Soviet Socialist Republic), who formed a 600 km long living chain in protest against enslavement within the USSR). Inspired by the resistance in its western neighbors, the Belarusian national movement tried (due to the passive attitude of the majority of citizens) to organize similar actions, while declaring that Belarus belonged to the western cultural circle (Republika Białoruś 2012). Orienting themselves towards Europe, the Belarusian democrats were also looking for concrete solutions to increase the real sovereignty of Belarus, which, despite gaining independence, was still fully dependent on the supply of Russian energy resources. Hence, in 1993, in expert circles associated with the BNF, a project was drawn up for a 'Baltic-Black Sea oil collector', i.e. a system of oil pipelines connecting Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Latvia. The authors of the project assumed that, within a few years, it would be possible to create a system allowing the above-mentioned countries to be fully independent of supplies from Russia, which invariably used its raw material resources to consolidate its influence in the region. In the background of this concept, a political dimension could also be discerned, referring to the already-mentioned early 20th century idea of a comprehensive alliance of the states of the region, going beyond economic issues. This project, both in narrow energy terms and even more so in geopolitical terms, did not gain the support of the Belarusian authorities and to this day remains only an example of the regional aspirations of the Belarusian opposition (Навумчик 2020).

President of Belarus since 1994, Alyaksandr Lukashenko has made no secret of the fact that his foreign policy priority is integration with Russia, which was also one of the key themes in his victorious - and so far only democratic - election campaign. Hence, Minsk rejected any variant of regional integration without Moscow's involvement or seeking EU membership. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, the Belarusian authorities have recognized the importance of cooperation with the countries of the Baltic Sea basin, especially with its immediate neighbors Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. It was to these countries that Belarus addressed an offer to build a 'good neighborhood belt'. Presenting this concept at a conference in Vilnius in 1997, Alyaksandr Lukashenka listed the following premises: the need to mutually guarantee the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states in the region, intensify trade and scientific and economic cooperation, and expand markets for Belarusian goods. At the same time, he pointed to four key dimensions of good neighborly relations: political tolerance and legal cooperation, military security, economic stability and information cooperation (Симановский 2014). The idea of a 'good neighborhood belt' became the cornerstone of Belarusian policy towards its western neighbors for the next 23 years (i.e. until 2020), and its persistence stemmed from the logic, typical of the authoritarian regime, of combining openness to economic cooperation and favorable trade exchanges while being unwilling to make concessions in the sphere of human rights and democracy, as reflected in the aforementioned postulate of 'political tolerance'.

The other side's point of view only partly coincided with Minsk's. The basis for the views of the Polish elite was the ULB (formed from the names of three countries: Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus) theory, formulated still during the Cold War in Polish émigré circles in Paris, which set the main goal of the actions of a future independent Poland as supporting the independence of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. At the root of this concept was the conviction that only the existence of sovereign states in Eastern Europe would be an effective guarantee of security for Warsaw (Najder 2008). The political class in the Lithuania and Latvia did not formulate this so strongly, but perceived the situation in the region similarly, although, for example, Lithuania only recognized the de jure independence of Belarus at the end of 1992, while Poland did so as early as December 1991 (Камышев 2005). Vilnius' delayed reaction, however, was not due to a denial of the Belarusians' right to their own state, but rather due to disagreements over the course of the Lithuanian-Belarusian border and the historical rights to use an almost identical state emblem, the Pahonia, dating back to the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Initially, tensions were so high that the then Belarusian Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kiebič made an initial agreement with the Polish authorities in 1992 to use the port of Gdansk to tranship Belarusian goods and to build a broad-gauge railway line from Belarus to Gdansk freight terminals (Foligowski 1999).

Eventually, however, Minsk worked out an agreement with Vilnius, which allowed it to develop large-scale cooperation with the closer Lithuanian port of Klaipėda, which was much more profitable for the Belarusian economy than using distant Gdansk. At the same time, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia recognized the benefits of economic cooperation with Belarus and became the country's key trade partners for many years, with the first two countries permanently entering the top ten of Belarus' trade markets in terms of both imports and exports (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2023).

At the same time, it should be emphasized that the gradual introduction of authoritarianism in domestic politics initiated by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and the course towards integration with Russia in foreign policy, presented Belarus' western neighbors with a serious dilemma. A different geopolitical orientation and increasingly far-reaching violations of human rights forced the pro-democratic Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian elites to express a critical opinion while taking into account economic considerations and the bilateral agenda related to, inter alia, the legal protection of national minorities. Added to this, motivated by painful historical experience and geopolitical logic, was the fear of Moscow's aggressive policy of seeking to rebuild its dominance in the post-Soviet area, also at the expense of Belarus. These countries therefore sought compromise solutions, an example of which is the policy of 'critical dialogue' adopted by Poland in 1996, consisting of condemning those actions of the Belarusian authorities which were contrary to human rights, democratic values and the rule of law, while maintaining working contacts at a reduced level. (Polska i Białoruś 2003). As the practice at the end of the 20th century and in the first two decades of the 21st century showed, however, the implementation of such a programmed strategy was very challenging, as it was difficult to reconcile ostracism towards Minsk with the development of economic contacts. This was well illustrated in the early 2000s, when, in spite of the previously adopted principle of lowering the level of talks, meetings took place between the presidents of Poland and Belarus in 2003, and in subsequent years between prime ministers and the presidents of the upper houses of parliament (Снапкоўскі 2017).

It must be remembered that the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 to include ten countries, including Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, meant that Belarus, at a distance of approximately 1,000 km, bordered not only the above-mentioned three countries, but also the EU, which introduced a completely new dimension into the overall relations of Minsk with the West and into the direct bilateral contacts of the Belarusian authorities with the EU's immediate neighbors. (Białoruś 2004). From the outset, the new EU members have been involved in efforts to develop a broader EU strategy towards the post-Soviet area, including Belarus, which together with Azerbaijan represents the greatest challenge due to strong authoritarian tendencies there. It does not seem coincidental that it was Poland and another country from the Baltic Sea Region, i.e. Sweden, that came up with the Eastern Partnership initiative, which became the cornerstone of Brussels' Eastern policy for many years. The Eastern Partnership, which was inaugurated in 2009, was the basis for Brussels' Eastern policy for many years. The offer of cooperation within the framework of the Partnership, which was inaugurated in 2009, stemmed not only from a belief in the need to develop cooperation with, inter alia, Belarus, but also from a desire to weaken Russian domination. The Belarusian regime interpreted this program as a relatively easy opportunity to obtain Western credits, technologies and investments, and as a political instrument to be used in often difficult and tense negotiations with the Kremlin, which seeks full domination (Białoruś 2009).

As a result of such an instrumental approach of the Belarusian side to relations with the EU, from time to time the dialogue broke down, mainly in connection with the political turmoil surrounding Alyaksandr Lukashenka's successive re-election, the best example being December 2010. At that time, all the achievements of more than two years of dialogue, initiated in the summer of 2008, were lost or frozen due to the brutal pacification of the post-election mass demonstration by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's opponents and the repression that followed in the following months. An important factor at these moments was Moscow, for whom the anti-Western turn in Minsk's policy was sometimes sufficient reason to provide additional economic and energy subsidies. At the same time, it is worth noting that Russia's aggressive actions in the post-Soviet area (such as the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and the subsequent annexation of Crimea and support for two self-proclaimed republics in the Donbass in 2014) effectively motivated Lukashenko to make another opening in relations with the West. In other words, Belarus, as a relatively small state, has pursued a policy of constantly balancing between two much stronger centers of influence, namely the EU and Russia (Korosteleva 2016). Such an unstable nature of relations between Belarus and the EU meant that, depending on the situation in Belarus, both Poland and Lithuania and Latvia had to react decisively to violations of human rights and rapprochement with Russia, or, during periods of dialogue, became leading promoters of the most far-reaching cooperation. It is worth pointing out that, even when the Belarus-EU dialogue was frozen, trade between Belarus and its immediate neighbors was still at a high level (National

Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2023). Thus, both the activity of Vilnius, Warsaw and Riga in engaging Belarus in neighborhood cooperation and more broadly in the EU dimension, as well as trade, which is resistant to political perturbations, were for many years one of the key factors in strengthening Belarusian sovereignty, particularly in the context of Russian policy in the region.

Strategic transit corridor: The importance of land transport routes and Baltic ports for the Belarusian economy and state sovereignty

The most obvious example of the direct translation of cooperation with Baltic Sea neighbors into Belarusian sovereignty was the transit of goods to and from ports in Lithuania and Latvia. Deprived of access to the sea and at the same time economically dependent on exports (60 to 70 per cent of goods produced in Belarus were exported annually before 2020), the Belarusian economy was condemned from the very beginning of the 1990s to cooperation with neighbors with port infrastructure. Due to distance and logistical considerations (including identical rail gauge), the most favorable options were the Lithuanian ports of Klaipeda and the Latvian ports of Vindava and Riga. Hence, despite the initial disagreements on the Minsk-Vilnius line, mentioned in the previous section of the text, the Lithuanian, Latvian and Belarusian authorities came to an agreement relatively quickly. As a result, since the 1990s, the two aforementioned Baltic states have become a kind of 'maritime window to the world' for Belarus. A significant proportion of strategic Belarusian exports, including above all potassium fertilizers and petroleum products, after transit to individual ports, found their way to customers in Europe and beyond. On the other hand, cooperation with Belarusian exporters was also very important for the Lithuanian and Latvian economies. For example, according to 2012 estimates, approximately one-third of the cargoes handled in Klaipeda are products originating from Belarus (at present, these are mainly potassium fertilizers). On the other hand, in the structure of Lithuanian railway transport, Belarusian cargoes accounted for as much as 40% at that time. Moreover, for Lithuania, this cooperation was much more important than trade with Belarus, as it allowed the transport and logistics sector, which accounted for up to 10% of GDP, to prosper. Latvia was even more dependent than Lithuania on Belarusian or Belarusian-transported cargo. The transport and logistics sector accounted for around 13% of Latvia's GDP at the time (which was slightly more than in Lithuania), and goods from Belarusian direction accounted for more than 50% of the total freight value. What is more, the Belarusian side was aware not only of the important role of transit in the economies of the neighboring Baltic states, but also of the competition between them for increased freight volumes, hence Minsk sometimes tried to play Vilnius and Riga by negotiating more favorable terms of cooperation. This enabled the Belarusian side to lobby – at least to some extent – the Lithuanian and Latvian elites to soften their stance on EU sanctions, as happened, for example, in spring 2012 (Kłysiński 2013).

The main beneficiary of transit cooperation, however, was Belarus, as evidenced by an unprecedented transaction for Belarus-Lithuanian relations in April 2013, when the Belarusian state potash company 'Belaruskali' acquired a 30 per cent stake in the Klaipeda cargo terminal. It is noteworthy here that the transaction took place during the period of the Belarus-EU dialogue freeze, which was another confirmation of the stability of economic cooperation before 2020, developing despite the unfavorable political climate (Лукашенко меняет 2013). Simultaneously, the Belarusian side saw not only economic but also geopolitical benefits, primarily related to the strengthening of sovereignty. Hence, when Moscow demanded in 2017 that Minsk decide – following the action of Russian operators – to break contracts with ports in Lithuania and Latvia and then redirect transit to ports in Russia, Belarus refused. The skeptical stance of the Belarusian authorities was not even changed by the Russian railways' offer of a 50 per cent discount on freight tariffs and the Kremlin's blackmail, which made the oil price for Belarus dependent on the transshipment of oil products from Belarusian refineries at Russian ports. It is worth noting, however, that the correctness of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's strategy of maintaining transport via the Baltics, despite pressure from Moscow, was supported before 2020 even by Belarusian commentators sympathetic to Russia (Петровский 2017). A separate, somewhat adventurous, aspect of using the Baltic ports to strengthen Belarusian sovereignty was the supply of oil from Venezuela to Estonia's Muuga and Lithuania's Klaipeda, from where the crude was transported by rail to Belarusian refineries. This was part of Minsk's strategy of diversifying its oil supply between 2010 and 2012, against the backdrop of pressure from Russia, its main supplier of crude. Lukashenko, taking advantage of his friendly relations with the then president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, bought shares in local deposits and contracted supplies which, despite their extreme unprofitability (not least due to the high cost of

transport across the Atlantic Ocean), were a demonstration of the Belarusian authorities' determination to seek alternative sources of supply. As Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister for Energy Uladzimir Siemashko admitted in 2012, cooperation with Venezuelan suppliers helped the Belarusian authorities to reach a favorable agreement with the Russian side (Поставки в Белоруссию 2012). At the same time, the deputy head of the Belarusian government did not mention that without the mediation of the Baltic States this Venezuelan 'row' would not have happened. Należy przy tym nadmienić, iż w opisywanym okresie intensywnej polityki Mińska na rzecz dywersyfikacji, rozpoczęła się realizacja wielkiego rosyjskiego projektu inwestycyjnego na Białorusi, czyli budowa elektrowni atomowej w Ostrowcu (obwód grodzieński), co umocniło zależność energetyczną białoruskiej gospodarki od współpracy z Rosją. Pierwszy blok siłowni został uruchomiony w 2020 r. (Hyndle-Hussein, Kardaś, Kłysiński, Konończuk 2018).

Transit-logistics cooperation with Poland developed in a different way. In this case, as mentioned earlier, Polish seaports, including Gdansk, were not competitive with Lithuanian or Latvian ones, so that the importance of Poland for Belarus was mainly due to the common trade routes on the East-West axis. The strategic location of both countries created favorable conditions for the development of the transit of goods from distant Asian markets, including China, exported to the markets of EU countries, and for the import of Western goods to Russia and the Far East. Thanks, among other things, to cooperation with Poland, the importance of Belarus as a transport corridor for China has steadily increased, and as a result, for example, in 2020, about 2 per cent of Chinese exports worth a total of EUR 8.3 billion went via Belarus to the West. Containers were transported mainly by rail, including using the freight terminal in Małaszewicze, located in Poland (Tygodnik Gospodarczy 2021). Minsk had already been using its transit advantages since the early 2000s to establish broader cooperation with China in order to at least partially counterbalance Russian domination. This was partly achieved in the economic and investment sphere by attracting a number of Chinese investors (with whom cooperation was not always successful), with whose participation the Sino-Belarusian industrial park Veliky Kamen was established in 2012. According to the plan, it was to be a transport and logistics hub and at the same time an investment zone for companies interested in manufacturing and exporting their goods to both the Russian and Asian markets as well as to the EU and other Western countries. Ultimately, the Great Stone was to become one of the elements of China's One Route project, which would mean the permanent inclusion of Belarus in Beijing's main economic expansion strategy. In addition to the land route through Poland, the park, located near Minsk in the vicinity of an international airport and railway lines, was to have the advantage of being close to Lithuanian and Latvian ports, where it was planned to transship some goods. However, an obstacle to the development of this project was the lack of a real common market within the Eurasian Economic Union, as perceived by the Chinese, with trade protectionism of Eurasian member states, including Russia and Belarus, being particularly unfavorable from China's point of view (Jakóbowski and Kłysiński 2021).

From engagement to isolation: The meltdown of the 2020 dialogue with the countries of the region in the context of a general breakdown in relations with the West

The dramatic events of 2020 proved to be a watershed for both Belarus and Belarusians themselves. Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has been in power continuously since 1994, reacted strongly to the public protests against the presidential elections, which were rigged for the umpteenth time. Widespread repression had already occurred at previous elections, especially in 2006 and 2010 when there were major street protests. However, 2020 proved to be an unprecedented challenge for Lukashenko. Fatigue, discontent and frustration gripped the majority of Belarusian citizens. The state of turmoil in the usually passive Belarusian society translated into huge demonstrations that, at their peak in August 2020, even gathered more than 200,000 people in the capital. Always obsessively focused on maintaining control over the state and its citizens, Lukashenko perceived these symptoms of mass opposition as a Western-controlled 'color revolution', one of the darkest scenarios he had always feared. Hence, against the wishes of a large section of the population, he ordered himself to 'count' 80 per cent of the vote once again, and ordered the loyal security structures to take extremely brutal action (Kłysiński 2023).

Any criticism from the West, outraged at such a drastic violation of human rights, was dismissed, deepening Lukashenko's conviction of a Western elite conspiracy – Poland, accused of seeking to annex the former 'eastern borderlands', became the main object of the regime's propaganda attack. The Baltic neighbors were also in the forefront of the attacked states, especially Lithuania, which was sheltering political emigration. At the same time, the dictator received support from Vladimir Putin, concerned about the

risk of a change of power under street pressure in Belarus, perceived by the Kremlin as a state in the direct sphere of Russian influence. As a result, a period of isolation began for Lukashenko in his relations with Western states, which gradually tightened sanctions regimes, including a trade embargo. In line with the paradigm outlined earlier, previously engaged in cooperation with Belarus, including diversification of foreign trade and supply of raw materials, Warsaw, Vilnius and Riga, as well as (slightly less involved in Belarusian issues earlier) Tallinn almost immediately became the leading promoters of sanctions against the regime. Uncharacteristically, it was the Baltic States that were the first to introduce sanctions even before the EU-level restrictions, deciding on 31 August 2020 to ban 32 regime officials, including Alyaksandr Lukashenka, from entering their territory. (Kłysiński 2021). This was a serious warning signal to Minsk that things had gone too far and that not only political dialogue, but also economic cooperation with countries that constitute one of the key factors of Belarusian sovereignty, was at stake. Just how many potential opportunities were missed by the events of 2020 is clearly indicated by the symbolic fact that exactly on the day of the tragic presidential election, i.e. 9 August, the second (and, as it turned out, the last) tanker with American oil arrived in the port of Klaipėda, which was yet another politically revolutionary attempt to diversify the sources of this raw material (Второй танкер 2020).

The escalation ladder: Minsk's confrontational policy in 2021-2023

The first sanctions packages introduced by the EU and the USA against Belarus after the tragic 2020 elections did not go beyond the standards familiar from previous crises in Belarus-EU relations. These were mainly visa restrictions, meaning a ban on entry to the EU for selected representatives of the Belarusian regime responsible for repression, torture of opponents of the authorities, persecution of free media and social organizations, and convictions of political prisoners. The most dangerous sanctioning tool, which is always undoubtedly the trade embargo, was used to a very limited extent until spring 2021 and mainly targeted specific private and state companies suspected of building the regime's financial base and supporting the terrorist apparatus (Kłysiński 2021). A breakthrough in the West's sanctions policy towards Belarus turned out to be the incident with the Ryanair plane, flying from Athens to Vilnius, whose crew was forced to land near Minsk by Belarusian air traffic control personnel on 23 May 2021. As it turned out, this was an operation by Belarusian (most likely carried out in close cooperation with Russian allies) special services to arrest opposition journalist Raman Protasevich and his partner Sofia Sapiiega, who were on board and being prosecuted by the regime. In the view of the West, this was an act of international terrorism, which prompted the EU to adopt in June a full embargo on the export of Belarusian petroleum products and severe restrictions on the sale of potash fertilizers, the most profitable category in Belarusian exports. The EU restrictions were also joined by the US in introducing its own restrictions, particularly on fertilizers, in the summer of 2021. These actions were unprecedented, as it was the first time that an EU Western embargo covered entire sectors of the Belarusian economy in such a comprehensive manner (Dobrynsky 2021). It is also worth noting that the direct effect of these sanctions was to de facto (after a transitional period) close the export route of oil products via Lithuanian and Latvian ports, which had been so profitable for Belarus for many years.

The following months only brought a deterioration of the situation, resulting from the escalation of tensions by the Belarusian side. From May/June 2021. (i.e. in parallel with the air incident), the EU countries bordering Belarus, i.e. Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, recorded increasing pressure from migrants from non-European countries attempting to illegally cross the border. The crisis reached its peak in October/November, when thousands of desperate citizens from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan and other African and Asian countries stormed the Polish section of the border every day. It has been established beyond doubt that this was a joint Belarusian-Russian hybrid operation to test the resilience of the EU (and to some extent NATO) to the migration crisis, to discredit it internationally and to destabilize the countries most critical of the regime after the 2020 elections. - i.e. precisely these three EU neighbors of Belarus (Dyner 2022). As a result, in December 2021, the EU and the USA adopted further sanctions packages sealing earlier restrictions, with the most egregious effect being the closure of access to the port of Klaipėda for Belarusian potash fertilizer exporters from 1 February 2022, making it de facto impossible or significantly more difficult to reach key non-European customers, such as Brazil, China and India (Kłysiński 2022a). Another serious blow to the Belarusian economy was the sanctions package of 2 March 2022, introduced in connection with Belarus' complicity in the Russian aggression against Ukraine. As a result, the EU embargo covered at least half of Belarusian exports to EU markets (sales of timber,

wood products, metal and iron goods, among others, were blocked) and, with restrictions in place from 2021, the scale of losses could be as high as 70 per cent. (Kłysiński 2022b). And while the crisis in relations between Belarus and the West was already very serious, it has reached a critical state in the context of the war in Ukraine.

The scale of the breakdown in dialogue was most evident in the case of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, which was primarily due to the huge contrast, unprecedented since the early 1990s, between the intensive cooperation in very many areas before August 2020 and the almost open hostility and complete lack of trust after the Belarusian presidential elections. The unprecedented dimension of the crisis was also confirmed by the reduction of the diplomatic representation of the above countries in Minsk. At the beginning of October 2020, in protest against 'unjustified' sanctions from the EU, the Belarusian authorities summoned their ambassadors in Warsaw and Vilnius for consultations and then demanded a far-reaching reduction in diplomatic staff from these countries' missions in Minsk. As a result, the Lithuanian and Polish ambassadors left Belarus together with some of their subordinates. (Krzysztozek 2020). Subsequently, in May 2021, the Belarusian authorities demanded the withdrawal of almost all Latvian diplomats from Minsk and in July similar steps were taken against the Lithuanian side. In accordance with diplomatic rules, Vilnius and Riga responded with the same and, as a result, for almost two years these countries have had no de facto diplomatic representation, although they still maintain official relations (МИД Литвы 2021, Кронман 2021). A few months later, a similar situation also occurred on the Minsk-Tallinn line. Thus, another negative precedent was set in Belarus' increasingly tense relations with the Baltic Sea states.

A choice without an alternative: Increasing dependence on Russia as a threat to the future of Belarusian sovereignty

The breakdown of dialogue with the West as a result of the events of August 2020 immediately translated into an intensification of cooperation between Belarus and Russia, which from then on became Minsk's de facto sole political and military support. Lukashenko, despite his previously expressed fears of losing his independence to the Kremlin, found himself in a no-win situation and had to accept the Russian side's demands for, among other things, accelerated integration into the Union State. And although the intensification of Minsk-Moscow cooperation in the context of the lack of dialogue with the West had already occurred several times in previous years (above all after the 2010 presidential elections), this time the choice in favor of Russia was already non-alternative. After the traumatic confrontation with the mass rebellion of his citizens in 2020, Lukashenko did not want to and at the same time could not plan on easing repression either in the short or medium term. His number one goal was and still is to maintain power at all costs, even through total repression, which has been uninterrupted for almost three years now. Under these conditions, only cooperation with an equally undemocratic Russia could guarantee Lukashenko's hold on power. Hence, the regime, almost from the beginning of the political crisis in Belarus, gradually abandoned further channels of cooperation with the West, including those profitable and geopolitically advantageous, such as the export of oil products via Lithuania and Latvia. It is worth recalling that as early as February 2021, i.e. even before the EU embargo, a Russian-Belarusian intergovernmental agreement was concluded on redirecting part of Belarus' fuel exports from the ports of the Baltic States to Russia. (Минск и Москва 2021). This was probably not without pressure from the Kremlin, seeking the complete subordination of its Belarusian ally. At the same time, however, attempts by the Russian side to force such a solution before 2020 were met with effective resistance from the Belarusian authorities, which clearly shows how much Belarus' resistance to pressure from Moscow has decreased. Minsk's escalation of tensions in the region, described in the previous section, and its clearly confrontational policy towards the West were also the result and cause of its increasingly close cooperation with Russia, culminating in its support for the attack on Ukraine.

The following months – with the tightening of the Western trade and financial embargo – only deepened Belarus' dependence on Russian support. According to communiqués from the Belarusian authorities (no exact statistics are available), Russian-Belarusian trade last year increased by \$11 billion compared to 2021, to \$50 billion. The value of exports, estimated by Minsk at around \$23 billion, more than \$7 billion more than in the previous year, was also set to be a record since the beginning of commodity exchange between independent Belarus and Russia. As a result, Russia's share in Belarusian foreign trade approached an unprecedented 70%, and in the industrial production sector it reached 75%. This situation has undoubtedly been brought about by the occupation of new niches in the Russian market

by Belarusian exporters after some Western companies left the market. In addition, the provision of all seaports and railway lines by the Russian authorities allowed Belarusian exporters – after the closure of the port of Klaipėda – to at least partially restore exports of potash fertilizers to China by land through Russia and by sea to Brazil. Simultaneously, 3.5 million tons of petroleum products were also exported through Russian ports in 2022, around a third of exports before the EU embargo in 2021. The Kremlin officially admits that it is providing support in the transport of other sanctioned commodity groups, such as timber and wood products. There are plans to hand over to Belarus the Bronka transshipment terminal in the Leningrad region with a capacity of around 3.2 million tons per year (expandable to more than 7 million tons), mainly designed to handle containers. In addition, Moscow last March deferred to Minsk the repayment of US\$1.4 billion in debt due in 2022-2023. (Kłysiński 2023).

Thus, Russia has become not only a major market for Belarusian producers but also a strategic transit hub, in a sense taking over the role of Poland and the pre-2020 Baltic States. As a result, the fate of the Belarusian economy has been closely linked to the macroeconomic situation in Russia, which is engaged in a costly war with Ukraine and is also burdened by severe restrictions from the West. However, this is not the only consequence of Belarus' unconditional orientation towards rapprochement with Russia. Breaking off the dialogue with the West in 2020, has wiped out many years of difficult, and fraught with numerous disagreements, but nevertheless fruitful political, economic and energy cooperation of Belarus with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia (to a lesser extent Estonia), i.e. with countries which considered and still consider the preservation of Belarusian sovereignty as an important part of their *raison d'être*. Concentrating on maintaining absolute power, Lukashenko has thus lost one of Belarus' most important assets to save the country from catastrophe, as understood by the rulers of the Polotsk Principality, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the founders of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918 and the opposition leaders of the 1990s. Now, as an illegitimate president, further compromised by his complicity in the aggression against Ukraine and subordinated to the will of Moscow, Lukashenko can only delay the process of dismantling Belarusian independence.

Is the Belarusian state project finished?

In its recent history, an independent Belarus has drawn on the geopolitical opportunities that opened up in the early 1990s for the young state suddenly created by the collapse of the USSR. Of key importance was the period up to 1994, that is, until Alyaksandr Lukashenka became president. It was then that the authorities of the Republic of Belarus defined the strategic directions of foreign policy and foreign cooperation, and it was then that the importance of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland could be particularly clearly seen. Lukashenko's imposed priority of integration with Russia introduced a paradigm for more than 20 years, according to which important moments for Belarusian independence usually appeared at moments of crisis in relations with Moscow, seeking full control over its smaller Belarusian partner.

From the current perspective, it is clear that the opportunities to establish a stable, in-depth dialogue between Minsk and the West through, among others, its Baltic neighbors, have not been properly utilized. The assessment of the current state of Belarusian statehood presented in the study therefore does not inspire optimism. Isolated by Western partners and at the same time dominated by Russia, Lukashenko is no longer able to make not only any reorientation but even modifications in his external and internal policies. A symbol, relevant also in the context of security in the Baltic Sea region, of the already extreme usurpation of Kremlin interests, is Lukashenko's agreement to deploy tactical (and possibly strategic) nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory. The stalemate in which the Belarusian resim is currently stuck means that within the next 10 years, Belarus may disappear as a *de jure* state at worst and a *de facto* state at best. This will be accompanied by a rising wave of emigration, especially among young Belarusians, economic stagnation and the breakdown of state structures. The only chance for the survival of Belarusian statehood in the current situation is a change in the system of government, related both to a personal factor, i.e. a change in the position of president, and a structural one, i.e. at least the initiation of a systemic transformation in Belarus. As a result, only a move away from the authoritarian model could guarantee Belarus' survival until 2034. This state of affairs raises a number of challenges for Western political elites, and decision-makers in particular. It should be important for EU countries, and especially Belarus' immediate neighbors, to take any action directed at preserving Belarusian sovereignty. Importantly, however, it is necessary to abandon the old patterns, albeit valid even before the 2020 crisis, according to which Lukashenko has always been the main guarantor of Belarus' subjectivity in

the international arena for the West. At present, the only appropriate, politically and morally justified investment in the future of Belarus is to seek out rational-thinking circles in Belarusian power circles, as well as support for opponents of the regime and those Belarusian citizens for whom Russia is not the only landmark on the map of Europe.

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