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BELARUS: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGES

Preliminary Draft Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following highly problematic August 2020 Belarusian Presidential Elections, which many observers characterised as neither free nor fair, widespread protests swept through Belarus. That the elections were illegitimate was hardly surprising. President Alexander Lukashenko has long maintained his grip on power through electoral fraud and repression. This time, however, the opposition rallied around a single candidate after other candidates were either jailed or exiled and the public's sense of betrayal was palpable.

The resulting political crisis has struck a society that is also struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic crisis, that though linked to that pandemic, also reveals the limits of the statist and centralised model that President Lukashenko has promoted. There are clear signs that this model can no longer meet the needs and expectations of the Belarusian people, particularly as it relies heavily both on state run enterprises and Russian subsidies, particularly on imported energy. Lukashenko has long exploited that model to *Russify* the country's identity and cultivate it in a spirit of Soviet nostalgia in this young country. As that model falters, the opposition is now raising fundamental questions both about the country's identity and its future direction.

Mass demonstrations have continued in the face of ever-more repressive measures. The protests have drawn support from a large swath of society, including opposition activists, students, factory workers, health workers religious figures, collective farmers, and representatives of the state media, among others. Women have played an extraordinarily important role both in leading the opposition movement and acting as a vanguard in these peaceful marches.

Russian President Putin views Lukashenko as a difficult partner, and there has been constant tension between the two men, particularly as the leader of Belarus has long resisted implementing a promised union between the two states. Indeed, the President of Belarus has played a "cat and mouse" game with Russia, in which he has sought to reap as many benefits as possible from close bilateral collaboration without relinquishing the levers of power. The Kremlin, however, is now starting to call in its chips and is strongly pushing the vulnerable Belarusian dictator to embrace what it sees as the spirit of agreements signed in the 1990's to forge a Union State. In the face of mounting domestic criticism, Lukashenko appears to be unwilling to give in to any Russian demands that could seriously limit his grip on the country. Some suggest that Russia wants a pliable partner ultimately willing to cede sovereignty to a greater Russian state.

Lukashenko is now deepening military cooperation with Russia, agreeing to a more Russian inspired military doctrine, creating a Russian-Belarusian regional grouping of forces, integrating its national air defence system with that of Russia and extending new basing rights to its Russian partner. If fully implemented, these developments would significantly complicate NATO's defensive position in that part of Europe. Russian military domination of Belarus, for example, would put more Russian troops on the border with allied countries. This would gravely upset the regional military equation, complicate the task of defending those front-line states and likely require new NATO deployments to enhance deterrence under altered and more dangerous circumstances. With forces permanently deployed in Belarus, Russia would perhaps be better positioned to move units into the Kaliningrad enclave and cut off the so-called Suwalki Corridor, which constitutes the only land bridge between the Baltic States and the rest of NATO. But the two countries forces are already so integrated that Russia may already be prepared to conduct such an operation. Of course, such a move would be profoundly escalatory and so would only be contemplated in very extreme circumstances. But even if Russia is far more likely to work through subterfuge rather than through direct military action, NATO needs to account for all contingencies to make deterrence credible. On the political front Russia is now promoting an overtly pro-Russian political party in Belarus, engaging figures who worked to build illegitimate quasi state institutions in occupied Crimea and in rebel held territory in eastern Ukraine. It may exploit calls for democratic reforms to push Kremlin backed political forces to the centre of the state apparatus. From there, Russia might be in a better position to call the shots, advance the fulfilment of its ambitions to enliven the "Union State" and thereby squelch Belarusian sovereignty.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE OF A BELARUSIAN STATE

1. On 8 December 1991, Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk, and Stanislav Shushkevich, the respective leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, signed a treaty in Belavezha Pushcha national park and Minsk (Belarus) announcing the withdrawal of these three republics from the Soviet Union. Years later, Alexander Lukashenko would propagate the myth that he had been the only member of the Belarusian Supreme Council to oppose the breakup of the Union, although he was not even in the Chamber to vote that day (Maheshwari, 2017).

2. In Soviet times, Belarus was known as the ‘assembly shop’ of the union. Its economy was dependant on industrial giants who imported unfinished products and raw materials from other parts of the USSR and then re-exported machinery, electronics, chemicals, petrochemicals, and agricultural products. When the Soviet Union dissolved, traditional supply chains among the former Republics broke down and the Belarusian economy suffered heavily, with GDP falling 34.7% between 1990 and 1995. Poverty and unemployment mounted, and inflation had hit 2,200% by 1994 (Dobrinsky, et al., 2016). In the midst of this catastrophic economic situation and rising public disillusionment with the post-independence government, the most noted opponent of independence, the very same Alexander Lukashenko, was elected to head the government (Sannikov, 2005). This was the last free election held in Belarus.

3. Over the following decades, Lukashenko transformed Belarusian political, economic, and social life, often in contradictory ways. He paradoxically did so by cultivating a sense of continuity with the Soviet past while asserting the country’s independence from Russia. Lukashenko’s primary objective has always been to arrogate power to himself and to consolidate and maintain his hold over the state apparatus. Accordingly, in 1996, he orchestrated a referendum which altered the constitution and dissolved an elected parliament that opposed this blatant power grab. He then replaced his legislative opponents with chosen allies, effectively ending the country’s last pretence of democracy. It was a decision that led the NATO Parliamentary Assembly to suspend relations with the Parliament of Belarus. Following the 2001 Presidential elections, Lukashenko further tightened his grip on Belarusian institutions, launched a crackdown on dissent and moved Belarus closer to a fully authoritarian order, measures which earned him the moniker, “Europe’s last dictator”, although there are other competitors for the title in the Eurasian space (Sannikov, 2005). The end of democratic elections naturally coincided with an ever-worsening human rights situation. The regime had systematically stripped away all protections of basic human freedoms. Political opposition could result in arrest, torture and sometimes murder. The regime eviscerated the free press, while the Belarusian language, which the regime characterised as the language of opposition, was, at least for the moment, relegated to second class status (Sadouskaya-Komlach, 2020).

4. Belarus never undertook the kind of comprehensive market reforms that so profoundly transformed most of the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, Lukashenko essentially undid those few reforms enacted prior to his election. Belarus effectively became a museum of Soviet style central planning when the rest of Eastern and Central Europe was undertaking fundamental structural reforms. Lukashenko brooked no dissent, tolerated no alternate centres of power in the country and thus saw the free market as a direct threat to his grip on power (Sannikov, 2005). As a result, not even a semi-autonomous commercial oligarchy emerged in Belarus as it had in Russia (Sierakowski, 2020).

5. The Belarusian President was simultaneously compelled to play a delicate diplomatic balancing game with the Kremlin—currying favour when this served his personal interests but never moving so close to that powerful and tumultuous neighbour as to undermine his claim to embody the spirit of an independent nation. This was never an easy balance to strike. In 1996, 1997, and 1999, Belarus and Russia signed a series of treaties which brought the two nations close to de facto unification. But this so-called “Union State” proved more theoretical than actual

and Lukashenko had simply seen it as an opportunity to consolidate his hold on power at the expense of Belarus' sovereignty. With his country perpetually on the precipice of reunification with Russia, Lukashenko exploited treaty loopholes to obtain preferential economic treatment from Russia, while never implementing the treaty in the way the Kremlin had hoped. How Lukashenko approached the Union State became his ace card. To entice Belarusian cooperation, Russia extended its small neighbour access to its large internal market and agreed to sell it oil and gas at highly advantageous prices. Russia saw this as an investment that would ultimately facilitate a union in some form, at what, seemed a bargain price (Dobrinsky, et al., 2016).

II. A HYBRID AND HIGHLY POLITICISED ECONOMIC MODEL

6. During the late 1990s and until the economic crisis of 2008-2009, the Belarusian economy derived important economic benefits from this Russian connection. Because of the inherent economic inefficiencies of its statist model, however, as well as the on-again-off-again feuds with Russia stemming from reluctance to integrate fully with Russia on the Kremlin's terms, the Belarusian economy was never dynamic (Dobrinsky, et al., 2016) (Maheshwari, 2017). Difficulties in the relationship between Lukashenko and Russian President Putin only exacerbated the problem.

7. Eventually to compensate for this on-and-off relationship, Lukashenko sanctioned a series of minor reforms aiming to simplify the process of forming small businesses while extending certain tax advantages to local IT firms. He also enacted real estate transaction reforms while agreeing to privatise several key state-owned firms in 2007-2008 (Dobrinsky, et al., 2016). These reforms, however, were hardly comprehensive and were only partially implemented. Still, by the early 2000s, Belarus's GDP growth was statistically significant although concentrated in just a few sectors. The global financial crisis of 2008, however, struck hard, and the Belarusian economy has never really recovered from it (Mackinnon, 7/8//2020).

8. Under steady Kremlin pressure, in 2010, Lukashenko agreed to integrate Belarus into the Russian dominated Eurasian customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan. This led it directly into the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014 (Gardner, 2014). None of this ostensibly fraternal statecraft eased burgeoning friction between Lukashenko and Putin. Indeed, during the past decade, the two have clashed constantly over Belarus' refusal to accept the legitimacy of Russia's annexation of Crimea at the UN (while nonetheless accepting what Russia had done), and have disagreed over oil and gas policy, military exercises, and an array of other contentious matters. Lukashenko's residual concerns about Crimea, of course, reflected his legitimate fears that Putin would be tempted to do to Belarus what he has done to Ukraine. Lukashenko's central diplomatic strategy was to curb that particular temptation while creating as much leeway for himself as possible given a range of very apparent constraints.

9. Despite the aura of stasis, change was bubbling underneath. Although Lukashenko's statist economic model had obvious limits, a middle class of sorts had begun to emerge on the back of a nascent and somewhat successful digital technology industry and several other niche markets in which the country managed to hold its own. Belarus made a mark in software production, while it enjoyed a niche position in the production of trucks, tractors, machinery, weapons, and fertilizer, all of which it has managed to sell internationally. With some money in their pockets, many Belarusians were able to travel throughout Europe and beyond. Those who could not, were nonetheless able to tap into global networks and media through the internet. This too had an important and transformative impact on the culture and public expectations (Grzywaczewski, 31/8/2020). Lukashenko had long exploited this model, in part, to embrace a Soviet identity while stifling a more genuinely Belarusian identity. But as that model faltered, Belarusians began to pose fundamental questions about the country's identity.

10. The lack of adequate market mechanisms and limits on human freedom in Belarus have taken a toll, and Belarusians are well aware of how their country's political circumstances condition their economic prospects. The World Bank estimates Belarus's per capita GDP stood at USD6,713 in 2020 although GDP is expected to contract by 2.8% in 2020 (World Bank, "Country Context-Belarus, 2020). Several other European countries are perhaps poorer, but they have grown more quickly than Belarus in recent years. Overdependence on Russia means that Belarus is politically vulnerable, and this adds a risk factor to the economic situation as does the lack of comprehensive economic reform and privatisation. These vulnerabilities have only become more apparent in the wake of the 2020 rigged elections, mass protest movements and now mounting Russian pressure.

11. Indeed, Belarus is particularly dependent on subsidised energy imports from Russia which, not surprisingly, is its most important trading partner (Mankoff, 5/2/2020). Those subsidies have provided a modicum of economic stability and given Lukashenko a degree of economic credibility that he might not otherwise have enjoyed. Indeed, for many years economic stability in Belarus provided the regime with something of a cushion. Russian energy subsidies furnished Belarusian manufacturers with certain cost-price benefits that bolstered export competitiveness, generated income, kept workers reasonably satisfied with their wages, and helped the manufacturing sector carve out a niche in international-Russian markets. It is also worth noting here that in recent years Russia has pushed Belarus to privatise some of the country's leading industries. Some suspect that its ambition is not to build a more efficient Belarusian industrial sector, but rather to put these industries fully under Russian control. Lukashenko has long danced around the matter as ceding these industries would obviously reduce his domestic and international political leverage.

12. The Belarus economic model, in fact, has reached its limits. State ownership makes it very difficult to make the country's firms more productive and competitive and limits their capacity to integrate in world markets. Russian energy subsidies are slated to end in 2024 and debt is rising. The prospects for improved living standards are thus dimming, and political instability and the COVID-19 pandemic have only made matters worse. The recession will likely deepen in 2021 as consumers retrench and government resources for fiscal and monetary expansion shrink (World Bank, "Country Context-Belarus, 2020).

III. BELARUSIAN IDENTITY

13. Although it might be tempting to blame Lukashenko for pursuing a policy of studied ambiguity on matters pertaining to relations with Russia and the West, some of this reflects broader structural challenges. The national identity of Belarus has emerged in a unique fashion. Prior to its creation after the end of the Cold War, Belarus had enjoyed no extensive modern experience of statehood beyond the ephemeral Belarusian People's Republic (Mankof, 5/2/2020). Views of both state and nation are conditioned, in part, by a degree of Soviet nostalgia, the important role of Russian culture and sometimes conflicting forms of nationalism rooted both in those elements of national history that are distinctly non-Russian and some that are (Vasilevich, 2020).

14. Lukashenko essentially created a kind of nostalgic Soviet style state that cultivated an illusion of familiarity and legitimacy among a people in search of a modern national identity (Sierakowski). He has favoured the Russian language over Belarusian and chose a flag reminiscent of that which flew over the Republic in Soviet times. In effect, this was in keeping with a pattern that advanced Russian interests over the identity of Belarus. All of this provides a kind of vocabulary that Lukashenko can now wield to justify his reliance on the Kremlin in the face of mounting public disillusionment with his rule. The experience of mass protest in Belarus appears to have been a uniting one, a phenomenon that complicates the situation not only for Lukashenko, but also for Russia (Mackinnon, 12/8/2020).

15. While Lukashenko reinstated the flag and coat of arms of Soviet Belarus as national symbols in 1995 and eventually tied Belarus to the Eurasian Economic Union, his vision of how Russia shapes Belarusian identity has frequently shifted over time (Sannikov, 2005). Having previously fought against a version of national identity which emphasised the Belarusian language, Lukashenko, later went so far as to state that “if we forget Russian, we will lose our mind. If we forget how to speak in Belarusian, we will cease to be a nation” (Rudkouski, 2017). Lukashenko has clearly tacked between conflicting notions of identity to fit the moment. It has always been an exercise in political opportunism.

16. Reform-minded opponents of Lukashenko have adopted their own unofficial symbols undergirded by alternative historical narratives, such as the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms, which symbolically convey an alternate nationalist and more patriotic historical narrative (Scollon, 2020). In a recent Belarussian poll, asking “What historical tradition should Belarus primarily draw upon?” the Grand Duchy of Lithuania garnered 39.7%, the USSR 28% and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth 6.3% (OSW, 2021). With Lukashenko now stuck between pro-democracy protesters and a Russian state that offers an economic lifeline in exchange for potentially catastrophic concessions, only time will tell how Belarus’ developing national sentiment will shape that country’s relations with Russia and with the West. It should nonetheless be noted that making a choice for democracy is not a geopolitical choice. Economic developments will also play an important part in this unfolding narrative as will the policies of outside actors.

IV. THE 2020 ELECTIONS

17. Prior to the 2020 Presidential elections, few would have guessed that President Lukashenko, who had ruled for 26 years, would confront any serious challenges to his re-election. Lukashenko’s three main rivals during the early campaign had been opposition blogger Sergei Tikhanovskaya, former CEO of Belgazprombank, Viktor Babariko, and former Belarusian Ambassador to the United States, Valery Tsepkalo, — all of whom were either arrested or compelled to flee the country prior to the election (Rácz, 2020). Their candidacies were not really viable under the system Lukashenko had constructed. Lukashenko nonetheless initially used them to demonstrate that there was a degree of pluralism; he was painting a picture of Belarusian democracy without its substance.

18. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya ultimately emerged as Lukashenko’s primary challenger after most of the nine opposition candidates running for the Presidency were either arrested or severely beaten including Ms Tikhanovskaya’s husband, Sergei who was arrested two days after declaring his intention to run for President (Snyder, 21/12/2020). Lukashenko’s brazen efforts to subvert the will of the public backfired and his actions served to unify the opposition and trigger mass protests that continue to this day. Opposition forces quickly rallied around Svetlana Tikhanovskaya’s candidacy even though she had virtually no experience in national political life. With the help of the unified opposition, Ms Tikhanovskaya ran an effective campaign drawing large crowds even in industrial cities which were generally viewed as favouring Lukashenko. Just prior to the elections, more than 63,000 people attended her campaign rally in Minsk (Roth, 2020). Svetlana Tikhanovskaya’s election campaign was spurred on not so much by the organising capacities of opposition forces but rather by deep-seated collective frustration arising out of enduring economic malaise, corruption, police violence, and the malignant stasis of a regime that had so clearly elevated its interminable control of state institutions over the genuine interests of the Belarusian people (Rácz, 2020). Lukashenko’s efforts to divide the Belarusians had resulted in their unification.

19. Despite widespread support for Ms Tikhanovskaya, following the voting, the Belarusian election commission published official and patently false results indicating that President Lukashenko had garnered 80.08% of the vote compared with Ms Tikhanovskaya’s 10.09% (Roth,

2020). Lukashenko's regime had long before mastered the art of vote rigging. The regime controls the media, the security services, the election process, and vote counting. Elections are little more than an exercise in which Lukashenko himself sets the margin of his own victory, and the electoral machinery almost miraculously turns out precisely that result (Belsat, 2016). The OSCE and other observers claimed that the election had failed to meet even minimal democratic standards. The failure of a very obviously popular candidate to muster no more than 10% of the popular vote utterly shattered any possible claim that Lukashenko had legitimately won the election. The entire voting exercise came to be seen, rightly, as a farce.

20. The public reaction to the blatantly rigged election was swift, and so too was the regime's response. Protests took place in major cities throughout Belarus. Weekend demonstrations brought upwards of 100,000 people onto the streets of Minsk (Karmanau, 2020a). A rattled security apparatus ordered police and security forces to employ excessive force to disperse protestors. Security forces in civilian clothing incited violence aimed to invite police attack on otherwise peaceful gatherings. Many protestors were simply beaten in police vehicles and then thrown back into the street (Grzywaczewski, 31/8/2020). Others were locked in the notorious Okrestina jail, where torture and mistreatment were widespread and hardly hidden from public view as its purpose was to act as a deterrent.

21. As Hugh Williamson, a director at Human Rights Watch put it "the Belarusian government shattered its own horrendous record for brutality and repression" (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The stark contrast between the peaceful conduct of the demonstrations and the vicious response of the regime and its security forces gave enormous moral weight to the case that the opposition was making. This time, it seemed, the Belarusian dictator had over played his hand. Lukashenko underestimated the aspirations of the Belarusian people, who were rightly incensed that he had so blatantly worked to undermine a so-called free election.

22. The regime quickly moved to break up the Coordination Council, established by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya after she was compelled to leave Belarus. It has become a vehicle through which the opposition had hoped to orchestrate the peaceful transfer of power based on the popularly held conviction that she, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, had indeed won the election. It also sought to silence prominent opposition leaders and journalists. Security forces arrested Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and compelled her to read a prepared text in a broadcast calling on Belarusians to end the protests. She was subsequently forced into exile in Lithuania, likely under the threat of having her young children taken from her. The regime then kidnapped Maria Kolesnikova, a widely popular opposition figure and aid to Ms Tikhanovskaya. She was in the process of being forcefully exiled to Ukraine when she tore up her passport at the border, and thereby avoided that particular fate. She was then arrested and, like Sergei Tikhanovskaya, is currently a prisoner of conscience according to Amnesty International (Karmanau, 2020b) (Amnesty International, 2020).

V. THE BELARUSIAN POLITICAL OPPOSITION, MASS DEMONSTRATIONS AND THE LEADING ROLE PLAYED BY WOMEN

23. Since the election debacle, women have played a fundamental role in galvanising opposition to the regime of Lukashenko, decrying electoral fraud, and organising peaceful weekly marches in Minsk and elsewhere which have kept these matters on the front burner in Belarus and internationally. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Maria Kolesnikova, and Veronika Tsepkalo have played particularly important leadership roles both prior to the rigged elections and in their wake. Their courageous moral and political leadership and their stout resistance to a mendacious regime have resonated deeply both in Belarusian society and internationally. Their soaring popularity in the country points to the emergence of a long-suppressed and yet seemingly well-articulated civil society in search of honest leadership reflecting society's aspirations and concerns. Belarusians

are clearly looking for a government that willingly engages in a genuine dialogue with society and is ultimately responsible to it. These objectives certainly existed below the radar screen prior to the current crisis. But it took a combination of yet another grotesque election fraud, a pandemic, and an economic crisis to bring matters to a head. Of course, Lukashenko's regime sees matters in a diametrically opposed fashion and is now effectively engaged in a standoff with the country's citizens.

24. What is transpiring in Belarus is thus akin to what took place in Central European countries where, at the Cold War's end, long-suppressed civil societies suddenly emerged from a dreadful hibernation to demand fundamental political, economic, and social changes that elevated respect for essential human rights to the pinnacle of the state's *raison d'être*. But the situation in Belarus is unique. Like other captive nations, Belarus suffered untold violence over the course of the 20th century. The Belarusians, however, are perfectly aware that they exist in a geo-strategically vulnerable space that gives them very little freedom of manoeuvre. They know that street violence will only result in catastrophe. The country's brutal history and geostrategic vulnerability has thus conditioned both the tactics and the aspirations of Belarusians. The weight of the past informs the peaceful nature of protest in that country and, in important ways, limits the demands that protestors are making (Sadouskaya-Komlach, 18/12/20).

25. Indeed, Belarusian civil society tends to assert itself in a very subtle and admirably peaceful manner. When COVID-19 struck the country, in typically authoritarian fashion, Lukashenko dismissed the seriousness of the disease and showed little inclination to adopt measures to protect the public. Rather, he claimed that "the virus attacks the weak," failed to implement lockdown measures and ridiculously suggested that people drink vodka and take saunas to fight the disease (Mackinnon, 7/8/20). In other countries, such actions from a leader would elicit loud protests from those elements of society sufficiently aware that such an approach would only court public health disaster. Instead, the Belarusians simply set out to organise a range of self-protection measures, including the production of protective equipment for health workers. This was consequential, and it revealed a high level of civic engagement and social solidarity while avoiding direct confrontation with a vicious and utterly out of touch dictator. The post-election protests have been conducted in that same spirit, even though the political conflict between civil society and the dictator can no longer be avoided. This is nevertheless a conflict that is contained and framed in as realistic a manner as possible. It is indeed both striking and admirable that this formidable sense of social solidarity has survived such a tragic history and decades of authoritarian rule (Sadouskaya-Komlach, 18/12/20).

26. Women's marches have been particularly effective in communicating the democratic and peaceful aspirations of the protest movement. These demonstrations have provided a study in contrast to the thuggish response of the regime and have created a vehicle for establishing new and legitimate social and political leaders in a country that is clearly starved for them. With the police consistently attacking men at otherwise peaceful demonstrations, Belarusian women began a series of all female marches engaging women of all ages and social classes in peaceful protests. Often dressed in white and bearing flowers, women marchers have openly challenged the police to disobey criminal orders to engage in unjustified violence. Their demands have included the release of political prisoners, investigation of police violence and either recognition that Svetlana Tikhanovskaya won the 2020 Presidential election, or the organisation of free and fair elections covered by a free media and observed by the OSCE (Sadouskaya-Komlach, 18/12/2020).

27. Despite the regime's provocations, the opposition movement in Belarus has been entirely peaceful and has even painstakingly organised street clean ups in the wake of weekly protests. When there has been violence on the streets, it has been committed by armed state security forces—wielding clubs, water cannon, tear gas, flash grenades and rubber bullets. Thousands of demonstrators have been arrested, hundreds have been kidnapped and disappeared and some

have been murdered. The marked presence of women in street demonstrations has nonetheless pushed the regime into a very difficult corner, and when it has used violence, it has only elevated the moral stature of the movement and the women leading it.

28. The demonstrations have also helped weave together coalitions which previously operated in a kind of anomie purposefully cultivated by the regime. Now doctors who have treated the victims of regime violence are appearing on the streets in their hospital clothing. Striking factory workers are engaged as well as leaders of the Orthodox Church, collective farmers, and representatives of the state media apparatus, who have clearly tired of passing off regime lies as some kind of eternal truth. The Belarusians are forging broad social coalitions not dissimilar to what transpired in Poland during the Solidarity Movement when highly consequential links were forged among dissident intellectuals, students, the Catholic Church, and ever-more alienated Polish workers. (Sierakowski 20/10/2021).

29. The construction of this socially diverse coalition that managed to rally around a single Presidential candidate has only added to the moral contest that is being played out on Belarusian streets throughout the country. It raises compelling long-term questions about the governability of the country under its current leadership. The harsher the crackdown, it seems, the greater Lukashenko's dilemma becomes.

30. The opposition has conducted its demonstrations in a remarkably creative and disciplined fashion, and those on the streets have adjusted constantly to the regime's tactical oppression. When security forces close off city centres, protests simply move to the urban periphery. Humour has been used effectively to mock the exaggerated claims of the regime, and this is not without important political and diplomatic consequence. Citizens have used the cyber realm to disseminate accurate information that aims to counter the regime's depraved propaganda. Opposition hackers released the names of 100,000 members of the security forces and threatened to leak additional information if these forces continued to commit criminal acts on behalf of the regime. Many subsequently quit (Sierakowski 20/10/2021). As of 1 November 2020, the number of employees at Minsk's Main Internal Affairs Directorate had declined by some 18 percent. The Central District Department of Internal Affairs in Minsk underwent a 29 percent fall in staffing. Many of those employees who left security and police forces have been supported with funds raised by the Belarusian diaspora (Kobets, Vlad and David J. Kramer, 14/12/21).

31. Sadly, the level of repression in Belarus has worsened in the months since the elections. An independent expert issued a report to the OSCE under its so-called Moscow Mechanism stating that Belarus authorities had committed "massive and systemic" human rights violations before, during and after the presidential elections (OSCE, 5/11/2020). It called for those responsible for torture and other abuses to be brought to justice. Then in February 2021, the government carried out a nation-wide raid on opposition figures and journalists. The Belarusian Investigative Committee, part of the state's criminal law enforcement structure, claimed that the searches were targeting groups "positioning themselves as human rights organisations," with the stated purpose of "establishing the circumstances of the financing of the protests." Human Rights Watch has characterised the raids as part of a blatant intimidation campaign and an attempt to eviscerate a clearly vibrant civil society. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya recently suggested that 33,000 people have been detained since August, while more than 900 face criminal charges with potentially long prison sentences (Walt, 25/2/2021). This particular crackdown occurred just prior to the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, which was slated to take up the human rights situation in Belarus (Tass, 5/3/21). Finally, although protests slowed over the winter months of 2021 largely due to the crack down, activists have clearly signalled their intention to revivify the movement this spring.

VI. GEOPOLITICS, THE BELARUSIAN DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT AND RUSSIA

32. The quest to build a democratic order in Belarus unfortunately is made all the more difficult due to that country's location, strategic vulnerability and historical links to Russia. Indeed, Vladimir Putin has unambiguously identified democratic movements in bordering countries as posing a strategic threat to Russian national security, although he tends to link national security not only to traditional Russian interests but also to his personal ambitions to control all the levers of the Russian state. Putin has conducted wars against Ukraine and Georgia and occupied parts of their sovereign territory driven by fears that these countries democratically elected governments aspired to deepen their ties with the trans-Atlantic community of nations. Putin's greater concern is that rising democratic aspirations in bordering countries might spread to Russia and put his own seemingly interminable hold on power at risk.

33. The Kremlin is obviously very wary of what is unfolding in Belarus given the difficulties it has confronted in other countries on its periphery including Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia. In all four of those countries, civil societies have chafed at the repressive designs of Russia's regional policies which expressly aim to quell democratic movements, prop up friendly elites, foster corruption and prevent countries, over which it feels it has a legitimate right to rule, from adopting even mildly friendly postures toward the west. Russian concerns have only mounted in recent months as Russian dissent against the repressive Putin regime is widening, leading to ever more comprehensive domestic crackdowns (Carpenter and Kobets).

34. Belarus is a member of both the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Its military has also participated in Russian military exercises, including a 2017 exercise testing the response capacities of Russian forces to a potential conflict with NATO. It is worth noting, however, that Lukashenko long refused to consent to the permanent deployment of Russian forces in Belarus.

35. This now seems to be changing, as the Kremlin is clearly exploiting Lukashenko's growing vulnerability. Lukashenko recently agreed to participate in two additional sets of joint military exercises, from 9-20 March 2021 at the Polivno training range in Russia's Ulyanovsk Oblast, and from 15-27 March at the Osipovichsky training facility in Minsk Oblast. The two militaries will ultimately conduct more exercises this year than ever before, culminating in the massive Zapad Manoeuvres 2021 exercise to be held in September 2021. On 5 March 2021, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and his Belarusian counterpart Viktor Khrenin agreed to establish three joint military training centres. The facilities will be located in Russia's Nizhny Novgorod and Kaliningrad regions and in Belarus's Grodno region. Lukashenko has also suggested that Russian military aircraft might be based on Belarusian airbases and that Belarusian pilots could fly them (Whitmore, 2021).

36. Putin has thus begun to cash in his chips. He will likely continue pushing for deeper military integration as the price of support for the ever more unpopular Lukashenko. Putin is apparently looking for manoeuvre space. This is worrisome because if his forces gain access to Belarusian territory, their redeployment would patently complicate matters for NATO on its Eastern flank. It would also powerfully convey to the Belarusian opposition that Moscow has certain limits which, if transgressed, might result in a full-scale military intervention that would be all the easier if Russian troops were already deployed in country.

37. In the past, Lukashenko has sought to play Russia off against Europe. For example, he never legally recognised Crimea as part of Russia (Mankoff, 5/2/2020). But what Lukashenko takes away with one hand, he gives with the other. Thus, in the wake of Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea, Belarus was one of only 11 nations to vote against UN Resolution 68/262 which recognised Ukrainian territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders and underscored the invalidity of the 2014 Crimean referendum.

38. Belarus also sided with Moscow in refusing to admit that human rights abuses had been committed against Crimean Tatars (Davidzon, 3/03/2021). Now, however, Lukashenko's diplomatic operating space has narrowed considerably, and he will find it very difficult to play the role of middleman in an ever-more polarised domestic and international setting and will feel compelled to side toward Putin. As protests increased in size and intensity in Belarus, Lukashenko duly reported that Russia was prepared to provide "comprehensive assistance to ensure the security of Belarus." He also falsely maintained that NATO was amassing troops along the Belarus border to deflect blame for his failing foreign policy and to justify his overture to the Kremlin (Gramer and Mackinnon, 2020).

39. It is also noteworthy that Russia is now establishing pro-Russian political parties in Belarus. On 6 March 2021 the pro-Kremlin party Soyuz (Union) held its founding congress in Minsk, ominously in the presence of several Russians who have served in illegally annexed Crimea and the so-called Donetsk People's Republic. These parties are slated to project Russian influence from within the Belarusian state apparatus and would, if registered, presumably be prepared to support the Union State from inside the parliament. If Russia were to begin to call for more democracy in Belarus, it would very likely be looking to these pro-Russian parties to advance its interests (Whitmore, 2021).

40. Indeed, Russia itself is taking a risk by tying itself to the deeply unpopular Lukashenko. Putin obviously wants to curry public favour and exploit pro-Russian tendencies in the country. Russia is Belarus's primary trading partner, and although the bilateral relationship is often fraught, historically Belarusians have tended to view Russia favourably. A poll conducted by the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in November and December 2020, however, found that 43% of Belarusians now consider Russia to be the greatest threat to the territorial integrity of Belarus, the highest figure among the countries surveyed (21% of respondents consider Poland's policy a threat, 20% that of Lithuania, and 18% that of other countries). Yet, Belarusians continue to hold a very positive perception of Russia (86% of respondents) and the Russian people (96%), and even of Vladimir Putin, who until recently enjoyed the support of 60% of Belarusians. Belarusians obviously have a less positive view of their own president. Lukashenko was seen positively by 27.2% of respondents and rather positively by 13.6% (OSW, 29/01/2021).

41. But other polls suggest that Belarusians may have a more negative view of Russia than the OSW survey indicates. In a recent survey, the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) asked younger citizens if Belarus should seek closer cooperation with the EU even if doing so would result in estrangement from Russia. Fifty-five per cent of respondents said that this would be acceptable (Krawatzek, 2020). When looking at the support levels for unification with Russia, the Belarusian Analytical Association suggests that the Belarusian public's support for unification with Russia fell from a high of nearly 64% in 2018 to a low of only 40.4% in 2019 (Belsat, 2020). In the above cited OSW survey, 70.9% of respondents viewed the 'Union State' with Russia positively, while 62.1% saw the EU in a positive light.

VII. THE ENERGY CARD AND THE UNION STATE

42. While lacking meaningful oil and gas reserves of its own, Belarus nevertheless remains an important player in Europe's energy markets. Russian pipelines run through Belarus and, it hosts two important oil refineries, Naftan in the north of the country and Mozyr in the south. Belarus thus serves as a vital energy export and transit gateway for Russian energy and the industry generates 19% of the country's total export revenues. Belarus has long imported oil and gas from Russia at a substantially reduced price, a benefit that constitutes an important subsidy both to consumers and producers. But the relationship inflicts important costs. Moscow now expects Minsk to agree to a variety of integrationist projects, some of which threaten Belarusian autonomy and sovereignty, as the real price of this energy. Lukashenko has long played a delicate balancing game in which he

has sought to defend his iron grip over Belarus, in part, by providing a certain level of economic well being generated through Russia's "strings attached" largesse, while also defending Belarusian autonomy and failing to fulfil his promises to the Kremlin. These conflicting ambitions have triggered several energy disputes with Russia, most notably in 2004, 2007, 2010, and 2019.

43. For the most part, Minsk has been able to avoid meeting promises for a single currency, common legislative initiatives, and supranational governance. But Russia continues to push hard for the Union State (Preiherman, 2020). The Treaty on the Creation of a Union State was signed on 8 December 1999. It outlined plans for common foreign, defence, and social/economic policies, as well as a unified parliament and a single currency (Gupta, 2020). It included agreements to harmonise taxation, trade, banking, and energy regulations as pathway to the eventual creation of a unified state. Some analysts suggest that the ever-ambitious Lukashenko's had once hoped that he could use the treaty launch his own career as the leader of a greater Russia (Mankoff, 5/2/2020). Over the years, however, the two countries have failed to agree the terms for this union. Although Minsk has acceded to singular Russian-led integrationist projects such as the EAEU, Lukashenko has vehemently held out against the Union State out of a justified concern that it would end Belarusian sovereignty. For years, he rather systematically rebuffed Russian overtures on the matter — most recently in discussions with President Putin in 2019 (Gupta, 2020). As a result, to Putin's great dismay, Lukashenko never agreed to monetary integration with Russia and its legal, economic, and political systems remained distinct from Russia's (Sierakowski).

44. Russia, however, has begun to exploit the leverage conferred by its energy endowments and military supremacy as well as by Lukashenko's growing vulnerability. Once completed, the Nord Stream II pipeline will further enhance this leverage as that pipeline purposefully bypasses Belarus, Poland and Ukraine and directly links Russia to European gas markets. Older pipelines running through its territory on the way to Europe had traditionally given Ukraine and Belarus a degree of leverage in their dealings with Moscow. That leverage will now be lost (Kubiak, 2020). Lukashenko saw the writing on the wall early in this regard and had harshly criticised Russia's first Nord Stream pipeline linking Russia and Germany through the Baltic Sea in 2007. Nord Stream II, which should soon be completed, will double direct flows of crude oil between Russia and Europe. In effect, this will put the survival of the Belarusian energy industry in Moscow's hands (Mammadov, 2020). Belarus has long enjoyed a privileged position which allowed it to purchase Russian crude oil at below-market prices. It was then able both to reexport this oil and use it as a cheap production input (Shraibman, 2020). This privileged position is now also at risk.

VIII. RUSSIA AND THE 2020 BELARUSIAN PROTESTS

45. Bilateral tensions over energy and integration have also loomed over the domestic turmoil in Belarus. Relations between Moscow and Minsk had become so fraught last year that Lukashenko even accused Russia of "interference" in the presidential elections. He then arrested 33 so-called Russian "mercenaries", accusing them improbably of working with the Belarussian opposition and plotting terrorist attacks. The evidence seems to suggest that their mercenaries were merely transiting through Belarus on their way to a third country, but the attention surrounding the matter revealed the degree of tension between Russia and Belarus. This bizarre spectacle ended in their release following the elections, but it contributed to the broader degradation in bilateral relations while, almost invariably summoning images of the kind of "little green men" Russia deploys to do the dirty work of destabilisation and annexation (BBC, 2020) (Euractiv, 2020).

46. Though Moscow viewed the protests as an opportunity to push the cornered Lukashenko into accepting further integration, it also recognised a potential threat posed by a regional democratic movement inspiring Russia's own increasingly alienated public. The Kremlin derived some comfort from the fact that protestors were not animated by overtly pro-Western sentiments and were not pursuing an avowedly anti-Russian agenda. The judgment in Moscow was that if it pushed too

hard to prop-up Lukashenko, those pro-Russian sentiments could be put at risk (Sestanovich, 2020).

47. Once Lukashenko's grip on power began to slip, however, Russian concerns mounted, and the Kremlin embarked upon a more actively interventionist strategy. It is worth noting that as social strife around the elections rose in Belarus, the Russian city of Khabarovsk (the largest city in the Far East region) was consumed with mass anti-Putin protests inspired by a Kremlin decision to remove the regional governor. Some Russians began to see a link. Belarusian opposition flags and "long live Belarus" placards, for example, were on display at the 15 August protests in Khabarovsk, Russia, and the Kremlin likely understood that the democracy movement in Belarus could spread to Russia itself (VOA, 2020). President Lukashenko himself had also speculated on these linkages when he noted during the opening days of the protests, that "if Belarus falls, Russia will be next" (Wesolowsky, 2021).

48. On 16 August 2020, Russian state-media announced that President Putin had spoken with Lukashenko and expressed his readiness to provide additional assistance based on the principles of the Union State (Tass, 2020a). Russia then dispatched two planes filled with Russian "journalists" ordered to fill vacancies in the Belarusian state media following mass resignations and the summary firing of many Belarusian journalists (Luxmoore, 2020). The Kremlin understood its effort to shore up Belarusian state media and the propaganda apparatus would be essential both to the regime's survival and to the defence of Kremlin interests. Lukashenko later publicly thanked the Russian state media company RT for its help and support at a critical moment (Balmforth and Zhegulev, 2020).

49. Russia has pushed a narrative, so far unsuccessfully, that the protest movement is little more than a Western plot to weaken the country. Its propaganda aims to exacerbate cleavages in Belarus between the regions, workers, and intellectuals and Catholic and Orthodox Christians (Carpenter and Kobets, 2020). But Belarus, unlike Ukraine, is not riven by the kind of cleavages that Russia can readily exploit. Indeed, the people of this small and homogenous country enjoy a shared historical narrative in sharp contrast with the more divided Ukrainians. The protests movement itself welled up spontaneously from the base of society and the arrests of opposition leaders will do little to quell the public's utter disillusionment with Lukashenko.

50. Again, energy may be the Kremlin's stronger suit. Even threatening to end subsidised energy exports to Belarus raises the spectre of economic collapse and might therefore compel compliance, at least among those in charge of state institutions. Russia, of course, has also sought to exploit the cyber realm to push its own narrative and enhance its leverage. But military options remain its trump card even if this is not an option that Putin would likely favour. Indeed, the Kremlin recognises that playing that card would have significant costs and it cannot discount the possibility of Belarusian military resistance. Moreover, it would significantly escalate military tensions in Europe and ultimately backfire (Mackinnon 12/8/ 2020). Subterfuge, enticement, propaganda, a range of hybrid tactics, the diplomacy of threat, and a hard diplomatic push for union seem to be its chosen methods for the moment.

51. In the face of what Putin now understood as a potential existential threat, on 27 August 2020 he placed Russian law enforcement officers on standby for possible deployment to Belarus if "the situation starts getting out of control" (Moscow Times, 2020). Lukashenko then met Putin in Sochi. In a closed-door session on 14 September, Putin offered Belarus a USD1.5 billion loan (Rainsford, 2020). Putin may have promised an additional USD3 billion during the lead up to a second Sochi meeting on 22 February 2021 (AP, 2021). Lukashenko's public remarks have markedly changed in recent months, and he now regularly heaps praise upon both Russia and Putin. He hails bilateral cooperation with Moscow, describes Russia as his country's "elder brother", and promises that Belarus will never abandon its allegiance to Russia (Walker, 2020), (Warsaw Institute, 2020).

52. Vladimir Putin obviously recognises that Lukashenko's standing in his country has suffered a grave setback. There is no love lost between Russia's President and Lukashenko but, for the moment at least, there does not seem to be an alternative leader from the Kremlin's perspective. Russia has thus sought to link itself to a kind of false reform premised on the prospects for a Union State, which it can control, and which would ultimately increase Belarusian dependence on Moscow. It is a difficult balancing act, particularly as the Kremlin's gambit is increasingly apparent to the Belarusian people.

53. Russian aid to Lukashenko thus comes with strings attached. On 26 November 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Belarus to remind Lukashenko of his need to initiate "reforms"— while also likely pushing for deeper integration through the Union State apparatus (Sasse, 2020). Lukashenko subsequently launched a 'people's assembly' to discuss political reforms in Belarus, and even hinted at his future departure from the Presidency. Most independent observers believe, however, that Lukashenko's proposal to amend the constitution is nothing more than a political ploy to buy time (Euronews, 2021).

54. The Kremlin has recently wrestled important military concessions from Belarus, with the two countries adopting a common military doctrine and a Russian-Belarusian "regional grouping of forces", as well as intensified talks regarding an integrated advanced air defence system (Barros, 2020a). Lavrov recently said that Belarus' upcoming 2021 charring of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) will be used to advance Belarusian-Russian integration, and Russia has moved quickly to settle trade disputes with Belarus and advanced Belarusian integration into a Union State (Barros, 2020b). What remains to be seen is how long Moscow will be willing to support Lukashenko or whether it will seek to cultivate a more dependably pro-Russian candidate. That could prove difficult given the level of popular mobilisation and vigilance in Belarus itself. But Russia is nonetheless now supporting pro-Russian political movements that could then be used to justify the annihilation of Belarusian sovereignty.

IX. EUROPEAN AND NORTH AMERICAN RESPONSES

55. European and North American leaders recognise the potential volatility of the situation in Belarus and, of course, all agree that a Russian military or hybrid intervention would be catastrophic. But clearly, public communications about the situation have reflected a degree of caution given the tenuous situation in that country and in the region as a whole. The default position has been to appeal for calm and for dialogue while nonetheless criticising Lukashenko's regime for its brutal response to peaceful and legitimate protests. Critics in Belarus suggest that the western response has generally been far too tepid, and several countries, including Poland and Lithuania have called for a far more robust and comprehensive response.

56. On 10 August 2020, the day after Belarusian Presidential elections, Poland called for an extraordinary meeting of the EU Council to discuss the unfolding situation (Reuters, 2020). In the early stages, when Lukashenko's grip on power looked the most tentative, the EU seemed to have several options. Brussels could have pushed for new free and fair elections, it could have recognised Svetlana Tikhanovskaya as the rightful President, or it might have swiftly imposed tough sanctions on regime leaders and government agencies. Instead, the EU essentially watched and waited.

57. By late August, EU foreign ministers seemed to have agreed on targeted sanctions including visa bans and asset freezes on regime officials. The first round of sanctions was ultimately adopted in October 2020, followed by second and third rounds in November and December, respectively. But Cyprus held up any decision for more comprehensive sanctions (Euractiv, 2020). The democracy movement in Belarus sees EU sanctions not sufficiently comprehensive to open the door for positive change. Nearly a month and a half past the election, Lithuania's Foreign Affairs

Minister warned that failing to act would have dangerous long-term consequences (LRT, 2020). Critics suggested that the sanctions were largely symbolic, and initially did not even directly target Lukashenko who, at the end of the day, was the indisputable architect of the electoral fraud and the crackdown (Viačorka, 2020).

58. Neighbouring countries like Lithuania have played an important leadership role in formulating a response to the events. This is driven not only by proximity but also by deep experience both with Belarus and with Russia. Lithuania, for example, is now hosting the exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya while its media provides a window on the dramatic events unfolding in Minsk and elsewhere in the country. The same is true for Poland which, like Lithuania, has long and deep historical ties to Belarus and to its people and harbours justified concerns about Russia's immediate and longer-term intentions.

59. In the wake of the elections, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo joined the European Union's Josep Borrell in condemning the obviously rigged elections as having been neither free nor fair. Some US officials, however, concluded early-on that Lukashenko was likely to remain in power, and this has conditioned the US response (Walcott, 2020). The United States implemented targeted sanctions and eventually refused to recognise Lukashenko as the legitimate President. But in midst of the US election campaign, Belarus essentially fell off the radar screen (Lawler, 2020). During the campaign, then candidate Joe Biden promised to support the emergence of a democratic Belarus. His Administration has since imposed a new round of sanctions on Lukashenko's government, including visa restrictions on 40 Belarusians involved with the crackdown and accused of human rights violations. The United States has also warned that economic sanctions against nine Belarusian enterprises that were suspended in 2015 could be revived. The Administration has communicated that if Lukashenko releases political prisoners and initiates a genuine political dialogue, he could prevent the resumption of these sanctions scheduled to begin on 26 April 2021. A more comprehensive US strategy is still under development.

60. In meetings with European and North American officials, the exiled opposition leaders Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has called for a tougher line toward the Lukashenko regime. "Unfortunately, the reaction of the international community to the political crisis in Belarus is very modest," Ms Tikhanovskaya told a meeting hosted by the European Council of Foreign Relations that included French, Romanian, Polish, and Lithuanian foreign ministers. She has also met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and addressed the European Parliament in Brussels when she accepted the annual Sakharov Prize on behalf of Belarus's democratic opposition movement (Davidzon, 10/3/2022).

61. Again, the nightmare scenario would be a Russian military operation followed by a de facto or outright annexation of Belarus. This would not only be disastrous for the Belarusian people, but it would also create enormous complications for neighbouring countries and for NATO. Indeed, a Russian military occupation of Belarus would put more Russian troops on the border with allied countries. This would gravely upset the regional military equation, complicate the task of defending those front-line states and likely require new NATO deployments to enhance deterrence under altered and more dangerous circumstances. With its forces permanently deployed in Belarus, Russia would be theoretically positioned to move units into the Kaliningrad enclave and cut off the so-called Suwalki Corridor, which constitutes the only land bridge between the Baltic States and the rest of NATO. It would also pose a direct risk to Eastern Poland (Ashford and Kroenig, 14/8/2020). Of course, such a move would be profoundly escalatory and so would only be contemplated in very extreme circumstances. It is, moreover, not at all clear that Russia would be in any position to pacify an occupied Belarus and how such a move would be seen by a Russian public that has grown increasingly unhappy with Putin's regime. But even if Russia is far more likely to work through subterfuge than direct military action, NATO needs to account for all contingencies in order to make deterrence credible (Hunzeke and Lanoszka 26/3/2019). In an important if nonetheless paradoxical manner, Lukashenko's capacity to block Russian deployments on the territory of

Belarus has contributed to European stability. The key question now is whether this policy can continue in a period of enormous domestic tensions and mounting Russian pressure (Shlikiarov, 3/12/2019).

62. NATO and Belarus have maintained relations premised on common interests and maintaining channels for dialogue. The two sides have cooperated on civil preparedness and defence reforms. NATO works with Belarus to implement reforms in these areas, while continuing to call on Belarus to increase the pace of its democratic reforms. Relations with NATO started in 1992, when Belarus joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. This forum for dialogue was succeeded in 1997 by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, which brings together all Allies and partner countries in the Euro-Atlantic area. Dialogue is facilitated by the existence of Belarus' diplomatic mission to NATO, which was opened in April 1998. Bilateral cooperation began when Belarus joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 1995. Under the PfP, NATO and Belarus have developed practical cooperation in several areas through the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) between NATO and Belarus. Belarusian personnel have attended courses in NATO countries and practical cooperation has developed in areas such as civil preparedness, crisis management, arms control, air defence and air traffic control, telecommunications, and information processing, as well as language training and military education. This cooperation has continued despite deep concerns among Allies about the worsening political situation in Belarus since August 2020. All Allies support a sovereign and independent Belarus. NATO frequently reiterates that it poses no threat to the country and has no military build-up in the region (NATO, 13/10/2020).

63. In an August 2020 phone conversation between Polish President Andrzej Duda and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the two leaders agreed that Minsk must demonstrate full respect for fundamental rights, including freedom of speech and the right to peaceful protest. They further agreed that the Alliance should remain vigilant and strictly defensive and be prepared to deter any aggression against NATO Allies (NATO, 18/8/2020). In discussions with the Secretary General Stoltenberg on 2 September, then NATO PA President Attila Mesterhazy shared a similar message suggesting that, "The people of Belarus – and no one else – must determine their own future. They must be able to choose their own political leaders freely and without fear of violence."

X. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

64. This is an extremely difficult moment for Belarus. The number of political prisoners in the country had reached 322 by the end of March and continues to grow. The Independent media is under constant attack, with the regime detaining more than 470 journalists and media activists in 2020 alone. Hundreds have been subject to repressive measures and at least 60 subjected to torture or mistreatment. The recent conviction of two journalists on trumped up charges demonstrates that this trend continues. Planned legal changes will recast criminal and Labor Law and laws defining extremism and would make almost any criticism of the government illegal and subject those engaged in this criticism subject to severe punishment. The regime is clearly seeking to suppress civil society and undermine its capacity to express its political preferences.

65. There are signs that the economic situation is worsening, and this could trigger further unrest in the country. Alexander Lukashenko continues to believe that use of force and intimidation of civil society will keep him in power. He also believes that protests in Belarus are the handiwork of external actors (primarily Poland and Lithuania). In recent months he has also launched a merciless attack on the Polish diaspora in Belarus. Lukashenko is using ethnic Poles in Belarus as hostages and as a tool in his aggressive policy towards Western countries. This is contrary to international law and the legal and political commitments Belarus has undertaken to uphold it. He must stop this repression immediately. Given Mr. Lukashenko's state of mind and the fact that the state apparatus is dominated by security forces, the opportunities for constructive dialogue are

minimal. The international community should gird itself for more violence and continued persecution of innocent citizens in Belarus. It should prepare itself to react accordingly using all available tools including a range of restrictive measures and stronger diplomatic sanctions.

66. Belarus should remain high on the international agenda (especially in the Human Rights Council) and the international community should provide support to Belarusian society where possible. The OSCE should be engaged in this effort. It is important to adopt a realist outlook and recognise that without Russia, it will be very difficult to construct a sustainable solution for Belarus. The problem, however, is that Russia continues to demonstrate that it sees the challenge in zero-sum terms. This requires an approach to Russia that combines containment and engagement.

67. The international community has every reason to be concerned about Lukashenko's efforts to cling to power and Russian efforts both to prop him up and forbid the Belarusian people from choosing the form of government that will govern this small country. Russia's longer-term ambitions are even more concerning. It now appears to be pursuing a policy of slow annexation which will annihilate Belarusian sovereignty and squelch the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people. This is unacceptable, and the cost of pursuing these ends must be made very clear. Allied governments should continue to communicate to Russia that Belarus remains a sovereign nation and that any interference in its internal affairs is unacceptable and will have real consequences. They should, moreover, inform the Kremlin that that any agreements it signs with an illegitimate Lukashenko regarding integration, financial help, buying SOEs – would be illegitimate.

68. It is worth noting that the United States, the United Kingdom and Russia are signatories of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum while France signed a related set of agreements. That agreement guaranteed the borders of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. Obviously, Russia has already violated its obligations with regards to Ukraine, and it is important that the other signatories signal to Russia that Belarus' territorial integrity must be upheld and that to do otherwise would have very serious consequences (Haddad and Judah, 7/8/2020). Belarus Baltic neighbours also have a leadership role to play here as the threat is in their backyard and they have a keen interest in regional stability and the emergence of a peaceful and autonomous Belarus with a government that is democratically accountable to its people.

69. European and North American governments obviously have limited leverage over what transpires in Belarus, but they should nonetheless prepare to apply sanctions to those directly engaged in the oppression of the Belarusian democracy movement or working to undermine the sovereignty of that country. The EU, the United Kingdom and Canada should coordinate their approach with US policy makers. These key players need to support those advocating for democratic freedoms while conveying that a democratic Belarus is a welcome partner to the international community and would be deserving of significant international support. The experience of countries like Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania provides an apt narrative demonstrating the degree to which genuine, bottom-up democratic reform generates both political and economic wellbeing. It should be signalled that support will be forthcoming to a regime which protects basic human rights and works for peaceful relations in the Baltic region. At the same time, if the regional security situation worsens or if Russia deploys forces in a provocative manner, then NATO Allies will need to take measures to shore up deterrence in the region and provide critically needed reassurance to Allies there. More specifically, reinforcements in the Baltic region could be needed to cope with potential escalation risks and to blunt a growing Russian anti-access threat (Hunzeker and Lanoszka (22/10/2020).

70. Any political dialogue in Belarus that does not directly engage the leaders of the legitimate opposition is not a real process of national reconciliation. Both Lukashenko and his Russian backers will likely attempt to orchestrate a fake process of reform engaging bogus reformists.

Belarusians will recognise this for what it is. The international community should as well, and should steadfastly advocate for the end of repression, for dialogue with legitimate opposition figures, and for a free press. Accordingly, those Belarusian authorities, who have engaged in human rights violation including the conduct of mass arrests and acts of intimidation and violence against those peacefully demanding their fundamental human rights, should be held to account both in Belarus and internationally. Finally, the government of Belarus must be made aware that the international community is monitoring this situation very closely and that it will be held to account for transgressions of international human rights laws and conventions. Mediation efforts, that engage the key actors including Russia, under the auspices of the OSCE and/or the Council of Europe with the support of national government like Finland, Switzerland, Austria, should be strongly supported.

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