Free Belarus Journal

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BELARUSIAN PATRONS CLUB
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Foreword of Editor-in-Chief

Dear Readers,

We present to you the first issue of the *Free Belarus Journal* — an academic journal devoted to Belarusian affairs and, more broadly, to Belarusian affairs on the European map. It is not without reason that the journal is published in Poland and with the participation of Polish partners and institutions. Our institutional home is the **Free Belarus University** — an educational project established by Prof. Aliaksandr Milinkevich to prepare and train future Belarusian personnel to assume responsibility for the state.

I believe that Poland, as Belarus's neighbour, has a particular role to play in the dialogue and discussions among the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, the sovereignty of Belarus — the main theme of our first issue — has become an intellectual axis and a pretext for in-depth reflection. We will return to this fundamental issue in subsequent issues of the Free Belarus Journal and during the implementation of our research projects, seminars, publications, and media activities.

Our goals, i.e., the team of the *Free Belarus University*, the editorial staff, and our circle of friends, include:

— increasing the frequency of the Free Belarus Journal;

— creating an academic information platform;

— initiatives supporting Belarusian scientists living in exile;

— supporting academic initiatives of the Belarusian minority in Poland;

— taking steps to launch an academic publishing house;

— actively counteracting disinformation and false codes in historical and political sciences

— building an intellectual base for future structural reforms in Belarus.

However, our most important dream is to support the process of Belarusians' return to their homeland, including all academic projects, and to strengthen the reconstruction of intellectual life based on the best European models and experiences.

Dear readers,

I am pleased to invite you to cooperate. We invite you to submit not only articles but also reviews and information about Belarusian scientific and academic events. We will strive to maintain a chronicle of important events from the world of science in which Belarusians and their foreign partners participate in our pages and on our website.

Thanks to the Patrons' Club led the Belarusian Council for Culture — for their financial assistance in preparing current issue and printing the journal. Thanks to the European Endowment for Democracy for long-term cooperation and support for *Free Belarus University*, *New Eastern Europe* journal for translation support and long-term cooperation, the Solidarity Fund and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland for financial assistance in publishing last year's signal edition of the Free Belarus Journal.

Professor Mariusz Maszkiewicz
Editor-in-Chief

(Geo)politics and Its Underpinnings

Mariusz Maszkiewicz

Belarus's Sovereignty in the Context of Geopolitics

Introduction

As a consequence of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's policies, Belarusian sovereignty has been, and continues to be, under serious threat. This is especially true in the context of Belarus's so-called unification process with Russia, which has formally been in progress since the signing of the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State on 6 December 1999 (which entered into force in January 2000). However, it was the outbreak of full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022 that showed the extent to which Minsk's autonomy has been curtailed as a result of Vladimir Putin's policies. In this article, I do not aim to provide a political analysis of the process of Belarus losing sovereignty, but rather seek to explore its conceptual foundations through the lens of selected geopolitical theories.

Both Russian and Belarusian proponents of so-called geopolitics tend to treat Belarus as a marginal element in a broader strategic game. Consequently, the international agency of Minsk — sanctioned by the country's executive authorities and its de facto president — is systematically questioned or diminished. It is therefore worthwhile to examine this dynamic from a theoretical standpoint. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate how both the terminology and the conceptual frame-

work of geopolitics — so often uncritically accepted as self-evident, particularly by Lukashenka's supporters and Russian propagandists — have been profoundly destructive to the process of state-building.

What is geopolitics and why is it not regarded as a scientific discipline?

Let me begin with a brief presentation of my understanding of this 'discipline,' which has become extremely popular among political scientists in recent years.

In my view, anyone with a university education — whether in philosophy or the humanities — should possess the ability to apply the tools of scholarly inquiry to critically examine the definitions of words. This includes, in particular, the capacity to understand and interpret language through its structural, etymological, semantic, and historical-cultural dimensions. From this perspective, it is difficult to accept the claim that geopolitics constitutes a scientific discipline. I will explain the reasoning behind this position.

Politics is an integral element of human activity and of the functioning of various communities — social, national, and otherwise. At its core, politics reflects the human concern for the common good. Classical definitions of politics guide us towards an understanding of the human being within the framework of social relationships and communal life.

Geopolitics refers to the exercise of political power on a scale broader than that of the community, the nation, or the state. It is the domain of state and economic actors that possess the capacity to exert influence on a global level — those endowed with the requisite attributes or instruments to do so. Geopolitics is practiced by global powers, often irrespective of the intentions of their leaders or ruling elites. In this sense, small and medium-sized states do not engage in geopolitics; at most, they may serve as subjects of certain geopolitical processes. This occurs only insofar as their characteristics, such as

economic potential or geographical position, render them relevant to the dynamics of the global chessboard.

While political practice is one thing; the scholarly study of politics is another. Thus, some encyclopedias adopt a cautious stance towards the term 'geopolitics,' treating it as a research method rather than a science. For example, *The Columbia Encyclopedia* notes:

> Geopolitics, method of political analysis, popular in Central Europe during the first half of the 20th cent., that emphasised the role played by geography in international relations. Geopolitical theorists stress that natural political boundaries and access to important waterways are vital to a nation's survival. The term was first used (1916) by Rudolf Kjeflen, a Swedish political scientist, and was later borrowed by Karl Haushofer, a German geographer and follower of Friedrich Ratzel. Haushofer founded (1922) the Institute of Geopolitics in Munich, from which he proceeded to publicise geopolitical ideas, including Sir Walford J. Mackinder's theory of a European heartland central to world domination. Haushofer's writings found favor with the Nazi leadership, and his ideas were used to justify German expansion during the Nazi era. Many expansionist justifications, including the American manifest destiny as well as the German Lebensraum, are based on geopolitical considerations. Geopolitics is different from political geography, a branch of geography concerned with the relationship between politics and the environment.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica leans towards defining 'geopolitics' as 'political science', though more in the sense of a research method within political science which derives from geographical analysis. Notably, the entry was authored by Professor Daniel Deudney of Johns Hopkins University.

However, as early as the second sentence of *The Columbia Encyclopedia* entry, we read that 'geopolitical theorists emphasise…'. This means that the authors distinguish between a science, a research methodology, theoretical approaches to politics, and the actual practice of politics. In Eastern Europe, however, many experts, who are

lacking thorough academic training, claim that geopolitics is a science. This view overlooks the fact that political science and its related disciplines — such as political economy, political anthropology, political geography, political philosophy, and the theory of political and legal doctrines — are indeed sciences. Geopolitics, by contrast, is solely a political activity. One that is global. The root of this conceptual confusion may lie less in a genuine fascination with the research methods offered by geography, anthropology, or sociology, and more in a tendency to transform scientific findings into the foundations of political doctrine.

In a not so distant past, doctrinal communism — presented as 'scientific communism' in Soviet academic curricula — was treated in a similar way. This fascination remains strong and emotionally charged, particularly in the post-Soviet space and among former Marxists. As a result, it is often difficult to engage in a reasoned debate with those who believe that 'to act effectively it is enough to have knowledge.' Life experiences tell us that knowledge, by itself, is not enough. Furthermore, the history of the 20th century teaches us that when human beings are not placed at the centre of political doctrines, ideology can easily devolve into totalitarianism. Both fascism/Nazism and communism developed conceptual frameworks and their own language through which ideology masqueraded as rational or scientific theory. We are well aware that distorted instruments drawn from anthropology (such as racial theories) and economics (such as the political economy of communism) were employed to serve repressive regimes.

Soviet style of geopolitics

For over two decades, we have been held hostage to a certain geopolitical fashion imposed by Aleksandr Dugin. Dugin's influence, although admittedly overrated, does not stem so much from his merits and intellectual abilities as the fact that he represents a certain trend and a state of mind that characterises politicians and political scien-

tists in the post-Soviet space. One might say that this is a legacy of scientific communism. While this statement is certainly a simplification, it is not fully unfounded. Metaphorically speaking, we can say that the orphans of Marxist-Leninism have managed to find a new and better family for themselves. The adoption process was quick. Its results have brought us some oddities that not only hunt the departments of political science, but also took the form of government practices (neo-Bolshevism) in post-Soviet countries. In Belarus, Lukashenka has restored the state ideology (both as an academic subject and a set of 'truths to believe in') which is being implemented by state officials and functionaries.

In the case of Russia, a country which wants to be one of the most important players in global politics, we are seeing the implementation of the elite's need to dress its superpower and imperial ambitions in a carefully crafted ideological and doctrinal guise. A group of so-called 'geostrategists' has emerged to meet these ideological and strategic needs. Among them is Aleksandr Dugin, widely recognised as a proponent of Eurasianism, who now appears to be a fading figure. His decline in popularity is, in part, due to the growing competition within the field. For many years, Dugin provided much of the intellectual fuel that shaped the discourse, language, and political imagination of Russian policymakers, including politicians, decision-makers, and their advisors. His work has been cited by such influential figures as Gleb Pavlovsky, Vladislav Surkov, and Sergey Karaganov. At the same time, numerous Russian analysts, most notably Lilia Shevtsova and Arkady Moshes, have long drawn attention to the process of Russia's 're-imperialisation' (Konończuk, 2007). In his writings, Dugin revives the old concept of dividing Central Europe into two spheres of influence: one Russian, the other German (Dugin, 1997, pp. 224–228). Notably, in this framework there is no room for Belarus – even as a subject of inquiry – which points to the fundamentally imperialist and exclusionary logic of Dugin's approach.

Polish experts seem to overlook the fact that prior to Dugin, figures such as Dergachov and Sorokin, had already called for employing ge-

opolitics in the service of Russia's interests. In the 1990s, Sorokin explicitly posed a theoretical challenge for Russian diplomats: how to overcome the syndrome of lost bipolarity and restore Russia's status as a global power. The ideological framing of the United States persuaded many Russian analysts and experts that geopolitical rivalry with the US was ongoing with Russia adopting the role of a defeated sparring partner. This, however, did not imply that it could not, or should not, return to the game. What it needed was an ideological reconstruction, following the defeat of Soviet Marxism. Thus, according to its Russian proponents, geopolitics was a task of a state nature. For former Marxists, neopositivists, and advocates of materialism and scientific communism, the practice of geopolitics was not necessarily a source of satisfaction, but rather a means of reviving their academic careers which had been interrupted by the fall of communism. To do so they only needed to slightly correct their previous texts published in such magazines as *Questions of Communism* as well as slightly fix their plans and research projects. Samuel Huntington — albeit unintentionally — did Russian geopolitics a great service, as did Zbigniew Brzezinski — indirectly — by fueling geostrategic imagination and feeding hopes for the imminent return of rivalry that would restore Russia to its rightful place. Leszek Moczulski was right in his opinion that Russian geopolitical traditions date back to pan-Slavism and are deeply rooted in the works of Lev Gumilev (Moczulski, 2009, p. 510).

Within Russian analytical circles, any gesture of friendly interest expressed by Warsaw towards the countries of the post-Soviet space — Belarus and Ukraine in particular — is automatically interpreted as Poland's attempt to engage in broader geostrategic maneuvering on the side of its former enemies, namely the United States and NATO. For years, Moscow has jealously viewed the attempts to export democracy to Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova (in the form of the so-called colour revolutions). The Kremlin perceives these developments as part of a coordinated and externally driven strategy, serving as evidence of foreign interference in Russia's so-called near abroad. Overcoming this 'geopolitical mindset' and moving towards

dialogue and discussion about values remains a significant challenge — not only for Poland, but for the European Union as a whole (Emerson, 2001).

Criticism of Soviet geopolitics

In this context, it is worth taking a look at the critical assessment of geopolitics offered by Klaus Dodds (Dodds, 2019).

In his work on geopolitics, Dodds demonstrates a deep understanding of Russia's aspirations to make geopolitical discourse, which in essence deprives citizens of their right to sovereignty, the dominant model of social and political narrative. He therefore aptly begins his reflections by citing the example of the attempted poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a Russian defector in the United Kingdom. He also recalls the older story of Sergei Markov's assassination in London in 1978. Dodds argues that geopolitics, understood as the pursuit of domination, has no regard for human life. When macro-politics is the goal, it is possible to commit crimes and spread terror in the name of the interest of the state. Such interpretation of politics dehumanises the world, which, since the Second World War, we have been trying to adapt to the aspirations of modern man.

Dodds recalls the words of American geographer Richard Hartshorne, who condemned geopolitics as 'intellectual poison.' Similarly, the geographer Isaiah Bowman regarded geopolitics as an intellectually discredited and empirically distorted doctrine — one he held responsible for the genocides of the Second World War. Klaus Haushofer (1869—1946), a prominent German geographer and one of the canonical figures in the field of geopolitics, was cast into academic obscurity for decades, accused of having laid the intellectual groundwork for the principal ideologues of Nazism. In recent years, however, a renewed interest in Haushofer's work has emerged. Interestingly, it has come mainly from the East. The German geopolitical theorist has become one of the most frequently cited authors among Russian and

Belarusian analysts and political scientists who are engaged in constructing the doctrinal basis for the strategic decisions of the Kremlin and the Lukashenka regime.

The origins of what is now referred to as geopolitics can be traced to a number of 19th-century thinkers and theorists who based their analyses of international relations on the findings from geography, demography, and other social sciences. Among the most prominent is the British scholar Halford Mackinder (1861—1947), whose name is invariably cited in this context. However, Mackinder's theories constituted a synthesis of the United Kingdom's colonial experience. By their nature, they served not so much as a justification for economic conquest or overseas warfare as a rational assessment of imperial successes and failures. The geopolitical potential of colonial states and empires offered a rich foundation for systematic theoretical inquiry. Within this approach, geopolitics was not the work of ideologues in service of a state, nor a doctrinal rationale for expansionism, but rather an academic endeavour grounded in critical analysis and scientific reflection.

For Dodds, the revival of geopolitical thinking began during the Cold War in the United States. It was, and continues to be, closely associated with two key figures: Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. The global political environment, characterised by superpower rivalry, the arms race, and rapid technological and industrial development, provided the intellectual impetus for those engaged in advancing the strategic interests of the leading Western power — the United States. In this context, the tools of geopolitics were employed in a pragmatic, instrumental manner rather than treated as elements of a rigid doctrine. Analyzing the international landscape within this discourse required a return to concepts developed by classical geographers: Mackinder, Ratzel, Kjellén, and others.

Both Nicholas Spykman (1893—1943) and his intellectual successor Saul Cohen (1925—2021) recognised that the beginning of the Cold War showed a growing need to understand the territorial and ideological nature of the rivalry between the USSR and the US. In his 1963

work *Geography and Politics in a World Divided*, Cohen followed in Spykman's footsteps in describing a divided world. It was then that he coined the term 'rimlands,' which in Russian is often referred to as *limotrofy*, meaning countries living on the border between spheres of influence, civilisations, or, as some prefer, at the junction of tectonic plates. Here, Belarus is an all too obvious example for many theorists of so-called geopolitics.

In a broader, global context, the term 'rimlands' refers not only to the zones of influence of rival powers, but also to the overlapping cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, and other influences. During the Cold War, such regions included the divided city of Berlin, parts of Europe, particularly Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Korea, Vietnam, and the Caribbean.

American Cold War theorists and analysts emphasised the role of geopolitics in US strategic thinking, citing as key evidence the National Security Council Paper 68, or NSC-68, prepared for the Truman administration in 1950. This document warned of Soviet ambitions for global domination, pursued not only through military means, but above all through ideological, informational, and, more precisely, disinformation tools. NSC-68 was later complemented by the so-called domino theory, which interpreted Soviet expansionism as advancing under the rhetorical guise of decolonisation. It is important to note, however, that NSC-68 did not constitute a binding doctrinal document. Many high-ranking officials, including President Harry Truman himself, questioned, or disputed, various elements of the 66-page report prepared by a team of government experts.

What we call the US geopolitical strategy thus had its origins in concerns about the aggressive Soviet strategy aimed at gaining control over a large part of the world through the use of communist ideology. The US response was not only limited to such documents as NSC-68, but also the establishment of NATO and the strengthening of its containment strategy in Central Asia, Korea, Japan, and Australasia. Also, the Marshall Plan, which supported the reconstruction of Europe and the free market economy, should be considered part of

this strategy. In this context it should be remembered that due to the clear opposition of the Soviet leadership the countries which found themselves on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain missed the opportunity for reconstruction and the huge financial support from the US.

Dodds finishes his argument by demonstrating the extent to which Putin and the leadership of the Russian Federation have been influenced by Dugin's writings which point to the need for Ukraine's conquest and the restoration of a Russian sphere of influence across the post-Soviet space (Dodds, 2019, p. 58).

Examples of the concept of state sovereignty in the works of classic geopolitical thinkers

In today's world of complex economic and security interdependencies, state sovereignty is increasingly questioned, obscured, or at times arbitrarily relinquished. The post-Second World War international legal order — embodied by institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe — has repeatedly come under pressure and, in some instances, has been effectively dismantled due to member states' violations of established norms and obligations. Klaus Dodds identifies more than four key dimensions shaping contemporary understandings of sovereignty.

First, international recognition may serve as an indicator of state sovereignty — though not necessarily, as exemplified by Taiwan, which is widely regarded as sovereign despite lacking formal recognition within the UN system. Sovereignty, in this sense, is expressed through a state's capacity to negotiate, ratify treaties, and participate in diplomatic relations.

Second, it must be understood that sovereignty is conditioned by various interdependencies. In the era of globalisation, states do not always exercise full control over their own economies, which are de-

pendent on investments, capital flows, etc. Moreover, non-state actors with significant influence — for example multinational corporations, terrorist organisations, military forces representing stateless nations, private military and security companies, and powerful digital technologies (particularly those employing artificial intelligence and operating through cryptocurrencies as sovereign issuers of value) — are becoming increasingly bigger players on the global stage.

Third, as the foregoing suggests, even the most powerful states may struggle to maintain full sovereignty. For that reason comparisons of the scale or degree of sovereignty across individual subjects of international law reveal significant disparities and structural weaknesses. The sovereignty of a small African state significantly differs from that of the United States or such major powers as Germany, France, China, or Turkey. These differences are effectively captured by various indices that measure such factors as the strength of national currency or passports, levels of democratic development, and economic freedom.

Fourth, the scale of a country's sovereignty depends on its capacity/resilience in the event of external intervention (political, diplomatic, informational, economic and, finally, military). Evidently, not all states can afford full resilience, the ability to repel attempts by other external actors to disrupt their internal order and law (cf. Dodds, 2019, pp. 66—71).

In the case of Belarus, an additional and essential question must be raised in relation to the four dimensions that define sovereignty: namely, the issue of the so-called imagined community, or national and state identity. For example, the emergence of a sovereign Argentina in the early 19th century was accompanied by a process of nation-building that brought together diverse ethnic groups — both immigrant and indigenous — who collectively invested significant effort into shaping and sustaining a sovereign territorial state. In the Belarusian context, we must ask whether such an imagined community exists among the citizens of today's republic. What are the defining features of this community? What unites and divides its members,

and to what extent? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the identity formation process? Here we encounter a whole series of doubts as for many citizens of the modern Republic of Belarus, the Soviet Union is a competing project as the homeland where at least three or four generations grew up and were educated (including in terms of identity). Not to mention the still strong and numerically significant percentage of citizens who identify with the so-called 'Russian world.' A competing project is a nation state based on both the traditions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the premises of contemporary national revival. I am referring here to the processes at the turn of the 20th century, as well as after 1991, that is after the formal collapse of the USSR. Without delving into the tools that are able to show the degree of internal integration of a nation and the level of identity, we will not be able to determine the level of sovereignty. Therefore, for the time being, we must frame this issue as a research postulate — one that calls for a broader theoretical effort aimed at uncovering the relationship between national identity and state sovereignty in the Belarusian context.

The determinism of geopolitics and the prospect of Belarusian sovereignty

At the beginning of the 21st century, when Lukashenka's supporters believed that the regime could be theoretically justified, Belarusian political science journals featured numerous publications referring to geopolitical discourse. For example, the authors of the *Bielaruskaya Dumka* quarterly were leaning towards the 'Russian perspective.' Immersed in geopolitics, they failed to see that in the global game of major players some countries are of little significance. However, as it was believed that Belarus's location at the crossroads of East and West placed it in a particularly important position in global rivalry, some of the Belarusian experts also began to construct their own *geopolitical theories*.

Circles close to the Kremlin reinforce among the Belarusian ruling elite an impression that in the ongoing global rivalry their country is a very important link. Without diminishing Belarus's role, opponents of this approach argue that any country, regardless of its geographic location, can serve as an arena for global competition, involving both secret and overt governments, transnational criminal networks, financial systems, and various secret or open structures that support macro-social projects. Such voices are expressed by both opposition political activists and independent experts. This does not contradict the view, shared by serious analysts, that Belarus holds only marginal significance from the standpoint of Russian strategic interests (Manayeu, 2012).

Uladzimir Babkou believes that in the geopolitical game that we are seeing in the modern world, there are many areas that states should put under their security umbrellas (Babkou, 2010). For example, the financial resources spent on science show the potential and level of intellectual independence, while dependence on a single economic partner is seen as a threat.

More than a decade ago, Babkou believed that a classic threat (armed aggression against another territory) was unlikely. Russia's aggression in Crimea has reinforced this belief, as we are dealing with an exceptionally anachronistic (i.e., territorial) approach to geopolitics on the part of the Russian elite. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was similarly anachronistic. The Azerbaijani and Armenian elites, defending their interests, are unable to escape geopolitics and take a step forward by adopting a completely different perspective on resolving the conflict. The more we get lost in this 'geopolitical discourse,' the greater the intellectual effort should be directed toward the threats posed by modern civilisation (environmental devastation, terrorism, religious fanaticism, cybercrime, economic domination by non-state actors, etc.).

From the perspective of today's armed conflicts (as of 2025), Babkou's approach appears markedly optimistic. This is particularly evident in his discussion of the Eastern Partnership, which he describes

as a project indicative of an 'unfinished geopolitical arrangement in Europe' and a space open to new configurations or shifts. Babkou believed that Belarus — by virtue of its unique geopolitical position and potential — could play a meaningful role in the broader process of European unification. He was further suggesting that integration with Russia might enable Belarus to act as an accelerator in the construction of a European Union-like structure, referencing elements of the Eurasian Union project once advanced by Sergei Karaganov.

Uladzimir Kananeyeu was more cautious. Seeing certain hidden intentions of the architects of the Eastern Partnership programme, he pointed to Poland's ambitions to rebuild its influence in the countries which once belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Today, this vision can be reduced to a narrow 'Black Sea-Baltic Sea' coalition which has been initiated by Warsaw. At the same time, Kananeyeu saw some positive aspects of including Belarus in different EU projects which, in his view, could bring real economic and social benefits (Kananeyeu, 2009).

In relation to the earlier questions and doubts raised about the nature of geopolitics, it is worth noting a text by Siarhei Lomau, then an assistant at the Belarusian State University, who advocated for a more restrained approach to the field. He proposed the development of a scientific subdiscipline focused on the 'geopolitics of small states.' In his view, such a framework would provide the analytical tools necessary to understand national developments in relation to broader global dynamics, such as the clash of civilisations. On the other hand, thanks to the innovative methodologies offered by the 'geopolitics of small states' it could be possible to move from merely reacting to global events toward actively shaping outcomes that serve the interests of smaller actors within the geopolitical landscape. I leave the evaluation of this intellectual proposition to the reader.

Lomov's approach also draws on Kananeyeu's view that Belarus remains a point of persistent interest for major actors in global geopolitics. He argued that, within the context of competition over the rimland, Belarus could play an important role, potentially prompting the

United States to accept, at least at the level of doctrine, the implementation of ideological projects aimed at exerting control over Europe. These included historical concepts such as Pan-Slavism and Pan-Germanism, which, according to this logic, would facilitate the management of macro-political and macro-economic processes within a concentrated geopolitical environment.

After 2020, theoretical discussions which employ the tools of so-called geopolitics largely vanished from the intellectual discourse among Lukashenka's elites. The scale of the threat to Belarusian sovereignty no longer appears to permit meaningful political debate. The harsh realities of the post-Soviet space have displaced the capacity, or willingness, for deeper reflection.

As independent Belarusian political analyst Andrei Fiodorau observed at the time, instrumental interest in Belarus now comes almost exclusively from Russia. He noted that Belarus, by decision of its own authorities — but in contradiction to its constitution — had effectively entered into a *de facto* military alliance with the Russian Federation. The advantages of such an arrangement for Russia were outlined by General Leonid Ivashov, the former head of the Department of Military Cooperation at the Russian Ministry of Defense and later the Vice President of the Academy of Geopolitical Sciences. In his view, for Russia, Belarus represents the following:

— A strategic military bridgehead which isolates NATO's military assets from Russian territory along the Smaliensk-Moscow line;

— An external shield for Russian troops on the western strategic direction;

— An information system on the situation in the air and on land, as well as on the deployment of advanced Russian military facilities (radar in Baranavichy, airport near Lida, etc.);

— A part of the defense industrial complex;

— A spiritual borderland between Orthodox Christianity, on the one hand, and Catholicism and Protestantism, on the other;

— Support for the Kaliningrad Oblast, the Baltic Fleet, and a tool for political influence on Lithuania.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow reduced Belarus's strategic position to the role of a frontline base. More than a decade ago, Fiodorau made no secret of his irritation that Ivashov's statements were in fact dragging Belarus into possible armed conflicts, including a NATO-Russia war. He wrote that Moscow no longer cared about the integration process, as what was at stake was:

— Protecting the Kremlin's interests in the event of the loss of a trusted ally and the transfer of its potential to the enemy;
— The threat of NATO using Belarus's territory and, for example, reducing the flight time of NATO aircraft attacking Moscow to 20 minutes;
— The need to deploy new defense units on the Smaliensk-Moscow line and additional defense systems around Moscow;
— The need for costly construction of early warning systems against missile attacks on Russian territory, or the need to abandon such a system, which would lead to the 'blinding' of the Strategic Missile Forces and the loss of the ability to plan a retaliatory strike (i.e., the outright loss of the strategic nuclear forces);
— The potential threat of Belarus severing economic relations in the arms industry and the loss of access to spare parts for military systems;
— Hypothetical weakening of Russia's foreign policy potential, loss of prestige and attractiveness as an ally;

All this could result in the demoralisation of Russian society and a loss of trust in the leaders and representatives of the Russian Federation's ruling elite among Orthodox Christians, especially those in military service.

Fiodorau acknowledged that while some of Ivashov's arguments could be questioned, it must be admitted that, given the Kremlin's current confrontational stance, a move by Belarus closer to NATO,

would represent a significant strategic loss for Russia (Fiodarau, 2024).

All said, it is worth reiterating that when reading the works of contemporary Russian geopolitica l theorists, such as Aleksander Dergachev, Aleksander Dugin, and Vladimir Sorokin, we are carried away by their Hegelian spirit. This addiction to geopolitical thinking is best captured by Ludmila Shishelina, who points to some more realistic projects. She claims that small countries which are focused on regional security can dictate their terms to bigger players, provided they are consistent, show solidarity, and make good use of the international situation. For example, such a small country as Georgia, which does not count for much in the great rimland game or over any other geopolitical zone, remains a thorn in the side, while its allies (potential and real) are doomed to be played off against each other (Shishelina, 2008). It is therefore difficult to agree with the theses propagated by the theorists of so-called *geopolitics* that only macro-strategy wins and that the value-based world system must be consigned to the dustbin of history by joining the stronger side.

Belarusian sovereignty and the so-called Slavic geopolitics

Many supporters of the so-called geopolitics play a rather peculiar intellectual game which consists of attributing this discipline to intellectuals who have nothing to say on the matter any more. One such example is the work of the eminent geographer Piotr Eberhardt entitled *Slavic Geopolitics. The creators of Russian, Ukrainian, and Czechoslovak geopolitics and their ideological and territorial concepts* (Eberhardt, 2017). In his study, Eberhardt presents Nikolay Danilevsky, whose understanding of a Slavic empire was a reflection of his pan-Slavic views, and whom Eberhardt views as the most important theorist of Slavic geopolitics. Thus, we can read as follows:

‘For every Slav — Russian, Czech, Serb, Croat, Slovenian, Slovak, Bulgarian (I would like to add Poles) — the Slavic idea should be the highest idea, after God and His Holy Church, higher than freedom, science, education, higher than all earthly goods’ (Danilevsky, 1991).

This deep and fervent belief in Slavic unity coincided, especially in the second half of the 19th century, with the policy of the Russian tsarist regime. It is therefore not surprising that the Russian thinker did not mention Ukrainians and Belarusians, treating them naturally as part of the Russian ethnos. Not only that, Danilevsky extended his theoretical concept of a Slavic empire to include such nations as Romanians, Greeks, Hungarians, and all other nations inhabiting the Balkans. Pan-Slavism was an integral part of the military, economic, and cultural strategy of ambitious officials in St Petersburg. In such a geopolitical perspective, the nation and the state are determinants of a development strategy; there is no place here for the individual and the accompanying personalistic concepts.

Danilevsky put it this way: ‘If (i.e. the Poles) manage to resurrect an independent state in one form or another, it will inevitably become a centre of revolutionary intrigues (as we saw in Krakow when it was a free city) directed against western provinces of Russia. Russia will obviously not accept this and try to eliminate this hostile nest at the first opportunity’ (Danilevsky, 1991, p. 189; as cited in Eberhardt, 2017).

Without a doubt the intrigue that Danilevsky was writing about refers to Ukraine and Belarus. Similar beliefs, as Eberhardt noted, were held by other 19th-century Russian ‘geopoliticians,’ including, above all, Ivan Dusinsky. Eberhardt devoted an entire chapter to this thinker. When it comes to Ukrainian geopolitics, Eberhardt threw all of the prominent Ukrainian activists and intellectuals of the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries who were involved in building the idea of Ukrainian statehood into the same ‘geopolitical’ basket. He took particular pleasure in turning historians into geopoliticians, even though no one asked them for their opinion. Born in Przemyśl, the outstanding Ukrainian geographer and proponent of Ukrainian

independence, based on ethnographic assumptions, as defined by the map of the Ukrainian ethnic group, Stepan Rudnickiy (1877–1937), was, according to Eberhardt, one of the few so-called Slavic geopoliticians who noticed Belarus. Rudnickiy's concept of the Intermarium (also known as the Black Sea-Baltic Sea Bridge), put forward after the First World War, included countries such as Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Belarus, alongside Ukraine. There is no place for Poland and Romania in this Central European geographical and political arrangement (Eberhardt, 2017). It is therefore not surprising that Belarus is absent from the considerations of Ukrainian historians whom Eberhardt appointed to the role of the so-called geopoliticians.

Belarus's sovereignty in a geopolitical perspective — summary

The main research postulate that emerges from this analysis is to revise the terminology and concepts of so-called geopolitics so that they are not treated as a scientific discipline. This is to ensure that they do not constitute a theoretical intellectual contribution to political science, but are directly referred to as an ideological tool, in this particular case related to the Kremlin's projects aimed at excluding the sovereignty of post-Soviet states from international and academic discourse. This is the case because the introduction of the concepts of the so-called geopolitics into intellectual and expert discourse weakens, and even invalidates, the discourse on, among other things, the national and cultural aspirations of Belarus.

The sovereignty of states, especially small and medium-sized ones, experiences its limitations and potential. The globalising world, especially in the areas of economy, communication, mass culture, and others, is undermining the existing foundations of international law and customs. The internet, electronic money transfers, cryptocurrencies, and access to fast and not always honest information are changing our habits and the way we look at the world. Added to this are the

new challenges in the form of increasingly powerful non-state actors in international relations (corporations, financial centres, and economic systems). These also include the extra-legal structures of the criminal and oligarchic world and the dictators associated with it, which undoubtedly include such post-Soviet figures as Lukashenka and Putin.

Currently, the greatest threat arising from the false theoretical perspective of so-called geopolitics is the lack of faith among the society living within the borders of the Belarusian state in the possibility of self-determination for the nation and the state. The determinism imposed by the theorists of so-called geopolitics weakens their national aspirations and, as a result, leads to military, economic, and cultural threats.

All these factors disrupt the existing understanding of sovereignty. Therefore, it is postulated here that there is a need for more close monitoring of these phenomena, especially from the perspective of Belarusian state and national sovereignty.

Abstract

The author of the article examines the issue surrounding the popularity of so-called geopolitics. Once a concept known in political science — used primarily as a methodological tool for analyzing the global dynamics of major powers — it has, since the 1990s, and particularly in post-communist Russia, been redefined and promoted as a distinct scientific discipline. This shift served to provide ideological justification for the Kremlin's neo-imperial ambitions. The author draws a parallel between Dugin's version of geopolitics and the role that scientific communism once played in the Soviet Union. Within this framework, the article explores the question of Belarusian sovereignty as it is interpreted through the semantic and theoretical lens of so-called geopolitics.

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Viktar Shadurski

International Recognition of the Republic of Belarus and Its Borders as a Fundamental Guarantee of State Sovereignty

Introduction

The propaganda of the Belarusian authoritarian regime makes every effort to spread the thesis that the country's genuine state sovereignty allegedly began not in 1991, but in July 1994 — that is, only after the first presidential elections. The main credit for creating, consolidating, and developing an independent state is attributed to the dictator who has usurped power in the country for decades (BELTA, 2022). Information about the preceding period, with its dramatic events on the road to acquiring sovereignty and the first successes of the new state, is either silenced or heavily distorted.

This ideologically biased construct of authoritarian power is easily dismantled with well-known historical facts. Both within Belarus and abroad, exists a considerable body of scholarly and popular publications that provide a realistic assessment of Belarusian events, including the period from the late 1980s to the first presidential elections in the summer of 1994. These years were marked by attempts at com-

promise between supporters of independence and defenders of the Soviet empire, the formation of democratic foundations of governance, and the rapid development of civil society. In relatively favorable external conditions, Belarusian democratic forces succeeded in pushing the Supreme Council of the 12th convocation to adopt the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Belarus (July 1990) and, slightly more than a year later, to grant this declaration the status of law (25 August 1991), which amounted to a de jure proclamation of sovereignty. The signing of the Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (December 1991), its ratification by the parliaments of Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and other former Union Republics, as well as the resignation of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev on 25 December 1991, allowed Belarus to obtain independent status both de jure and de facto.

The collapse of the USSR opened the way to the swift international and diplomatic recognition of the newly independent states, including the Republic of Belarus. Foreign embassies began opening in the Belarusian capital, while dozens of Belarusian diplomatic missions appeared abroad.

A historic achievement that shaped the long-term stability of state sovereignty was the international recognition of the new state within its existing borders. Of its five neighboring countries, Belarus signed agreements on the delimitation and demarcation of borders with four — Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Ukraine — completing all necessary procedures under international law.

The achievements of Belarus's early independence years, above all its broad international and diplomatic recognition within its existing borders, remain a fundamental guarantee of the preservation of state sovereignty. This fact is of growing importance in today's dramatic circumstances, when the Belarusian dictatorship is ready to trade sovereignty — partially or even entirely — in exchange for the support of the authoritarian Russian empire.

Expansion of Belarus's international agency during the 'parade of sovereignties' of the Union Republics

With the deepening crisis of the USSR in the late 1980s, the international activity of the Union Republics, including Belarus, began to increase noticeably. The new challenges in the foreign policy sphere required effective personnel decisions from official Minsk. As a result of a compromise between party apparatchiks and democratic forces, on 17 July 1990, the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs was given to Supreme Council deputy and former party official Piotr Krauchanka, who shared and defended national-democratic values. In retrospect, writing in the 2020s, Professor Uladzimir Snapkouski described Krauchanka as a 'national communist' (Snapkouski, 2022, p. 41).

In a comparatively short period of time, the small staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (in 1990 it employed just over 30 people) under Krauchanka's leadership managed to cover considerable ground: from a kind of 'department' for UN affairs to a fully-fledged Ministry of Foreign Affairs of a European country that became a genuine subject of international law and secured broad international recognition.

As priorities, the new minister articulated tasks that, in our view, fully corresponded to the national interests of the time: strengthening international cooperation to minimise the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster; promoting the initiative to establish a nuclear-free zone in Eastern and Central Europe; attracting foreign investment; securing compensation from the Federal Republic of Germany for former inmates of Nazi concentration camps; expanding ties with the Belarusian diaspora; and seeking out and repatriating national historical and cultural valuables (Krauchanka, 2016, p. 10).

Systemic changes also began to take place at the legislative level. On 25 October 1990, the Supreme Council of the BSSR adopted the *Law on the Fundamentals of Foreign Economic Activity of the BSSR*, which entered into force on 1 January 1991. The preamble empha-

sised that the law was based on the principles enshrined in the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the republic, as well as on universally recognised norms and rules. In the same year, as part of implementing the law, the Council of Ministers of the BSSR established the State Committee on Foreign Economic Relations. A new form of the republic's foreign trade relations became the creation of enterprises with foreign capital participation (Republic of Belarus, 1990).

The renewed Ministry of Foreign Affairs significantly expanded its ambitions and autonomy in the international arena. Thus, at the 45th session of the UN General Assembly on 28 November 1990, Krauchanka, on behalf of Belarus, Ukraine, and the USSR, proposed a draft special resolution on the Chernobyl disaster. In its final version, another 116 delegations (out of 159 UN member states) joined as co-sponsors. On 21 December 1990, the General Assembly, at its plenary meeting, adopted by consensus (without a vote) the resolution *International Cooperation in Mitigating and Overcoming the Consequences of the Accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant* (United Nations General Assembly, 1990).

In 1991, relations between the Soviet Union's republics began to transform into the category of international relations. On 18 October 1991, the Republic of Belarus joined the *Treaty on Economic Cooperation*, signed in Moscow by representatives of most Union Republics. In October—November 1991, within the framework of this treaty, Belarus signed agreements on the principles of trade and economic cooperation with Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. In November 1991, a *Treaty on Interstate Relations* between the Republic of Belarus and Uzbekistan was signed in Tashkent Tsikhamirau, 2017, p. 18).

At the final stage of the USSR's collapse, Belarusian efforts to establish direct relations with foreign states intensified. In October 1991, a delegation from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the USSR visited Minsk. During the meetings, Chinese diplomats indicated that the PRC was ready to establish direct relations with the Union Republics. At a meeting in November 1991 between

Foreign Minister Piotr Krauchanka and U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State K. Kennan, the Belarusian side proposed establishing direct relations with the United States, including the exchange of consulates and trade missions (Krauchanka, 2009).

A reflection of the new opportunities was the visit to Belarus by UNESCO Director-General F. Mayor in December 1991, during which a Protocol-Memorandum on Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and UNESCO was signed. The document provided for broad contacts in the fields of science, education, and culture.

The issue of state borders acquired particular sharpness in Minsk's international negotiations. In the early 1990s, statements about the 'injustice' of the existing borders of the BSSR enjoyed some popularity in Belarusian political and expert circles. The topic was raised very actively by certain supporters of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), who argued that Belarus had the right to claim territories of the Vilnius region, Białystok region, as well as the Smaliensk, Briansk, Chernihiv, and part of the Pskov regions, since these lands had allegedly been lost illegally in the 20th century (Pazniak, 1992, p. ...). In some cases, similar arguments were even taken up by Belarusian officials. In the author's view, such unconstructive statements can be explained by national romanticism, as well as by a reaction to similar rhetoric in neighboring republics and states (Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine). However, they did not serve the national cause, as they failed to take into account the prevailing trends of the democratic world.

A visit to Minsk by the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Krzysztof Skubiszewski, in October 1990 became a landmark event in the border discussions. Piotr Krauchanka refused to sign the bilateral *Declaration on the Fundamentals of Interstate Agreements* prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland. The Belarusian minister cited the fact that the BSSR had not signed the Soviet-Polish treaty on the state border of 16 August 1945 and therefore could not agree to the Polish proposal to include in the document a provision on the inviola-

bility and immutability of the existing Belarusian-Polish border in the future (Snapkouski, 2003, pp. 120–121; Fedorowicz, 2021, pp. 14–15).

The Belarusian position was met with serious criticism from Polish and other foreign politicians and experts. The first visit of a Polish foreign minister to Minsk in the history of Polish-Belarusian relations was described by Polish researcher Krzysztof Fedorowicz as a failure, which resulted in the suspension of Polish-Belarusian contacts for almost a year (Fedorovich, 2021, p. 17). The professor based his conclusion on assessments provided by Minister Skubiszewski himself (Skubiszewski, 1997, pp. 124, 272).

However, despite a number of problems and difficulties, Belarus's foreign policy activity on the eve of independence can be assessed positively. This work became even more active and reached a higher level after December 1991.

The West's reaction to the disintegration of the Soviet space

After the USSR faded into history, debates about the causes of the disintegration of this vast global empire have continued. The scholarly literature provides detailed chronologies and analyses of the internal and external circumstances that led to the 'parade of sovereignties' among the Union Republics. Compelling evidence has been presented that the collapse of the USSR occurred primarily due to internal problems and the inefficiency of its political and socio-economic model, which could not compete with democratic countries with market economies. As the experience of *perestroika* and *glasnost* showed, it was extremely difficult, if not practically impossible, to reform the totalitarian system that had existed for several decades.

At the same time, pro-Soviet and pro-Russian actors continue to claim that the USSR collapsed not because of internal causes, but due to the aggressive policies of the collective West, which allegedly

sought to defeat its rival at any cost. The search for external enemies and their supposed domestic collaborators — who are claimed to threaten so-called stability in Belarus and draw Belarusians into conflict — remains a propaganda trend of the authoritarian Minsk regime even today.

In our view, the main 'fault' of democratic states lay in their great appeal: they demonstrated not only respect for freedoms and human rights but also a significantly higher standard of living for their citizens. These and other factors heightened the critical attitude of a large part of the Soviet population toward the authorities in Moscow. Accusations by Soviet propaganda against the United States and its allies, alleging subversive actions against the USSR, were increasingly rejected by the residents of the 'one-sixth of the globe.'

Evidence shows that the leaders of Western countries did not want the USSR to collapse, fearing that the vast territory would turn into a space of social instability, armed conflicts, and uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear and conventional weapons. They supported Mikhail Gorbachev until the last moment, as his course toward 'socialism with a human face' and the reduction of global military-political tensions fully satisfied the West. Proof of support for the Soviet leader was his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October 1990 for his 'leading role in the peace process, which characterises an important component of the life of the international community' (Nobel Prize, 1990).

It should also be emphasised that Western leaders and politicians poorly understood the specifics of the national republics within the USSR and did not consider the local elites capable of building stable independent states. The only exception was made for the three Baltic republics, where political, historical, and socio-cultural preconditions existed. It is well known that the forcible elimination of the Baltic states' independence in 1940 was never recognised de jure or de facto by the United States, Ireland, or the Vatican, and de jure by 26 additional countries. These countries maintained diplomatic relations with the governments of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in exile. For

example, in the late 1980s, three Baltic diplomatic missions continued to operate in the United States (Lithuanian and Latvian missions in Washington, Estonian mission in New York) and a Lithuanian mission in London (United Kingdom). Non-recognition of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries was particularly emphasised during the Reagan administration, when in 1982 the U.S. officially established Baltic Freedom Day (Lauri, 2005).

Many Western leaders in the late 1980s and early 1990s began to openly express concern for the political fate of the USSR. Closely observing the 'parade of sovereignties' among the Union Republics, they sent signals of support to Gorbachev. One confirmation of this can be found in the published records of communication between the last Soviet leader and Western leaders. For example, as early as 5 July 1990, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl told Mikhail Gorbachev that it was important to avoid actions that might create in the West the impression that the USSR was on the verge of disintegrating into a conglomerate of separate republics. On 30 July 1991, U.S. President George Bush informed Gorbachev that under no circumstances would he support separatism (Navumchyk, 2013, p. 427).

A key moment came during the well-known speech of U.S. President George H. W. Bush on 1 August 1991 at the Supreme Council of Ukraine, in which he addressed the Ukrainians — and, through them, all Soviet nations — stating: 'Americans will not support those who seek independence only to replace distant tyranny with local despotism. They will not aid those who promote suicidal nationalism based on ethnic hatred' (John-Thor Dahlburg, 1991). It is worth emphasising that these words were spoken just three weeks before Ukraine declared independence and four months before the December referendum on independence, in which 92.26% of Ukrainians voted to leave the Soviet Union.

It is in this context that the restrained reaction of certain leaders of major countries to the attempted coup in Moscow (August 1991) should be understood. In his televised address on 19 August 1991, French President François Mitterrand stated that he saw no reason

not to cooperate with the State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP) as the leadership of the Soviet Union. His words stood in contrast to the positions of other Western leaders, who demanded Gorbachev's restoration to power (Mitterrand, 1991).

The French leadership demonstrated interest in preserving the USSR until the very end: 'I am thinking absolutely soberly: it is in France's interest to have a centralised state in Eastern Europe... France will not support centrifugal forces. And I think all the old European countries with centuries of history, ancient traditions, and deep European experience are in the same situation. I mean England, France, Spain, Portugal...' (President François Mitterrand, 30 October 1991) (Navumchyk, 2013, pp. 427—428). Finally, Mitterrand's words at one of his meetings with Gorbachev, cited by the latter's former press secretary, were: 'You can be certain: France will never, under any circumstances, support the disintegration of the Soviet Union' (Grachev, 1994).

As noted above, one reason for the West's distrust of the sovereignty of the new states was doubt in their ability to maintain peace, stability, and security within the new regional configuration. Western observers saw that some representatives of the new elites were making claims about redrawing borders, which could lead to military clashes. The West supported the principle of the 'inviolability of borders,' adherence to which had preserved peace in Europe throughout the postwar period.

One illustration of this perspective is the article 'Belarus — an Invention of Soviet Power' published in the influential French newspaper *Le Figaro* on 28 August 1991, written by French Sovietologist Hélène Carrère d'Encausse. The author, who had written numerous scholarly works on the Soviet Union, argued that unlike Ukraine, the '20-million' Belarus did not possess clearly defined national characteristics, and that its language had been artificially created in the 1920s by Soviet authorities based on local dialects. Professor Carrère d'Encausse noted that in seeking independence, Belarus was making territorial claims toward its nearest neighbors. According to her, these claims stirred passions and could lead to armed conflict (Carre-

re D'Encausse, 1991, p. 5). Ironically, the arguments made by this renowned specialist on Russia provided rhetorical ammunition for future proponents of the 'Russkiy Mir'.

Even after 1991, Western politicians and experts continued to see Belarus as lacking a stable nationhood capable of pursuing an independent policy from Russia. Symbolically, one of the most widely cited English-language scholarly works on Belarus in the West, published by Professor David Marples in 1999, was titled *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Marples, 1999).

International recognition of independent Belarus

In October 1991, commenting on the United Kingdom's intentions regarding the development of partnerships with Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd stated that his country did not plan to recognise the independence of former Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic states (Kamyshau, 2005). However, Gorbachev's resignation and the peaceful transfer of power in the Kremlin to Russian President Boris Yeltsin compelled Western countries to acknowledge the changed political situation in the post-Soviet space and to pursue rapid recognition of the new states.

During the first two years or so, Belarus achieved full international recognition.* Between late 1991 and 1994, 129 countries recognised Belarus, 102 of which established diplomatic relations with official Minsk.** These relations were primarily formalised through the

* International (or international-legal) recognition — a unilateral act by a state through which the emergence of a new subject of international law is legally acknowledged, with the aim of subsequently establishing diplomatic or other official relations with it.

** Establishment of diplomatic relations — an agreement between two sovereign states, as well as other subjects of international public law, to maintain official relations with each other in accordance with legal norms and the practice of international relations.

signing of relevant agreements or protocols during visits by foreign ministers or by Belarusian foreign minister trips abroad. In some cases, diplomatic relations were established via the exchange of diplomatic notes.

Among the first countries to recognise Belarus even before Gorbachev's resignation were Turkey (16 December 1991), Sweden (19 December 1991), Mongolia (20 December 1991), and Bulgaria (23 December 1991). On 27 December 1991, the United States recognised Belarusian sovereignty. By the end of 1991, a total of 54 countries had recognised Belarus, two of which — the United States and Ukraine — had established diplomatic relations with it.

On 23 December 1991, during a meeting in The Hague, the leaders of 12 European Community member states collectively decided to recognise the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics. Following the joint statement in The Hague, the United Kingdom was compelled to abandon its delay in recognising the new states. On 27 January 1992, in a letter from Prime Minister John Major to the Speaker of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus, Stanislau Shushkevich, the UK expressed its interest in establishing diplomatic relations. Recognition of Belarus by Western European countries was virtually completed by February 1992, with the exceptions of Luxembourg (9 July 1992), the Vatican (11 November 1992), and Portugal (7 December 1992) (Kamyshau, 2005).

China established diplomatic relations with Belarus on 20 January 1992 and soon opened its embassy in Minsk. On 25 June 1992, diplomatic relations were established between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation. Shortly thereafter, the Russian embassy was opened in Minsk, and in 1993 the Embassy of Belarus was created in Moscow on the basis of the former Permanent Representation of the BSSR to the Council of Ministers of the USSR.

The opening of diplomatic missions in other countries and at international organisations is an important attribute of an independent state, as is the presence of foreign embassies and missions within the country itself. Establishing foreign diplomatic missions for Belarus

was somewhat easier than for other new states, since the status of a founding member of the UN, which the BSSR obtained alongside the USSR and Ukraine in 1945, gave it the right, even within the USSR, to maintain a national representation in New York from 1958, a mission to the European Office of the UN in Geneva and to UNESCO in Paris from 1962, and a mission to international organisations in Vienna from 1982. The BSSR's Ministry of Foreign Affairs also had experienced diplomatic personnel who coordinated and organised the participation of Belarusians in the work of UN institutions.

Additionally, during the BSSR period, Minsk hosted the General Consulate of the GDR (since 1972), the General Consulate of the PRL in Minsk (since 1972), and the Trade Representation of Bulgaria (since 1988), which further contributed to the accumulation of international experience.

By 1994, Belarusian foreign missions were functioning in 22 countries, and their network was gradually expanding (Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015).

International and diplomatic recognition of Belarus was generally carried out as part of a package with other post-Soviet republics. A notable exception was the specific formula for the restoration of Belarusian-German diplomatic relations.

Restoration of diplomatic relations between Belarus and Germany

The agreement on the restoration of diplomatic relations between Belarus and Germany, which had been severed in 1923, was signed on March 13, 1992, during a visit to Belarus by the Vice Chancellor and Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany, Hans-Dietrich Genscher. Germany, being the largest Western European country in terms of economic potential and a driving force of European integration, played a key role in this process. This achievement was largely due to

the position of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and personally to Minister Krauchanka — a historian by training — who prepared the necessary justification. This justification was based on events from the diplomatic history of the first quarter of the 20th century.

It is known that on April 16, 1922, in Rapallo (Italy), the RSFSR and Germany signed a treaty restoring diplomatic relations between them and providing for the development of relations in various fields. On November 5, 1922, a new agreement was signed in Berlin extending the provisions of the Rapallo Agreement to the allied RSFSR republics. The treaty on behalf of the BSSR was signed by the plenipotentiary representative of the RSFSR in Germany, M. Krestinsky. On the same day, the Reich Chancellor C.-J. Wirth, by special note, declared Germany's de jure recognition of six Soviet republics, including the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), and its consent to establish diplomatic and consular relations with them.

On December 30, 1922, the Soviet republics concluded the Treaty on the Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, according to which foreign policy fell under the jurisdiction of the union-level authorities. The government of the Belarusian SSR, like the governments of other Soviet republics, informed foreign representatives by note on July 21, 1923, that the conduct of all international relations and the implementation of all international agreements had been transferred to the government of the USSR.

Regulation of Belarus' state borders

One of the most important directions of the new state's international activity was the delimitation and demarcation of its state borders. The main work in this area took place during the first years of independence. However, given the complexity of the legal and technical procedures, the process was prolonged and was only completed in the second decade of Belarus' statehood.

The regulation of borders is a necessary foundation for long-term, mutually beneficial relations with neighboring states. It is well known that the question of 'one's own borders' remains the most acute and sensitive issue for nation-states (Akudovich, 2007, p. 25). In the case of Belarus, the borders established after World War II with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia — with a total length exceeding 1,250 kilometers — as well as with Russia and Ukraine, were not contested by any country (Lindner, 2006, p. 393).

The organisation and protection of the new state borders became the responsibility of the Main Directorate of Border Troops under the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, established in January 1992. At that time, Belarus inherited from the USSR two border detachments on the Polish border in Brest and Hrodna, 29 border outposts, and 16 border crossing points. In September 1992, the Smarhon' and Polatsk border detachments were created to guard Belarus' borders with Lithuania and Latvia. In November 1997, the Lida, Homiel, and Pinsk border detachments were added to protect the borders with Ukraine (Khomich, 2011, pp. 373–374).

The process of strengthening the state border was accompanied by its clarification and the legal consolidation of the results of agreements.

The mutual recognition of the Belarus-Poland border was relatively straightforward, if one disregards the 1990 discussions. In June 1992, Belarus and Poland confirmed the inviolability of the border in the form it had taken following the end of World War II (Znieshniaya palityka Bielarusi, 2004, p. 73).

The process of determining borders with the states that had been part of the USSR until 1991 was more complex. Only on 11 June 1993 did the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus, by its decision, grant the administrative boundaries with the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Latvia the status of state borders (Khomich, 2011, p. 374).

Delimitation and demarcation of the state border between Belarus and Lithuania. Official negotiations on the delimitation of the

border between Belarus and Lithuania (678.9 km) began on 3 January 1992. One of the disputes concerned the state ownership of the Haducishky (Lithuanian: Gadučiškės) railway station in the Pastavy District, which was partly on Belarusian territory but had been transferred to the Lithuanian railway during the Soviet period. The Belarusian side proposed that Lithuania purchase the station, but this offer was rejected. Only in the second half of 1994 was the issue resolved through a compromise: the border was agreed to run between the two tracks of the station. In February 1995, the delimitation of the Belarus—Lithuania border was completed, and on 6 February 1995, the Treaty on the Border between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Lithuania was signed in Vilnius (Republic of Belarus, 1996).

At the same time, a Protocol was signed on plotting the state border line between Belarus and Lithuania on the delimitation maps. In July 1996, the process of demarcation of the Belarus—Lithuania border began, carried out on a parity basis. The first border marker on the Belarus—Lithuania border was officially installed on 12 June 1997 near the 'Benyakoni' border crossing. The last, 1,957th, border marker was installed on 10 March 2006 near Lake Giluta in the Braslau District of the Vitsiebsk Region. The demarcation process was fully completed on 19 June 2008, when the final demarcation documents were exchanged in Vilnius.

As with delimitation, the demarcation process was conducted in a constructive spirit. Local disputes were resolved through compromise. One example is recounted by Aliaksandr Tsikhamirau, who describes the case of the residents of the village of Strėžiūnai, who lived on the Lithuanian side of the border but collected water in the neighboring village of Beliuntsy in the Voranava District of Belarus. To prevent systematic, though unintentional, violations of the border regime, the Lithuanian authorities agreed to relocate these residents, purchasing their land (Tsikhamirau, 2017, pp. 71—72).

A more significant obstacle was the lack of funding for demarcation work. This problem was alleviated through financial assistance from the EU.

Delimitation and demarcation of the Belarus–Latvia border. This process was facilitated by the fact that the border had already been thoroughly defined in the early 1920s (at that time, the Latvian government involved French specialists to work on defining the border between Latvia and the RSFSR, who marked the line in accordance with international standards).

The documents from 1921–1923 were used as the basis for determining the state border line between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Latvia on the section from the junction of the borders of Latvia, Belarus, and Russia to the mouth of the Rabezh (Robež) River into the Western Dzvina. On the section from the mouth of the Rositsa River into the Western Dzvina to the junction of the borders of Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia, the parties used as a basis the demarcation documents between Latvia and Poland, compiled in 1933–1935 (Khomich, 2011, p. 381).

On 21 February 1994, Belarus and Latvia signed the Treaty on the Belarus–Latvia State Border. Article 1 of the treaty stated that 'the state border line between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Latvia runs along the administrative boundary between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Latvia, which coincides with the Latvian state border on the section (as of 16 June 1940).'

In the same year, the demarcation of the border began, which continued until 3 October 2006, when near the settlement of Karasina in the Braslau District of the Vitsiebsk Region, the last, 417th border marker was ceremonially installed, marking the completion of the physical fixation of the Belarus–Latvia border on the ground. On 18 February 2009, representatives of Belarus and Latvia exchanged the final demarcation documents. The process of determining the Belarus–Latvia border was completed with the signing in Minsk on 28 January 2010 of the agreement on the determination of the junction point of the state border of the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Latvia, and the Russian Federation. As in the case of Lithuania, significant financial assistance for the demarcation work was provided to Belarus and Latvia by the European Union (Tsikhamirau, 2017, pp. 72–73).

Belarus—Ukraine Border. The border between Belarus and Ukraine, spanning 1,084.2 km, presented the most complex delimitation and demarcation challenges. By 1992, customs posts had already been established along the border, and border control measures were gradually being introduced. However, serious disagreements between the two sides delayed the signing of a formal state border treaty. The Treaty on the State Border between the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine was eventually signed on 12 May 1997 in Kyiv during the visit of the Belarusian head of state.

Even after signing the treaty, demarcation work did not begin immediately, as the National Assembly of Belarus refused to ratify the agreement, citing the need to resolve Ukraine's outstanding debt to Belarus. In June 1999, Belarus and Ukraine implemented an intergovernmental agreement regulating border crossing for residents of border areas. Under this agreement, 31 simplified border crossing points were added to the existing 17 international and intergovernmental checkpoints (Republic of Belarus, 1999, p. 122).

On 2 April 2010, the Belarusian parliament finally ratified the border treaty with Ukraine. Nevertheless, later that year Belarus again suspended the demarcation process. Besides the issue of Ukraine's debt, the suspension was also due to the lack of financial resources needed to complete the demarcation work. Importantly, the delay in demarcating the Belarus—Ukraine border was not related to any territorial disputes between the two states (Yurchak, 2012, pp. 143—145). The demarcation procedure was ultimately completed in 2013, giving Belarus a legally established border with Ukraine.

Belarus—Russia border. As noted above, in June 1993 the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus granted the former administrative border of the BSSR with four former Soviet republics the status of a state border. This step officially confirmed Belarus's unwillingness to seek revisions to the former Soviet-era borders. Although customs checkpoints appeared along the Belarus—Russia border, which extends 1,283 km, by the end of 1991, full-fledged border control was not introduced. On 15 April 1994, Belarus and Russia signed an agreement

on cooperation in border matters, committing to mutually ensure the protection of their external borders (Moiseev, 1997, p. 101).

Currently, the Belarus—Russia border is regulated by the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation, signed on 21 February 1995 in Moscow. The treaty stipulates that, under conditions of an open border between Russia and Belarus, both parties will take appropriate measures on their borders with third countries to ensure each other's security and will cooperate on border-related issues based on separate agreements (Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995).

Despite these optimistic declarations, the absence of specific arrangements for the Belarus—Russia border raises serious concerns, given the Russian leadership's attitude toward the sovereignty of neighboring states. Open sources indicate that this issue also concerns Belarusian officials. For example, on 20 August 2020, Belarusian Prime Minister Raman Halouchanka stated in an interview that technically equipping the Belarus—Russia border was estimated to cost the national budget 2.5—3 billion Belarusian rubles and would take 3—5 years to complete (Euroradio, 2020). Under these circumstances, there is no basis to consider the issue of the Belarus—Russia border as fully resolved.

Thus, over the years of independence, the Republic of Belarus has been able to preserve the borders inherited from the BSSR and legally consolidate them. The absence of territorial disputes with neighboring states, combined with Belarus's commitment to international law in defining its borders, has objectively contributed to strengthening Belarusian statehood and maintaining stability in the East European region.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that the period from December 1991, when Belarus became an independent state both de jure and de facto, until July 1994, when a political populist came to power through democrat-

ic means, was one of the most remarkable not only in modern Belarusian history but in the entire history of the country. One of the main achievements of this brief period was the broad international recognition of the Republic of Belarus and the establishment of diplomatic relations with dozens of countries worldwide. It was also during this time that the process of delimitation and demarcation of the state's borders began and gradually advanced. These achievements have largely withstood the test of decades and remain an important guarantee of Belarus's state independence to this day.

However, these accomplishments do not automatically guarantee the irreversibility of Belarus's sovereignty. For this, it is critically important that the country is governed by a government that defends the nation's interests rather than merely serving the needs of a dictator and his inner circle. This represents the most serious challenge for an Eastern European state.

To a lesser extent, Belarus has managed to preserve other vital achievements of its early years of independence. Upon coming to power, the authoritarian leadership, with the support of its followers, abandoned efforts to strengthen the national-cultural and democratic foundations of the new state. The use of the Belarusian language declined, objective research on national history was gradually replaced by imperial Russian narratives, and active public discussions on pressing domestic and foreign policy issues disappeared from the public sphere.

Significant changes also affected the priorities of both domestic and foreign policy. Amid the broad division of opinion among democratic forces, led by parliamentary speaker Stanislau Shushkevich, Belarus failed to defend the course toward state neutrality enshrined in the Declaration of Sovereignty of Belarus (27 July 1990). Official Minsk, although joining the CIS Collective Security Treaty with considerable delay — a treaty in which Russia played the leading role — effectively set the country on a path of military-political dependence on the Kremlin, reducing its room for strategic maneuver (Shadurski, 2024).

The authoritarian regime pursued a return to Soviet-era approaches and practices, including in foreign policy. State propaganda seeks to form a negative image of the United States and the European Union among the population, portraying them as adversaries of Belarus's national interests. This policy hinders the country's development, increases its dependence on Moscow's politics, and creates real threats to Belarus's independence. Under such circumstances, the question of the irreversibility of Belarus's state sovereignty remains open.

Abstract

The article argues that the Republic of Belarus gained state sovereignty in 1991 through a combination of favorable external circumstances and the successful efforts of national democratic forces. Contrary to the claims of pro-Soviet and pro-Russian authoritarian propaganda — that the collapse of the USSR resulted from hostile Western plans led by the United States — democratic countries in fact supported Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and withheld recognition of the independence aspirations of the Union Republics until his resignation (with the exception of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia). However, immediately after the peaceful dissolution of the USSR, the international community rapidly recognised the newly independent post-Soviet states, including Belarus.

The article highlights that one of the young Belarusian state's key historical achievements was the recognition of its borders by the international community, as well as the delimitation and demarcation of borders with four neighbors: Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Ukraine. The issue of the Belarusian-Russian border was also settled.

The accomplishments of the first years of independence became the most important and lasting guarantee of state sovereignty. This directly refutes the Belarusian authoritarian government's thesis that genuine independence was achieved only with the first presidential elections in the summer of 1994.

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Henadz Korshunau

Independence and Sovereignty of Belarus in the Eyes of Belarusian Society: Dynamics of Opinions According to Sociological Research

The public consciousness of every community contains inconsistencies, contradictions, and paradoxes. But perhaps only in the Belarusian case can such a paradoxical question arise: how do Belarusians view the sovereignty of their own country? At first glance, this question seems not only paradoxical but even meaningless, since the sovereignty and independence of a country are unconditional values for any state.

However, in our case there are indeed several nuances that make this question both meaningful and relevant. First, sovereignty was not only acquired simply as a result of the collapse of the USSR, but also shaped by the peculiar attitude toward state independence on the part of the current authorities.* Second, the Republic of Belarus is most closely integrated with the Russian Federation, the institutional embodiment of which is the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Third, after Russia's support for the Lukashenka regime during the Belarusian Revolution of 2020–2021, and especially after the full-

* The Republic of Belarus is the only country among the former Soviet republics whose official Independence Day is not currently linked to separation from the USSR or the Russian Empire.

scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (including through the territory of Belarus), the expert community has periodically raised the question: 'How much sovereignty is left in Belarus?' (Belsat, 2021; Nasha Niva, 2022).

It seems that most of the 'nuances' related to sovereignty concern, first and foremost, the attitude towards this phenomenon on the part of the Belarusian authorities, rather than the Belarusian people. Meanwhile, 'the only source of state power and the bearer of sovereignty in the Republic of Belarus is the people' (Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, Art. 3). In this article, we will analyse the dynamics of attitudes towards independence and sovereignty specifically from the perspective of Belarusian society. In our analysis, we will take into account not only the issue of sovereignty as such, but also the dynamics of the geopolitical orientations of Belarusian society. This is because, in the context of Eastern Europe, where the neighbour is the aggressive Russian Federation, the geopolitical component directly influences many opinions within society, especially during the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The basis for this text will be data from sociological research conducted over different years, carried out both by state research organisations and by independent bodies.

Attitudes towards sovereignty at the turn of the millennium

Belarusian sovereignty, like that of a number of other former Soviet republics, emerged in 1991, when the Belavezha Accords were signed, under which the USSR, as a geopolitical reality, ceased to exist. At that moment, public opinion regarding the 'suddenly' acquired sovereignty is reflected in the data from the All-Union referendum on the preservation of the USSR, held nine months before the Belavezha Accords. Without delving into the feasibility of conducting political re-

search in the USSR, it should be noted that among the nine Soviet republics, the Belarusian figures were far from the highest: the overall range of support for the preservation of the USSR extended from 97.9% (in the Turkmen SSR) to 70.2% (in the Ukrainian SSR). In the overall ranking, Belarus stood in seventh place out of nine, with 82.7% (Izvestiya, 1991).

The desire to restore the version of sovereignty that had existed before 1991 remained at a high level only for a short time. Already by 1993, only 55.1% of Belarusians wanted the return of the USSR, which was 27.6% lower than in 1991. Meanwhile, the sentiment for the USSR, of course, persisted, and this was sufficient for Aliaksandr Lukashenka to win the first presidential elections in Belarus, as he built his entire rhetoric on the idea of economic integration with Russia. A few years later, in the 1995 referendum, the majority of Belarusians supported economic integration with the Russian Federation (83.3% voted 'for' economic integration at that time) (TSIK, 1995).

As can be seen, in the 1990s integrative rhetoric was built mainly around economic issues, without encroaching on political components. However, even then the young Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka considered options not only for economic, but also for political integration with Russia. This gave rise to projects such as the Customs Union (1995), the Union of Belarus and Russia (1997), the Union State (1999), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (2002), and so on. Since that time, the issue of Belarusian sovereignty has been closely tied to another question — the form, spheres and pace of integration with the Russian Federation.

The integration processes alternately accelerated and slowed down. Yet in one way or another they always concerned the eastern direction and almost never the European one. This state of affairs forced the nationally oriented part of society to view the unipolar dynamics of integration naturally as a threat to Belarusian sovereignty. It should be noted that after the ageing Boris Yeltsin was replaced by the young Vladimir Putin, Lukashenka gradually began to avoid political integration with the Russian Federation: in Belarus's foreign policy a tenden-

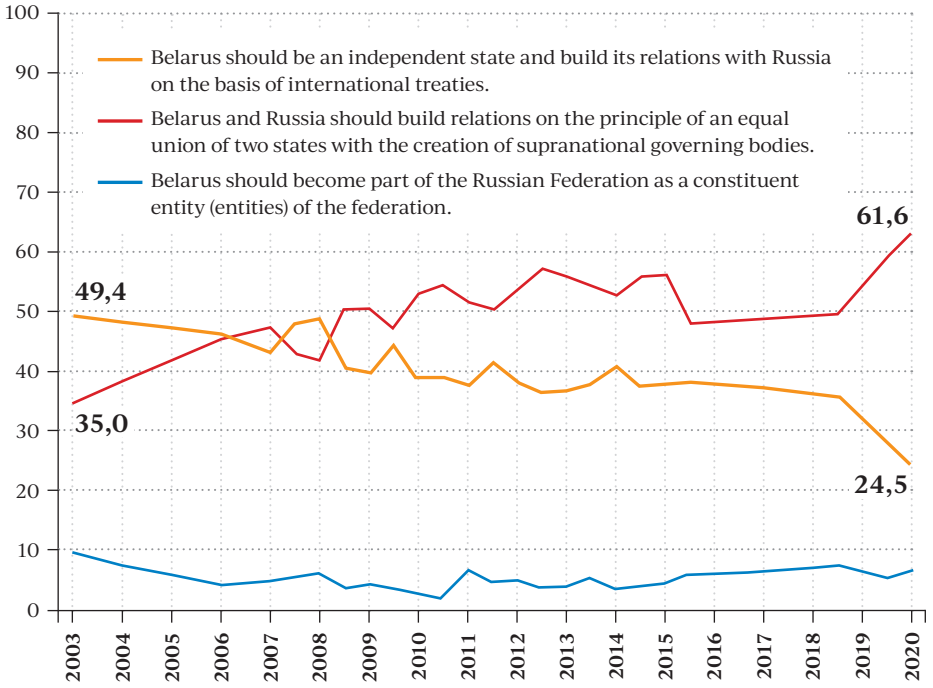
cy began to form towards rejecting the perception of Belarusian-Russian relations as something exclusive, and a demand repeatedly arose and was voiced for strengthening sovereignty through the development of a multi-vector foreign policy (Korshunau, 2023).

We do not have data on the basis of which it would be possible to determine the precise balance between political and economic motivations in the mass consciousness of Belarusians at that time. However, we know that throughout this period, the number of people wishing to restore the USSR was decreasing. As a result, within 15 years after the events in Belavezha Forest, the share of those nostalgic for the USSR fell threefold — to roughly a quarter of Belarus's population. Afterwards, the proportion of those wishing to restore the USSR fluctuated at approximately the same level, at least until 2015, when Independent Institite for Socioeconomic and Political Studies (NISEPI), which had been asking this question in monitoring mode for 22 years, ceased to operate (NISEPI, 2016).

At the same time, the mass consciousness of Belarusians was undergoing a gradual re-evaluation of the status of the Russian Federation: it ceased to be perceived as the only possible foreign policy partner, while assessments of Belarusian—Russian relations increasingly concentrated on trade and economic issues, and less and less on politics. In the 2010s, sociological studies (both by independent and by state organisations) confirmed precisely this characteristic: Belarusians supported economic integration with the Russian Federation, but only in the format that envisaged the preservation of their sovereignty (Artsiomenka and Melyantsou, 2013; Korshunau, 2018; Shraibman, 2019).

The trend towards affirming the value of one's own sovereignty in Belarusian mass consciousness has remained stable since at least the mid-2000s. This is clearly illustrated in Figure 1, which presents the dynamics of answers to the question 'In your opinion, how should relations between Belarus and Russia be built?', asked within the framework of long-term monitoring by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

Figure 1. Dynamics of the distribution of answers to the question 'In your opinion, how should relations between Belarus and Russia be built?' (%, 2003–2020)



Source: Institut sotsiologii NAN Belarusi (2020).

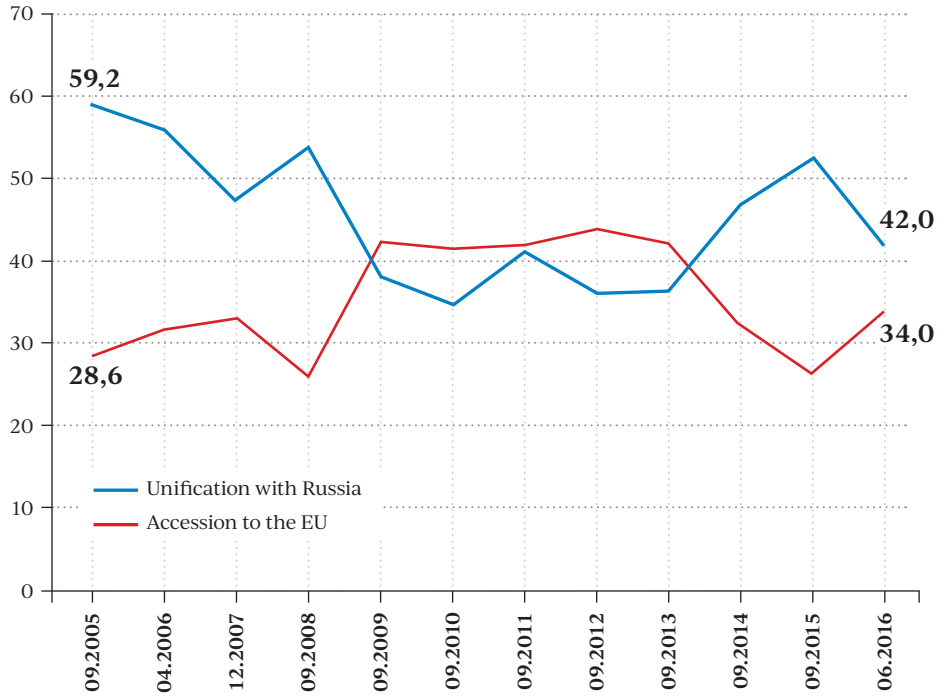
The share of supporters of the 'light' version of political integration with Russia decreased more than twofold from the early 2000s to 2020 — from 49.4% in 2003 to 24.5% in 2020. During the same period, the proportion of those who believed that Belarus should build relations with Russia in the same way as with other countries almost doubled (the share of those wishing to join Russia was consistently marginal).

In other words, there was a gradual and steady shift away from the idea of political integration with Russia in favour of respecting one's own sovereignty.

It is important that, unlike in most post-Soviet countries, in the Belarusian case the aspiration to distance politically from Russia did not automatically mean a 'turn to the West' (Korshunau, 2023). This

is evident from monitoring data collected by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Dynamics of the distribution of answers to the question 'If you had to choose between unification with Russia and joining the European Union, what would you choose?' (%, 2005–2016)



Source: NISEPI (2016).

In 2009, the number of sympathisers with integration into Europe exceeded the number of supporters of unification with Russia (which correlates with the figures of the Institute of Sociology). However, while afterwards the number of supporters of 'full' independence increased, the number of sympathisers with the pro-European vector did not grow. After 2014, it even collapsed and again became lower than those in favour of unification with Russia (Belsat, 2020).

This testifies to a romantic demand for a 'third way' and the assertion of sovereignty through equal distance from the main geopolitical poles – either through a commonwealth approach (a union 'with both

Russia and Europe'), or through total neutrality (remaining outside any unions). According to data, for example, from the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS), at the beginning of the 2010s such a 'third' strategy was close to roughly half of Belarusians (Artsiomenka and Melyantsou, 2013). By the late 2010s, similar figures were shown by nationwide studies conducted both by independent and by state research organisations (Shraibman, 2019; Institut sotsiologii NAN Belarusi, 2020).

Peculiarities of public opinion before and after the 2020 protests

Another problematisation of Belarusian sovereignty took place in 2019. It was connected with the resumption of preparations for roadmaps on further integration between Belarus and Russia. These roadmaps were never signed, but their heated discussion continued throughout 2019. As a result, from December 2018 to December 2019, the share of supporters of a union with Russia decreased from 60.4% to 40.4% — exactly by one third. At the same time, the number of sympathisers with a union with Europe increased from 22.4% to 32% (Belsat, 2020).

Then came 2020: the struggle with the pandemic, a national awakening during the electoral campaign, and unprecedented protests both in scale and duration. However, these developments hardly affected the geopolitical orientations of Belarusians. The reason lay in the conviction that if they had managed to cope with the threat of COVID-19, they could also succeed in affirming their own political subjectivity. This was an expression of the same romantic logic — people's sovereignty, the independence of the country, and remaining outside any integrationist formations.

This is confirmed by data from the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus from June 2020: a relative majority of respondents, when asked whom Belarus should orient itself towards in foreign policy, replied, 'No one — we should pursue an in-

dependent policy' (at that time 23.9% favoured the Russian direction, and 20.2% the European one) (Institut sotsiologii NAN Belarusi, 2020). The same is shown by figures from a November 2020 study of the Belarus Initiative at Chatham House: in response to the question 'In which geopolitical alliance should the Belarusian state best be located?', the options 'In a union with both Russia and the EU simultaneously' and 'Belarus should remain outside geopolitical alliances' together accounted for 62.8% (Chatham House, 2020).

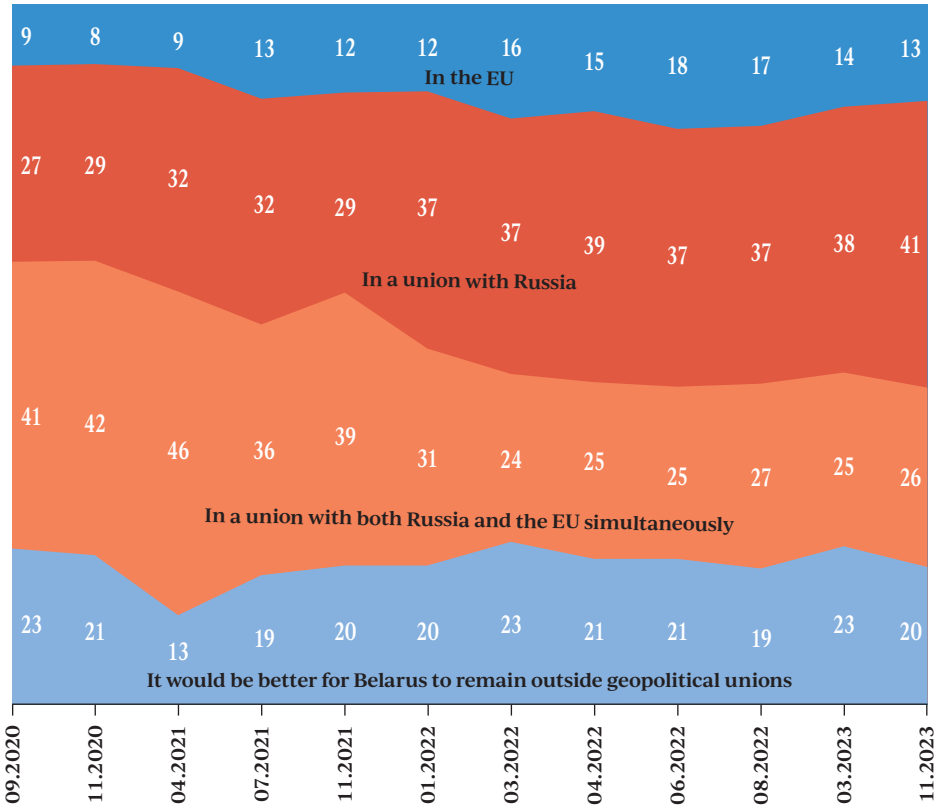
At the end of 2020, the situation changed, when it became clear that the protesters would not overthrow the Lukashenka regime on their own and that allies had to be sought. At this time, the number of supporters of a union with Russia rose to around half of respondents, while the number of supporters of a union with Europe grew to one-third of Belarusian society (according to answers to the question 'In which union would it be better for Belarusians to live?'). Moreover, when the question was asked in a more abstract form — 'How do you evaluate the following unions?' — the share of sympathisers with a union with Russia rose to 70.9%, and with the European Union to 62.1%. These results were obtained by the Centre for Eastern Studies (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, OSW), which conducted a survey at around the same time (OSW, 2021).

Returning to the data of the Belarus Initiative at Chatham House, its dynamics from 2020 to 2023 demonstrate that the main trend throughout almost all of 2020 was the dominance of orientations towards independence and neutrality — together these positions accounted for over 60%, a level higher than that recorded in 2010–2013 (see Figure 3). Subsequently, some fluctuations in geopolitical preferences took place, but they did not significantly affect the traditional popularity of the neutral position. By early 2022, after the build-up of expectations of military action, pro-Russian sentiments slightly increased, most likely due to disbelief in Europe's ability to resist Russia in any way (as in 2014). At the beginning of 2022, we see the following balance: popularity of the European Union — 12% (+3% after the events of 2020–2021), the share of sympathisers with a union with

Russia — 37% (+10% compared to September 2020), and supporters of neutral positions — 51%.

And here we arrive at the current historical stage — the Russian—Ukrainian war. Paradoxically, even this event did not significantly affect preferences in geopolitical choice. The only clear trend, which has been visible since the end of 2020 and continues up to the present, is the decline in the popularity of neutral geopolitical positions. Correspondingly, this has led to a growth in the number of supporters both of a union with Russia and of a union with Europe — though more of a union with Russia than with Europe.

Figure 3. Dynamics of the distribution of answers to the question 'In which geopolitical alliance should the Belarusian state best be located?' (%, 2020—2023)



Source: Chatham House (2023).

It should be recalled that Belarusians do not perceive the union with Russia as a military-political formation. This was the case in the 2000s, and it remains so today. Confirmation of this can be seen in the unwillingness of the vast majority of Belarusian society to participate in the Russian—Ukrainian war, in the lack of support for the deployment of Russian bases and Russian nuclear weapons (Ibid). Relations with Russia are perceived rather in terms of economic cooperation, a free trade zone or a single economic space (both formats of integration receive 34%). Only 10—15% see it as a union with common political and military structures, and fewer than 5% speak of a possible incorporation of Belarus into Russia (Chatham House, 2022b).

An important point: when people are asked not for a declarative geopolitical choice but for something more concrete and related to everyday life, the choice is not necessarily in favour of Russia but of the European Union. For example, when asked where they would prefer to work, 38% choose the West, and 33% Russia. Overall, almost two-thirds believe that Belarus should expand economic, political and cultural ties with the West (Chatham House, 2022a). Interestingly, the need to stabilise relations with Western countries is expressed not only by supporters of democratic values but also by sympathisers of the Lukashenka regime (Chatham House, 2025).

The desire to normalise Belarus's relations with Western countries should be viewed as an instrument of counterbalancing Russian influence. For, as shown by one of the most recent studies directly addressing questions of Belarusian sovereignty and independence, Belarusians' attitudes towards their country's sovereignty have in fact not changed since at least 2009 (Chatham House, 2024, p. 41). According to this research, 5% opposed the independence of Belarus, 11% opposed neutrality in foreign policy, and 9% opposed the idea of friendship with both Russia and Ukraine.

Belarusians value their sovereignty, want to be independent, and show little support for the idea of joining any particular (geo)political alliance.

Motivations of geopolitical choice

In the final part of the article, we will examine how people explain the peculiarities of their geopolitical choices. These are instructive examples of how individuals understand the sovereignty of their country, its prospects, and the threats it faces. We will rely on data from a Chatham House survey conducted online between 4 and 21 August among urban residents of Belarus (sample size: 793 respondents). Our analysis focuses on answers to open-ended questions — that is, on what people wrote themselves, without being prompted with predefined response options (in the text, respondents' answers are highlighted in italics and are presented in the language chosen by the respondents themselves).

Regarding the pro-Russian orientation: a certain group of Russia's supporters do not perceive it as a matter of choice, since there can be no choice when everything is predetermined. Such people believe that being together with Russia is Belarus's destiny, predetermined by common Slavic origins, by history itself, or by geography. The mythologeme of 'brotherly nations' continues to function.

— *Historically, we have always been together. Europe is alien to us.*

The shortcomings and ideological bias of Belarusian historical policy, the particularities of school education, and anti-Belarusian propaganda contribute to a situation where, in some minds, there is genuinely no distinction between Belarusians and Russians. They are merged into something single — one Russian people, one Slavic nation. This 'Slavdom' is often perceived less as a linguistic or ethnic community and more as a political formation, the essence of which lies in opposing colonial or capitalist aggression from the West (and more from the United States than from Europe itself).

— *Slavs — Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians — must stick together. The Yankees are delighted, they have achieved their goal: they have set the Slavs against each other...*

Opposition to the West does not always appear as something purely aggressive. There is a spectrum of views here — ranging from Belarus's supposed invisibility and irrelevance to the West, to perceptions of a genuine military-territorial threat from Western countries. To this are occasionally added feelings of resentment towards Western states (for political pressure, economic sanctions, or even border fences), distrust of the EU, and disappointment in it.

— The EU has discredited itself too much. It does not need us.

Within pro-Russian logic, Belarus appears as a small country on which nothing depends. Its very existence is perceived as owed exclusively to Russia. This is precisely what can be described as a 'younger brother complex' or a form of 'learned helplessness.'

— It is no secret that if the Russian Federation ceases to exist, Belarus will be carved up by the Poles and Lithuanians.

At the same time, some people place their hopes on genuinely equal foreign policy relations with Russia. The coexistence of declarations of Belarus's secondary role with the perceived necessity of confronting the West organically lends relations with Russia such a direction. This is why many emphasise Russia's strength, its power, and its 'enormous' size.

— Russia has more opportunities in everything. It is the largest state.

The necessity of an alliance with Russia is also explained by references to the objective ties that exist between Belarus and Russia. Here, the economy dominates: cheap resources, production chains, a vast market, and so forth.

— Simple pragmatism: gas, oil, and the possibility of selling Belarusian products in Russia.

It is important to note that a certain regret over the collapse of the Soviet Union has not disappeared. This sentiment has economic, political, and psychological dimensions. It is not merely a passive form of ressentiment; at times it takes shape as a hope for the Union's restoration.

— We are one; we were forcibly separated, our families broken apart. If the USSR had not collapsed, there would be no war today!

In terms of the relative prevalence of these motives, the first and by far the most common is the appeal to historical Slavic unity or brotherhood, primarily framed as necessary for resisting the West. In second place comes the image of Russia as a great power, rich in resources and always ready to protect its 'friends.' Third are economic considerations, followed by Soviet ressentiment.

When speaking about the pro-European choice, there are also several lines of argumentation. As in the case of the pro-Russian vector, some Belarusians explain the necessity of choosing Europe through historical and civilisational factors. People refer to a common history with Europe, to a greater axiological and mental closeness of Belarusians to Europeans, and sometimes even to the genetic similarity between Belarusians and Europeans (Belsat, 2021; Nasha Niva, 2022).

When comparing specifically the historical references used by the adepts of Russia and the supporters of Europe, a noticeable difference emerges: the former rely more on the last centuries, when Belarus was part of the USSR or the Russian Empire, whereas the latter reach much deeper into history — back to the times of the Polish—Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Belsat, 2021).

— History itself testifies to this. Belarus is a European country, and in some connection with Russia we have been for less than 200 years.

At the same time, for some Belarusians the events of the most recent history of Belarus — 2020 and 2022 — turn out to be particularly significant (Nasha Niva, 2022).

— Recently, there has been a sharp divergence in the development and views of Belarusians and Russians. We are now much closer to Lithuania than to Russia.

Another strand, also parallel to one of the pro-Russian arguments, is based on the thesis of the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. Only here Belarusians choose not Russia but Europe. The European Union is considered the natural antipode of Rus-

sia, and not only, or not so much, in military or political terms, but rather as an economic and again a civilisational counterpart (Belsat, 2021). Here, the pro-European choice may appear precisely as the choice of an opposite path to Russia.

– Russia is an aggressor that has revived Russian, imperial fascism. With such an 'ally' there will be ruin. Accordingly, one must choose the opposite course.

Against this background, it becomes clear that the choice of Europe often appears as a condition for Belarus preserving the status of a sovereign state, which within a union with Russia is considered impossible.

– I used to think that neutrality was better, but now I believe that remaining neutral is dangerous. A union with Russia leads to the complete loss of sovereignty and to the denial of Belarusians as a nation.

When looking at the numerical representation of each block of argumentation, the main reason here is the affirmation of the priority of a set of values referred to as European or democratic. This set includes democracy as such (including anti-totalitarianism and rotation of power), freedom and independence (both personal and national), as well as human rights, the rule of law, and humanism as the idea of the human being as the highest value.

– Belarus must become a free and democratic country. A union with the EU is a good option for us after a change of power.

Closely tied to the choice of values are the possibilities and prospects for development – of the individual, communities, society, and the state. Moreover, development is understood very broadly – as economic, civic, political, and technological.

– Economically we will always be closely tied to Russia. But if the question is where it is better, then unequivocally with the EU. With the EU, one can develop in a better direction, and with Russia, can one really develop?

Economic reasons also play their role in the choice of the pro-European path of development. Only in the case of Europe, when people

speak of economic benefits, they emphasise not resources and dependence on them, but rather the interconnectedness of values, a high standard of living, and the opportunities to grow and earn. This is, rather, a conversation about the choice of a particular way of life and of such a state that can guarantee it.

Clearly, there are also largely practical considerations focused on everyday benefits and better living conditions. Yet such mercantile thoughts are not widespread. Even within the framework of economic factors, they make up significantly less than half of all responses. And economic factors themselves are not in first place in terms of popularity.

When speaking of the relative weight of the highlighted blocks, in first place by a large margin comes the choice of the complex of democratic values. Second place is the rejection of Russia, with Europe appearing as its antipode. Third place goes to the prospects and opportunities for development that Europe offers. Next come economic factors, while in last place are considerations of a historical nature.

When looking at the motivations behind rejecting a geopolitical choice, there is a small difference between those who refuse to choose 'actively' (i.e. in favour of a union with both Russia and the EU) and those who do so 'passively' (i.e. by remaining outside any alliances).

The motivation of 'friendship with all' is fairly transparent — its main basis lies in economic pragmatism linked to geographical location.

— Belarus is located in the centre of Europe and surrounded by a large number of countries; to create good flows of goods and improve the economic situation it is better to ally with all the states surrounding Belarus.

Such pragmatic views are held by more than 40% of the supporters of 'active' neutrality. More than a quarter, meanwhile, place emphasis on issues of security. It should be noted that these issues have two distinct components:

1) a general commitment to peace and security throughout the world;
2) an ambivalent attitude towards Russia.

In the first case, we see rather simple arguments such as: 'Peace is good.' When it comes to relations with Russia, however, 'it's complicated,' because:

— Being in a union with the EU, there is a likelihood of an attack by Russia.

Thus, the choice of neutrality for reasons of security is by no means an abstract issue, but a very concrete one, in which the Russian Federation is assessed at the very least ambivalently.

As for 'passive' neutrality or the wish to remain outside any alliance, here only one factor largely operates — considerations about the security of Belarus. Admittedly, the 'security of neutrality' has two directions. The first strongly resembles the same 'fear of Russia' that we saw above.

— Belarus will be better off (neutrality), since in the case of Belarus joining one of the geopolitical unions, the alternative geopolitical union will consider it a provocation.

The second direction (chosen more often than the first one) expresses a hope in neutrality as a guarantee of security and of the preservation of the country's full sovereignty. In the view of some respondents, it is impossible to preserve true sovereignty within any kind of union. As a sort of ideal of geopolitical self-determination, such respondents usually take Switzerland.

— Belarus is a small country. Any alliances, whether with such a large country as the Russian Federation, or with such a large formation as the EU, will inevitably force the Republic of Belarus to adopt a position that is clearly disadvantageous for the country. It is better to remain neutral, as, for example, Switzerland does.

Let us add that the pragmatic factors which occupied first place in the justifications of 'active' neutrality are almost irrelevant for 'passive' neutrality — fewer than 10% mentioned them.

Thus, for a quarter of those who choose one or another variant of neutrality, this is largely an intuitive choice, stemming from distrust towards any forms of supranational integration. Clearly, this reflects

both the negative experience of building something in common with Russia and the lack of solid knowledge about the options and formats of a country's existence within the European Union. For another quarter, 'neutrality' is a rational choice of a pragmatic option, based on hypothetical opportunities to use Belarus's geographical location between East and West for economic and political purposes (with cooperation with Russia here seen as more economic than political). And for almost half of the sympathisers of neutrality, security considerations are paramount — complex, contradictory, and multifaceted. Here the desire for full independence of their country is compounded by distrust of Europe and fears regarding Russia (with fears of Russia being stronger).

Instead of a conclusion

Those who say that Belarusians received sovereignty and independence 'suddenly and by chance' are, in a sense, correct. Yes, it was a certain contingency, just as it was in the case of most former Soviet republics. However, this contingency of Belarusian sovereignty in its 1991 version was gradually levelled out; at least since the mid-2000s, the independence and sovereignty of Belarus have been regarded by its society as an indispensable value.

Analyzing attitudes towards sovereignty through the logic of geopolitical preferences reveals that, over the past decades, a demand for neutrality and a desire to remain outside political unions have emerged. Various interstate alliances are perceived mainly as instruments not of military-political but of trade-economic cooperation.

At the same time, in public consciousness exists the view that, under current conditions, full independence is hardly possible — there is a need for both trade partners and military allies. And here, unfortunately, Belarus's spectrum of choice is now very limited. In fact, the western direction (although desired by many) is now regarded as closed — both because of Europe's attitude towards Belarus and be-

cause of the probable dissatisfaction with such an orientation on the part of the Russian Federation. The only 'predestined' option (though unwanted by many) is the eastern one.

Thus, the problematisation or the very question of Belarusian sovereignty today is not a paradox. Today, due to the presence of such a neighbour as the Russian Federation, it remains an open question. But Belarusian society answers it in the following way: '*The sovereignty and independence of Belarus are values that must be preserved.*'

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Piotr Rudkouski

Sovereignty in a One-Man State: the Belarusian Paradox

Introduction

At its core, sovereignty means the exercise of supreme and independent authority over a given territory and its population (cf. Nash, 2023). The crucial question, however, is: what binds the population together to be governed sovereignly? Two main possibilities arise. One is the person of the ruler; the other rests on broader, cultural or axiological factors such as a shared identity (cf. Anderson 1983; Gellner, 1983) or common interests and security (Buzan, 1991; Tilly, 1990).

For nearly three decades, beginning with the 1996 constitutional referendum, Belarus has functioned as a one-man country. This is not mere rhetoric: Lukashenka's regime ranks among the most personalistic in the world, with state power concentrated in his hands to an extraordinary degree. According to V-Dem data, in 2024 Belarus ranked second globally — just behind Nicaragua — in the personalisation of power, scoring 99 out of 100 points. Notably, Belarus has even symbolically surpassed North Korea, long a benchmark of personalist rule, which has consistently scored 98.8 (V-Dem, 2025b).

The aim of this paper is to investigate how sovereignty can persist — or, conversely, falter — when it is tied to the will of a single autocratic ruler, as is the case in Belarus. However morally repellent personalistic autocracy may be — particularly with its nasty features such

as brutal repression and complicity in Russia's aggression against Ukraine — we approach it here analytically. It is treated as a *factor* of sovereignty, a specific set of conditions that shape a given political reality. By examining these conditions with precision, we can then turn to the question of how this situation might be overcome and what would be required to do so.

The paper is structured into three parts. It begins with a brief overview of politicians' and experts' opinions on Belarusian sovereignty, providing the background for our main investigation. The core analysis follows in the next section, where we examine international indices across three key parameters, complemented by comparisons with selected countries. The third part offers an explanation of the findings from section two, focusing on the relationship between sovereignty and personalistic autocracy in the Belarusian case. Finally, we present possible alternatives to person-bound sovereignty and outline the rationale behind them.

A brief review of politicians' and experts' opinions

From the very beginning of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's rule in 1994, voices have argued that Belarus had 'lost' or was 'on the verge of losing' its independence. These claims grew much louder after the events of 2020 and, in particular, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Just weeks after the invasion, Pavel Latushka, deputy head of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus and head of the National Anti-Crisis Management (NAU), openly advocated for Belarus to be recognised as a 'territory occupied by Russia'. According to his statements and the NAU's official position, Belarus is under temporary occupation by the Russian Federation, with Lukashenka's regime functioning as a puppet government (NAU, 2022).

Perhaps the most decisive formulation came from outside. Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda has repeatedly asserted that Belarus is 'no longer independent' but rather a 'province of Russia'. Speaking at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Vilnius in May 2022, Nausėda declared that 'de facto, Belarus has become part of Russia' (Moskalkov, 2022). He reiterated this position ahead of the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July 2023 (Yeryoma, 2023).

Expert assessments, while more measured in tone, point in a similar direction. David Kramer, managing director for Global Policy at the George W. Bush Institute, argued that Lukashenka had already traded away much of Belarus's independence and sovereignty to Putin in exchange for Moscow's political backing (Edelman, Kobets, and Kramer, 2023). Likewise, Anna Maria Dyner of the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) noted in July 2022 that 'to a large extent, Belarus has lost its sovereignty' (Dyner, 2022).

In June 2024, Huterer and Sahm, in *SWP Comment*, observed that Western sanctions and security ties further deepened Belarus's dependence on Russia, eroding sovereignty. Yet — they argue — Lukashenka preserved limited diplomatic space, portraying Belarus as mediator during Russia's invasion, facilitating talks while avoiding direct combat and sustaining engagement in UN and security forums. The key message of the experts' analyses is that Belarus's sovereignty, though gravely weakened, is not beyond repair (Huterer and Sahm, 2024).

Insights from international indices

Now let us turn to what international indices can tell us about Belarus's sovereignty. Unlike the opinions of politicians or individual experts, which often rely on only a few intuitively chosen dimensions, indices are usually built on a much broader foundation — sometimes dozens of parameters. They are also assessed quantitatively by groups of experts working independently. This makes the resulting data not only convenient to use, but also generally more impartial. Internation-

al indices are typically designed with consistency in mind: they must allow for meaningful comparisons across most, if not all, countries in the world. Any serious bias or an overly narrow set of parameters would undermine the entire project by producing internal inconsistencies.

That said, we should keep in mind that human factors — and thus biases — remain present. These indices are not purely statistical measures of hard facts, such as birth or death rates. Instead, they rely on 'soft data', reflecting the judgments of expert panels. Still, thanks to their more systematic methodology, such indices are usually more balanced and less one-sided than isolated opinions.

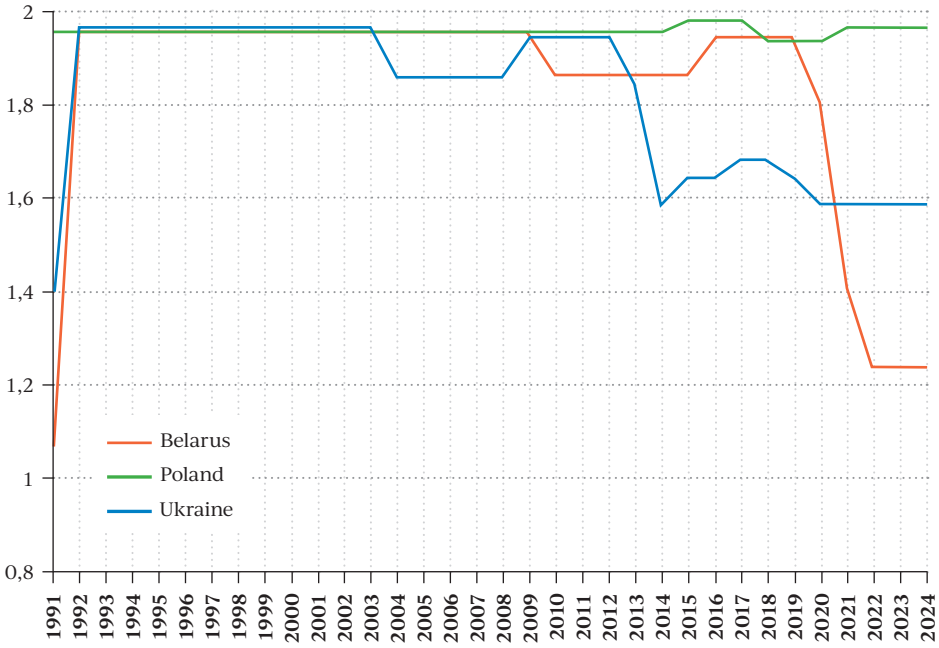
We will analyse three core dimensions of sovereignty: domestic autonomy (V-Dem), state fragility (Fund for Peace, FFP), and stateness (Bertelsmann Transformation Index, BTI). Occasionally, we will also consider some subparameters relevant to the sovereignty issue, such as the monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

Domestic Autonomy Index: a negative trajectory

The V-Dem project measures — among many other things — the level of *domestic autonomy* — that is, the extent to which a state conducts its internal policies independently. The index considers only informal influence exerted by other states. External constraints stemming from membership in international treaties (e.g., NATO), organisations (e.g., the World Trade Organisation), or supranational unions (e.g., the European Union) are not taken into account.

V-Dem's Domestic Autonomy Index seems to support the more pessimistic assessments of Belarus's sovereignty after 2020. As of 2024, Belarus scores 1.2 out of 2, the lowest in Europe. The second-least autonomous is Bosnia and Herzegovina, at 1.4/2. Belarus's score is comparable to that of Lebanon (1.2/2) and even below countries sometimes considered as failed states, such as Iraq and the Central African Republic, both of which receive 1.3/2 (V-Dem 2025a).

Chart 1. Domestic Autonomy Index in Belarus compared with selected countries (scale: 0–2)



Source: V-Dem.

To say that conditions merely deteriorated after 2020 would, in light of V-Dem data, be a serious understatement. For many years in the 1990s and 2000s, Belarus maintained a score of around 1.954 — roughly the same level as Poland. The first dip occurred in 2010–2015, when the score fell modestly to 1.86, before rebounding close to previous levels in 2016–2019 (1.94). Since 2020, however, Belarus has experienced a sharp collapse, followed by a sustained low plateau through 2022–2024. In this period, the index shows a major loss of internal policy autonomy, amounting to a cumulative decline of about 0.72 points (≈36.6%) from its earlier post-Soviet high (see Chart 1).

It is worth noting, however, that neither Belarus's authoritarian regime nor the high degree of power personalisation established since the late 1990s automatically deprived it of autonomy. Even its participation in building the Union State with Russia did not, in itself, eliminate Belarus's capacity for independent action.

Not that bad — follows from State Fragility Index

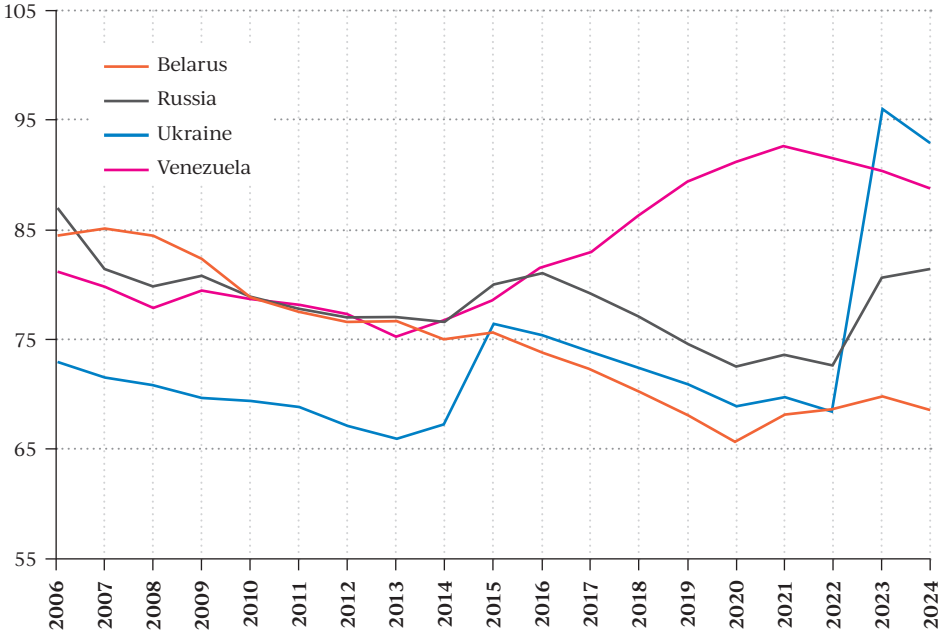
The State Fragility Index made by Fund for Peace is designed to capture the overall resilience — or weakness — of a state across multiple dimensions. It goes beyond the question of whether a government controls its territory or sets its own policies, and instead asks whether the state can cope with pressures from within and without. It draws on indicators of cohesion (such as the reliability of security forces or conflicts among elites), economic performance (decline, uneven development, or brain drain), political capacity (legitimacy, public services, and the rule of law), and social and cross-cutting stressors (demographics, refugee flows, or external intervention). Together, these paint a picture of how resilient — or fragile — a state really is (The Fund for Peace 2025a). While the V-Dem domestic autonomy index measures decision-making practices, FFP's Fragility Index assesses capacity and resilience. Though they sometimes overlap, each index focuses on distinct elements of state sovereignty: decision-making versus a state's ability to endure stress.

Looking at the long-term picture, the dynamics for Belarus have actually been positive. From high fragility levels in the mid-2000s, the country has steadily improved, and while the political turmoil after 2020 had an effect, it did not overturn or even dramatically weaken this overall trajectory. In other words, Belarus in 2024 remains significantly less fragile than it was 15—20 years earlier (Chart 2).

When we place Belarus next to countries chosen for comparison — Russia and Ukraine because of the ongoing war, and Venezuela because its political crisis has echoes of Belarus's post-2020 situation — the contrast is striking. Belarus now stands in the strongest position among these crisis-prone states. Ukraine's fragility has soared since 2022, Russia's has worsened, and Venezuela continues to rank among the weak performers globally.

It is important to recall that the Fragility Index reflects a complex set of factors, many of them not immediately obvious. For Belarus, the relatively lower fragility score in 2024 is driven in part by low

Chart 2. Fragility Index for Belarus and selected countries (scale 1–120)



Source: The Fund for Peace, 2025b.

economic inequality (3.0), comparatively stable public services (2.4), and limited refugee/IDP pressures (3.1). At the same time, the overall picture reflected in this index is highly relevant for understanding the nature of Belarusian sovereignty, the role of system personalisation, and its manoeuvring amid internal challenges and geopolitical instability.

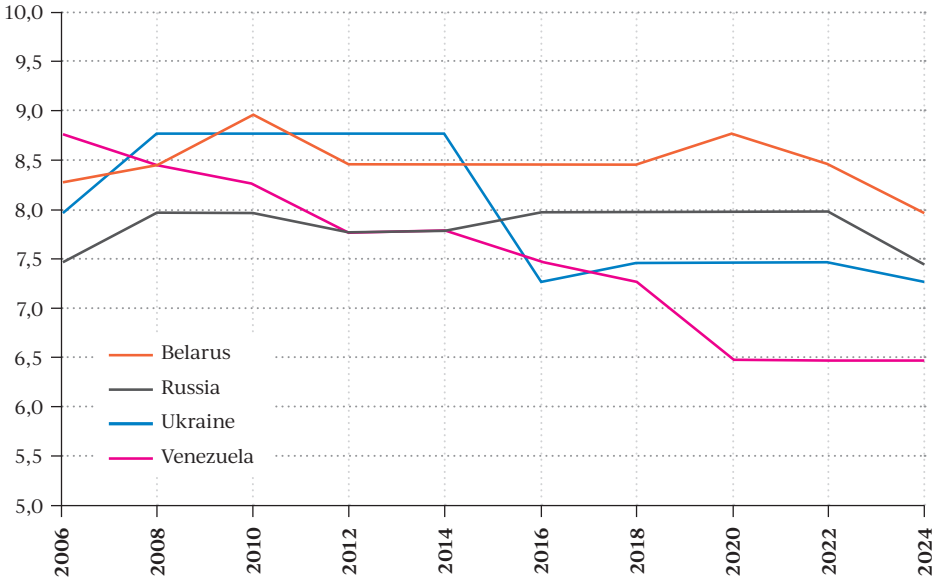
'Stateness' is at a decent level

Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) defines stateness as the clear recognition of the existence of a subject as a state, with adequately established and differentiated structures of authority (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2025). In practice, this refers to the internal institutional presence and control of the state, such as the monopoly on the use of force or the ability to administer territory. In other words, stateness captures whether the core structures of the state exist and work.

This concept differs from what is measured by FFP as state fragility in that while BTI measures institutional existence and functioning, the FFP evaluates whether a state can withstand internal and external pressures by combining political, economic, social, and security indicators. A low level of stateness is one of the factors that drives fragility upward in the FSI, but fragility is a broader phenomenon that includes stressors beyond institutional presence alone.

Within the BTI framework, Belarus has consistently displayed a relatively high level of stateness, generally hovering between 8.3 and 9 (out of 10) throughout the period under review (Chart 3).

Chart 3. Stateness index for Belarus and selected countries (scale 1–10)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2025.

Note: The years indicated (e.g. 2024) actually cover the period roughly two-three years earlier (eg. 1 February 2021 to 31 January 2023 if indicated 2024). This system is used in BTI reports, and we maintain it here for consistency.

As shown in Chart 3, in the mid 2000s (captured in the 2006–2010 data points), the country even reached a peak of 9, suggesting that despite its authoritarian political framework and high personalisation, the state maintained clear territorial integrity, strong author-

ity structures, and a lack of meaningful internal contestation regarding sovereignty. This aligns with the broader regional context, where Belarus remained stabler than Russia or Ukraine, both of which exhibited notable declines in stateness during the same timeframe.

Between 2012 and 2020, Belarus's stateness scores remained relatively stable at around 8.5, with a slight increase to 8.8 in the 2020 report. This brief improvement came just before the 2020 presidential election crisis, which triggered widespread protests and a subsequent harsh state response. The aftermath is clearly reflected in the post-2020 scores: by the 2022 and 2024 reports, Belarus's stateness rating dropped to 8.5 and then 8.0, respectively. Still, this drop is less dramatic compared to Venezuela's steep erosion or Ukraine's long-term downward trend. Remarkably, Belarus continues to rank higher than Russia, where uncertainties linked to the war and frozen separatist conflicts have led to a weaker assessment — half a point lower than Belarus's score as of 2024 report.

Two specific parameters of stateness merit separate attention. The first is Belarus's especially high score on the monopoly on the use of force — a core component of stateness — where it ranks 9 out of 10. By comparison, both Ukraine and Venezuela register much lower, at just 4 out of 10. In contrast, Belarus fares worse on state identity — defined as the extent to which all relevant groups in society agree on citizenship and accept the nation-state as legitimate. Here, Belarus scores only 7 out of 10, while Ukraine achieves a stronger 9 out of 10. All in all, however, Belarus performs relatively well in the BTI stateness index, much as it does in the Fragile States Index compiled by the FFP.

Explaining the person-bound sovereignty of Belarus

From the review of the three indices, we see that, taken together, they indicate Belarus has lost much of its external independence but con-

tinues to display notable resilience and effective state institutions. The sovereignty crisis is therefore partial — not a wholesale collapse. It is less a story of state failure than one of constrained autonomy within otherwise durable state structures.

To the above observation, let us reiterate what was stated in the introduction: Lukashenka's regime remains one of the most personalistic in the world, with state power concentrated in the hands of a single individual. Thus, two facts coincide here:

1. The sovereignty of the country has, on the whole, shown a positive trajectory; though since 2020 there have been setbacks — not serious enough, however, to suggest imminent collapse.
2. Belarus has been ruled for three decades by a highly personalised autocracy.

The key question is whether the connection between (1) and (2) should be expressed with *despite* — implying sovereignty has been maintained in contradiction to personalised autocracy — or with since — implying that sovereignty has been preserved precisely because of it.

It is clear that in the modern era, the personalisation of state power is neither the sole determinant of sovereignty nor even its primary one. Nevertheless, there are three points that must be kept in mind in order to better understand the Belarusian case.

A. Historically, the personalization of power — whether in states, empires, or even nonstate entities such as the Catholic Church — played a significant role and was widely perceived as a key factor of both external sovereignty and internal cohesion. Consider the Roman Empire, where the emperor was elevated beyond the status of an ordinary mortal. Emperors were formally deified or revered after death as gods (divi), but even in life, their authority and status were ritually and symbolically elevated beyond common humans (cf. Morten, 1993). In the Ottoman Empire, the sultan wielded absolutist authority throughout his reign (cf. Nursalam et al., 2024). Early modern Europe also offers striking examples, most

notably seventeenth-century France, where Louis XIV epitomised the 'divine right' style of monarchy. His famous declaration, *'L'état, c'est moi'* ('I am the state'), captured the essence of highly personalised rule (cf. Fox, 1960).

B. In the 20th and 21st centuries, although ruling absolutism has largely come to be regarded as obsolete — with only a few countries formally maintaining absolute monarchies — the person of a living ruler continues to play an important role as a unifying force and a visible symbol of national identity. For example, in the United Kingdom, the monarch embodies continuity within a Western cultural context; in Japan, the emperor serves as a symbolic figure deeply rooted in Shinto and cultural tradition; and in Thailand, the king represents a unifying authority within a Buddhist framework (for the latter case cf. Connors, 2003, p. 133).

C. There is also a long and reputable tradition of philosophical justification for person-bound sovereignty. In the early modern period, Jean Bodin defined sovereignty as the 'absolute and perpetual power' of a ruler who recognises no authority 'after God' greater than himself (Bodin, 1992, p 1, 4, 6). Thomas Hobbes elaborated this by conceiving the sovereign as the literal personification of the commonwealth: subjects make 'one man... to bear their person,' so that the sovereign's commands become the collective will of all (McWhorter, 2017).

From a different strand of thought, Adam Blackwood, defending Catholic royalism through the doctrine of *lex regia*, argued that the people transferred sovereignty entirely to the monarch under Roman law, leaving no earthly mechanism for holding the ruler accountable. Sovereignty, in this view, was irrevocably person-bound and subject only to divine authority (Mortimer, 2021). Georg W.F. Hegel later envisioned the constitutional monarch as the 'crown' of the state, unifying its various powers. For him, the Crown possessed 'the power of ultimate decision' and 'binds the different powers into an individual unity' — thus literally personifying the state (cf. Blunden, 2018, p. 4).

Finally, Carl Schmitt situated person-bound sovereignty within his theory of the *Ausnahmezustand* (state of exception). His famous dictum — 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exception' — makes sovereignty inseparable from the individual who can suspend the normal legal order in times of crisis, the ruler who determines what counts as exceptional (Head 2016, p. 16).

What has been outlined in points A—C is by no means an attempt to justify the current model of sovereignty in Belarus. Rather, the aim is to emphasise that — whether in the Belarusian case or in any other contemporary example — person-bound sovereignty is neither a mere political accident. It is not something that would automatically collapse if a leader such as Lukashenka were removed or if external support (e.g. from Russia) were weakened. Instead, this model must be understood as a serious and enduring form of political organisation.

Drawing on what has been established above, we can now formulate a twofold explanation for the persistence of person-bound sovereignty in Belarus. First, sovereignty itself is the necessary condition of the autocrat's power. Loss of sovereignty means loss of unlimited power. Thus emerges a vicious, yet at least in the short term effective, pattern: the absolute autocrat is vitally interested in the sovereignty of the state, while the sovereignty of the state, to a considerable degree, rests on the power of that autocrat.

Second, the autocrat's persona often becomes embedded in national identity. When alternative sources of national identity are weak or underdeveloped, the figure of the autocrat can even become the primary marker of collective identity. In such cases, sovereignty and identity become doubly bound to the person of the ruler.

Additional motives for sustaining a person-centred model of the state lie in the perceived effectiveness of such an arrangement. This notion was voiced by the pro-regime Belarusian political scientist Piotra Piatrouski, who, long before the 2020 protests erupted, had defended Lukashenka as an effective strongman and, moreover, as a champion of anti-liberalism — a further 'bonus' of having him as sole ruler (Piatrouski, 2017). In the post-2020 period, Piatrouski dou-

bled down on this mission of the Lukashenka regime: 'Strong centralised power in Belarus,' he argued during a briefing in Hrodna in March 2021, 'is not just a know-how — it is an objective and necessary measure, tied to the situation and to the geographic, geostrategic position of our country' (Hrodzenskaya prauda, 2021).

As for the essential element of the person-bound model as an identity marker, a telling statement came in June 2020 from Natallia Kachanava, then chairwoman of the Council of the Republic. Placing 'the President' (clearly meaning Lukashenka) alongside the anthem, the flag, and the coat of arms, she described him as the 'state's untouchable symbol' (NN 2020). The remark sparked a flood of sarcasm and humorous commentary that ridiculed its very meaning. Yet in fact, Kachanava's words were not plucked from thin air — they reflected a certain logic of thought, implicit or explicit, within both the Belarusian nomenklatura and part of society. We can reconstruct this logic in a two-step way.

1. Sovereignty must be grounded in a sense of national unity, which in turn is best legitimised by a certain national identity.
2. Given the weakness or problematic nature of some typical identifiers (e.g., the Belarusian language is narrowly used, while Russian does not distinguish Belarusians from Russians), the persona of the president can serve as a sound identity marker.

In other words, under conditions of atrophied cultural-historical markers, the elevation of the president into a state-national identity marker is, albeit not inevitable, a predictable development.

In conclusion, the model of person-bound sovereignty is neither an archaic relic of prehistory nor a political misunderstanding, but rather one of the possible models for maintaining sovereignty, one that can still hold appeal for certain segments of society. Thanks to its psychological mechanism — the ruler's attachment to unlimited power, which is possible only through the preservation of sovereignty — as well as its potential to foster unity and identity, this model can prove effective in Europe in the 21st century, at least in the short term.

Toward depersonalisation of sovereignty

It may seem unnecessary to explain why it is important to overcome the person-centred model of sovereignty, yet it is worth spelling out explicitly. The fundamental reason lies in the very logic behind it: *the sovereignty of the autocrat's country is the sine qua non of his unlimited power, and unlimited power is the supreme value of this autocrat*. In such reasoning, sovereignty becomes nothing more than a function of one individual's psychological attachment to absolute authority. We need not assume this is always the case, but it is enough to recognise that such attachment may take on the form of an obsession, a kind of drug. This would mean that a value as important as sovereignty — affecting millions of people at that — would be held hostage to the passions and psychological states of a single person, which may change, or which may be disrupted by death, severe illness, or even madness. This alone suffices to show how inauspicious this model of sovereignty is.

A second important reason stems from a broader axiological perspective — undoubtedly self-evident to the readers of this journal, yet worth articulating for the sake of completeness. Person-bound sovereignty not only clashes with the fundamental principles of democracy and civil rights, but also, in a sense, forecloses any prospect of democratisation in the country's future. If national sovereignty is bound to a person, while democracy presupposes the right to criticise the ruler and remove them from office through established procedures such as elections, then something must yield. Either the prospect of democratisation must be abandoned, or the model of sovereignty itself. The only possible compromise in this regard is a radical separation between the ruling individual (or group) and the person symbolising the unity of the nation and the sovereignty of the state — as in the case of the United Kingdom for example.

What, then, are the possibilities for depersonalising a country's sovereignty? There is no need to reinvent the wheel: the answer is to recognise the crucial importance of developing a cultural national

identity. Yet this 'wheel', though once invented, has almost been lost — both in terms of acknowledging its very existence and in recognising the basic conditions it must meet in order to function as a wheel. Due to an unfortunate trend in the humanities — postmodernism, deconstructive constructivism, critical theories — confusion have taken hold (cf. Rudkouski 2016). To continue the metaphor of the wheel: people began to argue that a wheel is merely a social construct, and that a square or triangular object could serve just as well. Thus, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by national identity — one that can serve as an alternative to person-bound sovereignty and the person-centred collective identity that legitimises it.

A very concise and apt definition of national identity is given as: 'National identity is people's understanding of who they are in relation to others' (Barker, 2012). A common-sense understanding of national identity — widely accepted within psychology, though often ignored by political scientists and sociologists — states: 'National identity is viewed in psychological terms as 'an awareness of difference,' a 'feeling and recognition of 'we' and 'they'' (Yoonmi, 2012, p. 29).

In line with these definitions, let us point to two basic features of identity, which may also serve as key criteria for evaluating any given formulation of identity:

1. *Distinctiveness* — what makes me different from others, or what makes my group different from other, analogous groups?
2. *Coherence* — how compatible the various components of identity are; or, approached from the opposite angle: how much cognitive dissonance the identity generates?

The two basic features of the content of identity determine whether an identity is weak or strong. This rests on an assumption well established in cognitive psychology: confusion is more costly than clarity, and contradiction is more costly than coherence. The greater the degree of confusion or contradiction at the level of national identity, the more likely an individual is either to turn toward a person-centred identity or to abandoning national identity altogether in favour

of other forms of collective identification — religious, supranational, and so forth.

What, then, might be the (depersonalised) identity formula that best satisfies the criteria of distinctiveness and coherence? A comprehensive analysis would require far more space; however, the fragmentary discussion below should suffice to indicate the direction in which it is reasonable to proceed. Let us consider such identifiers as neo-Soviet symbols — the red-green flag and the 'rising sun' coat of arms — as well as the Russian language. Both markers are easily recognizable, which can be counted as an advantage, and they are fairly durable. Yet Russian performs poorly in terms of distinctiveness, since it fails to distinguish Belarusians from Russians.

As for the red-green flag and the 'rising sun' coat of arms, they stand in clear tension with the principle of coherence. Their semantic load is contradictory:

1. [*As implied by their origins and decades of use (1950s—1980s)*] Belarusians are part of the Soviet people; Belarus is part of the USSR; hence, any form of cultural autonomy — let alone political sovereignty — is unacceptable (an 'anti-value').
2. [*As assumed within independence-oriented discourse, in which these symbols are supposed to be manifestations of state independence*] Belarusians are a distinct nation, with their own culture, and their political sovereignty is a constitutional principle.

The two meanings — (1) and (2) are incompatible, which makes these symbols a source of incoherence in national self-identification.

What national identifiers best meet the criteria of distinctiveness and coherence? The list of possible options is open-ended and could be very long. For the purposes of this analysis, however, we shall confine ourselves to three elements which, since the attempt to establish the first Belarusian state in 1918, have played a fundamental role in the construction of the Belarusian national community: the Belarusian language; the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms; and the revivalist historical narrative.

The Belarusian language is both distinctive — clearly setting Belarusians apart from Russians, Poles, and other neighbours — and free of fundamental contradictions within the discourse of sovereignty. Its promotion quite well dovetails with the idea of Belarus as a sovereign nation rooted in its own cultural tradition. The white-red-white flag and the *Pahonia* symbolise continuity with the early Belarusian state tradition and the European heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They provide distinctiveness from Soviet and Russian symbolism and coherence with the narrative of Belarusian independence and self-rule. The revivalist historical narrative emphasises the uniqueness of Belarus's historical path, from medieval statehood to modern nationhood, thus reinforcing distinctiveness. It also provides coherence by integrating diverse historical experiences into a single story of cultural and political self-determination.

The three identifiers — considered either individually or as a set — meet the criteria of distinctiveness and coherence in a manner that endows them with strong potential to underpin a durable national identity.

No doubt, the practical reorganisation of Belarusian sociopolitical reality in a way that fully embodies the three national identifiers is a highly challenging task. It demands not only structural changes and new institutions, but also a deep cultural and psychological shift, something that cannot be achieved overnight. Besides, for the time being, manifesting one's attachment to some of these identifiers — such as the white-red-white flag — within Belarus can be dangerous, since such expressions are systematically met with harsh repression.

However, the focus here is on the long-term perspective. The central goal is to outline a strategic vision of how and where Belarus should move in order to overcome person-bound sovereignty. This path is not one of abrupt transformation but of gradual progress: it begins with small steps and diaspora-led activities during difficult times and grows into bolder initiatives when more favourable circumstances arise — moments that can sometimes emerge unexpectedly.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this paper has shown that Belarusian sovereignty today is neither wholly collapsed nor genuinely secure. International indices present a mixed picture: while Belarus shows signs of declining external sovereignty, its internal statehood remains resilient.

What is even more important lies behind what indices attest: Belarus's sovereignty has for three decades developed within a highly personalised autocracy. For Lukashenka, whose unchecked authority is inseparably tied to the sovereignty of the state, the loss of that sovereignty would mean the collapse of his power base. The second mechanism is the fusion of the leader's persona with the national identity. In a country where other sources of national identity, such as history and culture, may be contested or weak, the leader can become the ultimate symbol of the nation.

This model of person-bound sovereignty is inherently flawed and poses significant risks to the nation's future. The path forward, therefore, involves moving beyond this personalised model of sovereignty. This would entail the deliberate construction of a strong, cultural national identity that is separate from the leader. Such an identity would need to be both distinctive, clearly setting Belarus apart from its neighbours, and coherent, with its various elements fitting together to create a unified whole.

This alternative path would involve promoting symbols of a unique Belarusian identity, such as the Belarusian language, which has been a focal point for national identity movements. Other key symbols include the historical white-red-white flag and the *Pahonia* coat of arms, which have been used by those advocating for a democratic and independent Belarus. By fostering a national identity rooted in its own culture and history, Belarus could potentially build a more sustainable and resilient form of sovereignty, independent of any single leader.

Abstract

This paper examines the paradox of sovereignty in Belarus, where national independence is bound to the personal rule of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Drawing on international indices — including V-Dem, the Fund for Peace, and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index — it demonstrates that while Belarus has lost much of its external autonomy, its internal statehood remains resilient. The analysis shows how sovereignty survives in a personalistic autocracy through two mechanisms: the autocrat's vital interest in preserving sovereignty as the foundation of his power, and the fusion of his persona with national identity. While potentially effective in the short term, this model of person-bound sovereignty is unstable and detrimental to democratic development. The paper argues that overcoming this system requires the deliberate construction of a depersonalised national identity, rooted in language, historical symbols, and cultural continuity, to secure a sustainable and coherent form of sovereignty.

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Vakhtang Maisaia

Georgia's Current Authoritarian Regime, and the 'Belarusianisation' Dilemma: a Comparative Analysis of the Political Systems of Belarus and Georgia

Introduction

The label 'Belarusianisation', applied to Georgia's contemporary political system, may be understood as follows: the ruling party rigs elections and secures a parliamentary majority, granting only a small share of seats to opposition representatives (roughly 30 out of 150 seats). In addition, the ruling party holds a constitutional majority, enabling it to form the government and amend the Constitution. This allows for the abolition of Article 78, which stipulates European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and the promotion of a so-called 'Strategic Appeasement Foreign Policy' — restoring diplomatic ties with Russia and reinforcing alignment with Belarus.

Moreover, the notion of 'Belarusianisation' implies full control of law enforcement agencies and the armed forces (in Georgia referred to as the 'Defence Forces'), alongside direct political management of their leadership. Although electoral falsification could provoke riots and turmoil, such unrest would be swiftly disbanded. This scenario

would leave the West disengaged, thereby enabling Russia's dominance. Georgia would, in turn, be drawn into Russia-led geo-economic and geopolitical projects such as the 'North–South Corridor' or the regional security format '3+3', in much the same way Belarus has participated in the CSTO, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Russia–Belarus Union State.

The label also encompasses the creation of a primitive ideological cliché within the system of governance, designed to consolidate power and facilitate usurpation of authority. A parallel can be drawn with the Lukashenka case, in which such ideological modality emerged under the label of 'Lukashism'. This refers to the idealisation of Aliaksandr Lukashenka as a national leader — popularly nicknamed 'Batka' (a reference to Batka Makhno, the warlord of the 1917–1922 Civil War). 'Batka' symbolises informal political leadership, with nationwide recognition of a 'continuum leader' status based on monopolisation of three elements of power: nation saviour, nation 'father', and nation 'wisdom'. The tendency strongly resembles the Soviet ideological pattern of 'Stalinism'.

In Georgia, the ideological cliché 'Bidzinism' is not as developed as 'Lukashism', but it has emerged as a nascent trend portraying Bidzina Ivanishvili's uniqueness and his supposed philanthropy. From the standpoint of national political culture, Ivanishvili has been heroised as a 'fighter' against the authoritarian regime of Saakashvili, as a charity-oriented tycoon, as a 'promoter' of peace and stability, as an opponent of corruption, and as an 'efficient' political manager — ultimately acquiring the status of a 'national hero'. This strategy of image promotion aligns with the political-technology approaches discussed by Olshansky and Penkov (2005, p. 387). A similar image was cultivated for Lukashenka since 1994, when he too was promoted as a 'fierce fighter against corruption'.

The authoritarian legacy in both countries demonstrates a focus on informal leadership, the tightening of political liberties, and cooperation with authoritarian leaders abroad. A particularly striking feature of 'Belarusianisation' in Georgia is that the ruling party has ini-

tiated political persecution of opposition leaders and dissidents, thereby entrenching authoritarian governance.

The 2024 Georgian elections and their geopolitical implications: the Kremlin 'sharp power' trigger to the national realm

Following the parliamentary elections of 26 October 2024, which ended with the victory of the 'Georgian Dream' party through what were widely regarded as rigged results, the political landscape shifted decisively. Within the newly elected parliament, the ruling party consolidated its position and reoriented foreign policy away from a Euro-Atlantic and European trajectory towards a more overtly 'Eurasian' direction.

The electoral process itself was critically assessed by international organisations. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission published its Final Report on 20 December 2024, in which it sharply criticised the conduct of the elections, particularly the management of election day and the subsequent counting process (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024). The 53-page report highlighted multiple irregularities. For example:

> In most cases, voting was assessed as procedurally well organised. However, in 6 per cent of the 1,924 observations, which is a significant number, the process was assessed negatively, mainly due to indications of voter pressure and intimidation, sometimes accompanied by tension, unrest and overcrowding. While not against the law, party representatives, mostly from GD, video-recorded the voting process at most polling stations. This, as observed, had an intimidating effect, as the cameras were often directed at VIDs or polling booths, potentially compromising the secrecy of the vote. Unknown individuals were observed tracking voters outside polling premises (10 per cent), frequently with-

> in the prohibited 100-metre perimeter. Party representatives in polling stations were also reported tracking voters in 7 per cent of the observations. This widespread perception of voter intimidation conflicts with OSCE commitments and other international standards. IEOM observers reported group or family voting at 4 per cent of the polling stations. Observers received some credible reports on vote buying (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, pp. 7–8).

The report makes clear that the 2024 elections were deeply flawed, undermining democratic standards and casting doubt on the legitimacy of the ruling party's renewed mandate.

The political situation in Georgia has deteriorated further since 28 November 2024, when Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze abruptly announced the ruling 'Georgian Dream' party's decision to suspend efforts to begin accession negotiations with the European Union until 2028. He also declared that the cabinet would refuse all EU budgetary support. Kobakhidze made this announcement during a special briefing following internal party consultations. Adopting the official party line, he claimed that while EU membership remained a priority for 2030, this would only be pursued on Georgia's own terms in order to preserve its 'dignity'.

This argument represents a deliberate distortion of the accession logic. In practice, the EU dictates the conditions of membership through the Copenhagen Criteria — which require a functioning democracy and market economy — and the regulatory framework set by the EU Council. Georgia's ruling party thus attempted to invert the accession process, reframing it as a matter of national pride rather than compliance with EU standards.

The decision came amid growing international condemnation of the 26 October parliamentary elections. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe declared the elections illegal, fraudulent and falsified, and refused to recognise the legitimacy of the incumbent government or parliament (PACE, 2024). This raised the prospect that Georgia could, like Russia and Belarus, face suspension or exclusion

from Council of Europe membership. On the same day, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the October vote as neither free nor fair, describing it as a further manifestation of democratic backsliding for which the 'Georgian Dream' party bore full responsibility (European Parliament, 2024). EU lawmakers called for a rerun of the elections within one year, under strict international supervision and by an independent election administration. They further urged the EU to impose sanctions and to restrict formal contacts with the Georgian government.

European election observers also criticised the conduct of the elections, noting that the process unfolded in a divisive atmosphere and was marred by widespread irregularities, including bribery, double voting and physical violence (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024). These developments compounded earlier concerns: in June 2024 the EU had already suspended Georgia's membership application after parliament adopted a controversial law requiring organisations receiving more than 20 per cent of their funding from abroad to register as 'pursuing the interests of a foreign power' — a measure closely modelled on Russia's so-called 'foreign agents' law, which has long been used to discredit civil society organisations critical of the government.

In the wake of Georgia's deepening political crisis — marked by massive protest rallies involving much of Georgian society — the ruling party has transformed into a form of 'Soviet-style leadership', resembling the 'political vertical system' of the Russian Federation. The gradual shift of the regime, through what may be described as a constitutional coup d'état, has created a new type of autocratic system based on competition and struggle between political clans and factions within the ruling party.

This system bears some resemblance to the political structures of Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, before Stalin consolidated power and transformed the Bolshevik Party into the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. At present, there appear to be six principal factions within the ruling party, which may be labelled as follows:

— *The 'Kakhetian' Clan* — chaired by the incumbent chairman of the ruling party, Irakli Garibashvili, with strong influence in the eastern region of Kakheti and in Kvemo Kartli in the south-east. The clan maintains significant business interests in the oil and pharmaceutical sectors, with external links to China and Azerbaijan. It competes with both the 'New Pioneers' and the 'Kaladze-Italians'. Some sources suggest it has sought ties with ultra-radical groups such as 'Alt-Info' and the neo-conservative movement. Following Garibashvili's replacement, the State Security Service (SSS) launched raids against these movements, arresting several members, including key figure Beka Vardosanidze.

— *The 'New Pioneers' Clan* — led by the incumbent prime minister Irakli Kobakhidze and a circle of younger politicians including Archil Talakvadze and Mamuka Mdinaradze. During Mikheil Saakashvili's authoritarian regime, they held only lower bureaucratic positions. Now they are directly managed by Bidzina Ivanishvili. This faction controls the party apparatus, regional branches, the parliamentary majority staff, and approximately 30 MPs. It advocates a policy of 'neutrality' in foreign affairs and holds significant influence over the judiciary.

— *The 'Technocrats' Clan* — associated with the First Vice-Speaker of Parliament, George Volski, and composed mainly of former Communist Party members and long-standing party bureaucrats. The faction is linked to the 'People's Power' movement, a strategic ally of the ruling party that operates its own media outlet, POST-TV, as well as a regional business network.

— *The 'Kaladze-Italians' Clan* — led by Kakha Kaladze, Tbilisi's mayor and deputy chairman of the ruling party. This faction controls around 20 MPs, as well as several parliamentary committees, and exerts dominance over Tbilisi, its surrounding areas, and parts of western Georgia. It possesses independent financial and analytical resources and is seen as capable of breaking away from the ruling party to form its own political movement. Kaladze has reportedly been promised promotion to the premiership several times, but

without success. His faction maintains links with radical-right movements in several EU member states.

— *The 'Personal Guard' Clan* — directly managed by Bidzina Ivanishvili, this faction exercises control over party leadership and the entire law enforcement network. It commands extensive financial and political resources and maintains wide-ranging links across the Eurasian geopolitical space and in several EU states (Maisaia, 2025, p. 110).

Taken together, this configuration suggests that the ruling party lacks a solid and credible political foundation, with support estimated at only around 35 per cent of the electorate. More than half of voters are either openly opposed to the ruling party or deeply disillusioned by its inefficiency and policies. Consequently, turnout in the forthcoming parliamentary elections is expected to be low, reflecting widespread public disengagement. This trend is further exacerbated by demographic pressures — particularly high levels of illegal migration.

The current 'political vertical' system in Georgia is giving rise to a 'comprador' structure of the Eurasian type, characterised by the increasing dominance of tycoon rulers. This pattern is reminiscent of Russia in the late 1990s, when governance between 1996 and 2000 was heavily influenced by seven oligarchs. In Georgia today, a similar, though smaller, constellation is emerging, with three figures exerting disproportionate influence over the national political system:

— Bidzina Ivanishvili, with an estimated fortune of USD 4.5 billion;

— Vano Chkhartishvili, with assets of roughly USD 1.5 billion;

— David Kezerashvili, former Defence Minister and financial backer of the opposition 'National Movement', whose wealth is estimated at around USD 2.5 billion and who currently resides in Cyprus.

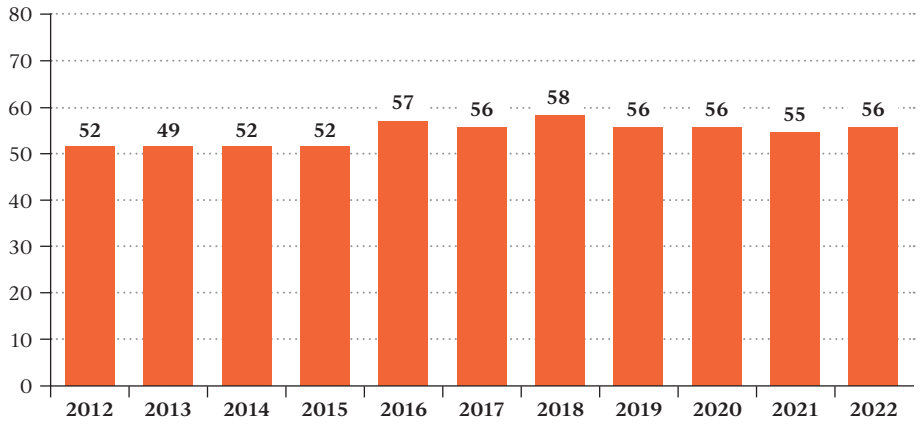
On 30 December 2023, Ivanishvili unexpectedly announced his return to politics for a third time. His first entry into Georgian politics was in November 2011, when he created the 'Georgian Dream' party — a coalition of several movements positioned in opposition to the then-ruling 'National Movement'. He became prime minister in 2012

before resigning in 2014. His second political comeback took place in 2018, when he assumed the position of party chairman. His latest return in December 2023 appears to mark his definitive re-entry into active politics.

Several factors explain this third return, the most significant being the deepening crisis of elite corruption. More than geopolitical competition among the United States, Russia and China in the South Caucasus–Caspian regional space, it was the endemic corruption inherited from previous governments that posed the greatest threat to Georgian statehood (Burlacy, 2023).

Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index* (CPI) offers further context. Georgia's score in 2022 improved slightly by one point — a change deemed statistically insignificant under the CPI's methodology. With 56 points, Georgia ranks ahead of its Eastern European and Central Asian peers, primarily due to earlier successes in eliminating petty bribery. However, according to Transparency International, Georgia has stagnated since 2012. Unlike Armenia or Moldova, which have achieved notable progress since 2017, Georgia has made little headway in recent years in combating systemic corruption (Transparency International, 2023).

Figure 1. Corruption perceptions index (CPI) results for Georgia 2012—2022 (in %)



Source: 'Transparency International of Georgia,' Corruption Perception Index (CPI) results for Georgia 2012—2022.'

Transparency International Georgia, the local chapter of the global watchdog, reacted to the 2022 CPI, stating that Georgia's score 'has not improved significantly since 2012, which means that the country has not taken effective steps against corruption in the last 10 years' (Georgia Corruption Index, 2023).

The above-mentioned statistics indicate that the anti-corruption effort in Georgia has sharply decreased since 2013, when the 'Georgian Dream' came to power and the political regime transformed into a so-called 'hybrid regime' with a 'comprador' state structure, in which around 60 per cent of members of parliament are close to being millionaires (Ekman, 2009, p. 10).

It should also be noted that the political 'castling' involved the diminishing role of former Prime Minister Garibashvili, who was appointed as Chairman of the ruling party but with only nominal power, as his vis-à-vis Irakli Kobakhidze retained the position of Political Secretary, while Bidzina Ivanishvili became Honorary Chairman — effectively the real Chairman of the party. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister of the autocratic Georgian regime, Irakli Kobakhidze, outlined four main geopolitical missions as the basis of his government's future foreign policy priorities (Caucasus Watch, 2025):

— Integration into EU structures

— Restoring peaceful relations with Russia

— Providing political stability in Georgia

— Promoting stable regional security in the South Caucasus and developing the so-called 'Caucasian geopolitical code' as the key foreign policy mission.

This effectively meant that the NATO agenda was erased from the list of foreign policy priorities, while no mention was made of strategic relations with China. Instead, there was a slight emphasis on the 'Russian vector', framed as an 'appeasement' foreign policy. It also remains unclear whether the development of the 'Middle Transit Corridor' continues to be regarded as a strategic priority, as it was under the previous government. Nor can the possibility be excluded of Geor-

gia joining the '3+3' regional security format under the aegis of the new government. The latter appears largely 'technical' in origin, with its main political function being to secure victory in parliamentary elections and consolidate the ruling party's power. Thus, a period of 'light isolationism' can be observed in Georgian politics.

It is noteworthy that the Kremlin has shown decreasing loyalty towards Georgia's ruling party and its 'political vertical' system, instead seeking to promote another echelon of more prudent and openly pro-Kremlin political entities. According to some sources, the Kremlin has allocated more than $20 million to conduct a hybrid information war against Georgia. This trend is reflected in the return to Georgia of Otar Romanov-Pirtskhaladze, the former Chief Prosecutor, who has been declared a 'Kremlin agent' by the US State Department, and who now leads a pro-Russian political movement entitled 'Peace and Solidarity'. Moreover, a dedicated television channel, 'Solidarity and Peace', has been launched to disseminate openly pro-Russian sentiment (Maisaia, 2025, p. 113).

In general, a comparison of the current systems in Georgia and Belarus suggests that the Kremlin's strategy of waging hybrid war — with an emphasis on information-psychological operations and the use of 'sharp power' elements – has achieved its objectives in both countries. The chart above illustrates this tendency.

Georgia and Belarus: political system correlation and special service-dominated autocracy — a comparative study

The Lukashenka autocratic regime is grounded in the dominance of law enforcement agencies and special services — a so-called 'police-run' national political system — with full control over the National Armed Forces. Moreover, informal leadership is also central to the regime, with the 'grey cardinal' Viktar Sheiman exercising influence

through what has often been described as his 'invisible hand' since 1994. The current Belarusian political leadership can thus be seen as bipolar in structure and, in conjunction with the Georgian political leadership (the Ivanishvili–Kobakhidze tandem), may be labelled the 'Lukashenka–Sheiman duet'.

It is symptomatic that, with the direct assistance of Special Destination Force units, both Lukashenka and Ivanishvili managed to suppress mass protest movements and remain in power — Lukashenka in 2020, and Ivanishvili in 2024–2025. In both cases, the advantage in combating civil society resistance and non-compliance trends lay firmly with the incumbents. In Belarus, according to several sources, the total number of security personnel is estimated at between 150,000 and 200,000. By contrast, the Armed Forces number around 65,000 according to official data, but they are scattered throughout the country, while the security forces are concentrated mainly around the capital, Minsk — in particular the notorious 3rd Separate Red Banner Special Forces Brigade of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, deployed in Uruchye.

Lukashenka has repeatedly stated that he can only be removed 'over his dead body', and his actions confirm this assertion. He has brought internal troops into Minsk and blocked the main roads to his residence. Unlike Ceausescu, all security forces remain loyal to Lukashenka, and they are capable not only of suppressing opposition but also of mobilising their own supporters at rallies. Over the course of three decades, Lukashenka has succeeded in building an extensive and effective system of security forces, including the following structures and paramilitary units:

— National Security Council Apparatus: This body effectively functions as a political police, forming the core of the Lukashenka regime in terms of information and analytical support, as well as implementing cyber security and surveillance of the political opposition. Staffed by around 500–1,000 personnel, it is supervised by Lukashenka's eldest son, Viktar.

— Presidential Security Service (SBP): The most powerful structure personally subordinate to Lukashenka, with approximately 1,500 staff. According to reliable sources, the SBP equals the KGB in numbers. Beyond its power units, it maintains analytical divisions and electronic warfare specialists.

— State Security Committee (KGB): Retaining the structure and identity of its Soviet predecessor, the Belarusian KGB follows the same management system as that of the USSR. With around 2,000 personnel, its leadership is frequently rotated by Lukashenka, typically every three to four years. It is currently headed by Lieutenant General Valery Vakulchyk.

— KGB Special Forces 'Alpha': An elite unit composed solely of professional officers. Candidates require higher education and prior military service. The average age is 30–35, and the unit has around 400 personnel.

— Separate Service of Active Measures (OSAM): Special forces of the KGB Border Troops tasked with anti-terrorist operations and strategic reconnaissance in border zones. Lukashenka's sons, Viktar and Dzmitry, both served in OSAM. The service numbers around 3,000 personnel and is considered the most secret and loyal structure. Informal paramilitary groups, often referred to as 'death squads', are believed to have been formed from OSAM and Almaz units, accused by the opposition of kidnapping and murdering around 140 people.

— Ministry of Internal Affairs Special Forces 'Almaz': The personal reserve of the Minister of Internal Affairs, regarded as the most combat-ready unit. Members must be able to arrive at base within 5–7 minutes of an alarm. The unit consists of approximately 300 personnel.

— Ministry of Internal Affairs Internal Troops, 3rd Separate Red Banner Special Purpose Brigade: Specialises in breaking up rallies, arresting regime opponents and performing OMON functions. Stationed in military unit 3214, Uruchye, it numbers about 2,000,

including maroon beret battalions, SOBR (Special Rapid Response Unit), and support units.

— Minsk Special Purpose Police Regiment: Consists of around 900 personnel tasked with maintaining public order during mass rallies.

— Army Special Forces, 5th Separate Special Purpose Brigade: Specialises in reconnaissance and sabotage, with training covering around seven months annually. Approximately 3,000 personnel serve in this brigade.

This is only a partial list of the coercive 'arsenal' at Lukashenka's disposal for suppressing protests, opposition demonstrations, or even potential confrontation with the regular army. In addition, territorial defence units established in 2002, by presidential order, act as a strategic operational reserve in the event of war or mass unrest. In peacetime, these units remain only partially staffed, but mobilisation could increase their strength to around 120,000.

In Georgia, the situation bears similarities to that of Belarus, but with important peculiarities, particularly regarding the role of special and law enforcement agencies. The special services and police units clearly dominate the Defence Forces of Georgia, and the ruling party has developed its own strategy for dealing with protest rallies and dispersing demonstrators. As for the government's response to the current political crisis, there appears to be no independent plan, other than one seemingly devised in Moscow.

According to some reports, around 30–40 Russian political consultants, advisers and special service liaison officers are stationed in a Tbilisi hotel, where they have allegedly established a special headquarters to advise the Georgian government on managing protest rallies. It is also suggested that covert Russian law enforcement agents have entered Georgia, acting as proxy units, and could be activated in an emergency. Representatives of the Wagner private military company are also rumoured to be present. The Kremlin shows no intention of relinquishing its grip on Georgia, especially during its confronta-

tion with the West and the ongoing war in Ukraine. In this context, Russia seeks to promote its geo-economic project, the 'North–South Corridor' (St Petersburg–Mumbai), as a rival to China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, while reinforcing its influence in the South Caucasus — a region which Moscow has officially designated a vital zone of strategic interest.

The Georgian government, meanwhile, appears to have a plan to mobilise its own supporters. In the days ahead — reportedly on Wednesday — the ruling party and state structures intend to summon loyalists to defend regime-controlled television stations ('Imedi TV' and 'Post-TV', the latter being a local branch of Russian NTV) as well as affiliated NGOs. It is expected that the government will rely heavily on special services while keeping the Defence Forces at arm's length. The Army, trained and equipped by the United States since 2002, still maintains some Western influence within its headquarters. By contrast, the following special service and law enforcement bodies remain firmly loyal to the government:

— State Protection Service (SPS): 5,000–6,000 staff.

— Special Foreign Intelligence Service (SFIS): In April 2024, the pro-American chief was dismissed and replaced by Irakli Beraia, a former Defence and Security Committee Chairman, MP, and loyal associate of Bidzina Ivanishvili. The SFIS comprises around 5,000 personnel, including special units. However, following the Belarusian KGB model, the agency was downgraded in May 2025 to departmental status and merged into the State Security Service.

— Ministry of Internal Affairs: Formerly led by Ivanishvili's personal bodyguard, Vakhtang Homielauri, later replaced by Gela Giorgadze, the ministry commands 50,000 police officers, but only two departments — Operational Department, including a special unit known as the 'Robocops', numbering around 4,500, and Special Task Department, with a rapid reaction unit of 4,000, plus 3,000 reserve personnel — are considered truly loyal. These two departments are primarily responsible for dispersing rallies and maintaining control

— State Security Service (SSS): Directly controlled by the ruling party and originally managed by Ivanishvili's personal adviser George Liluashvili, later replaced by Anri Okhanashvili, a loyal political figure with no relevant experience. The SSS commands around 6,000 personnel, including 2,000 paramilitary forces.

— General Prosecutor's Office and Ministry of Justice: Both remain aligned with the ruling party.

The overall situation remains strained and unpredictable. Any forecast depends largely on the extent to which the Kremlin is prepared to intervene, for in effect the 'geopolitical key' to Georgia lies in Moscow's hands. A noteworthy detail is that the Georgian State Security Service (SSS) and the Belarusian KGB signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2016 on strategic cooperation and partnership (Gamtsemlidze, 2021). This agreement enabled the two agencies to exchange experience in fostering authoritarian governance and entrenching regime control.

The table below illustrates a comparative analysis of the adaptability and similarities of the political systems of Georgia and Belarus.

Table 1. Authoritarian system characteristics: Belarus and Georgia (2025)

Category	Republic of Belarus	Georgia
Ideology	Sovereign Democracy / Lukashism	Sovereign Democracy / Bidzinism
Political regime	Autocratic	Close to Autocratic
Political leadership typology	Bipolarity (Lukashenka–Sheiman)	Bipolarity (Ivanishvili–Kobakhidze)
Ruling / authority party	Belarusian Party 'Belaya Rus' (White Rus)	'Georgian Dream — Democratic Georgia'
Foreign policy orientation	Eurasian integration – anti-Western stance	Eurasian solidarity — anti-Western stance
Controlled NGOs	'Foundation of the First President of Belarus'	'Neutral Georgia'

Category	Republic of Belarus	Georgia
Controlled opposition	Communist Party of Belarus, Liberal-Democratic Party of Belarus, Republican Labour and Justice Party	'People's Power' party; 'Peace and Solidarity' party (led by Otar Romanov-Pirtskhaladze, linked to the Communist Party of Russia)
Highest political decision-making body	State Council of the Republic (comparable to the Soviet Politburo) — hierarchical vertical with territorial distribution of power	Ruling party's 'Political Council–Biuro' (analogous to the Soviet Politburo) — hierarchical vertical with clan-based distribution
Controlled media and means of control	Ministry of Information of Belarus; Belarusian State TV; NTV Belarus; *Belarus Segodnya* newspaper	POST-TV; Imedi TV; Public Broadcasting of Georgia; Sakinformi; 'Peace and Solidarity TV' (private channel)
Special Services	Soviet legacy — KGB of Belarus (holistic body integrating foreign intelligence and counter-intelligence)	Soviet-type — State Security Service (SSS) of Georgia (holistic body integrating foreign intelligence and counter-intelligence)

Conclusion

The political systems of Georgia and Belarus demonstrate a clear convergence, with increasingly similar indicators that foster undemocratic governance. Both regimes have endorsed authoritarian models within the post-Soviet space, facilitated by third-party influence promoting a new doctrine of 'neo-imperialism' aimed at achieving complete domination in the region. Russia is the key provider of the ideology of so-called 'sovereign democracy' in both cases.

Russia has also experimented with its own version of a 'colour revolution' in Georgia, often referred to as the 'birch tree revolution'.

This concept is rooted in the narratives of Soviet military theoretician Messner and later developed by ideologues such as Konstantin Nikiforov, who elaborated the theoretical foundations of a Russian-style 'colour revolution' (Nikiforov, 2019, p. 428). While such strategies failed in Moldova and Montenegro, they appear to have been implemented successfully in Georgia.

One striking feature of the 'birch tree revolution' is its use of psychological warfare, which creates a propaganda-driven and fear-based environment. Russian policymakers have pursued this approach through local pro-Russian propagandists operating television channels directly managed by the Russian National Centre for Psychological Operations (Hakala and Melnychuk, 2021, p. 6). The overarching aim is to cultivate an aggressive political atmosphere conducive to authoritarian consolidation.

Central to this strategy is the usurpation of power by populist and controversial figures with ties to the Russian political elite. In Belarus, President Lukashenka carried out a constitutional coup d'état in 1996 by annulling the authority of parliament and subordinating the judiciary to the executive. In Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili replicated this trajectory by capturing the judiciary through the so-called 'Murusidze Clan' of corrupt judges in 2018, and in 2024 effectively transforming parliament into a single-party assembly reminiscent of the Soviet Supreme Council. Both Lukashenka and Ivanishvili share an affinity for conspiracy theories and mystification of political events, while simultaneously glorifying the Soviet lifestyle and its social standards (Shoshiashvili, 2024). These regimes also exhibit systematic political purges, suppression of opposition, restrictions on free speech and widespread human rights violations.

In a broader sense, the monopolisation of political power — as seen also in the Russian Federation — remains the principal precondition for the establishment of authoritarian or even totalitarian governance. Geopolitical orientation is thus inseparably tied to the internal configuration of political systems and to the ideological scripts they embrace. Since declaring independence in 1991, both Georgia and

Belarus have navigated a turbulent trajectory — from fragile democracies to entrenched autocracies — with the prospect of returning to democratic values remaining uncertain, though still possible.

Abstract

Process of 'Belarusianisation' has been undertaken in the speediest manner, reinforced by strategic cooperation with Lukashenka's Belarus and Putin's totalitarian Russia. In this scenario, the ruling party of Georgia — the pro-Russian oriented Georgian Dream — managed to rig the elections and secure a majority in a Parliament that now resembles its Belarusian counterpart, leaving only a small minority of seats to opposition representatives (roughly 30 out of 150). The ruling party holds a constitutional majority after conducting what amounts to a constitutional coup d'état, enabling it to form the government and to amend the Constitution. Its first target is Article 78, which stipulates European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The party seeks instead to pursue a so-called 'Strategic Appeasement Foreign Policy,' restoring diplomatic ties with Russia and deepening cooperation with Belarus. Election falsification could spark political riots and turmoil, yet such protests are likely to be swiftly disbanded. This dynamic risks pushing the West into a complete breakdown of relations with Georgia, leaving the country within Russia's sphere of dominance. Georgia already participates in the pro-Russian geoeconomic project *North–South*, has de facto restored its membership in the CIS, and even aspires to join BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Since 1994, similar patterns have been observed in Belarus. Following this model, Georgia's ruling party has begun persecuting opposition leaders and dissidents while consolidating authoritarian governance. The current regime has copied the structure of Belarusian law enforcement agencies and established strategic cooperation with Belarusian special services.

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Historical Trajectories

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An Attempt to Change the Paradigm of Belarusian Reflections on Their Own Civilisational Belonging*

It would be a truism to state that Belarusian historiosophical thought constantly refers to the dichotomy East—West, Rome—Byzantium, Lithuania—Moscow, Poland—Russia. Attempts to break this dichotomy appeared only in independent Belarus. The greatest merits in this field belong to the Centre of Ethnocosmology Kryuja. The Centre was founded in 1988 by Siarhej San'ka (by education a physicist with a doctorate in philosophy) and Todar Kashkurevich (visual artist and musician) as an informal coordination centre for researching the Belarusian past and working towards the reconstruction of the ancient worldview, pre-Christian, pagan religion (combined with criticism of the 'theology of the Abrahamic circle') and traditional values, cultivating aristocratic values and the ethos of the autochthonous population of Belarus and the Baltic region.

The term 'ethnocosmology' refers to the ethnic cosmos in all the diversity of its manifestations. It denotes a research field integrating various branches of science insofar as they relate to ethnocultural issues: ethnogenesis and ethnolinguistics, cognitive and contrastive

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culturology, typology of cultures, physical anthropology, archaeology, political history, social philosophy, astronomy (palaeoastronomy), palaeobiology and others. The name 'Kryuja' was used as a word-symbol referring to the first impulses of culture as a sacred archetype. The founders of the Centre of Ethnocosmology referred here to the thought of one of the pioneers of the Belarusian national movement, the aforementioned Vatslau Lastouski. The goal set by the founders of 'Kryuja' in the field of philosophy was the reconstruction of the 'ethnophilosophy' and 'cognitive history' of Belarusians, the development of authentic forms of contemporary philosophical discourse, reception of the achievements of European traditionalism and criticism of 'post' philosophy. The Centre also postulated in-depth studies of the Baltic and Indo-European community and the Baltic foundation in the ethnogenesis of Belarusians, constructing the 'region of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania' and justifying the circumbaltic geopolitical orientation. The fundamental goal was the formation of a new ethnocultural identity of Belarusians (Tsentr etnakasmalohii 'Kryuja').

After Belarus gained independence, the Centre organised conferences and seminars, supported musical projects of ethnic music and neofolk. In the years 1994—1998 it published 3 issues of the magazine 'Kryuja: Crivica. Baltica. Indogermanica', whose editor was S. San'ka, and in the years 2005—2011, three issues of the scholarly-journalistic almanac under the Lithuanian title 'DRUVIS' (English 'doors'), edited by T. Kashkurevich. In the years 2008—2012 'Kryuja' also maintained its own website, unfortunately inactive for a long time now.

The activity of the Centre of Ethnocosmology collapsed after the departure of Aliaksei Dziermant, a talented and energetic philosopher, culturologist and publicist, who was the third pillar of the magazine 'DRUVIS'. Dziermant created in 2010 together with Yahor Churylau the project 'Cytadel' (*Belarusian 'Цытадэль'*). The final reason for the break was the publication by Churylau and Dziermant in January 2012 on the website of this project of a programmatic text entitled 'Rus' and Kryviya', in which they postulated the construction of a 'Great North' with Russian participation (Churylau and Dziermant, 2012). The idea is not unfounded, but it caused a sharp reaction from

Kashkurevich, who accused Dziermant of treason and expelled him from the Centre of Ethnocosmology (Zayava Tsentra Etnakasmalohii 'Kryuja'). Dziermant and Churylau published in 2013 one issue of the almanac 'Sivier' (*Belarusian 'Сівер'*, meaning 'north wind'). The title was intended to give direction to philosophical and metaphysical searches. The graphic design of the almanac was prepared according to the illustrations of Frantsishak Skaryna's publications. As the editorial board announced, the turn towards Skaryna was caused not only by reflection on his legacy in the field of visual and printing culture, but also because 'Sivier' was a project analogous to Skaryna's project. In essence, this almanac resembles 'Druvis' in its content; it even included an article by S. San'ka (Sivier. Almanakh Vialikay Pounachy). However, only one issue of this magazine appeared, and the 'Cytadel' project ended its activity in 2016. Aliaksei Dziermant ultimately changed from a singer of the Baltic roots of the Belarusian nation and Western European traditionalism in the spirit of Alain de Benoist into a subordinate ideologist of the 'Russian world' (Dziermant: mietamarfozy, 2025).

Although San'ka and Kashkurevich announced the continuation of the Centre's work, Dziermant's departure dealt 'Kryuja' a blow that proved, as it turned out, to be fatal. This does not diminish the Centre's achievements in its nearly quarter-century of activity. The fundamental result of San'ka's studies on Baltic regional culture is his proposal to change the paradigm of Belarusian reflections on their own civilisational belonging. As this thinker stated, the only model in the historiosophical tradition regarding Belarus is the following model: Belarus between East and West. According to him, this is the most glaring example of 'legitimised domination of the *foreign*, presented as the only serious and possible *own*'. In this model, only one pole represents almost unconditional permanence in relation to Belarus: the East, Russia, Eurasia, which for Belarusians are almost synonyms. On the other hand, the West for Belarusians is both Poland, Central-Eastern Europe, Mitteleuropa, and the entire 'free world'. The East-West opposition is characterised by inherent relativism, which made it a means of manipulating mass consciousness and realising

one's own interests. Thus for Europe understood as a whole, the East is Asia as a whole. For Western Europe, the East is Eastern Europe or Russia—Eurasia. In the present world, this is the opposition Atlanticism/Eurasianism. However, the contemporary West and contemporary East are born of a completely different — Southern — principle, which arose in the Mediterranean region and over several millennia expanded throughout the world. There lie hidden the roots of the relatively recent split of Europe into Western and Eastern, which has brought so much misfortune to Belarus, encoded in its geographical location (San'ka, 1998, p. 183—187).

On the map, what strikes the eye first is the main European watershed and the sources of the great European rivers: the Volga, Dniapro, Dzvina and Nioman. Control over this watershed meant control over communication routes, but not only that. The territory from which these great rivers flow, 'Kryviya' (Belarusian Kryuja), also has a sacred status (San'ka, p. 7—17). Belarus still maintained its borderland character and never completely submitted to the imposed divisions, as noted by, among others, Abdziralovich, the philosopher recalls. But trying to preserve its authenticity, i.e., not joining either the West or the East, one can only seek another path, directed along another, primordial axis, on the North—South axis. In European traditionalism, this axis is perceived as fundamental, while the East—West axis has secondary, derivative significance. At the same time, the North is 'pure', 'unmixed', and the South is the result of mixing everything with everything. The North is the territory of Being, while the South is the territory of Nothing (in the Platonic sense), non-identity. According to San'ka, the turn of the metapolitical axis by 90° changes much in the arrangement of even known historical material and provokes quite radical destruction not only of Belarusian but also of European history. The geopolitical consequences are also considerable. Belarus's natural orientation towards the circumbaltic region is, according to him, the only authentic alternative both to the Maastricht scenario of European integration and to the reintegration efforts of mondalist-Eurasians and to the New World Order of 'mondalist-Atlanticists' (San'ka 1997, p. 312—314; San'ka 1998, p. 187).

The theory of the Baltic substrate in the ethnogenesis of Belarusians has been very seriously undermined as a result of modern genetic research (Balanovskiy and Tegako, Nasevich, 2024). Serious doubts are also raised by the unambiguous attribution of 'Kryviya' to the North. The author of the 'Tale of Bygone Years' in describing the settlement of individual tribes, in this case the Krivichs, states: 'they sit at the head of the Volga, and at the head of the Dzvina, and at the head of the Dniapro...' (*седять на верхъ Волги, и на верхъ Двины и на верхъ Днепра*...) (Russkie letopisi 2011, p. 6). 'Head' in the broad sense of this word is a great geographical region, located in the watershed between the Atlantic and endorheic basins, with the former additionally divided into the Baltic and Black Sea basins, encompassing the upper reaches of the Dniapro, Dzvina and Volga, whose sources lie close to each other but flow in different directions. 'Head' is, however, a broader concept than Valdai and the Okov Forest, from which these three great rivers flow. My research has allowed me to establish the border between 'Head' and 'Lower', 'Panizouye' on the Dniapro between Barkulabau and Bykhau. On its right tributary, the Sozh, this border can be drawn north of the Krychau-Prapoysk line (now *Slaharad*). Meanwhile, in the basin of the right tributary of the Dniapro, the Biarezina, Minsk, located on the Svislach, belonged to the 'Head'. It seems that the border of 'Head' and 'Lower' on the Dzvina could have been the boundary of the territories of Latvian tribes (Latgals and Sels) and Krivichs, because it was to the latter that the name *Krievi* preserved in the Latvian language and related to 'Head' originally referred, today meaning Russians (Krievi, 2020). In the Nioman basin, above the Lithuanian 'Head' in the form of Aukshtota, another Krivich 'Head' existed, at least on the Viliya, of which the name of the town Kreva (hypothetically Kriev) may be a remnant. It is even more difficult to make an unambiguous assessment in the case of the Nioman. One can only state that in historical times the border between the Polatsk principality and Lithuania was the Nioman Biarezina. Generally, one can suppose that even if the Nioman basin was connected with the 'Head' system, it was rather loosely and through the Viliya, not through the Nioman itself (Łatyszonek, 2006, pp. 109–112; Łatyszonek, 2013, pp. 214–220)

The term 'Head' (Верх) comes from the Russian language. Nevertheless, the term itself probably reflects much older notions of the peoples inhabiting these lands. Analysis of the geographical scope of the concept 'Head' in Russian sources allows us to state that it encompasses primarily the territory of the Smaliensk principality, on whose northern periphery lay Valdai with the sources of the three great Eastern European rivers. Without doubt, the Polatsk principality and Novgorod land also lay on the 'Head'. The Smaliensk and Polatsk principalities arose on Krivich territory, while Novgorod land arose on the territory of the Ilmen Slavs and Pskov Krivichs. Going even deeper into prehistoric times, one can state that the southern border of 'Head' on the territory of present-day Belarus corresponds roughly to the southern border of the Bancaushchyna-Tushemli culture, and going even deeper — the southern border of the Dniapro-Dzvina culture (8th century BC — 5th century AD) and the stroked pottery culture (7th century BC — 5th century AD). Both cultures mentioned above are considered Baltic or Balto-Slavic, although this conviction has recently been questioned (Nasevich 2024). However, neither the Tushemli culture nor the earlier Dniapro-Dzvina culture encompassed Valdai. Parallel to the Dniapro-Dzvina culture, north of it, existed the Dyakovo culture (7th century BC — 5th century AD), fundamentally Finno-Ugric. But this is not the end, because it seems that the southern border of 'Head' on the Dniapro corresponds roughly to the southern border of the pit-comb pottery culture (5000 BC — 2000 BC), considered Finno-Ugric, although palaeogenetic research does not confirm this. Regardless of the ethnic affiliation of the bearers of individual archaeological cultures who inhabited this territory, the boundaries of 'Head' I established in the 16th century in the Dniapro basin correspond approximately to the boundaries of archaeological cultures over several thousand years. I am unable to answer the question of why and how a boundary non-existent in nature maintained itself for thousands of years despite changes in archaeological cultures and the ethnoses attributed to them.

Thus, the notions of the indigenous peoples of Eastern Europe, including the ancestors of today's Belarusians, reflect the Head — Lower

division, not North—South, with 'Head' being the centre of the Eastern European world, and 'Lower' — its periphery. This division does not negate the sacred character of 'Head'. Glorifying 'Kryviya', San'ka ignored the fact that contemporary Belarus occupies only a small part of it, since most of the Krivich area has long belonged to Russia.

The territory of today's Belarus is rather the domain of the former Dregoviches, including the capital Minsk. Belarus is therefore more 'Dregoviya' than 'Kryviya', and half of Belarus is occupied by Paliessie, a cultural borderland with Ukraine (abstracting from the fact that Paliessie is itself a separate region). Co-creating the concept of 'Kryviya', San'ka somehow amputated half of his personal heritage, since he himself has 'exemplary' Belarusian origins — father from south-western Paliessie, from near Malaryta on the border with Ukraine, mother from near Dubrouna in the north-east of the country, on the border with Russia (Dubavets, 2010). Moreover, 58% of Belarus's territory as the Dniapro basin belongs to the Black Sea catchment. The country's capital, Minsk, is located in this catchment. Belarus therefore belongs to the Baltic—Black Sea zone and is indeed its keystone.

The Belarusian Krivich North and Dregovich South (Belarusian Paliessie and Panizouye) were culturally united only as a result of the spread of the culture of the Danubian Slavs, thus at the earliest from the 8th century AD, later the Rus' culture (11th century). Hence their civilisational unity is relatively new. It is worth noting, however, that the Belarusian—Ukrainian border recreates the southern border of the Principality of Turau from a thousand years ago, as Henadz Siemianchuk drew to my attention. This border runs across the uniform ethnic area of Paliessie, nor does it have any support in physical geography; it is therefore as mysterious as the border between Head and Lower. However, the Principality of Turau was a political entity separate from the Principality of Polatsk. Present-day Belarusian lands were permanently united politically only within the borders of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th century, which is a complete anomaly in their history. Thus the aforementioned assumption of Valiantsin Akudovich that the very territory of present-day Belarus forces

the existence of some forms of statehood has nothing in common with either the prehistory or the history of this land.

Siarhei San'ka's thought was developed by Ihar Babkou, who previously included Belarus in Central or Central-Eastern Europe (Babkou, 1997, p. 294—302). Now he expressed himself in the spirit of the Baltic—Black Sea 'Intermarium'. In his conviction, since Belarus belongs to the circumbaltic region, Ukraine represents the South. In his opinion, during the last century Belarus and Ukraine used the myth of sameness, similarity, hence both countries seemed uninteresting to each other, and therefore their dialogue seemed unnecessary. In the imposed (the author puts a question mark here) coordinate system East—West, both Belarus and Ukraine parallel self-define themselves somewhat in defiance of Russian practices of domination and elimination, Western strategies of orientalising their cultures, the geopolitical status of 'post-Soviet ghosts' and the internal situation of societal breakdown and the incompleteness of their modernisms. The turn to a different coordinate system, North—South, shows that Belarus and Ukraine are not the same but complement each other. Babkou refers here to a different concept than San'ka, who referred to the Indo-European community. According to Babkou, Belarus and Ukraine are respectively yin and yang of ancient Chinese philosophy, two opposing but mutually complementary primordial forces. According to the Belarusian philosopher, as a result of civilisational impulses from the south — Kievan Rus', Byzantium, the steppe and from the north — historical Lithuania, Vilnius, Baltoscandia, 'Intermarium Civilisation' was created, linking cultural zones: Baltic and Black Sea. Today Belarus and Ukraine are each separately emerging from their post-Soviet and postcolonial past, but seeking their peak they constantly look back. They lack, however, a 'myth of the future', awareness of their historical mission. The utopianism of this civilisation realised by the author does not throw him off track, because in his opinion every nation is in a certain sense a 'semiotic utopia' (Babkou, 1998, p. 3—6; Babkou, 2005; Babkou, 2007, p. 83—85).

In this way, Belarusian philosophy after almost a hundred years caught up with Belarusian geopolitics. The leader of the Belarusian

national movement, Anton Lutskevich, had been advocating since 1916 the concept of 'United States from the Baltic to the Black Sea', with Lithuania and Belarus practically forming one state, with which Latvia and Ukraine would be more loosely connected (Sidarevich, 2010, p. 11–12). Also the greatest Ukrainian geopolitician, a generation younger than Lutskevich, Jurij Lipa, although starting from different assumptions, perfectly understood the importance of Belarus for Ukraine. In his concept of the 'Black Sea fortress', Ukraine is the vault of this fortress. This vault in turn has its command point – Crimea, and its key, which is precisely Belarus. This country has, according to the Ukrainian thinker, the same significance for Ukraine's territorial strength as Crimea has for its maritime power. Hence Lipa recognised that a common state with Belarus is for Ukraine quite simply a matter of survival (Lipa 1942, p. 9–14). Incidentally, all leaders of independent Ukraine, even if they referred to Lipa's concept, as evidenced by the establishment of GUAM (agreement of Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova), completely neglected the key issue of Belarus according to Lipa.

As I wrote in the conclusion of my previous book, the weakness of all concepts of civilisational plurality is the failure to consider the North–South division in European history, earlier than the East–West division and the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy (here again with the exception of Koneczny, who appears as the most original of all theorists of civilisational pluralism). It seems that the population of the Baltic Sea shores, as well as the North Sea, has more common features, despite all ethnic and religious divisions, than the inhabitants of the western part of the Baltic Sea basin with the European South, belonging to the Mediterranean civilisation in Fernand Braudel's understanding. Moreover, the first Belarusian state, the Principality of Polatsk, was unambiguously oriented on the North–South axis, with its emergence connected to the activity of Danish Vikings, starting from the Viking par excellence – Ragnar Lodbrok (Łatyszonek, 2011, p. 139–147). Therefore, I consider Siarhei San'ka's breaking through the East-West dichotomy in the Belarusian worldview to be an epochal event. Characteristically, supporters of placing Belarus on the

North-South axis, inscribing it in the circumbaltic zone or, more broadly, the Baltic—Black Sea zone, also invoke Skaryna and Abdziralovich, which once again confirms the archetypal character of these figures for Belarusian culture.

Unfortunately, cultural relations with the North are the domain exclusively of non-governmental institutions and private individuals. The assimilation by Belarusians of Lithuanian historical and cultural heritage presents itself best (though this has a rather one-sided character), thanks to the fact that Vilnius is a strong emigration centre of Belarusian culture, including a Belarusian university (Łatyszonek, 2024). Regarding Latvia and Scandinavia, we are dealing with the efforts of individuals. Supposedly the Lukashenka authorities did not agree to create a Scandinavian studies department at Polatsk University, despite the Swedish government wanting to fund such a department. Regarding the South, unfortunately Belarus and Ukraine, apart from economic relations, throughout the entire period of independence had their backs turned to each other both politically and culturally. In politics, the Lukashenka regime in 2022 actively took Russia's side. In the case of culture, Belarusian—Polish and Ukrainian—Polish exchange throughout the independence period exceed Belarusian–Ukrainian exchange by several orders of magnitude.

The above remarks do not change the fundamental conclusion, in my opinion, that the East—West dichotomy has been imposed on Belarus and signifies its mental enslavement, from which it can escape only by changing its civilisational vector to the North, to the circumbaltic area, and in the longer perspective through work on building the North-South axis.

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Uladzimir Arlou

Belarus — Moscow's 'Bargaining Chip'*

Formation of the BSSR in Smaliensk

Chairman of the BSSR Provisional Government, Zmitser Zhylunovich

The declaration of independence by the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) and its recognition by several European nations compelled Soviet Russia to permit Belarusian communists to establish the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). In late December 1918, the North-West Regional Bolshevik Conference in Smaliensk proclaimed itself the First Congress of the CP(b)B (Communist Party of Bolsheviks of Byelorussia) and adopted a resolution on the creation of the Byelorussian SSR, with borders roughly corresponding to those of the BNR. On January 1, 1919, the Provisional Workers' and Peasants' Soviet Government of the BSSR,

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ВЕСТКІ

Часовага Работніча-Селянскага Радавага (Советскага)
Ураду Беларусі.

МАНІХВЭСТ

Часовага Работніча-Селянскага Савецкага Праўіцельства Беларусі.

Таварышы і браты рабочыя, бедныя селяне і чырвонаармейцы Беларусі

Viestki newspaper with a manifesto on the declaration of the BSSR. January 1919.

formed under the leadership of Zmitser Zhylunovich, issued a manifesto. While it echoed the statehood aspirations previously expressed in the BNR's Second Constituent Charter, it omitted any declaration of democratic freedoms. The government relocated to Minsk on January 5 and quickly realised that the Bolshevik leadership's recognition of Belarusian independence was merely a cynical political maneuver. By January 16, the Bolsheviks had already ordered the transfer of the Smaliensk, Mahiliou, and Vitsiebsk provinces to the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) — a significant portion of these territories has never been returned.

LitBel

Soon, under the looming threat of war with Poland, the government of the puppet republic discovered that the 'truncated' BSSR had been

Coat of arms of the BSSR, 1919.

merged with the Lithuanian SSR — another Bolshevik creation — into a buffer entity known as LitBel (the Lithuanian—Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic), with its capital in Vilnia. LitBel was devoid of any Belarusian national elements: its government did not include a single Belarusian representative, and everything associated with Belarus, including the language, was regarded as counter-revolutionary. From the outset, LitBel proved unviable. Its authorities failed even to establish the basic attributes of statehood, and by the end of summer 1919, Polish troops had completely occupied this artificial formation. Alarmed by their rapid advance, Lenin offered Poland the entire territory of LitBel in exchange for peace. Józef Piłsudski, leader of the reborn Polish state (himself of Belarusian descent and fluent in the Belarusian language — he even addressed the people of Minsk in Belarusian during the Polish occupation), agreed to a tacit arrangement and refrained from supporting Denikin's assault on Moscow.

The second announcement of the BSSR

The existence of an independent Lithuania made the reestablishment of LitBel impossible. To prevent national forces from seizing power in

Coat of arms of the BSSR, 1920.

Belarus, the Bolsheviks agreed to reinstate the BSSR. The second proclamation of the Byelorussian SSR took place on July 31, 1920. This time, its territory comprised only six districts of the Minsk province, with a total area of 52.4 thousand square kilometers and a population of 1.5 million. It was during this period that a proverb — still remembered today — emerged: 'Belarus has three capitals: Minsk, Lahoysk, and Plieshchanicy.'

A new partition of our country

The final outcome of the Soviet–Polish War was the signing of the Treaty of Riga in 1921 (Belarusian representatives were not admitted to the negotiations). Under its terms, a vast part of our country was annexed to Poland.

These lands came to be known as 'Western Belarus'. They consisted of 29 counties belonging to the Bielastok (Białystok), Vilnia (Wilno), Navahradak (Nowogródek) and Paliessie (Polesie) voivodeships. The region covered an area of 113,000 square kilometres and had a population of more than 3.5 million people. The state border passed

BSSR borders after the Treaty of Riga between Soviet Russia and Poland.

very close to Polatsk, Minsk and Slutsk. At one stage in the negotiations, Moscow was prepared to cede the whole of Belarus, but the Polish delegation did not agree: the prevailing view was that it would not be possible to 'swallow' so much territory.

Vilnia became the unofficial political, cultural and scholarly capital of the separated lands.

Policy of Belarusianisation

In the 1920s, an official policy of Belarusianisation was carried out in the BSSR. Government institutions, units of the Red Army stationed in the republic, and above all educational establishments of all levels were switched to the Belarusian language. By 1928, 80% of schools were already delivering education in Belarusian. The Belarusian State University and the Institute of Belarusian Culture were established, the latter later transformed into the Academy of Sciences.

Favourable conditions were created for the development of Belarusian literature. Alongside acknowledged masters such as Janka Kupala, Jakub Kolas, Zmitrok Biadulia and others, younger writers like Maksim Haretski, Kuzma Chorny, Michas Charot, Uladzimir Dubouka, Alies Dudar, and dozens of their talented colleagues were working productively. The publishing house *Savietskaya Bielarus'* placed particular emphasis on the publication of Belarusian literature.

At the same time, during the Belarusianisation period, the cultural rights of national minorities were also upheld. The state languages of the BSSR at that time included Belarusian, Polish, Yiddish, and Russian, each sustaining schools, periodicals, and works of fiction.

Enlargement of the republic

At that time, Belarusian national communists succeeded in securing from Moscow the return of part of the lands that had been incorporated into the RSFSR.

In 1924, the BSSR managed to regain most of the Vitsiebsk and a substantial part of the Homiel governorates, as well as the Horki district and part of the Mstsislau district of the Smaliensk governorate. As a result, the territory of the republic doubled, reaching 110.6 thousand square kilometres, with a population of 4.2 million people. The next step came in 1926, when the Homiel and Rechytsa districts, with

an area of 15.7 thousand square kilometres and 650,000 inhabitants, were returned. A third enlargement was being prepared, which was to bring back the western part of the Smaliensk region into the BSSR, but it never took place, as Moscow's nationalities policy changed radically.

Stalinist terror

The clear successes of Belarusianisation caused great anxiety in the Soviet capital, which increasingly resembled the former Russian Empire but under new Bolshevik slogans. The machinery of repression began with the destruction of the 'Union for the Liberation of Belarus', when in 1930 more than 110 figures of science and culture were arrested. It is traditionally believed that the Union's case was fabricated by the OGPU, though this view is debatable, since strong independence-minded attitudes among Belarusian leadership and intellectual circles were a reality.

The republic endured the tragedy of collectivisation in the 1930s, when the best, most enterprising and therefore wealthiest part of the peasantry was destroyed. The remaining villagers found themselves in a situation similar to former serfdom: kolkhoz peasants, for the most part, did not even have passports until the 1970s.

In 1933, a reform of Belarusian orthography took place, which, 'for the purposes of the internationalist education of the working people', artificially brought the Belarusian language closer to Russian. The Bolshevik authorities deliberately exterminated the national intelligentsia and anyone who dared to hold independent views. This is testified to by the Minsk Kurapaty site, where, according to independent researchers, the remains of up to 250,000 victims may lie. Dozens of similar places exist throughout Belarus.

In just one night, from 29 to 30 October 1937, 132 representatives of the Belarusian creative and scholarly intelligentsia and the state apparatus, including 22 well-known writers, were shot in Minsk. The

exact number of victims of Stalin's bloody terror in Belarus is still unknown (figures range from 600,000 to 1.4 million), but it touched virtually every family.

The campaign of the Red Army in Western Belarus

For millions of our compatriots — inhabitants of Western Belarusian lands — the Second World War began on 1 September 1939 with Nazi Germany's attack on Poland. On 17 September, the so-called 'liberation campaign' of the Red Army into Western Belarus began, made

Soviet propaganda poster, 1939.

possible by the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Stalin's regime and the Nazis.

Within ten days, Western Belarus found itself under Bolshevik control. At the end of October, the People's Assembly in Białystok voted for the annexed territory to become part of the BSSR. Its territory increased by more than 100,000 square kilometres, and its population by 4.5 million people. Unification within a single republic – even within the framework of Stalin's empire – corresponded to the national interests of Belarusians and clarified our historical perspective. Yet this came at an extraordinarily high price.

In former Western Belarus, mass deportations and physical extermination of 'anti-Soviet elements' began. The number of deported and sent to labour camps was measured in tens of thousands; the number killed, in thousands. The region's economic and cultural wealth was plundered. The new authorities sharply restricted the rights of believers of various denominations. In education, a policy of Russification was pursued.

The bargaining over Vilnia and Vilnia region

In the autumn of 1939, this region remained de facto within Belarus for forty days. Central newspapers in Minsk were published under the slogan '*Vilnius is Belarusian again!*'. A Vilnius Region was established. The newspaper *Vilienskaya Prauda* ('Vilnius Truth') started issuing, writing about preparations for elections to the People's Assembly. In the towns and townships of the Vilnius area, inhabited predominantly by ethnic Belarusians, rallies were held adopting resolutions in favour of joining the BSSR. The largest rally – with 75,000 participants, a third of the city's population – took place in Vilnius.

However, Moscow and Berlin signed a new secret protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Under this agreement the 'spheres of influence' were altered, and still-independent Lithuania was handed over

to the Soviet zone. On 10 October, the USSR and the Republic of Lithuania signed an agreement on the transfer of the Vilnius Region to Lithuania. Moscow did not even consider it necessary to inform Minsk — yet another reminder of the puppet-like position of the BSSR.

In return for this 'generosity', the USSR secured the right to station Soviet military bases in Lithuania, and in the summer of 1940 it seized the entire country along with the other two Baltic republics — Latvia and Estonia. To ease discontent in the already-occupied Lithuania, the Soviet government also transferred an additional 2,600 square kilometres of BSSR territory to it, including the towns of Svieciany (now Švenčionys), Salechniki (Šalčininkai), and Druskieniki (now Druskininkai).

Losses in World War II

During the war, the population of Belarus fell by one third — from 9 to 6 million people. Many towns and villages were reduced to ruins and ashes. The economy suffered immensely.

Yet another fact must not be forgotten: Belarus was the only victorious country in the Second World War to suffer major territorial losses. The first of these was the Viĺnia region, and in 1944, Moscow transferred to Poland three districts of Brest region and most of the Białystok region (with its large Belarusian population area), which until then had been part of the BSSR. As a result, the territory of the BSSR shrank from its pre-war 225.7 to 207.6 thousand square kilometres.

In July 1944, a draft resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) appeared, 'On the establishment of Polatsk Region within the RSFSR'. According to this plan, Belarus was to be deprived of a large area including Polatsk, Ushachy, Braslau, Dzisna, Miory and Sharkaushchyna, but the leadership of the BSSR succeeded in defending this territory, citing above all the republic's enormous wartime losses.

In 1945, the Byelorussian SSR, together with Soviet Ukraine, became one of the founding members of the United Nations. Stalin achieved this by pointing to the republics' contribution to victory over the Nazi aggressors. In reality, he calculated that in this way he could weaken the Belarusian and Ukrainian national independence movements, while at the same time securing two additional votes in the UN.

Only one case is known when the head of the BSSR delegation voted against a resolution proposed by the USSR — because he had missed the moment of voting 'for' and belatedly raised his hand. The true value of the 'independent BSSR's' representation in the UN is shown by the fact that until 1990 it did not even have a typewriter with a Belarusian font.

Statehood in Belarus within the USSR consistently exhibited a puppet-like nature. Under Stalin, the republic endured enormous human and cultural losses. The policy of Russification continued until the very collapse of the Soviet empire. All the achievements of the BSSR were the result not of 'wise party and Soviet leadership', but of the intelligence, diligence and sacrifice of the Belarusian people.

Chronology

1 January 1919 — Proclamation of the Byelorussian SSR in Smaliensk by the Bolsheviks.
16 January 1919 — Resolution of the Central Committee of the RCP (B) on the incorporation of the Smaliensk, Mahiliou and Vitsiebsk governorates into the RSFSR.
17 February 1919 — Proclamation of the Socialist Soviet Republic of Lithuania and Belarus (Litbel).
31 July 1920 — Second proclamation of the BSSR within the borders of the Minsk governorate.
1921 — Treaty of Riga, under which Western Belarus went to Poland.
17 September 1939 — Beginning of the Red Army's 'liberation campaign' in Western Belarus.

10 October 1939 — USSR transferred Vilnia and Vilnia region to Lithuania.

1944 — Moscow transferred most of the Białystok region of the BSSR to Poland.

1945 — Byelorussian SSR became one of the founding members of the UN.

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Cultural Codes

Aaron Arsin

Naked Power and Sovereign Life

Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the Emperor's new clothes, in which the ruler appears before his people unclothed, does not end with the boy's cry: 'But the Emperor has nothing on!' Nor does it end when the crowd finally voices its outrage at the shamelessness of the ceremony:

> But he hasn't got anything on!' the whole town cried out at last. The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, 'This procession has got to go on.' So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all (Andersen, 2023).

The solemn ceremony goes on.

Naked power — that is, power which continues to operate despite being exposed — is the first theme of this article. Sovereign life, which stands in opposition to naked power, is the second. Finally, the struggle between naked power and sovereign life for 'survival' is the last issue to be examined.

The analysis will draw on examples from recent Belarusian history, though it will not be limited to them. The methodological framework combines the anthropology of spectacle and visual culture, political theology, semiotics, and aesthetics.

Naked power

Naked power is:

1. The obscene absence or lack of proper form (semiotics and aesthetics);
2. An unconvincing 'spectacle of power' (anthropology of spectacle);
3. A political body without dignity: one that struggles, or is even unable, to survive and to make use of a state of exception which the unworthy body itself has provoked (political theology);
4. Finally, in political science terms, naked power is power that is clearly afflicted by a deficit of legitimacy, or whose legitimacy is rapidly eroding.

In this study, we shall set aside the latter (political science perspective) and concentrate on the preceding ones.

Naked power as improper form

Naked power as improper form is indecency, transgression, excess or lack, associated with exposure and nakedness — whether actual, when taboo parts of the body are displayed in public space, or symbolic, when such display is allowed only indirectly. The figures of naked power are, semiotically and culturally, fools and tricksters, crowned or elected (Szakolczai, 2009; Horvath, 2008; Horvath & Szakolczai, 2019; Sznajderman, 2014).

Let us return once again to Andersen's tale. His ridiculed naked king proves with his final steps that he is by no means a simpleton.

A fool behaves inappropriately in a stereotypically inverted manner: he weeps at weddings and laughs at funerals (whereas a sensible person adjusts himself precisely to the situation). Though the king appeared almost to the very end as a deceived simpleton, the recognition of his own nakedness transformed him into a madman. The behaviour of a madman, unlike that of either the fool or the wise man,

is sudden: he 'is able to achieve forms of behaviour forbidden to "normal" people' (Lotman, 1992, pp. 64–65). The naked king destroys all boundaries of law – and willingly imposes his own, indifferent to both men and God. The absurd ceremony marks both the beginning and the seal of a 'state of exception' that crushes every law, divine and earthly alike (Agamben, 2008a, b; Schmitt, 2000; Shchittsova, 2020). Naked majesty is precisely that madness which henceforth guarantees absolute power.

Speaking of such fool–trickster madness, Yuliya Charniauskaya observes that nakedness may be:

1. a sign of purity and innocence, a manifestation of unhidden truth;
2. an image of absolute Otherness, alienness, hostility, even werewolf-like strangeness;
3. a sign of the diabolical principle (Charniauskaya, 2004).

In general, in cultures where clothing is customary, notes the New Catholic Encyclopedia, 'the display of nakedness often carries a magical meaning' (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2003, p. 473).

Yuri Lotman described the shock provoked by attacking naked madness. He recounted

> ...enormous psychological impact, at the beginning of World War II of a spectacle to which he was a witness. A division of German motorcyclists, heading directly for the dugout trenches of the enemy reproduced, perhaps unconsciously, the behaviour of the *berserkers*: the motorcycles were laden with passengers (four to each one), armed with sub-machine guns, completely naked, but wearing leather boots, their wide tops crammed with automatic magazines. The gunners were drunk and rushing directly at the enemy, shouting loudly and continuously shooting long bursts into the air (Lotman, 2009, p. 41).

The semiotician and literary scholar Jerzy Faryno argues that 'a naked person, a person without clothing, is socially insignificant; the naked body is almost asemiotic' (Faryno, 2004, p. 184). Yet it should

be noted that this asemiotic 'hole' is always constructed in relation to clothing.

> Nudity is marked in our culture by [...] only the obscure and ungraspable presupposition of clothing [...] nudity is not actually a state but rather an event [...] We can therefore only experience nudity as a denudation and a baring, never as a form and a stable possession (Agamben, 2011, p. 65).

This denudation can occur in two ways: according to the principle of the minus-costume (the removal or simplification of clothing, in contrast to the surrounding environment), or in a completely opposite manner — through sumptuous and overloaded garments which overwhelm others with their spectacle, masking and concealing the bearer while simultaneously displaying him.

The first principle was employed by Bulgakov's Woland, who appeared at his own ball in a shabby outfit, as well as by Emperor Napoleon:

> The marked simplicity of Napoleon's uniform, in sharp contrast to the ceremonial uniforms of his court, was part of the Emperor's intention [...] In this sumptuous crowd of marshals and courtiers, which impressed both Parisians and foreigners, Napoleon stood out through the plainness of his attire. This was meant to emphasise that the Emperor is the one who looks; that the court — and more broadly, the whole world — is a spectacle for the Emperor. And he himself, if he is a spectacle at all, embodies only the spectacle of grandeur, indifferent to spectacularity [...] Supreme power presupposes no external observer and therefore has no need to display itself (Lotman, 2010, pp. 93—94).

Thus, Andersen's king, who chose to be indifferent to his spectators, simply grew up into Napoleon (and into the Muscovite devil).

The opposite variant is represented by embroidered uniforms, epaulettes, cockades, oversized lapels and caps, broad shoulder-boards

covered with incomprehensible lavish insignia, decorations spread across the chest, the glitter and dazzle of gold, a grandeur meant deliberately to overwhelm (Lotman, 2010, pp. 92–96). Examples of this practice include Nicholas I and the later Stalin; among the petty dictators of the twentieth century, Idi Amin, Muammar Gaddafi, and Jean-Bédel Bokassa.

Such overloading with splendour, however, displays rulers and their entourages as infernal harlequins:

> A strange crew this – bright, motley, flashy, pied,
> Beribboned, like mediaeval fools they ride,
> O'erhung with keys and pins and other trash:
> This one a blue, and that has a gold sash –
> So many crosses, medals, icons, what-on's
> Before and aft, more than they've clasps and buttons
>
> (Mickiewicz, 2016, lines 141–146).

This is how Adam Mickiewicz described the military-imperial bustle.

In such a situation, a denudation occurs – a stripping! – of the public at the expense of the splendour of the spectacle. Denudation is always accompanied by stupefaction.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly warned:

> Any violent revolution, whether political or religious, produces an out burst of folly in a large part of mankind [...] The power of one needs the folly of the other [...] the upsurge of power [orig. germ. Machtentfaltung – performance of power] is so terrific that it deprives men of an independent judgement, and they give up trying more or less unconsciously to assess the new state of affairs for themselves (Bonhoeffer, 1959, p. 19; Bonhoeffer, 1954, S. 18)

Paradoxical though it may seem, the body clad in a distinctive military uniform, wrapped in golden, silver and red ribbons, covered in orders and medals, laden with resounding titles – in short, a body ex-

cessive in its ceremonial attire — is, in fact, a naked body. The mask-costume, which transforms the visage (Boholm, 2011), does not merely conceal but also reveals, exposes — and brings to the surface the most hidden, base desires and impulses:

> Veiled by mask and attire, altered beyond recognition, the body of the Other — yet, though enclosed, it paradoxically discloses its instincts, with the sexual foremost among them; and in the symbolism of mask or costume, this is often conveyed far more explicitly than by nakedness itself (Dudzik, 2013, p. 83).

It is striking that even a body without any attire may possess a special 'naked' costume — or lack it altogether. As Kenneth Clark observed, and John Berger later elaborated, the naked body (nakedness) — bereft of any costume — is presented in and of itself. By contrast, the nude body (nudity) is interwoven with the gazes of others — and with the reactions to those gazes. It is clothed in the costume of its own and others' looks, even when ostentatiously ignoring them (Clark, 1956; Berger et al., 1990, pp. 47—54).

If nude female models are dressed in the desires of others, in exploitation, social inequality and struggles for power, then Adam and Eve in Paradise wore garments of an altogether different — indeed supernatural — kind. According to theologians, naked Adam and Eve were robed in garments of light, in God's grace. Sin destroyed this attire — and laid bare the fatal deficiency thus revealed (New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2003, pp. 472—473).

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, linked the shock of nakedness to the acquired autonomy of the genitals. According to Augustine, in Paradise these parts of the body were wholly subject to the will of our ancestors. Sin abolished this capacity, and the genitals mounted their assault:

> When this grace was stripped from them, in order to punish their disobedience with a commensurate punishment, a new impudence was awakened in the urges of their bodies. The consequence was that their nudity became indecent, thus making

them aware of their condition and dismayed by it (Augustine, 1998, p. 615).

On the extra-daily performances participants 'put the body '*in form*'' (Barba, 2006, p.8), but egoistic naked power literally puts the body out of form — and off form.

Thus, nakedness appears in the montage of the richly attired and the poor, the unadorned — and the adorned. Nakedness introduces a division between ruler and subject. When nakedness cannot be masked, or conversely, when such masking is overly artificial and insistent — then we are confronted with naked power.

Naked power, which displays an improper form, falls under the aesthetic categories of the ugly (Rosenkranz, 1853; Eco, 2007), of kitsch and of trash (Zhbankou, 2003; 2010). In its kitsch variant, naked power is πονηρός (Greek ponēros: evil will) in deceptive attire, when 'Error [...] is never set forth in its naked deformity [...] But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced [...] more true than the truth itself' (Irenaeus, 2018, p. 315; cf. Irenaeus, 1857, p. 3; Strong, 1890).

Naked power may refrain from concealing its evil essence (κακός), or may indeed reduce life to rot and refuse (σαπρός). And 'rubbish often coexists with bureaucratisation [...] in neither is there a drop of taste' (Charniauskaya, 2015). If private aesthetic existence leads to political community (Shparaha, 2010), then naked power assails the very aesthetic foundations of society, while passing itself off — or, at best, the 'trinkets' of a servile 'Great Graphomaniac' — as obligatory artistic models (Zholkovskiy, 1994, pp. 54—86). As Tadeusz Konwicki aptly noted, tyranny is 'graphomaniac power' (Konwicki, 2010, p. 203).

From the very beginning, the Belarusian intelligentsia perceived Lukashenka's rule as naked power. In the very first issue of the journal ARCHE, editor Valer Bulhakau wrote:

> Lukashenka is the apotheosis of denudation, of denudation turned into a basic principle of existence. 'Rob me, rob,' Luka-

shenka shouts with a cry. Pornography, Lukashenka, and much more await you (Bulhakau, 1998, p. 7).

At first, the authoritarian forms of power were dominated by the 'minus-costume' — marked by rudeness, breaches of protocol, and other antics described in detail by the biographers of the Belarusian president (Feduta, 2005; Karbalevich, 2010). In addition, the country produced its own 'Great Graphomaniac' — the police general-pornographer Mikalai Charhinets, administratively appointed as the leading Belarusian writer. Yet gradually the form of power became encrusted with ceremonies and excesses. By 2020, many had already come to perceive it as incongruous.

It should be noted that naked power in its minus-costume, just setting out, does not encounter the same resistance from society as later power in sumptuous robes. Yet both are signs of crisis, and succeed one another in turn. Perhaps Donald Trump, with his abrasive behaviour reminiscent of television trash shows (Grindstaff, 2002; Manga, 2003), embodies the early form of naked power, while his predecessor, entangled in ceremonies like a late Brezhnev, represented the old one.

Naked power has its own dynamics, tied to spectacle.

Naked Power as the Unconvincing Spectacle of Power

Power is a 'spectacle of power' (Yampolskiy, 1989; cf. Case & Reinelt, 1991). Naked power, however, is an unconvincing spectacle of power.

When, and for whom, does the spectacle of power fail to convince? The spectacle of power — that is, a performance staged by the ruling group — fails to convince when it is not accepted by its audience, and in more severe cases, when it even discourages the participants themselves, provoking nausea and repulsion.

As shown in *Festivals of Departing Times* (1999), enthusiasm, chaos, and rituality in Soviet spectacles shifted in a patterned way. In Belarus in the 1920s, the major Soviet festivals (the demonstrations of

7 November and 1 May) did not yet possess a rigid ritual form and stood out for their chaotic character, especially noticeable against the backdrop of later years. In the 1930s—1950s, the Soviet demonstration became disciplined and militarised: before the tribune marched ranks of soldiers, workers, athletes; armoured vehicles rolled by, and platforms carried living sculptures. In Stalin's era, the Soviet festival acquired a canonical character (Yampolskiy, 1989; Osęka, 2006).

During the Thaw, despite prescribed scenarios, the spectacle astonished with the unconstraint and creativity of demonstrators. Finally, from the 1970s, the festival became frozen. Enthusiasm diminished, and the indifference of participants was already difficult to hide in the chronicles. This lasted indefinitely — until suddenly it ended (Yurchak, 2014).

The state of naked power corresponds both to the earliest and, above all, to the latest spectacles. At the dawn of Soviet Belarus, communist demonstrations, though they might have repelled spectators for aesthetic or social reasons, still displayed the genuine enthusiasm of their participants. This was young naked power, which had not yet acquired its proper attire.

By the end of Soviet rule, however, there was an excess of such attire, while the energy to carry it had long since ebbed. Slogans at demonstrations multiplied, portraits of Politburo members proliferated, and the Presidiums barely fit onto the stage at Party congresses.

In his dissertation, Rasinski (2022) demonstrated that Soviet political spectacles (congresses, demonstrations, assemblies) followed distinctive ritual cycles. The form of the spectacle (the appearance of tribunes, staging, gestures of leaders), the length of slogans in newspapers and reports, the number of Central Committee members — and political upheavals themselves — all corresponded to phases of the cycle. Their dynamics map quite neatly onto structural-demographic theory (Turchin, 2010).

Short slogans mark the restart or the beginning of a new cycle, and this beginning may appear as young naked power; lengthy ritual phrases correspond to old naked power.

In old naked power, leaders lose their gestures, tribunes become cluttered with papers or, conversely, reduced to a bare monolith. When a leader who once gesticulated in images, pointed the way, bestowed blessings, jabbed a finger at the public, or at least held a sheet of paper in his hand, appears in the newspapers as an immobile portrait — often, quite literally, bronze — then it is highly likely that the next published photograph will be of the leader in his coffin.

Old power ossifies; the spectacle becomes rigid and unconvincing, despite the outward obedience of the public. One could say that late (naked) power loses its aura (Benjamin, 2001).

This ritual ossification, which renders spectacles unconvincing, also applies to the performances and images of the first Belarusian president. During the referendums of 1995—1996, his images with the people resembled energetic spirals (similar figures had represented Lenin and Stalin). Later, however, the spirals gave way to narcissistic ellipses, with the ruler himself placed in one — or in both — of the foci. Instead of the 'disruptive' gestures of Soviet communists, the president's images are dominated by clasped hands forming a protective, closed circle — something which does not foster dynamism either (Rasinski, 2022, pp. 299—315).

Ritual expansion also applies to the All-Belarusian People's Assemblies. At first, the state flag decorating the backdrop of the stage was modest in size. Later it grew larger — and finally, by 2016, the entire background was filled with red and green colours. After this came 2020 — when the functioning of the system changed abruptly (in 2025, there was no assembly at all).

Equally unconvincing were the most recent inauguration ceremonies. Already by 2010, the president's cortege drove through streets that were almost empty of spectators. In 2020, the ceremony took place in secret altogether. In 2025, the cortege passage was restored, but the spectators gathered by administrative command could not form a convincing crowd.

It is telling that the Belarusian autocrat, who began as a political trickster in a 'minus-costume,' eventually constructed a ritual system

overloaded with excess. Yet at the core of this cumbersome system — and here lies the key difference from the late Soviet Union — stands the body of an unpredictable, though now ageing, trickster.

Naked Power as the Body Without Dignity

In the Middle Ages, the king was understood to have two bodies (Kantorowicz, 1997). One was the mortal body — the body of the particular king, who fell ill, died, and had his own personal vices. The other was the body of eternity, the body of dignity, which guaranteed the stability and continuity of royal power and was secured by a whole system of institutions. These two bodies could even come into conflict with one another, but the body of dignity always prevailed.

In the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the king possessed a phantom body (Sowa, 2011). The nobility — collectively, in its entirety — was the body of dignity, while the actual king, as a phantom organ, mattered little in comparison to this nobility.

France went still further in such 'disappearance' of the body. After the French Revolution, when the king was sent to the guillotine, the country established a distinct body of dignity with an empty place at its centre. This empty place forms the basis of rational procedures that ensure the proper functioning of the worthy body (Lefort, 1988, p. 17).

In all these cases, the body of dignity dominated. With naked power, the picture is altogether different.

Naked power is the body without dignity. The driving force of such power is the political trickster, who seeks 'performative legitimacy' (Tannenberg, 2021), but is bound by his physical body.

The mortal body of the tyrant-trickster is proclaimed to be an eternal body, while the body of dignity, with its institutions and rules, becomes nothing more than a servant to this mortal body, brimming with situational passions.

This is precisely why, with the death of the trickster-ruler, the system he created usually dies with him, for it was not built on eternal dignity but on the whims of the present moment.

What is interesting, however, is that after the death of Lenin — who displayed certain trickster traits — the Soviet system lasted another 67 years. The reason was not only that the Communist Party functioned, in a sense, as an institution of the eternal body. Lenin's very body itself was embalmed: the dead body of the founder became a source of Soviet power. During parades, leaders ascended the Lenin Mausoleum, while beneath their feet lay the 'ever-living' mummy.

Another aspect of the political 'naked' body is tied to the state of exception.

Giorgio Agamben opposed the sovereign, who declares the state of exception, to the figure of the *Homo sacer*, who cannot be sacrificed but can be killed with impunity (Agamben, 2008a). Yet *Homo sacer* and Agamben's sovereign are connected by transitional forms (see Table 1), for the state of exception is not only declared — it is also used, and it is also lived (and outlived).

Table 1. Figures of the State of Exception

State of Exception	Agamben's Sovereign		Hero	Queen, putschist		Courtier, sycophant	Marauder	Commoner	Homo sacer
	1	2		With dignity	Without dignity				
Declares	+	+	+	+	+	—	—	—	—
Uses	+	+	—	—	—	+	+	—	—
Lives	+	—	+	—	—,+	+	-	+	—

Homo sacer does not declare a state of exception, does not make use of it, and cannot make use of it; ultimately, he does not live it, for no time belongs to him.

Agamben's sovereign occupies the opposite pole. He declares the state of exception and unquestionably uses it. He may either live it personally — harshly dealing with his subjects (as Peter I did, killing monks) — or remain separate from the exceptional situation he has established.

The commoner lives through the state of exception, much as people endure an occupation; the marauder does not live it but utilises it. Without the figure of the courtier (the sycophant), many ceremonies would be impossible.

The sovereign ruler appears unworthy when the intermediary positions of commoners, marauders, and courtiers are undermined. Yet there are still certain figures who embody naked power themselves. These figures exist in the shadow of the worthy: the hero and the queen.

The hero is intertwined with revolts and experiences them but does not make use of the state of exception; he fulfils his role without claiming status, and often explicitly refuses it. The queen may declare a state of exception over distant territories in accordance with her constitutional duties, but she neither experiences it nor uses it.

The false hero and the putschist are unworthy variants of the hero and the queen. They declare the state of exception in order to exploit it, but they suffer defeat and may not survive the political storm (as happened to some participants in the August 1991 coup in Moscow).

Experience (and endurance) are the key moments in the life of the sovereign.

Sovereign life — a life of dignity that cannot be destroyed

As Agamben noted, the Greek language did not have a single word for 'life': there was ζωή (*zoe*), referring to general, animal life, and βίος

(*bios*), indicating a socially structured life (Agamben, 2008a). However, if we look at how these words were used not in Ancient Greece but at the beginning of the Common Era, a very different picture emerges (Strong, 1890): the limited, property-bound *bios* could never approach the infinite *zoe*, which formed the basis of life, encouraged simplicity and equality, and at the same time transgressed all boundaries, filling space with excess.

This divergence between structured life and boundless life has repeatedly provoked reflection. Jean-Jacques Rousseau celebrated the blissful savage, constrained by culture; German humanists contrasted culture with civilisation; nationalist revivalists in Eastern Europe sought sources capable of dismantling existing subjugation; Mikhail Bakhtin juxtaposed the carnival with authoritarian hierarchy; numerous *communitas* nurtured in 'liminal' conditions refreshed old structures and built new ones; and the 'philosophy of life' celebrated vital energies.

Agamben values structured life, while general life is regarded by him as a worthless 'bare' life. The author of these lines, however, prefers unbounded life, viewing structured life with suspicion — as a potential source of later 'naked power.'

In any case, both structured and unstructured life can be unified under a single concept: 'life.'

Sovereign life is a life of dignity that cannot be destroyed. Such life is a communal life pursued for its own purposes and by its own will, accordingly with its own history, and, as a rule, within its own territory — although sovereign life can also exist and endure without a clearly defined territory. A shared history plays an important role in sovereign life — whether real or imagined — a history oriented not only towards the past but also towards the present and the future. Shared history constitutes a kind of narrative sovereignty, which sustains dignity.

The primary foundation of sovereign life is life itself: a life that cannot cease to exist and which seeks to fill every available niche.

The second foundation of sovereign life is dignity, guaranteed by memory and responsibility. Memory is embodied in external carriers — books, monuments — and is transmitted through collective social practices: celebrations, education, and so forth. These shared practices are supported by institutions such as schools, businesses, and the media.

Sovereign life cannot be destroyed because it incorporates death and dishonour — and the overcoming of death and dishonour. In threatening conditions, sovereign life is preserved and transmitted with regard to the 'gaps' in both physical life and the dignity of its carriers.

In the first case, some participants in sovereign life may die but become eternal heroes in collective memory. This memory is passed down through generations, despite adverse external circumstances, often solely within the family (as in occupied and partitioned Poland). The deceased heroes become guardians, guarantors, and symbols of a nation that has regained its sovereignty. However, this strategy requires a reliable mechanism for transmitting collective memory within the family and carries its costs: an obsession with the ghosts of the past and human loss.

The second strategy is one of slipping past death, a strategy of deception and masks. Sovereign life preserves itself at the expense of temporary stains on its own dignity. This is the strategy of folkloric *Nestserka* and underground partisans, who present themselves as collaborators with the occupiers. This strategy dominates in Belarus, but its costs are also evident: the risk of losing memory, identity, and of permanently becoming another; the danger that temporary stains on dignity will turn into lasting sources of shame or pride; the threat that others' masks will adhere to the face and become one's own appearance. Finally, when sovereign life changes masks, it struggles to exist without them.

Naked power acquires sovereignty when it subjugates and appropriates sovereign life. Between naked power and sovereign life, a struggle ensues for survival.

A Struggle for 'Surliving'

The Belarusian word *pierazhyvannie* encompasses three meanings: 1) surviving, enduring — the act of staying alive; this is survival itself, and the success of that survival; 2) the emotions and meanings associated with an existing situation; and finally, 3) *pierazhyvannie* as the lived experience, the very process of living under particular conditions; thence the neologism 'surliving' coined for the purposes of this essay.

After August 2020, videos appeared on Belarusian television and Telegram channels linked to the security forces, later dubbed 'confessional' videos. In these videos, beaten demonstrators admitted to opposing the established order, praised the police who had apprehended them, and disclosed personal information (such as sexual orientation and salary).

These are 'texts of coercion [...] obtained through torture, intimidation, and blackmail of participants or signatories.' As one subtype of coercive texts, confessional or 'torture videos':

> 1) consolidate the terror group and its supporters (providing them with a perverse satisfaction, although pleasure is not the primary function [...]); 2) intimidate others; 3) humiliate coerced 'actors' and 'actresses' to break their will and prevent further activity (Slounik kinaterminau, 2026).

It is important to note that torture videos demonstrate the form of life of naked power: naked power has a residual, extremely limited life that seeks to strangle the life of others (Shchytsova, 2014, p. 179). In these videos, the experiences required by naked power are imposed on sovereign life through violence: the captured must adopt the language of their captors in order to survive. But survival is also necessary for naked power, and here it struggles.

To survive, naked power must cultivate its collective body of dignity. Yet, first, this collective body requires enough vacancies and rewards to attract candidates for 'sycophantic' positions; second, it must have people to select from (amidst flight and fear).

The struggle for survival requires a developed media system. In Belarus, cinema, newspapers, and television are state-controlled, but their quality discourages engagement. In such conditions, neighbouring imperial narratives are borrowed and transmitted, posing a threat not only to society but also to power itself.

Crucially, survival and the experience of it (when trials are imbued with meaning and emotion) must be grounded in *lived experience* — daily practices of presence in reality, both spiritual and material — and rare is the naked power capable of such living.

Quiet daily practices are the foundation of sovereign life in an occupied country and the basis for a sovereign life unafraid to be visible (in exile). Not participating in the 'revival' of naked power, not giving it attention (if you are not a soldier or politician), not being the object of another's 'experience,' but experiencing for oneself, supporting friends and loved ones, and even ordinary conversation — a simple conversation in Belarusian — is an act.

Sovereign life demands the preservation of memory, care for others, and dreams of the future as a shared *to-come*. Finally, sovereign life comprises institutions filled with their own experiences. When these experiences resonate with the surrounding world, sovereign life becomes power.

Abstract

This article explores the concepts of naked (bare) power and sovereign life through the lens of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, Belarusian history, and several theoretical frameworks (anthropology of performance, semiotics, aesthetics). Naked power is defined as power that persists despite exposure, marked by improper form — an obscene absence or excess of presentation — alongside unconvincing performance and a lack of dignity. It manifests through excess or deficiency in 'costume' (literal or symbolic attire), trickster behaviour, and the creation of a state of exception. By contrast, sover-

eign life denotes a dignified existence that cannot be destroyed, grounded in collective history, memory, and responsibility. The struggle between naked power and sovereign life centres on *pierazhyvannie* – a Belarusian term encompassing survival, emotional experience, and the lived process of everyday life. Examples from Belarusian history, such as the 'penitential videos' circulated after 2020, illustrate how naked power attempts to suppress sovereign life through violence and coercion. Yet sovereign life endures in quiet practices, memory, and communal institutions.

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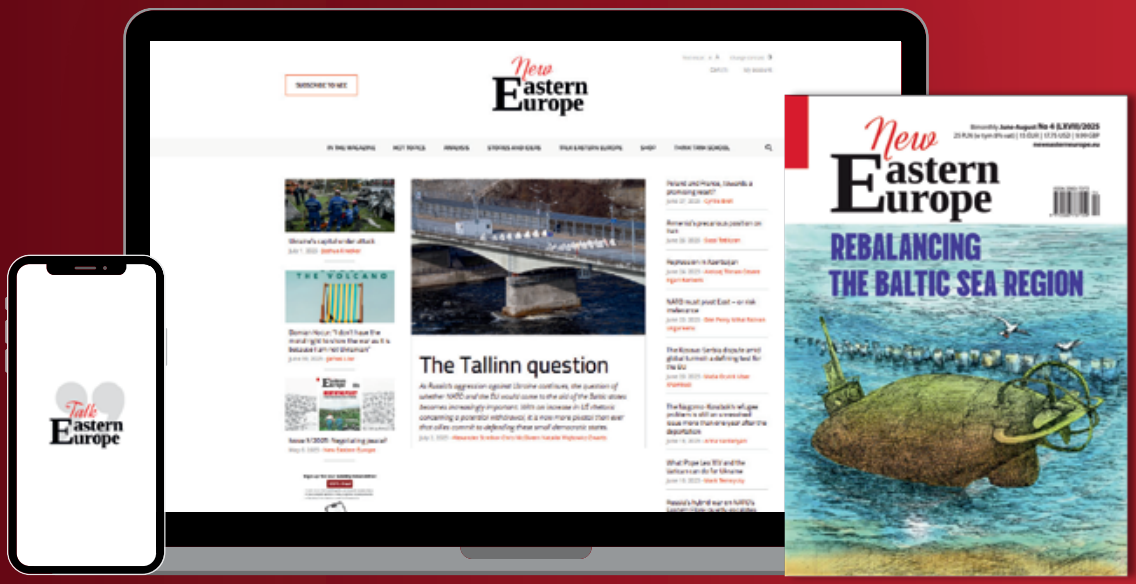

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