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ECONOMICS AND SECURITY COMMITTEE (ESC) Sub-Committee on Transition and Development (ESCTD)

BELARUS: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGES

Draft Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following highly problematic August 2020 Belarusian Presidential elections, which many observers subsequently characterised as neither free nor fair, widespread protests swept through Belarus. That the elections came to be seen as illegitimate was hardly surprising. Alexander Lukashenko has long maintained his grip on Presidential power in Belarus, through electoral fraud and harsh 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 became 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 Lukashenko has long 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 also long sought to cultivate a spirit of Soviet nostalgia in this young country. As that thoroughly archaic model falters, the opposition is now raising fundamental questions, both about the country's identity and its future direction.

Demonstrations have continued in the face of ever-more repressive government 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 an agreement on the Union State of Russia and Belarus. Indeed, the illegitimate 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 national power. The Kremlin, however, is now starting to call in its chits and is pushing the vulnerable Belarusian dictator to embrace what it sees as the spirit of agreements signed in the 1990s to forge a Union State. In the face of mounting domestic criticism, Lukashenko initially seemed unwilling to give in to any Russian demands that could seriously limit his grip on the country. This dynamic is now changing as Lukashenko is highly unpopular in Belarus and is increasingly compelled to cling to Russia for external support, given his mounting domestic and international isolation. For its part, the Kremlin wants a pliable partner, ultimately willing to cede critical aspects of national sovereignty to a notional greater Russian state.

The situation in Belarus escalated markedly on 22 May when the government of Belarus falsely claimed that terrorists had planted a bomb on a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius, ordered the crew to land when the plane entered Belarusian air space and then arrested two passengers: Roman Protasevich, a 26-year-old dissident Belarusian blogger who lives and works in Lithuania and his partner, the Russian student Sofia Sapega. This chain of events has accorded the illegitimate ruler of Belarus the status of international pariah, and his actions in this case have triggered an array of sanctions which have further isolated the government, closed Belarusian airspace to international traffic, and denied the national airline access to airports around the world.

From a position of weakness, Lukashenko is now deepening military cooperation with Russia, agreeing to a more Russian inspired military doctrine, strengthening 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, could 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 increasingly operating in lockstep and Russia may already be prepared to conduct such an operation. Of course, doing so would be profoundly escalatory and so would only be contemplated in very extreme circumstances.

Even if Russia is far more likely to work through subterfuge 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, while engaging figures who previously 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 its ambitions to enliven the "Union State" and thereby squelch Belarusian sovereignty.

This draft report will be presented and discussed by the Economics and Security Committee (ESC) for adoption at the Annual Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

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 dependent on industrial giants that 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 economy of newly independent Belarus suffered heavily, with GDP falling 34.7% between 1990 and 1995. Poverty and unemployment mounted, while inflation had hit 2,200% by 1994 (Dobrinsky, et al., 2016). In the midst of this catastrophic economic decline and as the public grew increasingly disillusioned with the post-independence government, the most noted opponent of independence, the very same Alexander Lukashenko, was elected as head of state (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 did so by cultivating a sense of continuity with the Soviet past while paradoxically 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 ultimately 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 contenders for the title in the Eurasian space (Sannikov, 2005). The end of democratic elections naturally coincided with an ever-worsening human rights’ situation. Indeed, the regime had systematically stripped away all protections of basic human freedoms. In Lukashenko’s Belarus, 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. Lukashenko essentially undid those few reforms enacted prior to his election. Belarus effectively became a museum of Soviet-style central planning while the rest of Eastern and Central Europe embarked upon 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, at least initially (Sierakowski, 2020).

5. The Belarusian leader 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. Lukashenko simply saw it as an opportunity to consolidate his hold on power at the expense of Belarusian sovereignty and modernisation. With his country theoretically 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 manner the Kremlin had hoped. How Lukashenko approached the Union State thus 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, for what, at the time, 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 anachronistic statist model as well as the on-again-off-again feuds with Moscow 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 personal 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 in 2007-2008, 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 (Dobrinsky, et al., 2016). These reforms, however, were hardly comprehensive and, in any case, were only partially implemented. Still, by the early 2000s, Belarus’ GDP growth was statistically significant although concentrated in just a few sectors. The gains were short-lived. The global financial crisis of 2008 struck hard, and the Belarusian economy simply lacked the resilience to fully recover from it (Mackinnon, 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, over the past decade, the two have clashed constantly over Belarus’ refusal to accept the legitimacy of Russia’s annexation of Crimea at the United Nations (UN) (while nonetheless accepting what Russia had done). They have also feuded 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 the very apparent constraints he confronted.

9. Despite the aura of stasis surrounding Belarusian political life, change was bubbling beneath the surface. 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 discrete 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, some 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, in

important ways, fuelled public expectations for better governance and more economic opportunity (Grzywaczewski, 2020). Lukashenko had long embraced a Soviet-style identity, including the social certainties of the old order, while stifling a more genuinely Belarusian identity and aspirations for greater economic openness. But as this highly inefficient model faltered, Belarusians began to pose fundamental questions about the country's identity and government policy.

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. Belarus confronts a range of challenges in 2021 despite an anticipated global recovery. The old sources of economic growth are drying up and the country's economic outlook is not promising. Recent growth has hinged on heavy borrowing, high commodity prices, and trade with a previously dynamic, but now stagnant, Russian economy. These factors are not likely to drive future growth, and Belarus would need to undertake more serious structural reform to make this possible over the longer term (Kremer, 2019). 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 and economically vulnerable, and this adds a risk factor to the economic situation as does the lack of comprehensive economic reform and privatisation. These vulnerabilities have become ever more apparent in the wake of the 2020 rigged elections, mass protest movements, mounting Russian pressure and the hijacking of a passenger airplane flying over Belarusian air space..

11. Belarus has been particularly dependent on subsidised energy imports from Russia which, not surprisingly, is its most important trading partner (Mankoff, 2020). Those subsidies provided a modicum of economic stability and gave Lukashenko's regime 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 compensated for structural deficiencies undermined productivity. These subsidies, in turn, bolstered export competitiveness, generated foreign exchange, 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, per se, 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 has, in fact, 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, the COVID-19 pandemic and international isolation have only made matters worse. After contracting by roughly 2.3% in 2020, real GDP will likely stagnate in 2021 as consumers retrench and government resources for fiscal and monetary expansion shrink. A large external debt burden, sanctions, economic isolation and a slow vaccination roll out will also take a toll (The Economist Intelligence Unit) (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, the country had enjoyed no extensive modern experience of

statehood beyond the ephemeral Belarusian People's Republic (Mankof, 2020). Views of both state and nation are conditioned, in part, by a degree of Soviet nostalgia, by the prominent place accorded to Russian culture in Belarus and by conflicting forms of nationalism rooted in Belarus' national history that are distinctly Russian and non-Russian (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, 2020). He has favoured the Russian language over Belarusian and chose a flag reminiscent of that which flew over the Republic in Soviet times. This was in keeping with a pattern that sometimes sacrificed the national aspirations of Belarus in order to advance Russian interests. This dynamic has provided a kind of vocabulary that Lukashenko has wielded to justify his reliance on the Kremlin in the face of mounting public disillusionment with his rule. The experience of mass protest in Belarus, however, appears to have been a uniting one for many Belarusians, a phenomenon that complicates the situation not only for Lukashenko, but also for the Kremlin (Mackinnon, 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 these conflicting notions of identity to suit 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 him an economic and diplomatic 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 to choose democracy is not a geopolitical choice; it is a domestic political one, intimately related to the sovereign right of self-determination. That said, economic developments and the policies of outside actors will shape the context in which this choice is made.

IV. THE 2020 ELECTIONS

17. Prior to the 2020 Presidential elections, few would have guessed that Lukashenko, who, by then 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 propagated the notion that a free and fair election was to be held; he was, of course, painting a picture of a 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, 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, in effect, only further rallied the opposition.

19. Despite widespread support for Ms. Tikhanovskaya following the voting, the Belarusian election commission published official and patently false results indicating that 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 since 1994 have been little more than exercises 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 officially tallied popular vote utterly shattered any possible claim that Lukashenko had legitimately won the election. The entire voting exercise, rightly, came to be seen 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 other security forces to employ excessive force to disperse protestors. Security forces in civilian clothing incited violence aimed at inviting the police to attack otherwise peaceful gatherings (Clark, 6/9/2020). Many protesters were simply beaten in police vehicles and then thrown back into the street (Grzywaczewski, 2020). Others were locked in the notorious Okrestina jail, where torture and mistreatment are widespread and hardly hidden from public view as they aim to deter dissent.

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 overplayed 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 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 very popular opposition figure and aid to Ms. Tikhanovskaya. Kolesnikova 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 languishing in jail as 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. It is noteworthy that 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 the democratic aspirations of Belarusians on the front burner in that country and internationally. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Maria Kolesnikova, and Veronika Tsepalo 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 that reflects and channels 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 at the end of the Cold War, when 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, 2020).

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, 2020). 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 a 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. It revealed a high level of civic engagement and social solidarity as well as a degree of discipline, thereby avoiding a 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, 2020).

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 of 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, 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 cannons, 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, and it does so with ever greater frequency and ferocity, it has only elevated the moral stature of the movement, the women leading it, and the society that supports them.

28. The demonstrations have also helped weave together coalitions which previously operated in the state of anomie, purposefully cultivated by the regime. Doctors, who have treated the victims of regime violence began appearing on the streets in their hospital clothing. Striking factory workers became involved 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 had begun to forge broad social coalitions, not dissimilar to what transpired in Poland during the Solidarity Movement, when highly consequential links were established among dissident intellectuals, students, the Catholic Church, and ever-more alienated Polish workers (Sierakowski, 2020).

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 rather than endure the shame of complicity (Sierakowski, 2020). 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, 2021).

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 Belarusian authorities had committed “massive and systemic” human rights violations before, during and after the presidential elections (OSCE, 2020). It called for those responsible for torture and other abuses to be brought to justice. Then, in February, the government carried out a nationwide 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 noted that 33,000 people were detained between August and January 2020, while more than 900 faced criminal charges, with potentially long prison sentences (Walt, 2021). The crackdown unfolded 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, 2021). Finally, although protests slowed over the winter months of 2021 largely due to the crackdown, activists clearly signalled their intention to revive the movement this spring. The problem is that the regime has only ratcheted up the oppression and, as the state orchestrated hijacking of a Ryanair flight between Athens and Vilnius has demonstrated, the regime now appears perfectly willing to burn its remaining bridges, both to the citizens of Belarus, and to the international community.

VI. THE HIJACKING OF A RYANAIR FLIGHT

32. The international stand-off with Belarus took a darker turn on 22 May. The government of Belarus falsely claimed that there was a bomb on a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius and ordered it to land when it flew into Belarusian air space. The illegitimate leader of Belarus, Lukashenko, then gave an “unequivocal order” to the military to dispatch a fighter plane to accompany the commercial plane to the airport in Minsk. Upon landing, several of the 123 passengers were spirited away from the airport. The group included both Roman Protasevich, a dissident Belarusian blogger who lives and works in Lithuania, and his partner, the Russian student, Sofia Sapega. When the Belarusian authorities cut internet and cell phone service during mass protests, Telegram, a social media app, continued to work. The Nexta Live channel that Protasevich had founded operated on Telegram and had an estimated 2 million subscribers. It became a primary source of information for opponents of the regime. This is, apparently, why the regime went to such extraordinary lengths to bring him to Minsk—even if this meant profoundly isolating itself internationally (Khurshudyan et. al, 2021).

33. There is now evidence that the purported bomb threat was only emailed after Belarusian authorities diverted the plane. Officials in Minsk originally claimed that the threat came from Hamas. They later said the threat was issued from a location in Switzerland—claims that experts say are ludicrous (Khurshudyan, 2021). Needless to say, no bomb was found on the plane, and it quickly became apparent that the threat was a hastily conceived government ruse to force the plane to land and to arrest Protasevich and Sapega. The other passengers who mysteriously slipped away are believed to have been Belarusian and/or Russian intelligence officers who had informed authorities in Minsk that Protasevich was indeed on the plane.

34. It is worth noting that the security forces of Belarus, the not coincidentally named KGB, had put the democratic blogger Protasevich on a terrorism watch list. In fact, he was returning to Vilnius from Greece after attending an economic conference there with the Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Within days of his arrest, Protasevich, looking bruised, dismayed, and out of character, appeared in a clearly orchestrated video to “confess” his crimes and convey, apparently under duress, that he was being well treated. In the video, he said that he had organised mass riots and managed opposition Telegram channels. This propaganda exercise itself is a grotesque violation of basic human rights, but it fits with Lukashenko’s *modus operandi*. Indeed, a cavalcade of detained Belarusian protestors have been similarly paraded in front of the cameras and compelled to confess to crimes that they did not commit.

35. The International Civil Aviation Organisation, an agency of the UN, reported that the “apparent forced landing” of the flight may have violated the Chicago Convention, the 1944 international accord that lays out the fundamental principles of international aviation (Troianovski and Nechepurenko, 2021). Clearly Lukashenko was attempting to demonstrate to his opponents, many of whom are now living in Poland and Lithuania, that they cannot escape the long reach of his security forces.

36. Within hours of the event, Greece and Lithuania called it a state-orchestrated hijacking. Lithuania’s President, Gitanas Nausėda, labelled Belarus’ actions “abhorrent”. They called for its airspace to be declared unsafe and for Belarusian aircraft not to be accepted at European Union (EU) airports. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki of Poland described it as an “act of state terrorism.” Germany’s foreign minister, Heiko Maas, said that, “such an act cannot remain without clear consequences,” and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, called for a “firm and unified response” by the EU. U S Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, strongly condemned, “the Lukashenko regime’s brazen and shocking act to divert a commercial flight and arrest a journalist”. He called for an international investigation and “close coordination with partners on the next steps (Troianovski and Nechepurenko, 2021). NATO issued a statement saying that the incident had “seriously violated the norms governing civil aviation and endangered the lives of the passengers and crew”. It also called for the release of Protasevich and Sapega (NATO, 2021). Svetlana Tikhanovskaya responded to the incident by noting that, despite worsening repression, the Belarusian opposition is preparing for a new round of anti-government protests, adding that, “The regime is nearing a total isolation like never before...there’s nothing more to wait for — we have to stop the terror once and for all” (Ilyushina, 2021).

37. Indeed, this state-sanctioned hijacking is so beyond the norms of international behaviour that it quickly inspired a new round of sanctions against the government, while deepening Lukashenko’s international isolation and lack of popularity at home. Within days of the incident, the EU made clear that it would prevent all E U airlines from crossing Belarusian airspace. Belarus’ national airline Belavia can also no longer fly over or land in E U territory. It is working with the United States and other partners to develop a list of targeted sanctions against those “associated with ongoing abuses of human rights and corruption, the falsification of the 2020 election, and the events of 23 May”. The EU has said it will provide Belarus with Euro 3 billion in grants and loans, if the country “changes course”, which, for all intents and purposes, would require a fundamental change in leadership in that country (The Guardian, 2021).

38. For its part, the Biden Administration announced that it would reimpose full sanctions against nine Belarusian state-owned enterprises. Moreover, it suspended a 2019 US-Belarus agreement that allowed carriers from each country to use the other’s airspace. The State Department has also issued a Level 4 warning urging US citizens not to travel to Belarus, while the Federal Aviation Administration quickly warned commercial airlines to “exercise extreme caution” before considering passing through Belarusian airspace. The United States also indicated that it would suspend its discretionary application of the 2019 US-Belarus Air Services Agreement

and worked with allies in the European Union and elsewhere to develop “a list of targeted sanctions against key members” of Lukashenko’s regime (Wang, 2021). The Administration has called on Lukashenko to allow a credible international investigation into the events surrounding the 23 May incident.

39. Russian responses to the hijacking have, not surprisingly, been far less harsh. Indeed, many in the state-controlled media have applauded Lukashenko’s “brilliant special operation” as one member of the Duma put it (Wang, 2021). Soon after the incident, Lukashenko travelled to Sochi in Russia for two days of consultations with Putin. His government also unleashed another round of arrests, including arrests of journalists. In his first public appearance after the incident, Lukashenko said that, by diverting the plane, he had somehow prevented a potential nuclear catastrophe, as the airliner could have triggered the defence systems on the country’s Astravec power plant. He also characterised the response of the international community as an act of “hybrid war” (Khurshudyan, 2021).

40. European and North American governments are well aware that further sanctions risk penalising all Belarusians, many of whom oppose the Lukashenko regime. There is also a risk that internationally isolating Belarus will only give the Kremlin more leverage over Lukashenko. This requires drawing a fine line and while flight bans will have a generalised impact, they are essential, given that what has transpired cannot be tolerated as it threatens to throw international aviation into chaos. More targeted sanctions will now seek to deal directly with that issue—for example—by banning aviation to and from Belarus while striking more harshly at those individuals and companies responsible for ongoing human rights violations. There is also a broad effort to communicate that it is ultimately up to the people of Belarus to determine who leads the country, not the current regime, which is illegitimately clinging to power, and not external actors. It is noteworthy, however, that Svetlana Tikhanovskaya herself has called for tougher sanctions on the current regime.

VII. GEOPOLITICS, THE BELARUSIAN DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT AND RUSSIA

41. The quest to build a democratic order in Belarus unfortunately is made all the more difficult by the 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, in part, 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.

42. 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 these 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 towards 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).

43. Belarus is a member of both the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (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, even though clauses included in the Union State provided for the free use of the territory of Belarus by Russian forces for military purposes.

44. This now seems to be changing as the Kremlin is willingly exploiting Lukashenko's growing vulnerability to demand ever more compromising concessions. Lukashenko recently agreed to participate in two additional sets of joint military exercises, from 9-20 March 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 have ultimately conducted more exercises this year than ever before, culminating in the massive Zapad Manoeuvres 2021 exercise held in September. On 5 March, 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' 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).

45. 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 and isolated Lukashenko. Putin is apparently looking for room to manoeuvre for his military forces. 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 Belarus. Since August 2020, cooperation between the secret services of Russia and Belarus has intensified. Both sides confirm that the cooperation includes intelligence and counterintelligence activities targeting the West. Joint special operations are also being carried out (including an effort to ferret out a "conspiracy" against Lukashenko).

46. In the past, Lukashenko has sought to play Russia off against Europe. For example, he never legally recognised Crimea as part of Russia (Mankoff, 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.

47. Belarus also sided with Moscow in refusing to admit that human rights' abuses had been committed against Crimean Tatars (Davidzon, 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, made infinitely worse by his role in the Ryanair hijacking. This leaves him at the mercy of the Kremlin, but this was already evident well before the hijacking. As protests increased in size and intensity in Belarus last summer and autumn, 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 domestic and foreign policy and to justify his overtures to the Kremlin (Gramer and Mackinnon, 2020).

48. 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 had 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 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 that it may well control to advance its interests (Whitmore, 2021). It should be noted that Belarusian authorities denied the Soyuz party's application for official registration, so the issue remains unresolved.

49. Indeed, Russia itself is taking a risk by tying itself to the deeply unpopular Lukashenko, who has now burned his bridges to the international community by orchestrating a hijacking. Putin obviously wants to curry public favour and exploit pro-Russian tendencies in the country. Russia is Belarus' 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 considered 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, until recently, Belarusians continued to hold a very positive perception of Russia (86% of respondents) and the Russian people (96%), and even of Vladimir Putin, who not long ago 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, 2021). There is little doubt that Putin and Lukashenko have both fallen from grace in the eyes of the Belarusian people.

50. Indeed, more recent 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, by contrast, 70.9% of respondents viewed the 'Union State' with Russia positively, while 62.1% saw the EU in a positive light. In any case, public opinion polls in the current environment are not reliable at present due to the vicious crackdown that the regime is carrying out on dissenters.

VIII. THE ENERGY CARD AND THE UNION STATE

51. While lacking meaningful oil and gas reserves of its own, Belarus nevertheless remains an important player in Europe's energy markets. Russian pipelines course 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 substantially reduced prices, 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, suggesting that the real price of this energy is significantly higher than the formal price. Lukashenko has long played a delicate balancing game. 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 largesse with "strings attached", 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.

52. 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 pathways 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 to launch his own career as the leader of a greater Russia (Mankoff, 2020). This obviously never transpired and over the years, the two countries have failed to agree on 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 because of a justified concern that it would end Belarusian sovereignty, and more importantly to him, his leadership career. For years, he systematically rebuffed Russian overtures on the matter — most recently in discussions with Putin in 2019 (Gupta, 2020). To the Kremlin's apparent dismay, Lukashenko never agreed to monetary integration with Russia and its legal, economic, and political systems have remained distinct from Russia's (Sierakowski, 2020).

53. Russia, however, has begun to exploit the leverage conferred by its energy endowments and military supremacy as well as by Lukashenko's growing vulnerability and isolation. 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 although Gazprom owns Belarusian gas pipelines. That leverage will now be lost (Kubiak, 2020). Lukashenko saw the writing on the wall early in this regard and 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 re-export this oil and to use it as a cheap production input (Shraibman, 2020). This privileged position is now at risk.

IX. RUSSIA AND THE 2020 BELARUSIAN PROTESTS

54. 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 these 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 up images of the kind of "little green men" Russia deploys to do the dirty work of destabilisation and annexation (BBC, 2020) (Euractiv, 2020).

55. Although Moscow has perceived both the protests and Lukashenko's domestic and international isolation as an opportunity to push for further integration, it also recognised a potential threat that the Belarusian democratic movement might inspire 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).

56. 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 seen this as confirming a risk that the democracy movement in Belarus could spread to Russia itself (VOA, 2020). 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).

57. 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 the Kremlin's interests. Lukashenko later publicly thanked the Russian state media company RT for its help and support at a critical moment (Balmforth and Zhegulev, 2020).

58. 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, despite the regime's efforts to muddle this, out of sheer opportunism. The protest movement itself welled up spontaneously from the base of Belarusian society, and the arrests of opposition leaders did nothing to quell the public's utter disillusionment with Lukashenko.

59. Again, the energy sector provides the Kremlin with an obvious and immediate source of leverage. Even threatening to end subsidised energy exports to Belarus raises the spectre of economic collapse and might therefore compel Lukashenko's compliance. Russia, of course, has also sought to exploit the cyber realm to push its own narrative and enhance its leverage. But military pressure remains Moscow's trump card, even though this is probably not an option that Putin would likely favour. Indeed, the Kremlin recognises that playing the military 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 could ultimately backfire (Mackinnon, 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, at least for the moment.

60. 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).

61. 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.

62. 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 believed, however, that Lukashenko's proposal to amend the constitution was nothing more than a political ploy to buy time (Euronews, 2021).

63. The Kremlin has recently wrested 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). Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov recently said that Belarus's 2021 chairing of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) would 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.

X. EUROPEAN AND NORTH AMERICAN RESPONSES

64. 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 there would be catastrophic. But clearly, public communications about the situation have reflected a degree of caution, given the tenuous situation in the country and in the broader region. 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. The Belarusian state's role in hijacking the Ryanair flight, however, has led to more strident language from the west and, as described above, triggered a new round of sanctions.

65. 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.

66. 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 as insufficiently 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).

67. Neighbouring countries including the Baltic states and Poland have played an important leadership role in formulating an international response to these 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 Tikhonovskaya while its media provides a window on the dramatic events unfolding in Minsk and elsewhere in the country. Poland, like Lithuania, has long and deep historical ties to Belarus and to its people, including ethnic Poles living in there, and harbours justified concerns, both about the human rights' situation in Belarus and Russia's immediate and longer-term intentions.

68. Lithuania, Poland, and to a lesser extent Latvia, have consequently been "punished" by Lukashenko for their active support for the people of Belarus. In June 2021, Lukashenko's special services created an artificial migration crisis on the borders with these three countries by bringing thousands of refugees from Iraq and other countries, mainly those in the Middle East. The ongoing influx of migrants to Belarus and their attempts to cross the border with the EU has been an example of a planned action to create a security crisis of regional dimensions and to justify the potential participation of the military in its resolution. On the eve of Zapad 2021 military exercises, it was presented by Minsk as provocative action by NATO countries. The fact that a military option remains on the table was evidenced by the communiqué from the conversation between Lukashenko and Putin on 23 August, during which preparations for the exercises and the situation on the Belarusian borders were discussed. On the same day, Lukashenko accused Poland of causing a border conflict and violating the state border. By importing illegal migrants, Minsk aims to force the EU to enter into negotiations and to break the political isolation the dictator found himself in after the rigged presidential elections.

69. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have been particularly strong supporters of the democracy movement in Belarus and have forged an array of civil society links to it. In a November 2020 meeting with Svitlana Tikhonovskaya, Latvia's Foreign Minister, Edgars Rinkēvičs pledged Latvia's unwavering support for the people of Belarus, and he underlined that the Belarusian civil society has the key role to play in deciding the future of its country. His Ministry issued a statement saying that, "Latvia will continue standing up for the sanctions policy to be kept in place against the Belarusian officials who are responsible for unjustified violence and repression on the part of law enforcement authorities and for falsifying election results" (Public broadcasting of Latvia, 2021). The Baltic states have also worked to mobilize opinion among NATO allies and partners to deepen ties to this vital opposition and to impose tougher sanctions on the regime in Belarus (Dempsey, 2021).

70. 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 the 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 Belarusians enterprises that were suspended in 2015 could be revived. The US Administration communicated that, if Lukashenko releases political prisoners and initiates a genuine political dialogue with the opposition, he could have prevented the resumption of sanctions which were imposed on “23 people and 21 entities linked to violent crackdown on peaceful protests.” A more comprehensive US strategy was under development when the regime hijacked the Ryanair flight. This has now elicited a tougher US response.

71. In meetings with European and North American officials, the exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has called for a tougher stance with respect to the Lukashenko regime. “Unfortunately, the reaction of the international community to the political crisis in Belarus is very modest,” Ms. Tikhanovskaya told a spring meeting hosted by the European Council on 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’ democratic opposition movement (Davidzon, 2021).

72. 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 invariably 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, 2020). Of course, such a move would be profoundly escalatory and so would likely 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, nor is it clear 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, 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 intense domestic tensions and mounting Russian pressure (Shlikiarov, 2019).

73. NATO and Belarus have long maintained relations premised on common interests and maintaining channels for dialogue. The two sides have cooperated on civil preparedness and defence reforms. NATO has worked 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’s 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 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, telecommunications, and information processing, as well as language training and military education. NATO also worked with Belarus on matters pertaining to air defence and air traffic control, but clearly this has not discouraged the regime from outrageously violating international rules governing commercial air control. In any case, this cooperation continued, despite deep concerns among Allies about the

worsening political situation in Belarus since August 2020. All Allies continue to support a sovereign and independent Belarus. NATO frequently reiterates that it poses no threat to the country and has conducted no military build-up in the region (NATO, 2020). But NATO has also expressed deep concern about the situation now prevailing in the country. The NATO website notes that NATO allies have expressed their concern at the lack of progress in democratic reforms in Belarus, while working to keep open channels of communication. It suggests that practical cooperation and dialogue are in the best interest of regional security. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has called on the Belarusian authorities to demonstrate full respect for human rights, including freedom of speech and the right to peaceful protest. He has underlined that it is for the people of Belarus to determine their future. All Allies support a sovereign and independent Belarus (NATO, 2021).

74. In an August 2020 phone conversation between Polish President Andrzej Duda and 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, 2020). In discussions with the NATO 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.”

75. The Ryanair hijacking has obviously made cooperation significantly more difficult. The problem was noted in the Communique issued in the wake of the June 2021 NATO Summit meeting in Brussels. The paragraph dealing with Belarus said, “Allies remain deeply concerned about developments in Belarus since August 2020. The policies and actions of Belarus have implications for regional stability and have violated the principles which underpin our partnership. NATO will remain vigilant of and monitor the implications for the security of the Alliance. The unacceptable diversion of a civilian aircraft in May and the subsequent arrest of a journalist and his partner travelling on board endangered the safety of civilians and was a grave affront to political dissent and freedom of the press. We support the independent investigations, including those by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). We support measures taken by Allies individually and collectively in response to this incident. We call on Belarus to abide by international law, respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners, including those belonging to the Union of Poles in Belarus. A democratic, sovereign, and stable Belarus is in all of our interests. Allies stand ready for a mutually beneficial NATO-Belarus partnership, taking into account political and security conditions. We will follow the scale, scope, and aftermath of the Zapad-2021 exercise, and continue to call on Russia and Belarus to act in a predictable, transparent way, in compliance with their international obligations and OSCE commitments” (NATO, 2021).

XI. CONCLUSIONS

76. This is an extremely difficult moment for Belarus. According to the Viasna Human Rights Center, as of 31 May 2021, there were 449 political prisoners held in Belarus and the crackdown in the country has only worsened over the course of the spring 2021 (The Viasna Human Rights Center, 2021). The Independent media has been under constant attack, with the regime detaining hundreds of journalists and media activists over the past year. Hundreds have been subject to repressive measures, and many have endured torture or mistreatment. The government-orchestrated hijacking of a commercial flight from Athens to Vilnius in order to arrest the dissident blogger Roman Protasevich precisely revealed just how vulnerable the free media now is in Belarus. Planned legal changes will recast criminal and labour law and laws defining extremism and would make almost any criticism of the government illegal and subject

those engaged in this criticism to severe punishment. The regime is clearly seeking to snuff out an autonomous Belarusian civil society and undermine its capacity to express its political preferences, or even free thought for that matter.

77. There are ever more signs that the economic situation in Belarus 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 pretends to believe that protests in Belarus are the handiwork of external actors (primarily Poland and Lithuania). In recent months he has launched a merciless attack on the Polish diaspora in Belarus to perpetuate the nefarious myth that it is a foreign threat embedded in domestic society. Lukashenko is using ethnic Poles in Belarus as domestic hostages and as tools in his aggressive policy towards Western countries. This is contrary to international law and the legal and political commitments Belarus has undertaken to uphold. Lukashenko must end this repression immediately. Given his illegitimacy, his state of mind and the fact that the state apparatus is structured for repression, the opportunities for constructive dialogue are, at best, few and far between. 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 sanctions.

78. Belarus must remain a priority on the international agenda (especially in the United Nations Human Rights Council), and the international community should provide as much support to Belarusian civil society as possible. Belarus is under a terrifying siege and the citizens of this European country need to understand that there is a deep sense of solidarity with them and broad recognition of the legitimacy of their aspirations to live in a free society. The OSCE has a role to play here. But it is nevertheless important to adopt a realistic outlook and recognize 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 zerosum terms. It needs to be reassured that the democratic aspirations of a neighbouring country are not anti-Russian aspirations. Rather, it reflects a normal and enduring human ambition for agency, freedom, security, and prosperity.

79. 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 how this country will govern itself. Unfortunately, Russia's longer-term ambitions now appear to be pursuing a policy of slow annexation, which will annihilate Belarusian sovereignty and squelch the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people, even as Belarus remains formally independent. 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 any agreements it signs with an illegitimate Lukashenko-led government regarding integration, financial help, and purchasing state-owned enterprises, by extension, would itself be illegitimate.

80. It is worth noting here 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's territorial integrity must be upheld and that to do otherwise would have very serious consequences (Haddad and Judah, 2020). The country's Baltic neighbours also have a leadership role to play here as the threat is in their backyard. Neighbouring countries have a keen interest in regional stability and, by extension, the emergence of a peaceful and autonomous Belarus with a government that is democratically accountable to its people.

81. European and North American governments 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 those working to undermine the sovereignty of that country. The hijacking incident orchestrated by the regime demonstrates the dangers it poses, not only to its own people, but also to the rules-based international order. The EU, the United Kingdom and Canada and other non-EU members in NATO or aligned with it 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 would be a welcome partner to the international community and would be deserving of significant international support.

82. NATO's Secretary General has called on the Belarusian authorities to "demonstrate full respect for human rights, including freedom of speech and the right to peaceful protest. He has underlined that it is for the people of Belarus to determine their future. All Allies support a sovereign and independent Belarus." The experiences 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 well-being. It should be signalled that support will be forthcoming to any government 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 eventually be needed to cope with potential escalation risks and to blunt a growing Russian anti-access threat that could be made worse if the government of Belarus were simply to cede its core sovereignty to Russia against the will of its own people (Hunzeker and Lanoszka, 2020).

83. Any political dialogue in Belarus that does not directly engage the leaders of the legitimate opposition and will not lead to free and fair new presidential elections 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.

84. 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 as well as other international obligations including the rules governing civil aviation. 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 governments like Finland, Switzerland, Austria, should be strongly supported.

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