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The Prospects for Belarus in 2023 in the Light of Russia's War in Ukraine: The Future Is Not Set in Stone

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Russia's war in Ukraine and the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions behind it pose two essential questions for Belarus in 2023: about the integrity of the country's sovereignty and whether the Belarusian army will eventually directly join Russia's full-scale war of aggression. The short answer is that the future of neither is set in stone. However, both depend only to a certain extent on the efforts of Lukashenka's regime rather than Putin's discretion.

Political Processes in Russia and Their Impact on Belarus

To predict Belarus' policy trajectory in 2023, account must be taken of political processes in Russia. Russian decision-making circles are preoccupied with the unsatisfactory course of the war and preparations for the 2024 presidential elections. On war strategies, Russia's elites are divided: the majority considers the war an unnecessary and costly enterprise while a smaller group advocates more radical action on Ukraine. The latter group is driven by extreme nationalistic, geopolitical considerations. In broad strokes, this division is between the major business owners and the siloviki, i.e., the leaders of military and security ministries and agencies. If the first group prevails, they will seek some sort of peace arrangement with Ukraine in an attempt to save Russia's face, and look to appoint a successor to Putin who would make such decisions. Conversely, the dominance of the radical group would mean a scaling-up of the war at virtually any cost.

The dynamics of these conflicting interests inside the Kremlin have an impact on Belarus. If the radicals' set the tone, this could have dramatic consequences, such as the Belarusian army being forced to enter the war following pressure from Moscow on Lukashenka. Russia could engineer provocations on the Belarus-Ukraine border or exploit weaknesses inside the Belarusian "power vertical". The Kremlin could also be tempted to bargain for closer

integration or even annexation of Belarus in order to present victories to the domestic Russian electorate as a justification for the war and to make up for Russia's losses. A moderate Russian approach to Belarus would entail business as usual, allowing Lukashenka to preserve his autonomy while also seeking ways to bypass Western sanctions in cooperation with Belarusian enterprises and maintaining Belarus as a semi-neutral party to the conflict.

Power Dynamics in the Current Moscow-Minsk Relationship

Current power dynamics in the Moscow-Minsk relationship mean that Lukashenka cannot force Putin to remove Russian troops from Belarusian territory. In 2022, the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Uladzimir Makei, attempted backchannel communication with Western counterparts about the possibility of sanctions relief, seeking rapprochement and arguing that Belarus would otherwise be drawn even further into Russia's embrace. Later that year, Makei died suddenly in suspicious circumstances, raising the question of whether his death was a coincidence or a strong signal from the Kremlin discouraging Minsk from conducting its own foreign policy.

A further demonstration of the power dynamics between Belarus and Russia concerns the prospects of closer integration within the Union State. This has been a matter of heated debate since 2019, when Dmitry Medvedev, then prime minister of the Russian Federation, initiated further integration moves with Belarus. Expert assessments of the integration negotiations vary from labelling the roadmaps futile and meaningless to the most extreme projection that this could lead to the complete loss of sovereignty for Belarus. Two observations can be made thus far. On the one hand, implementation of the majority of the roadmaps has become a slow and cumbersome process. Talks over cancelling roaming charges between the two countries are still ongoing, for instance, and there is little clarity on the substance of these negotiations. On the other hand, at least one striking agreement was made that can be considered a win for Russia. Belarus has recently given up its tax sovereignty, selling it "for two kapeikas". Belarus can no longer unilaterally decide on major aspects of its tax policy, such as VAT and excise tax rates, which make up the major part of its tax revenues.

Moreover, Russia also has access to the transactions of Belarusian legal entities, receiving information on the specifics of the entities' business activity and operations. Access to such data provides room for potential misuse and manipulation by Russia. It is remarkable that Belarus agreed to such a deal for the sake of short-term prospects of filling the budget gap with oil-refining industry profits, while ignoring the long-term consequences and national security risks. This is yet another example of Minsk making unfavourable moves and sovereignty trade-offs in response to Russian pressure.

The Potential for Belarus' Full-Scale Involvement in the War on Ukraine

One major consideration is that the Belarusian army is unprepared for offensive operations. This is hardly a secret for the Belarusian military command. Moreover, in contrast to Russian troops, who are potentially more susceptible to Russian ideology, Belarusian conscripts have little motivation to fight and die for abstract Russian nationalistic ideals. One alternative to satisfy Russia's military plan is use of the private sector security enterprise Gardservis, which uniquely in Belarus has a licence to use firearms by presidential decree. It has recently recruited over 1000 contractors. Some Gardservis employees have told the media that they have close ties with the Wagner Group and participate in joint training.

At the same time, there is noticeable quasi-mobilization activity in Belarus. Men of conscription age are required to attend military enlistment offices, supposedly for registration purposes, and this is widely communicated in state media and on city centre television screens. What is less visible, however, is that several Belarusian plants have been reportedly converted into facilities for servicing and repairing Russian military equipment. At the very least, Belarus could play the role of a servicing station and a logistical back-up.

Russia's *modus operandi* in the war against Ukraine demonstrates that the Kremlin has passed the point of rational calculation and been overcome with geopolitical fever. The current hesitancy among the Russian elites regarding military strategy leaves Russia's future course of action in chaos. Scenarios that would have earlier been dismissed as radical conspiracies or uncalculated moves, such as further annexations, coups or nuclear strikes, can no longer be fully excluded. Belarus could be dragged deeper into the war and this could result in unexpected and uncontrollable consequences for both autocrats, including potential elite defection, mass protest and possible power transition in both Belarus and Russia.

Policy Recommendations for the EU

➤ Adhere to a values-based foreign policy, following the example of the Baltic states in their relations with Ukraine, Belarus and Russia

Russia's war on Ukraine has had a disruptive impact on the global economy, supply chains and energy markets, putting pressure on EU policymakers in relation to their constituents and tempting them to choose pragmatic solutions. Appeasing the regimes in Moscow and Minsk, however, and allowing room for rapprochement will only embolden the autocrats' disruptive future ambitions.

➤ Provide support for Belarusian volunteers fighting on the Ukrainian side, such as the Kalinouski regiment

The Belarusian volunteers need support for their capacity-building efforts to grow their units, undergo training and acquire military and technical equipment. If the Lukashenka regime deploys troops in Ukraine, Belarusian regiments that are part of the Ukrainian armed forces could facilitate communication with fellow Belarusians to persuade them to switch sides.

➤ Provide sufficient aid to Belarusians in exile

The entanglement of the Belarusian regime in the war means that Belarusians who had to flee the country now face more obstacles to immigration processes. Lithuania and Poland have been open to accepting Belarusians and issuing residence permits. Other countries, such as Germany, are now treating Belarusians more harshly than in 2020. Similarly, Czechia has decided to significantly reduce the legal grounds for the presence of Belarusian students, including those expelled from Belarusian universities for political reasons. Such policies have a devastating impact on Belarusians in exile, who have paid a high price for their political stance. Aiding Belarusians in exile not only serves humanitarian purposes, but also strengthens the Belarusian diaspora, which in turn serves as a bridge for support to Belarusians inside the country.

➤ **Provide support to Belarusian businesses seeking to relocate**

Private sector business owners and employees constituted the core of the protest movement in 2020. The more Belarusians are able to sustain themselves and apply their talents abroad, the more they will be able to support the Belarusian diaspora and subsequently donate to the fundraisers helping the victims of repression and funding various civic initiatives. Encouraging Belarusian businesses to operate abroad would also help them hire fellow Belarusians who would then be able to send remittances home.

➤ **Include Belarus in the conversations within the Eastern Partnership Programme through expanded collaboration with Belarusian pro-democracy actors and broader civil society**

As the Eastern Partnership reaches a new milestone, given the newly acquired EU candidacy status of Ukraine and Moldova, the programme will soon require significant reform. Belarus should be given a European perspective too once the Belarusian crisis has been resolved. Belarusian voices in support of joining the European family and sharing European values cannot be freely expressed in the current political environment, but that does not mean that there is no basis for such support. A considerable segment of Belarusian society has pro-EU sentiments. Nearly every Belarusian protest features EU flags and there are numerous pro-democracy groups in Belarus that have aspirations for EU membership in their founding charters.



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