

# **Belarus and its future development: What does it mean for the Baltic Sea Region?**

*By Andrei Sannikov*

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## Abstract

Soft security has to embrace hard security concerns and avoid contradictions. There was a paradoxical situation when NATO in recognition of a potential threat from the territory of Belarus was strengthening its military capabilities on Europe's eastern border and the same NATO members within the framework of European Union refused to recognize those dangers and tried to appease the dictator who creates all the conditions for such threats. There has to be clear understanding that no business interests connected with the Lukashenko's regime can be used as an excuse to soften attitude to this dictatorship and ease the pressure, since it will lead to more hard security threats coming from the territory of Belarus. The pressure on the regime should be concentrated on the issue of the thousands of political prisoners that has to be released. All kinds of pressure are morally justified to save lives of political prisoners that are being slowly killed in Lukashenko's prisons. The main mistake that was made by the West as regards Belarus was that the politics on Belarus have always been affected by a heavy Kremlin-fear factor. In other words, the West has always been reluctant to support the Belarusian opposition persuading itself that the Kremlin would react by force. Lack of understanding of the dangers connected with the Lukashenko's regime, not only for Belarusians but also for the Baltic Sea Region (as most vulnerable for Russian aggression) led to growing military and other threats and, as a result, to the need of increasing exponentially the expenses for strengthening the security. All these extra expenses and growing security threats could have been avoided if Belarus was paid a due attention and stronger measures (for e.g. economic sanctions, political isolation of the regime, reducing or cutting off diplomatic presence) were used after the gross and mass violations of human rights in Belarus. It has to be clear that unless the meaningful investment into independence and democratic development of Belarus is made the security of the whole region is in danger. Unless EU assistance to Belarus is tied to values and conditioned with absence of repression and respect for human rights, it will contribute to the growing threat to Europe.

**Key words:** security in the Baltic Sea Region, geopolitical changes in Europe, geostrategic importance of Belarus.

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## 1. Free world under attack

The war in Ukraine has transformed Europe profoundly. The tragic events that are unravelling before our eyes have so many dimensions that it will take time to identify and analyze many of them. However, such an analysis is needed, at least of the most significant ones and their causes, to prevent and stop similar developments in the future. One of such fundamental things that is obvious but still is not fully recognized is the fact that the democratic world needs strong and resolute military power to defend its values when they are attacked on other territories such as aspiring democracies. Hard power is again becoming the main instrument to defend the democracies and to protect soft power.

The world has changed, perhaps irrevocably after February 24, 2022. All of a sudden Europe has experienced the largest displacement of people within the continent, the world economy was encountered many new realities that it is still to cope with. The Russian invasion led to a recognition of a new sense of purpose within transatlantic community. However, the immediate reactions within NATO and its swift expansion to encompass Finland and Sweden addresses the problem but does not solve it.

The dangers, threats and challenges of the contemporary world have at their roots the long-time persistence attacks on the democracy by autocratic regimes and their agents in the democracies and an inability of the free world to effectively oppose these attacks.

## 2. Democratic decline

Since the year 1973, Freedom House has published its annual report that assesses the level of political rights and civil liberties around the world, gathering data and information from around 210 countries and territories. 'The Freedom in the World' report was released on February 29th, 2024 titled 'The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict'. The report indicates that the year 2023 marked the 18th consecutive year of global freedom decline, with a concerning scale of deterioration. Political rights and civil liberties were undermined in 52 countries, affecting one-fifth of the world's population, while only 21 countries showed improvements. The downturn in rights and freedom was mostly due to attacks on pluralism, with flawed elections and armed conflicts being the main causes, as the title suggests.

The manipulation of elections contributed to the decline of freedom scores in 26 countries and took various forms. This dramatic democratic decline is the main reason of numerous domestic conflicts that we observe today and of a major war in Europe that Russia is waging against Ukraine. In Eastern Europe the democratic decline began even before the newly independent states became democratic.

It all started with Lukashenko coming to power in Belarus in 1994 which was the beginning of the establishment of the regime that is nowadays known as the last dictatorship in Europe. The foundation of Europe's last dictatorship was laid in Belarus precisely in the 1990s when Europe lived through its best period of great expectations, enlargement and common values. Lukashenko achieved a successful coup d'état (disguised as a referendum) and assumed total power in 1996. In this he was effectively assisted by the then Russian president Boris Yeltsin. In fact, it was a 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' deal.

Yeltsin who was seriously ill at the time of the presidential election in Russia in 1996 needed some kind of a PR event to show that he is not only in control but also is capable of expanding Russia's influence beyond its borders. For this purpose, he came to Belarus on the 22nd of June 1996, the day when the World War II started on the territory of the Soviet Union, to demonstrate imperialistic intentions so popular in Russia. Before that Lukashenko and Yeltsin on April 2nd 1996 signed a Treaty on the Formation of the Community of Russia and Belarus in the Grand Kremlin Palace in Moscow.

For these services rendered by Lukashenko, Yeltsin supported the coup d'état of November 1996 in Belarus. The EU responded to this by suspending relations with the regime, hoping that the next election would be fair. Popular opposition leaders who enjoyed broad support were murdered in 1999: Gennady Karpenko, Yury Zakharenko, and Victor Gonchar. Every one of them could have won an election against the dictator. The EU did not respond to that. The Council of Europe conducted an investigation years after the murders. In the meantime, the dictator was building, consistently and methodically, modern Europe's toughest totalitarian system in Belarus.

All the regimes of the former Soviet Union, notably that of Russia, carefully studied the approaches and methods tested by the dictator in Belarus. They did not simply study them, but they also adopted the best dictatorship practices for their own use. It was abundantly clear how Lukashenko's practices were

implemented in Russia. Among other things, Russia was always watching how quickly Belarus could patch up its relations with the EU after yet another, more vicious spat.

The experience of the Belarusian dictatorship demonstrated that after any flare ups with the West, after putting down peaceful demonstration, putting more political prisoners into jail, someone would always come forward in Europe to defend the bankrupt Belarusian regime, and appeasers would be found domestically, who would join efforts to make the EU to revert to the Realpolitik mode.

It could be said that Europe created Lukashenko, and Lukashenko created Putin's Russia, Russia that started the bloody war in Europe. This horrendous consequence of the previous attitude to Russia clearly shows that no Realpolitik, no amount of 'engagement' and overtures towards dictators are going to create predictable, safe neighbors for Europe. Dialogue and engagement with these regimes legitimize them and let them into the EU where it is the EU's systems and values that corrode. Hence, there are fewer and fewer free countries in the world today.

European democracy is increasingly becoming a product for purely domestic consumption. It is in full effect in the EU, where politicians, journalists, government officials and ordinary citizens alike are more than happy to benefit from it, and it grinds to a halt at the EU's boundaries. Democratic principles prevail inside the EU: independent courts protect human rights from encroachment by other individuals as well as governments. Outside the EU, one can conveniently forget about principles and deal with dictators. The policy that Vaclav Havel, president of Czechoslovakia in 1989-1992 and president of Czech Republic in 1993-2003, described as 'the sinister experience of dictator appeasement', is now called a 'policy of engagement'. This is precisely what the EU was offering Lukashenko up until 2020, the man whose regime was responsible for disappearances and murders of opposition leaders, journalists, mass human rights violations, as well as destruction of national culture, history and language.

### **3. Futile attempts to make peace with Lukashenko**

In the 1990s, there was a discussion of two-track policy of the West towards Belarus, somehow resembling western policy towards East European countries in the 1970s and 1980s. The West did have relations with communist governments but did pay serious attention to human rights and used sanctions when they were abused.

It was clear that in case of Belarus the West was reluctant to introduce sanctions (in fact there were never real sanctions besides visa, or rather tourist, restrictions for some officials), but at least there have to be more pressure on the regime to respect its own commitments as regards to human rights and more support for pro-democracy tendencies and forces in Belarus.

The usual behavior of the Belarusian regime: when the West softens its position and shows willingness to deal with Lukashenko the repressions become much harsher in Belarus. It would be good for the West to remember its previous failed attempts of rapprochement with the regime, especially in 2010.

That year there was a lot of trust in Lukashenko, especially from the three European countries most important for Belarus, namely Lithuania, Germany and Poland. On the very eve of presidential election in 2010, Polish and German foreign ministers and the president of Lithuania visited Belarus, met with Lukashenko and with the opposition and made their conclusions that Lukashenko can be trusted in his intentions to come closer to Europe and that he allegedly is supported by a majority of Belarusians.

All those conclusions were based on what they heard from Lukashenko and his people. The prominent European politicians did not share the views of the opposition that the dictator was not popular at all and might use force against peaceful demonstration on election night. They in fact expressed their support for the dictator on the very eve of the election. What happened during the night of that election is known – the most brutal crackdown on the peaceful demonstration and years of harsh repressions.

Quite remarkably the reason for concern this time is not the horrible situation with human rights in the country under dictatorship but the fate of the dictatorship itself being threatened by a neighboring bigger tyranny. The fact that it was Lukashenko illegally clinging to power for almost 25 years, who laid the ground for the Kremlin to move anytime to swallow Belarus, was ignored. It was no one other than Lukashenko, who signed all the agreements on the union with Russia and then in accordance with those agreements, both public and secret, was destroying the national identity of Belarusians in every possible way. Speaking native Belarusian publicly out of the limits of some language ghettos allowed by the regime is still an act of courage in Belarus.

Indeed, the Kremlin has always been a threat to the independence of Belarus, even to its existence as a sovereign state. There is no doubt about it after Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and annexation of Georgian lands and especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Ukrainian Crimea.

There was also no doubt that Lukashenko was a peddler capable of selling the independence and not protecting let alone fighting for it. Europe's last dictator is notorious for his hatred of the true national identity of the country he has held as a hostage for so many years. Belarus for him is not a motherland to be proud of but a means of enriching himself and satisfying his instincts.

Independence of Belarus is a matter of international security. It is too important strategically for Europe to be surrendered to Putin and Lukashenko, two tyrants. Independence of Belarus has to be protected internationally and not through the support of the regime that offers the territory of Belarus to the Kremlin every time it wants to threaten the West with major offensive military exercise, such as Zapad. Finally, it led to the complete military control of the territory of Belarus by the Kremlin. Lukashenko became an accomplice and a co-aggressor in the bloody full-fledged invasion of Russia into Ukraine.

#### 4. How the security was shaped after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant inevitable dissolution of the Warsaw Pact<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the formal dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in July 1991 preceded the formal denunciation of the USSR in December that same year. The geopolitical changes at the end of the 20th century, that were supposed to eradicate dividing lines between East and West, did not produce the desired result and in some cases created new divisions between countries of the former Eastern bloc and the countries of the former Soviet Union. The countries of the former Warsaw Pact and the three Baltic States knew that they wanted to be integrated in the West and were moving in this direction at different speeds.

The former parts of the USSR could not afford themselves such a luxury as a free geopolitical choice. They had to deal with their common interdependence and dependence on Russia first. To some extent European republics of the former USSR, by agreeing to establish the CIS (the Commonwealth of Independent States) and to subordinate themselves to Russian domination, made a decisive contribution to a relatively safe passage of Central European countries from the political East to the political West.

In the 1990s, those dividing lines did not seem to be dangerous but gradually they were becoming more distinct again, separating part of Europe from the whole. The search for new security arrangements eventually resulted in two tendencies that roughly shaped the situation in the region in the 21st century. These tendencies had opposite vectors:

- One was voluntary accession to the North Alliance of the former Warsaw Pact members supported by the population of those countries.
- Another was the new military pact hastily created and controlled by Russia where several CIS countries were coerced into signing the Collective Security Treaty (CST)<sup>2</sup>.

It is worth noting that the CST was signed much earlier than the first enlargement of NATO that occurred in 1999. NATO in early 1994 established the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program by which, according to the then US president Bill Clinton, NATO would give a way for countries in Eastern Europe, including those that were part of the Soviet Union and even Russia itself, to work together "*for the best possible future for Europe*".<sup>3</sup> That was an attempt from the side of NATO that was trying to find some ground for cooperation in the area of security with Russia and the other newly independent states. It was reluctantly accepted by Russia. However, Central Eastern European states were not happy with the program, fearing that it could become an obstacle to their full membership.

1 Warsaw Pact was a collective defense treaty established by the Soviet Union and seven other Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe: Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania (Albania withdrew in 1968).

2 The Treaty was signed on May 15th, 1992 in Tashkent by the heads of six countries, namely Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In December 1993, after a lot of pressure from Russia and from communist forces inside the country Belarus had signed the Treaty as well. Despite the similar pressure and even blackmail from the side of Russia, Ukraine managed to stay away from this trap.

3 Borawski, John (April 1995). "Partnership for Peace and beyond". *International Affairs*. 71 (2). Royal Institute of International Affairs: 233–246. doi:10.2307/2623432. JSTOR 2623432.

These countries also were very cautious with Russia, fearing retaliation, and did not openly declare outright their NATO ambitions. At one moment Poland even put on the table an idea of 'a NATO-bis', or a shadow NATO, for Central Eastern Europe.

The hesitancy and cautiousness of former Warsaw Pact members was understandable: firstly, they needed to get rid of Soviet troops on their territories, which was not an easy exercise, fraught with chaos and risks. When that was eventually achieved, the road to NATO was cleared and Central Eastern European countries led by the Visegrad Group started their accession to the Alliance.

## **5. What about Belarus?**

Similar to all the other independent states that emerged after the collapse of the USSR (except the Baltic States, of course), Belarus was not able to claim its NATO aspiration even if it would have wanted to do so. In the early 1990s, Belarus became independent but the country was not free. The democrats had never been in power in Belarus. The politics were affected by the retrograde communist majority in the parliament and the government, and the rise of Lukashenko. That is why Belarus was not able to formulate any free and independent security concept. However, Belarus was a net contributor to the European and international security by playing a constructive role in security and disarmament negotiations on conventional forces and on nuclear arsenals of the former USSR.

The Russian armed expansion in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, that went practically unpunished, was understood by Putin as a weakness of the West and served as a basis for his decision for a full-fledged war against Ukraine that started in February 2022.

There were other factors that paved the way for the unprecedented bloody war in Europe. One of these factors was the dictatorship of Lukashenko in Belarus, which in many ways served as a model for the Putin regime and that provided all the necessary conditions including logistics, for Russian aggression.

Dictatorship always means war, be it a war of dictators against their own people or, as in the case of the Russian attack on Ukraine, monstrous war against the neighbors. The most efficient way to prevent war is to get rid of the dictatorships.

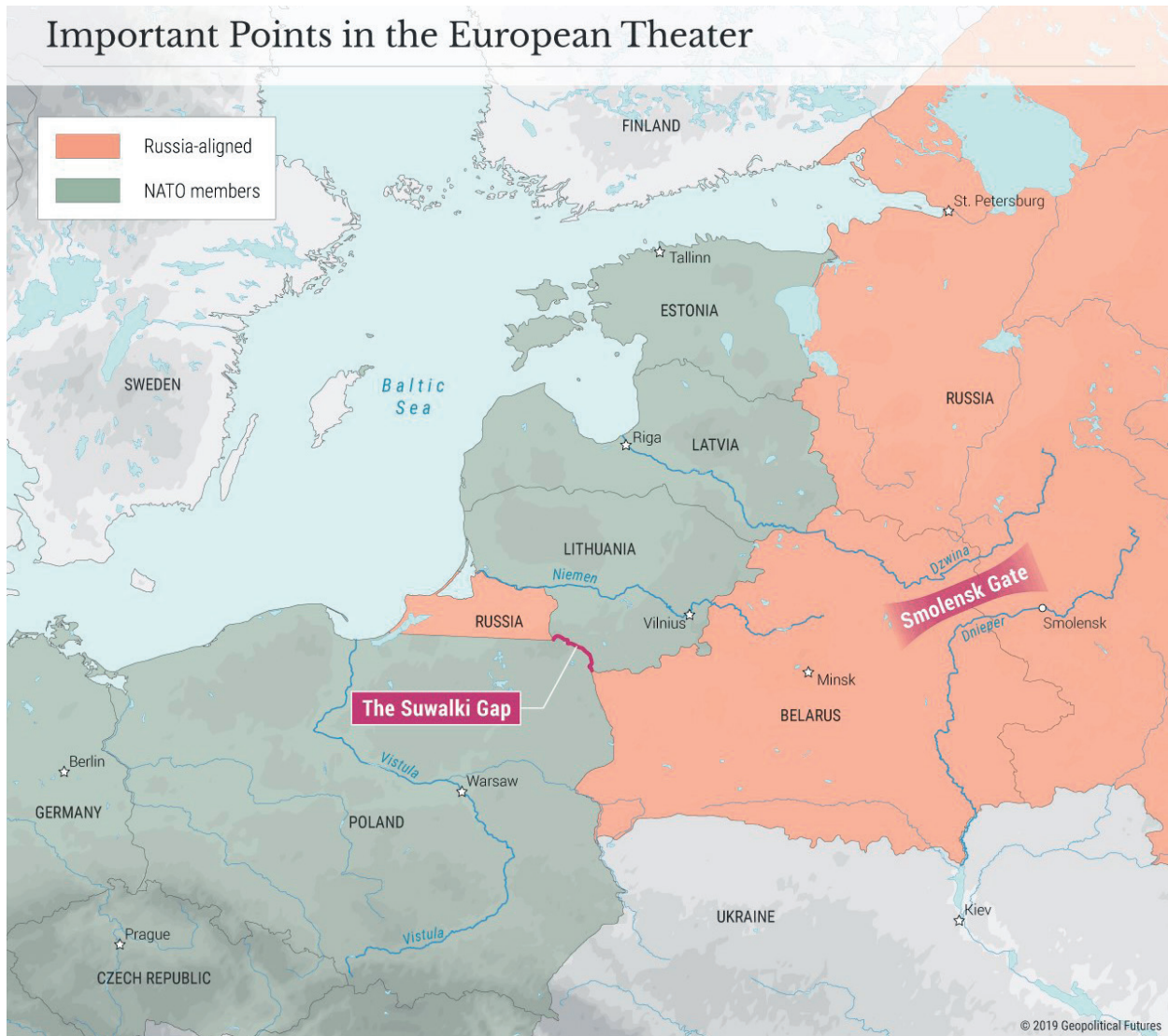
Despite a horrendous record of human rights abuses, even political killings, Lukashenko was allowed to live quite comfortably for almost 30 years, easily surviving short periods of sanctions that were so mild until 2020. Even in 2020, when there was a revolution in Belarus, the reaction of the West was very slow and not effective. Surviving the revolution and brutally cracking down on the protesters, Lukashenko eagerly provided the territory of Belarus to his fellow dictator Putin to attack Ukraine. The war against Ukraine had been prepared quite openly during large scale Russian-Belarusian military exercises on the territory of Belarus. The West preferred not to see the dangers of future war in these drills.

## **6. Geopolitical significance of Belarus**

Belarus holds an extremely important place in Europe in many respects. Its geostrategic importance is due to two geographical regions adjacent to Belarus in the east and the west. These are the Smolensk Gate and the Suwalki Gap.

The Smolensk Gate, the area between the Western Dvina and Dnieper rivers, is one of the main strategic corridors important for cross-border trade between the East and the West, and it is important not only for Russia, but also for the second largest economy in the world, China. For China Belarus is very important due to its proximity to the EU. For example, in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, which Belarus joined in 2014. Through this initiative China aims to expand its economic and political influence while simultaneously gaining access to the most desirable international markets.

At the same time, the Belarusian Smolensk Gate is the route through which the Russian Empire has repeatedly invaded Europe and through which the Russian Federation today invaded Ukraine with the goal of taking Kyiv. It is known from history that when Russia begins its invasion of Europe through the Smolensk Gate, it reaches the Vistula River and goes further, to the Elbe and Danube.



Source: [https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2019/10/31/the\\_potential\\_war\\_map\\_of\\_eastern\\_europe\\_113111.html](https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2019/10/31/the_potential_war_map_of_eastern_europe_113111.html)

The second geostrategic area, the Suwalki Gap, acquired special significance after the collapse of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact. The Gap is extremely important for the security of the Baltic region since it separates Belarus and the Russian exclave Kaliningrad. This Gap is the only road and rail link between Poland, Central Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. In the event of an invasion, the Gap would cut off the three countries from the mainland of Europe. For these reasons, some experts call the Suwalki Gap "NATO's Achilles heel".

During periods of tension between Russia and the West, Belarus becomes a key geopolitical factor. It depends on its policy whether the situation will escalate (if Belarus sides with Russia), or whether a detente is possible (if Belarus becomes democratic and re-joins Europe).

## 7. Belarus is as important for Europe as Ukraine

In 1994, influential Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote: "The crucial issue here, one that might well come to a dramatic head in the course of 1994, is the future stability and independence of Ukraine. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that without Ukraine Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire. American policymakers must face the fact that Ukraine is on the brink of disaster: the economy is in a free-fall, while Crimea is on the verge of a Russia-abetted ethnic explosion. Either crisis might be exploited to promote the breakup or the reintegration of Ukraine in a larger Moscow-dominated framework. It is urgent and essential that the United States convince the Ukrainian government—through the promise of substantial economic assistance—to adopt long-delayed and badly needed economic reforms. At the same time, American political assurances for Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity should be forthcoming".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Premature Partnership*, *Foreign Affairs*, volume 73, number 2 (March/April 1994), p. 76.

This maxima still serves as the guiding principle for the US policy in the European part of the former Soviet Union. In other words, Ukrainian factor is still deemed to be decisive for the security in the region and the role of Belarus as an indispensable element of Russian aggressive invasion that could have been avoided if Belarus was free and democratic, is ignored.

The argument of a paramount importance of Ukraine for the European security is only partly true. The region has to be viewed as a whole and all newly independent states were of a significant importance for the security of the region, especially Belarus, as was shown above.

The Baltic States were very important for the developments in the region and of special importance were their relations with Belarus, both with the democratic forces and the Lukashenko regime. Unfortunately, the Baltic States that had a luxury of being much more prepared for their renewed independence than any other occupied part of the former Soviet Union, did not pay much attention to the developments in their neighborhood. It will be fair to say that this was the case with all the newly independent states that have plenty of problems of their own to think about future consequences of the developments in their neighborhood.

The Baltic States were quite privileged to enjoy a strong support from Nordic countries which kind of supervised and helped them with reforms and with reintegration with the rest of Europe. Their attitude towards the emerging dictatorship on their border in Belarus was quite complacent. They were happy to do business with the Lukashenko regime and use the developments in Belarus as the favorable background for their integration into the European Union and NATO.

The realization of the true dangers of Lukashenko regime came too late, when the situation developed from gross violation of human rights into the real war in the region. Lithuania realized the dangers of the regime only when the construction of the nuclear power plant in Astravets close to its capital Vilnius, was nearing completion around 2020. Latvia was most friendly to the Lukashenko regime till the brutal crackdown on the peaceful protesters in 2020. Estonia was more reserved in its relations with the dictator, probably because it does not have a common border with Belarus.

The negligence as to the growing dictatorship on the immediate borders of the European Union has led to the utmost break of European and international peace and security – the war.

## **8. The ongoing military preparations on the territory of Belarus**

The mass invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was preceded by the notorious Zapad exercise, which in 2021 exceeded the scale of all previous exercises and involved more than 200,000 military personnel from Russia and Belarus. Zapad-21 officially lasted until September 2021, but in fact, the drills and deployment of military forces and armaments continued up until the mass invasion of Ukraine by Russia with the full participation of the Lukashenko regime on February 24th, 2022. On the very eve of this invasion, from February 10th to 20th, 2022, the unscheduled exercise Allied Resolve 2022 took place on the territory of Belarus.

After the beginning of the full-fledged war against Ukraine, the military drills on the territory of Belarus were held almost non-stop. The regimes in Belarus and Russia call them drills, as does the press, however, it is doubtful that during wartime this is a proper definition of such activities. They are rather preparations for war operations than regular peacetime exercises.

Nevertheless, these preparations have acquired an even more dangerous format: using the territory of Belarus for the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons. Minsk and the Kremlin started to talk about moving nukes into Belarus as early as 2022, when in St. Petersburg, Putin informed Lukashenko that Belarusian Su-25s could be improved to carry nuclear weapons.

Even earlier, simultaneously with the mass invasion of Russia into Ukraine in February 2022, Lukashenko, with the help of yet another rigged referendum, removed from the constitution the ban on nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus. In April 2024, a new military doctrine was adopted in Belarus, which would allow for the use of nuclear weapons by Russia from the territory of Belarus.

In May 2024, the two regimes began practical preparations for the possible launches of nuclear weapons. Russian forces began what they call practical training with their arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons. Putin said the exercise will involve three stages, and Belarus – which has Russian nuclear weapons deployed on its territory – will join the second. This nuclear element of the regular drills conducted on the territory

of Belarus by Russia adds a new and very dangerous dimension to the military activities close to the Ukrainian and European borders.

At the same time, the number of accidents and provocations on the border of Belarus with the EU (Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania) in May reached a record number: 6,647 attempts to violate the border were stopped by the border guards from the European Union side.<sup>5</sup>

The growing dangerous activities on the territory of Belarus threatening the Baltic region and European security are, as usual, the consequences of the lack of preventive measures and appropriate reactions to the ongoing crimes of the Lukashenko regime and its full involvement in the war against Ukraine. For example, the nuclear games with Russia on the territory of Belarus became possible because of the lack of any reaction to the violation of the Budapest Memorandum by Russia. The memorandum was signed not only by Ukraine but by Belarus (and Kazakhstan) as well, which gave up their nuclear weapons in exchange for assurances of their independence. The violation of the memorandum started not with the Russian war on Ukraine but by the Russian encroachment on the independence and sovereignty of Belarus, when the Kremlin used Lukashenko, the illegal ruler of Belarus, to conclude agreements that undermined the state independence of Belarus, such as the so-called Agreement on the Union State of Russia and Belarus.

## 9. Liberation of Belarus will stop the war in Europe

The territory of Belarus controlled by the pro-Kremlin Lukashenko regime was the key factor in unleashing the mass invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Logically, the liberation of Belarus will be the key factor in ending this bloody war, restoring peace, and strengthening international security.

Soft security has to embrace hard security concerns and avoid contradictions. There was a paradoxical situation where NATO, in recognition of a potential threat from the territory of Belarus, was strengthening its military capabilities on Europe's eastern border, and the same NATO members, within the framework of the European Union, refused to recognize those dangers and tried to appease the dictator who creates all the conditions for such threats.

There has to be a clear understanding that no business interests connected with the Lukashenko regime can be used as an excuse to soften attitudes toward this dictatorship and ease the pressure, since it will lead to more hard security threats coming from the territory of Belarus. The pressure on the regime should be concentrated on the issue of the thousands of political prisoners who need to be released. All kinds of pressure are morally justified to save the lives of political prisoners who are being slowly killed in Lukashenko's prisons.

The main mistake that was made by the West regarding Belarus was that the politics on Belarus have always been affected by a heavy Kremlin-fear factor. In other words, the West has always been reluctant to support the Belarusian opposition, persuading itself that the Kremlin would react by force. Lack of understanding of the dangers connected with the Lukashenko regime, not only for Belarusians but also for the Baltic region (as the most vulnerable to Russian aggression), led to growing military and other threats and, as a result, to the need of exponentially increasing the expenses for strengthening security. For example, Poland will allocate \$2.55 billion to secure its eastern border to bolster its defenses against a rising threat from Russia and Belarus.<sup>6</sup> Lithuania has earmarked €152 million for the border infrastructure on the Belarusian section. Reinforcements of the Latvia-Belarus border only started in 2021, but the country is planning to finish strengthening its borders next year.<sup>7</sup> All these extra expenses and growing security threats could have been avoided if Belarus was paid due attention and stronger measures (e.g., economic sanctions, political isolation of the regime, reducing or cutting off diplomatic presence) were used after the gross and mass violations of human rights in Belarus.

It has to be clear that unless a meaningful investment into the independence and democratic development of Belarus is made, the security of the whole region is in danger. Unless EU assistance to Belarus is tied to values and conditioned on the absence of repression and respect for human rights, it will contribute to the growing threat to Europe.

5 <https://pozirk.online/ru/news/87396/>

6 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-spend-around-25-bln-securing-eastern-border-says-pm-2024-05-18/>

7 <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-09-15/baltic-states-and-finland-fencing-themselves-russia-and>

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