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RUSSIA TOMORROW:
NAVIGATING A NEW PARADIGM

# MINSK IN MOSCOW'S GRIP:
## How Russia subjugated Belarus without annexation

Hanna Liubakova

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# INTRODUCTION

For about five years, from 2015 to 2020, Belarus created an illusion that it was changing: a deceptive glimmer that suggested its leader, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, might steer his country away from Russia's orbit and toward greater independence. In hindsight, this false dawn only masked the tightening grip of Moscow.

Two myths fueled misplaced optimism. First, there was a belief that Belarus could balance between the East and West through a multivector foreign policy. Second, there was a hope that Minsk's limited reforms, release of some political prisoners, and especially its refusal to unconditionally back Moscow in the 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas signaled a liberalizing turn. Both illusions ultimately frayed during this period.

At first, Lukashenka positioned Belarus as a neutral host for peace talks on the Ukraine conflict—not a participant. The Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015 fed Western hopes: Belarus as mediator, not accomplice. Lukashenka even rejected Russian demands for a new Russian airbase in Belarusian territory, wary of appearing too dependent.

A partial thaw followed. Some Belarusian political prisoners were released. The European Union (EU) lifted sanctions. Western officials applauded Lukashenka's apparent pragmatism. Engagement resumed.

But beneath the surface, nothing fundamentally changed. The regime remained authoritarian and Soviet in ethos. The security apparatus stayed intact. Dissent was managed, not tolerated. And Moscow remained the indispensable lifeline—providing cheap energy, market access, and strategic cover.

By the end of the decade, the signs were unmistakable. Crackdowns against dissent intensified. Economic dependence on Moscow deepened. Russia's regional aggression hardened. The scaffolding of sovereignty remained, but the core was hollow.

When mass protests erupted in 2020 and the West recoiled at the regime's violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators in 2020, Lukashenka had only one direction to turn. The illusion of neutrality collapsed. So did the myth of a buffer state. What had once looked like strategic balance was instead a drift toward absorption into Russia.

A rapid unraveling ensued. After the extreme crackdown on protesters came the forced landing of a Ryanair flight to detain a dissident journalist, and the weaponization of migration at EU borders, both in 2021. Clearly, Lukashenka was no longer playing both sides. He had chosen one—and it was Moscow's.

This report examines how Belarus moved from close relations with Russia to full-scale integration under the Kremlin. From political alignment to economic subjugation. From linguistic erasure to cultural annexation. What looked like independence was dependency in disguise.

Yet beneath this transformation lies a deeper truth: Belarusians themselves have not chosen this path. Public opinion surveys consistently show opposition to war and to nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil. They reject the loss of sovereignty and the transformation of Belarus into a Russian-controlled satellite. The regime has chosen absorption. The people have not.

The following chapters trace Belarus's evolution into a de facto Russian outpost: militarily, politically, diplomatically, economically, and culturally. It also outlines strategic options for ensuring that Belarus's future is not decided solely in Moscow.

# SOVEREIGNTY ERODED: HOW BELARUS BECAME A RUSSIAN SATELLITE

Lukashenka's proclaimed neutrality during Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine was always a fiction. Belarus remained a loyal authoritarian ally, making no meaningful reforms. Still, until 2020, Minsk maintained a degree of strategic flexibility, balancing deep ties with Moscow against limited outreach to the West and to China. Now, however, the question is no longer whether Belarus is drifting into Russia's orbit but how much autonomy Lukashenka still retains.

From the start of his presidency in 1994, Lukashenka aligned himself with Moscow, consolidating domestic power by dismantling democratic institutions and suppressing dissent. He courted Russian elites and even positioned himself in the 1990s as a possible successor to President Boris Yeltsin, garnering the support of some nationalists in Russia. His ambition culminated in the 1999 Union State Treaty, a blueprint for deep integration: shared currency, joint institutions, and equal rights for citizens. But when Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, Lukashenka's dreams of entering the Kremlin were dashed. Putin used that treaty to attempt to end Belarusian sovereignty.

As a result, for over two decades, Lukashenka stalled implementation of the Union State Treaty, using the illusion of progress to extract economic concessions from the Kremlin—especially cheap energy—while avoiding genuine integration.

That strategy started to unravel in the late 2010s. Frustrated by Minsk's endless demands for cheaper energy prices, Moscow began tying economic support to political concessions. In 2019, the two sides drafted thirty-one road maps for integration. Lukashenka sought better economic terms; Moscow wanted alignment. When Belarusians protested, he let the demonstrations proceed: a signal to Putin that public backlash might limit his flexibility.

Everything changed after the fraudulent 2020 presidential election, in which Lukashenka claimed victory over popular opposition forces led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Mass protests left Lukashenka isolated and unrecognized by the West. Desperate, he turned fully to Moscow, and Putin seized the opportunity. In November 2021, Belarus and Russia formally endorsed twenty-eight Union State programs, reviving integration plans that aimed to harmonize legal systems, unify markets, and align policies in energy, finance, customs, and taxation. Though framed as cooperation, these measures eroded Belarusian sovereignty.

Implementation continues today with minimal transparency. Lukashenka maintains vague, noncommittal rhetoric, but the direction is clear: Moscow is embedding itself deeper into the Belarusian state. If enacted in full, these reforms would strip Belarus of real independence in key areas of governance.

The most sensitive areas—oil, gas, taxation, and customs—expose the imbalance. While the creation of a joint energy market remains stalled and more controversial steps like a single currency or union parliament have been deferred, integration is advancing quietly. A unified tax system is particularly telling. It includes a common policy, a supranational committee, and a Russian-designed digital platform with access to centralized taxpayer data. Lukashenka insists Belarus still makes its own decisions, but Moscow now has unprecedented access to its economic infrastructure.

The same dynamic plays out in customs. Lukashenka's proposed joint customs group, framed as merely advisory, opens the door to deeper dependency. The more Russia shapes Belarus's regulatory and administrative frameworks, the less independent Minsk becomes as bureaucracies are built to serve Moscow's interests.

Technically, Belarus retains sovereignty—just as other members of Russia-led blocs do, including the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These alliances offer the illusion of multilateralism, but are structured to preserve Russian dominance.

Russia's intentions are not subtle. In a 2021 essay, Putin asserted that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians form a "triune Russian nation," denying Belarus a distinct identity. Lukashenka has echoed this logic, repeatedly affirming Belarus's eternal closeness to Russia. Yet he continues to resist full annexation. Maintaining the appearance of sovereignty helps him contain domestic resistance and preserve what limited international engagement remains. For now, Russia seems content with this arrangement: decisive control without the complications of formal annexation.

Most Belarusians support independence. But every concession, every road map, chips away at the country's ability to determine its future. Lukashenka has traded that future to retain power. Belarus remains a state in name—but, increasingly, a satellite in function.

# MILITARY MERGER: FROM TROUBLESOME ALLY TO ARMED OUTPOST

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO's eastern flank faced a new reality. Belarus opened its skies, railways, and military infrastructure to support Moscow's assault.

What began as logistical support has since evolved into something far more permanent: the transformation of Belarus into a de facto military outpost of the Russian state. Behind the facade of sovereignty, Lukashenka's regime has traded independence for protection, welcoming Russian troops, hardware, and even nuclear weapons onto Belarusian soil.

Before 2022, Russia's permanent military presence in Belarus was limited to two Soviet-era facilities: the Hantsavichy missile warning station and the Vileyka naval communication center. Moscow sought to expand its footprint as early as 2013, aiming for permanent bases and deploying fighter jets. But Lukashenka resisted. Particularly after Russia's annexation of Crimea and armed intervention in the Donbas in early 2014, he avoided the optics of occupation, maintaining the appearance of a balancing act between the East and West. He hosted the Minsk peace talks, freed some political prisoners, courted Western engagement, and even refrained from recognizing Crimea's annexation, while publicly mocking the Kremlin's "Russian World" ideology.

That balancing act ended after the August 2020 fraudulent election and the mass protests that followed, when Lukashenka relied heavily on Moscow's political and security support to stay in power. By early February 2022 when Belarus held a constitutional referendum—under conditions of repression and with no genuine debate—that ended the country's nuclear-free status. The timing was no coincidence: Within days, Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. And Belarus was complicit from day one.

Since then, Belarus has allowed its territory and infrastructure to be used by Russian forces. Military and civilian airfields—including Homiel airport—have served as operational hubs for launching missile and drone attacks, conducting maintenance, and supporting logistics for Russian military operations against Ukraine.

But Belarus provided more than runways. Its integrated air defense systems, navigation networks, and flight control infrastructure supported Russian operations. The Mazyr Oil Refinery fueled the war machine. Belarusian railways became arteries of invasion, shuttling tanks, troops, and ammunition across the Ukrainian border. Belarusian roads, depots, and logistics hubs sustained the assault on Kyiv.

By December 2022, the depth of this integration became unmistakable. Putin announced that Belarusian SU-25 aircraft would be modified to carry nuclear weapons and that Russia's Iskander-M missile systems—capable of carrying nuclear payloads—had been delivered to Belarus. Because the operational control remained with Russia, the symbolic shift was profound.

Meanwhile, Belarus's defense industry quietly joined the war effort: repairing Russian tanks, modernizing aircraft, and supplying optical systems for missiles. Trains loaded with weapons and parts began moving in both directions, solidifying a more profound military-industrial interdependence.

Between February 2022 and March 2023, more than seven hundred missiles were launched from Belarus into Ukraine. However, as the front lines stabilized, Belarus's role shifted from an active launchpad to a strategic rear base.

In October 2022, as Ukrainian counteroffensives gained ground, Minsk and Moscow activated the Regional Grouping of Forces (RGF), a bilateral military formation that provided legal cover for new Russian deployments. Around nine thousand Russian troops, along with hundreds of tanks and artillery systems, arrived in Belarus under a joint command. The RGF marked a turning point: ad hoc cooperation became institutionalized military integration.

By mid-2023, most Russian troops deployed under the RGF had withdrawn, likely due to manpower constraints elsewhere. But the infrastructure remained—ready for rapid reactivation.

In March 2023, Putin announced that Russia had reached an agreement with Belarus to station tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory, with the construction of a special storage facility to be completed by July. The establishment of a Russian military base complete with nuclear weapons would significantly increase Moscow's leverage over Belarus and cement Putin's grip on the country.

By early 2023, Belarusian crews had completed training on using the Iskander tactical missile system for potential nuclear strikes. However, independent monitors have found no visual evidence of actual nuclear weapon deployments in Belarus, casting doubt on whether Moscow's nuclear rhetoric reflects the reality on the ground.

Throughout 2024, Belarus adopted a new military doctrine that codified deeper integration with Russia's armed forces. For the first time, it explicitly allowed the deployment and potential use of Russian tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory—framed as a deterrent against external threats. In practice, the doctrine handed Moscow strategic leverage near NATO's borders, while letting Lukashenka claim a protective nuclear umbrella at home. The price was a further erosion of Belarusian autonomy.

Even as Russian MiG-31K fighters armed with hypersonic Kinzhal missiles maintained their presence on Belarusian territory, keeping Ukraine's air defenses on constant alert, the relationship was becoming institutionalized rather than episodic.

In December 2024, Russia and Belarus signed the Treaty on Security Guarantees under the Union State framework. The agreement enabled permanent Russian bases and deployments in Belarus and committed both sides to mutual defense—including in response to threats against "sovereignty" or "constitutional order." It further folded Belarus into Russia's nuclear deterrence strategy.

As of mid-2025, roughly two thousand Russian military personnel remain in Belarus, including air defense units and aerospace forces. Russian operations continue from key locations, such as the Mazyr (Bokau) and Ziabrauka airfields.

New satellite imagery from May 2025 revealed expanded infrastructure at the Asipovichy base: new fencing, loading platforms, and air defenses—all consistent with preparations for storing and potentially deploying tactical nuclear weapons.

While Belarus has gestured toward de-escalation, suggesting it might scale back the Zapad-2025 joint exercises with Russia, these moves are largely symbolic and likely reflect Russia's shifting priorities on the battlefield rather than a genuine reduction in military activity. In September, separate large-scale drills took place—both the Zapad-2025 exercises and joint CSTO operations—keeping the region on edge.

Meanwhile, Minsk confirmed plans to host the Oreshnik missile system; Russia has already used this system in strikes against Ukraine. For Lukashenka, this is both a pledge of loyalty to Putin and a way to remain strategically indispensable.

In less than three years, Belarus has transitioned from a reluctant ally to a satellite state. Lukashenka has surrendered control over the country's military and security policy in exchange for Kremlin backing. The result: Belarus is now a forward base for Russian aggression—potentially with nuclear weapons.

This development reshapes NATO's eastern frontier, attempts to legitimize the forward deployment of Russian nuclear assets, and dismantles the boundaries between sovereign ally and subjugated proxy. The implications are stark. A former buffer state has become a Russian military outpost. Belarus is on the front line of Russia's war against Ukraine and the West.

# FROM FENCE-SITTER TO FOOT SOLDIER: HOW BELARUS LOST ITS FOREIGN POLICY

After Lukashenka spent decades creating the illusion of maneuvering between the East and West to preserve regime autonomy, poof—it's gone. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Belarus's foreign policy has collapsed into a one-way street leading straight to Moscow.

Facing sweeping Western sanctions and mounting isolation, the Belarusian regime claims to be pivoting toward Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Officials describe this reorientation as a strategic reset, aimed at offsetting annual losses estimated at $16 billion to $18 billion due to sanctions. But the pivot is largely rhetorical. Minsk's global engagement has narrowed to improvised alliances, symbolic gestures, and tactical outreach.

Lukashenka's facade of neutrality—avoiding recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea and refraining from endorsement of Kremlin claims over Abkhazia and South Ossetia—crumbled in 2021 when he acknowledged Crimea as Russian territory. By 2024, he was hosting bilateral meetings with Denis Pushilin, the Moscow-backed head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic.

At the United Nations, Belarus has become one of Moscow's most reliable allies. On March 2, 2022, it was one of just five countries to vote against a resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine—alongside North Korea, Eritrea, Syria, and Russia itself. Diplomatic independence has all but evaporated.

Western sanctions have gutted Belarus's traditional export markets. In 2019, Belarus exported goods valued at $8.5 billion to the EU. By 2024, that figure had dropped to just over $1 billion. Potash, oil products, and timber—key sources of revenue—have been hard-hit.

In response, Lukashenka launched an outreach campaign focused on the Global South. He visited Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, promising closer ties and "anti-colonial solidarity." Yet these trips have produced little beyond vague memoranda and photo ops. The case of Zimbabwe is telling: Lukashenka offered tractors and equipment, and trade reached $25 million in 2021. More significant, however, are Belarusian elite links to Zimbabwe's gold and lithium sectors, and growing military ties between the two regimes. These are not signs of diversification, but transactions rooted in authoritarian clientelism.

Nowhere is the asymmetry of Belarus's foreign policy more visible than in its relationship with China. While Minsk promotes Beijing as a key partner, the reality is marked by caution, imbalance, and diminishing returns. Lukashenka's fifteenth visit to Beijing, delayed until June 2025, was described in state media as "family style," which sounds like a cozy familiarity but produced no major agreements.

Belarus remains a logistical node in China's Belt and Road Initiative, but its value has declined amid the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions. In 2024, Lukashenka announced fifteen new "strategic" Chinese investment projects totaling three billion dollars, but much of this support is conditional and geared toward Chinese interests. The China-Belarus Industrial Park Great Stone lacks fresh momentum. With Western investors gone, it increasingly targets Russian and domestic firms.

Belarus's 2024 accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was meant to signal a turn from the West. In practice, trade with China is lopsided. Belarus exports potash and foodstuffs, while importing higher-value Chinese machinery and electronics. Belarusian defense firms are incorporating Chinese components into optics used by Russian tanks. In July 2024, Chinese and Belarusian troops held joint drills near NATO's borders. The two countries have also codeveloped the Polonez multiple-launch rocket system.

Even as formal economic cooperation stalls, Lukashenka remains politically useful to Beijing. His public support for China on the status of Taiwan and Hong Kong reinforces shared authoritarian alignment. As China expands its global reach, Belarus's transit infrastructure may retain some relevance. But the broader partnership remains shallow. China is watching carefully, but is not investing heavily. Not yet.

With traditional diplomacy in ruins, Minsk has embraced a model of "shadow diplomacy," a murky blend of military deals, sanctions evasion, and autocratic alignment. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as a key enabler. A UAE-based company acquired the Belarusian arm of Austria's Raiffeisen Bank after it came under pressure to exit. Investigative journalists from the Belarusian Investigative Center (BIC) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) network have alleged Dubai's involvement in laundering Belarusian assets through shell companies.

Ties with Iran have deepened. Since 2023, Minsk and Tehran have signed a string of defense agreements. A 2023 *Kyiv Post* article, citing unconfirmed reports and Western analysts, suggested Belarus may begin producing Iranian Shahed drones. During the 2024 military parade in Minsk, Belarus showcased its domestically produced "Geran" strike drones—closely resembling the Iranian Shahed-136 model widely used by Russia in Ukraine—marking their first public appearance. Defense ministers have met repeatedly, underscoring the growing military dimension of the partnership.

Meanwhile, Belarus is bypassing Western restrictions via new trade corridors. In 2024, the port of Makhachkala in Dagestan began handling Belarusian potash as part of the North-South Transport Corridor linking Russia and Iran.

Despite occasional overtures, such as Lukashenka's claimed willingness to mediate peace or restore dialogue with Washington, the regime shows no signs of meaningful reform. Recent prisoner releases have been tokenistic, used as bargaining chips rather than a shift in policy.

Belarus's foreign messaging now mirrors the Kremlin's almost entirely. From Ukraine to NATO to US policy, Minsk speaks with Moscow's voice. The country that once sought to straddle the East-West divide has become, decisively, a satellite of its eastern neighbor.

# HOSTILE TAKEOVER: RUSSIA'S CONTROL OF BELARUS'S ECONOMY

Since 2020, Belarus has undergone a profound economic shift: not toward growth or innovation, but into near-total dependence on Russia. What may look to some like recovery is, in fact, economic subjugation. Following a 4.7 percent decline in gross domestic product (GDP) in 2022 due to Western sanctions, the Belarusian economy rebounded by 4 percent in 2024, according to the World Bank. But this growth was driven to a large extent by Russian demand. Today, nearly every major Belarusian export, investment, and banking channel runs through Moscow. Belarusian factories feed Putin's war machine, the Russian ruble dominates the Belarusian ruble, and tens of thousands of skilled workers have fled to EU countries. This is not a partnership—it's an economic takeover. Russia no longer needs troops in Belarus to control it; it already controls the country through trade, credit, and industry.

State-owned enterprises have been systematically repurposed to support the Kremlin's war in Ukraine. Electronics firms like Integral and JSC Planar, once producers of civilian components, now supply Russian weapons manufacturers. Backed by nearly $120 million in Russian investment, Integral produces microchips found in Russian cruise missiles. Legmash in Orsha, which once manufactured textile machinery, now produces components for the Grad multiple rocket launchers. StankoGomel builds machine tools for the Russian arms industry. Textile giant Mogotex signed a contract with Chechnya's Erzu to produce military uniforms.

Even before the full-scale invasion, Belarus played a significant role in Russia's military supply chains, but recent disclosures reveal a dramatic escalation. By early 2025, according to BelPol, a group of anti-regime former security officers, at least 287 Belarusian state enterprises have become involved in producing weapons, components, or munitions for Russia, with the real figure potentially approaching 500 when private firms are included. Belarusian factories now manufacture or supply everything from artillery shells and rocket parts to drones and electronics components, making the country a crucial node in the Russian military-industrial complex.

Belarus's economy has long mirrored its authoritarian politics: centralized, state-controlled, and resistant to market reforms. Under Lukashenka, state-owned enterprises still account for more than half of GDP. This Soviet-style model prioritizes loyalty over innovation—a vulnerability Putin has exploited.

Today, up to 70 percent of Belarus's exports flow to Russia. When including transit through Russian-controlled ports and railways, Moscow effectively controls more than 90 percent of Belarus's outbound trade.

This near-total dependence extends beyond simple trade flows. With traditional European export routes blocked, Belarus has become locked into Russian transit corridors. In 2023, Belarusian exporters utilized twenty Russian ports, double the number from the previous year. Even goods destined for third countries must pass through Russia, inflating costs and shrinking profit margins. Key exports, such as potash and oil products, are especially vulnerable, with state-owned producer Belaruskali facing costly delays at Russian-controlled ports.

Moreover, Belarus's fiscal survival depends almost entirely on Russian support. The country owes roughly eight billion dollars in intergovernmental loans to Russia, making it Moscow's largest debtor. Last year, Russia granted a seven-year deferral on debt repayments—effectively writing a blank check to preserve Lukashenka's loyalty.

The Belarusian ruble is informally pegged to a currency basket, half of which is the Russian ruble, meaning it rises and falls with Moscow's economic fortunes, limiting Minsk's ability to pursue an independent monetary policy.

Russian banks now handle an increasing share of Belarusian exports, while local financial institutions have been integrated into Russia's payment and messaging systems. Western sanctions have forced Belarus to adopt Russian digital infrastructure—from tax administration tools to consumer payment platforms—further eroding what remains of its economic sovereignty.

In 2024, more than half of foreign direct investment in Belarus came from Russia. Under the banner of "import substitution" and joint ventures, Russian firms aren't merely filling gaps left by departing Western companies, they're systematically displacing Belarusian competitors in a quiet economic conquest.

For Belarusian manufacturers, access to the Russian market represents both a lifeline and a trap. The more dependent they become on Russian demand, the more vulnerable they are to Moscow's political whims. In critical sectors, Russia has evolved from the largest customer to the sole customer, giving Putin effective veto power over Belarus's industrial base.

This process is hollowing out Belarus's economy from within. Domestic policies—such as price freezes and retaliatory sanctions—have only added strain. Prices are rising, and consumer choice is shrinking. When Lukashenka occasionally pushes back, such as blocking McDonald's rebranding to Russia's "Vkusno i Tochka" (which means "Tasty, Period") and instead insisting on a Belarusian brand, these gestures prove meaningless against the broader trajectory of economic surrender.

Nowhere is Belarus's decline more visible than in its once-thriving information technology (IT) sector, formerly a symbol of innovation and Western integration. The transformation has been devastating: IT exports plummeted 45 percent from $3.2 billion in 2021 to $1.8 billion in 2023, while the sector shed over 19,000 workers.

Russian investors, who previously comprised just 10 percent of foreign IT involvement, now account for nearly a third of the market. While these contracts offer short-term stability, they represent a strategic dead end: constraining growth potential, limiting global market access, and tying Belarus's technological future to Russia's isolated digital ecosystem.

The brain drain extends beyond IT. As Belarus's most talented professionals flee westward, the country loses not just individual expertise but entire innovation networks that took decades to build. This hemorrhaging of human capital ensures Belarus's long-term economic stagnation regardless of short-term Russian subsidies.

# CULTURAL HEGEMONY: THE APPROPRIATION OF MEDIA AND EDUCATION

Moscow is attempting to methodically redefine what it means to be Belarusian. Since the mass protests following the flawed election of August 2020, the Kremlin has fused its propaganda machine with Minsk's state media, rewritten school curricula, and flooded the cultural sphere with programming promoting "brotherly unity." The objective is unmistakable: erase the idea that Belarus can stand apart from Russia.

Russian cash and consultants now dictate prime-time narratives across Belarusian television. A joint history textbook portrays Belarus as a junior branch of Russian civilization, while concert stages and museums celebrate Kremlin-approved myths, silencing dissenting voices. This soft-power offensive, reinforced by Lukashenka's brutal repression, amounts to a slow-motion annexation of memory and identity.

The transformation began in August 2020, when Belarusian state media workers walked off the job to protest the regime's violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators. Almost immediately, rumors spread that Russian journalists—particularly from Kremlin-backed outlets like RT—had replaced them. Lukashenka fueled the speculation by publicly thanking Russian media, while RT admitted only to "advising" local teams.

Soon after, state channels began parroting Moscow's talking points. Anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric surged. When Russia launched its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Lukashenka was framed as a bystander, even as Belarusian territory was used as a launchpad for missile strikes and military operations.

Russia isn't just influencing Belarusian media—it's bankrolling it. In 2025, a new Union State joint media holding is set to launch with a budget of one billion Russian rubles (approximately eleven million dollars), headquartered in Moscow with a representative office in Minsk. The venture will encompass television, radio, and print outlets, marking a significant step toward media integration under the Kremlin direction. In February, RT hosted a two-day "media school" at the

Russian House in Minsk, an unmistakable effort to cultivate a new generation of regime-aligned Belarusian journalists.

Independent outlets, by contrast, are suffocating. Since 2020, the Information Ministry has blocked about eighteen thousand websites, branding nearly seven thousand as "extremist." Dozens of newsrooms have fled abroad; those that remain work under constant threat. For most Belarusians, uncensored news is becoming increasingly scarce.

After the 2020 protests, the regime also sharply curtailed academic freedom. Student activism is met with expulsions, imprisonment, forced "repentance" videos, and mobile court trials held at universities. The government has intensified its ideological campaign, blaming "internet technologies" and foreign influence for corrupting students and responding with stricter controls on campus life.

This campaign extends into all areas of student life. In 2023, Belarus's largest university banned Valentine's Day, citing it as "too Western," following a previous ban on Halloween for similar reasons. Since 2024, military training has been introduced into curricula, and even kindergartens now host military-themed events.

The state is also strangling educational choice. Licensing rules adopted in 2022 shut dozens of private schools and those that have survived face intrusive oversight. Belarusian-language teaching is in decline: Fewer than one in ten pupils study it, and no university offers a full Belarusian curriculum. In 1999, 86 percent of citizens identified Belarusian as their native language; by 2019, that figure had dropped to 61 percent and continued to fall.

At the same time, Belarusians are being steered toward Russian universities. State-funded places for Belarusians at Russian universities jumped from seventy-two in 2019 to 1,300 in 2023—plus an unprecedented 30,000-seat quota through the Rossotrudnichestvo exchange program. The Kremlin is grooming a generation whose professional networks and intellectual loyalties lie in the East, not the West.

Russia's cultural dominance in Belarus has grown in parallel with its political and media influence. Joint exhibitions, concerts, and museum partnerships—especially those highlighting shared military history—further embed Belarus within Russia's ideological orbit.

Events like the Slavianski Bazaar celebrate "Slavic unity," but the content increasingly serves pro-Kremlin narratives. Russian artists who openly support Moscow's foreign policy are welcomed, while Belarusian and Western performers and authors critical of the war in Ukraine or Lukashenka's regime are banned.

Since 2020, independent Belarusian culture has been gutted. State funding has shifted toward Russian-backed projects, leaving little room for local voices. The result is a cultural landscape where Belarus's distinct identity is increasingly blurred and, in many cases, erased.

# WHAT BELARUSIANS REALLY WANT

Most Belarusians aren't choosing Russia's path—they're being dragged down it.

While the Kremlin tightens its grip on Belarus's military, economy, and foreign policy, public opinion tells a very different story. Independent polling consistently shows that the Belarusian people reject war, oppose Russian nuclear deployments, and are uneasy about their country's deepening dependence on Moscow.

Over 85 percent of Belarusians oppose sending troops to fight in Russia's war against Ukraine, and more than half disapprove of missile attacks launched from Belarusian soil. These numbers have remained remarkably stable over time, signaling deep and consistent anti-war sentiment that transcends political divisions. Belarusians want stability, but not if it means becoming a launchpad for Russian aggression.

Russian nuclear weapons represent another red line. Two-thirds of Belarusians oppose their deployment on Belarusian territory, though support has ticked up slightly since Moscow reportedly moved tactical nuclear weapons into the country in 2023. This resistance to militarization extends to broader security arrangements. Support for remaining in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization dropped from 63 percent in 2020 to 54 percent in 2023. When Russia invaded Ukraine, more Belarusians briefly preferred remaining outside any military bloc than staying in the CSTO—showing growing distrust of Russian-led alliances. These trends suggest Belarusians are not deeply attached to such alliances and may be open to neutrality or alternative security options.

Geopolitical preferences reveal a more complex picture. While half of Belarusians still back an alliance with Russia, 16 percent favor alignment with the EU, and 30 percent support neutrality. More telling, 57 percent believe Belarus should improve ties with the EU, with 37 percent specifically wanting stronger trade relationships.

Support for NATO remains low, between 6 percent and 11 percent, typically, but this reflects mistrust on all sides, limited access to open debate, and years of regime-driven anti-Western messaging rather than wholehearted embrace of Russia. Importantly, even among those who back integration with Russia, few envision a single state. Belarusians may accept cooperation, but not annexation.

Media access explains much of this complexity. Among those who rely on state-controlled media, 63 percent support closer ties with Russia and only 2

percent support EU integration. However, among consumers of independent media, the numbers flip: 44 percent support moving toward Europe, while just 11 percent back greater integration with Russia.

This data point carries profound implications for Western strategy. Propaganda works, but only when it monopolizes the conversation. Where independent journalism survives, even underground or in exile, it shapes opinions and maintains space for alternative futures. Belarusians who access independent information are more likely to oppose war, support Ukraine, and envision a sovereign development path.

The regime may have crushed street protests, but resistance persists through underground sabotage, cyber leaks, and digital dissent. These aren't isolated acts of defiance; they signal a society that refuses to surrender its agency.

Belarusians are not ideologues. They are pragmatic. While geopolitical views are fragmented, public support for economic reforms is strong. Nearly 80 percent support fair competition between the public and private sectors. Most also want stock market development, tax cuts for small businesses, and less state interference.

That said, there are anxieties. Inflation, shrinking social safety nets, and the risk of economic shock are real concerns. Attitudes are nuanced: people support market mechanisms but fear short-term pain. Trust in the business elite is limited, but support for entrepreneurship is high.

The regime's choices do not reflect the will of the Belarusian people. Most Belarusians oppose the war, reject nuclear deployments, and favor neutrality over dependence on Moscow. Despite repression and propaganda, quiet resistance persists: in attitudes, media habits, and daily acts of dissent. This gap between state and society is strategic. The regime is brittle; the people are not. Western policy must begin here: Belarus is not lost, and its future is still in play.

# CONCLUSION

Belarus has not been formally annexed, but it has been absorbed. Militarily, politically, economically, and culturally, it has become a Russian outpost: a launchpad for aggression and repression alike. Yet this transformation is not complete, and it is not irreversible. The Belarusian regime survives through coercion and dependence, not legitimacy. Beneath the surface lies a society that still aspires to sovereignty, stability, and connection to the democratic world.

This report has shown how absorption happened, sector by sector—but also why it matters. A captive Belarus threatens NATO's flank, enables Kremlin aggression, and offers a template for authoritarian consolidation elsewhere. For the United States and its allies, the time to act is now. Containing Russia, defending Europe, and supporting democracy all run through Minsk. The path to long-term regional security runs not only through Kyiv but also through a free and sovereign Belarus.

## BELARUS IN THE BALANCE: STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR US AND ALLIED POLICY

The West can no longer afford to treat Belarus as a sideshow. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Belarus has become a critical platform for Kremlin aggression: militarily, economically, and ideologically. Restoring Belarusian sovereignty is now a strategic imperative for NATO's eastern security and the broader defense of democratic values.

To counter Belarus's deepening alignment with Russia, Western policymakers must adopt a four-part strategy: reframe Belarus as a frontline issue, enforce synchronized pressure, build democratic resilience, and prepare for regime rupture.

**First**, the United States must elevate Belarus as a national security priority. It should be fully integrated into NATO and EU threat assessments, treated alongside Ukraine and the Baltic states in strategic planning. Russian bases, nuclear deployments, and hybrid threats from Belarus are not theoretical: They are already altering Europe's security landscape.

**Second**, sanctions must be expanded, enforced, and fully aligned with allies. Belarus is a central hub for sanctions evasion and war logistics, leveraging smuggling networks, trade rerouting, and Russian support. The United States, the EU, and the Group of Seven should synchronize measures against Belarus's military-industrial complex, financial institutions, and dual-use sectors, extend secondary sanctions to enablers in China, Iran, and elsewhere, and close loopholes to raise the cost of Minsk's subjugation to Moscow and deter further aggression.

**Third**, pressure must be matched by investment in Belarusian democratic infrastructure. This includes independent media, secure digital tools, exile education, and cultural preservation. These aren't symbolic; they sustain the capacity for democratic self-rule and offer a credible alternative to Kremlin domination.

American leadership is vital. Appointing a US special envoy for the Belarusian democratic forces would centralize policy coordination and ensure Belarus stays on the transatlantic agenda. Belarusian democratic leaders must also be present in any future diplomatic process on postwar regional security. No high-level engagement with Lukashenka should resume until more than one thousand political prisoners are freed.

Thanks to US mediation, a number of Belarusian political prisoners and foreign nationals have been freed this year. This humanitarian track should continue. However, it is crucial not to legitimize Lukashenka or ease pressure prematurely. The United States must adopt long-term strategic thinking on Belarus. Ultimately, Western policy should be guided by the understanding that only a democratic Belarus can ensure lasting stability for the entire region.

Finally, contingency planning is essential. Lukashenka's regime is fragile. The West must be prepared for scenarios ranging from internal collapse to Russian destabilization. Planning should cover political transition, humanitarian assistance, and infrastructure security. Clear public guarantees of post-Lukashenka support—from economic aid to security cooperation—could hasten regime erosion and incentivize elite defections.

Belarus's future must be embedded in the broader strategy to end the war in Ukraine and roll back authoritarian influence. A free Belarus would deny Moscow a key launchpad, reduce NATO's exposure, and weaken Russian and Chinese leverage in the region.

The window for action is narrowing. A coherent Western strategy that combines pressure with preparation can still tip the balance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Hanna Liubakova** is a Belarusian journalist and political analyst. She is a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and has reported on developments in Belarus for international outlets including the *Washington Post,* the *Economist*, and others.

Liubakova began her career at Belsat TV, the only independent Belarusian television channel, which has been banned by the regime in Minsk. She later worked for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) in Prague, Czechia, and is currently writing a book about Belarus.

Her reporting has earned multiple honors, including the Freedom of the Media Award from the Transatlantic Leadership Network and the One Young World Journalist of the Year Award. She was also a finalist for the European Press Prize. In retaliation for her work, the Lukashenka regime sentenced her in absentia to ten years in prison. She is wanted by authorities in Russia and across all Commonwealth of Independent States countries.

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