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Introduction

Demonstrations in the build-up to Belarusian elections on 9th August 2020 have led to a spike in interest from politicians, analysts, and the media in the West. Commentators point to a variety of factors which suggest that this electoral cycle is more contested than in the past: the spread of protest to areas beyond Minsk and among the middle-class; the numbers willing to nominate challengers hailing from outside the traditional opposition; and polls suggesting that the President commands very little public support.1

Elections also follow a turbulent period in foreign relations for Belarus. While normally assumed to play a relatively stable role as a junior partner to Russia, long-term President Lukashenka has pursued greater strategic autonomy since 2014. This has led to growing attention from both Russia and the West.

As relations between Russia and ‘the West’ have soured Belarus has arguably become the latest arena in their competition for influence in the ‘shared neighbourhood’. While foreign and security policy is a minor issue on the election campaign within Belarus,6 the actions of both Russia and the West in and after elections will have significant implications for Belarus’ domestic and international trajectory in the years ahead. In turn, this will have important consequences not just for Belarus but for wider European security.

Moscow has applied substantial pressure to encourage Lukashenka to revert to a closer foreign and security policy, and to integrate the two countries more deeply.2 Meanwhile, the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom have swallowed concerns about human rights abuses to court Minsk on to a Western trajectory. They have delivered a range of positive incentives including visa liberalisation,3 military training,4 senior visits, and the resumption of Ambassadorial appointments.5

“In 2017, ELN identified a political crisis in Belarus as one of the most likely triggers of a potential NATO-Russia confrontation.”
policymakers in the West. This is a dangerous mistake.

Belarus occupies a critical position alongside the Suwalki Gap: the narrow strip of land which connects the Baltic states to Poland and the rest of NATO; as well as linking the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad to Belarus, formally Russia’s military ally. The ‘gap’ has long been held as one of the most dangerous areas on the NATO-Russia contact line.8 In 2017, ELN identified a political crisis in Belarus as one of the most likely triggers of a potential NATO-Russia confrontation.9

Demonstrations and subsequent crackdowns are a common feature of the Belarusian electoral cycle, and it remains unlikely that they are a prelude to an imminent political crisis. However, they do point to more fundamental challenges facing Belarus in the years ahead.10 The way in which Russia and the West interpret and respond to these challenges may have significant implications for European security and NATO-Russia relations. Given this comes in the context of an increasingly confrontational and distrustful NATO-Russia relationship, and of continuing military build-up in the region, the risks are significant.

To avoid a misstep, it is crucial that policymakers in the West and in Russia take steps to mitigate the most substantial risks, and begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of their interests in Belarus which goes beyond a zero-sum competition for influence.

This brief seeks to highlight both the challenges and what is at stake in Belarus. It proposes a set of non-exhaustive scenarios as a heuristic tool for policymakers to develop the institutional networks required and to deepen understanding of their interests and options in Belarus. Finally, the report recommends that policymakers:

1. **Invest now in the institutional networks, contextual understanding and strategic planning required to respond to future developments in Belarus based on a fuller and more heuristic understanding of interests and regional security dynamics.**

2. **Recognise the mutual benefits of Belarusian security guarantees and take steps to protect them.**

3. **Adopt a politically sensitive and human security centred approach to economic relations with Belarus.**

4. **Take steps now which reduce the risk of a confrontation in any crisis, and which enhance predictability and transparency in and around the Suwalki Gap.**
Security Risks: between Russia and NATO

Political instability in Belarus matters not only for humanitarian or academic reasons. The country occupies a critical and underappreciated position in European security dynamics. The potential risks associated with instability in Belarus are heightened by the proximity of NATO and Russian military assets in the Baltics.

The Suwalki Gap

Belarus is situated at a critical geographic position alongside the Suwalki Gap. The ‘gap’ is a narrow strip forming the Poland-Lithuania border. It provides the only land corridor connecting Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia with Poland and other NATO allies. It simultaneously acts as the only land corridor between the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and a Russian military ally, Belarus. It provides the venue of a textbook definition of the classical security dilemma and is widely considered to constitute the most likely venue for an accidental confrontation between NATO and Russia.¹¹
In 2016, NATO deployed battlegroups to Orsyz, Poland and Rukla, Lithuania led by the United States and Germany, respectively. NATO views such deployments as a defensive response to deter the threat of a Russian attack to close the Suwalki Gap and cut off NATO access to the Baltic States. However, they also exacerbate the perceived threat of a NATO manoeuvre designed to sever Kaliningrad from the Russian mainland and in doing so secure NATO dominance of the region.12 Recent discussion of enhancing the US military presence in Poland should also be seen through the lens of this security dilemma.13

A recent study of European arms control highlights that Russian defence planners consider the vulnerability of Kaliningrad as one of Russia’s most significant national security weaknesses. In particular, Russia is sensitive to possible threats to command, control and communication (C3) between Russia and Kaliningrad or efforts to deny Russian air traffic access to the territory.14 Indeed, Zapad exercises held in 2017 by Russia and Belarus were reportedly based on the response to a simulated attack against Kaliningrad by three fictional states (considered by many to in fact represent Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia).15 Given this, the ability to manoeuvre land forces through Belarusian territory in order to pre-empt or relieve any attack against Kaliningrad provides an instinctive hedge and is likely considered a core defensive interest.16

“Belarusian security guarantees make an important contribution to regional security in the Baltics”

Until 2014, there would have been little reason to doubt Belarusian support for any Russian action designed to reinforce Kaliningrad. After 2014 however, Belarus entered into a series of bilateral security guarantees with Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine. In general terms, these commit Belarus to prevent any third country from establishing a permanent military presence on its territory; or allowing any attack directed against a third country to be launched from Belarusian territory. These security guarantees are one element of Belarus’ effort to distance itself from Russian actions in Ukraine and to position itself as a neutral and stabilising presence in eastern Europe.17 More broadly, they directly address the risk of a Russian ‘bolt from the blue’ attack against NATO’s north-eastern flank.18 By increasing the time required to prepare and manoeuvre forces to mount such an attack, Belarusian security guarantees make an important contribution to regional security in the Baltics.”
contribution to regional security in the Baltic Sea and reduce the risk of misperceptions leading to an unintended confrontation. This serves the interests of both NATO and Russia.

Belarus has also sought closer military ties with NATO since 2014. In December 2019, its Defence Minister has said the country was discussing formats for joint training with the NATO alliance. More substantively, Belarus and the UK have undertaken reciprocal bilateral training which, in February 2020, included British Royal Marines and their Belarusian counterparts undertaking Operation Winter Partisan at Losvido, less than 50km from the Russian border. Given the primacy of NATO expansion into the former-Soviet republics in Russian military threat perception, this is likely to have been viewed as a significant warning sign by the Russian leadership. In addition, Belarus’ most recent military doctrine is reportedly geared toward resisting a Russian-backed intervention similar to what was witnessed in Ukraine in 2014 rather than participating in a collective defence of Russian territory. The recent emergence of Russian-language reports warning of genocide against Russian-speaking people and of the seizure of the country by Belarusian and Ukrainian nationalists following August elections provides some illustration of why such a concern may be warranted.

Russia’s reaction appears to confirm a concern with safeguarding its ability to project force through Belarus.

Since 2018, Russia has redeployed substantial military assets to Klintsy and Novopasskoye: both of which provide ready access to Belarusian territory. Russia is also known to seek the transfer of the Russian-Belarusian Regional Group of Forces (RGF) into the command structure of Russia’s Western Military District. The RGF was established in part to provide security to Kaliningrad and a capacity to rapidly mobilise force in the Baltic States. Russia allegedly used both Union Shield exercises in 2015 and the Zapad-2017 to trial how effectively it could bypass Belarusian command and control systems to effectively takeover Belarusian military units. It is possible that both policies are intended to safeguard Russia’s ability to project force on Belarusian territory should this be required. Accomplishment of either would essentially render Belarus unable to uphold its post-2014 security guarantees. While none of this should be taken to suggest that Russia is actively planning to undertake any offensive operation against Belarus, it does illustrate the extent of Russia’s threat perception in Kaliningrad, its connection with Belarus, and the securitisation of Russia’s perception of its key interests in the region.
Air Defence

Belarus also plays an important role in Russian airspace defence. Russia is known to consider an overwhelming air assault on Russian national infrastructure as another of its principal national security vulnerabilities vis-à-vis NATO. Belarus is effectively responsible for the defence of several hundred kilometres of airspace adjacent to Moscow, and while the extent of practical air domain cooperation should not be overstated, Belarus and Russia have constituted a single air defence zone since 2012. Again, Russia's declared objectives reflect this threat perception and appear intended to safeguard its ability to undertake related operations in and around Belarus. Russia has sought the establishment of a permanent air base on Belarusian territory since at least 2013, with two sites being cited as the likely location of this base: initially Lida and more recently at Baranovichi. Both sites are positioned to strengthen Russia's ability to secure an air corridor with Kaliningrad. Lukashenka's resistance to these efforts has led Moscow to condition Russian military assistance to the establishment of the base. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov complained as recently as September 2019, describing this as a “very unpleasant episode”, suggesting this remains a high-priority objective at senior levels in the Kremlin.

The establishment of an airbase at either Lida or Baranovichi would significantly exacerbate risks along the Russia-NATO contact line in the Baltics. Both Lida and Baranovichi lie less than 250km from the Orzysz and Rukla battle groups. It is understood an airbase would be likely to host 24 Su-27 heavy fighters, which are used to attack ground targets and establish air superiority. While it is unlikely these fighters would fundamentally alter the balance of power in the Baltic region, they would significantly increase the risk of an accident or miscalculation around the Suwalki Gap. An additional wing of heavy fighters in Belarus would enhance Russia's ability to rapidly mobilise air power over the Suwalki Gap, to secure an air corridor for Russian air traffic around Kaliningrad, and possibly to conduct counter-force operations against Rukla or Orzysz. Their presence is likely to increase the perceived threat of a 'bolt from the blue' aimed at closing the Suwalki Gap. More seriously, the closer proximity of NATO forces and Russian airpower inevitably increases the possibility of an accident. Indeed, as recently as March 2020 a Russian Su-27 crashed in unknown circumstances off the coast of Crimea. Military aircraft frequently fly without transponders turned on: the potential for this to lead to an accident has been well-documented by previous ELN research. Recent research has found that both Russia and NATO allies consider an unintended escalation following an accident around the Suwalki Gap is one of the most likely routes toward a military confrontation between Russia and NATO.
‘It’s the economy, stupid’

Since Lukashenka assumed the Presidency in 1994, his political authority has been closely tied to Belarus’ economy. Defying the market reforms carried out in other former-Soviet states, Belarus opted to retain a tightly state-controlled economic model.36 While this control has loosened somewhat in recent years, it leaves two legacies for Belarus’ political economy which are relevant for policymakers considering the country’s stability today.

At the President’s pleasure

To an unusual extent among the former-Soviet states, Belarus’ elite structure is highly centralised around the Presidential palace. The widespread privatisation of state assets which occurred across most of the former-Soviet space in the 1990s did not take place in Belarus. As a result, the country has not seen the emergence of the ‘oligarchs’ as a political class in control of their own private assets which they can wield to pursue their own political goals or develop their own followings.37 Rather, leaders of large industries form a technocratic managerial class who serve at the President’s pleasure. Lukashenka has proven himself adept at frequently rotating political appointments to avoid individual figures from establishing substantial personal followings. This does not mean he does not face a challenge from within this group, and a growing recognition of the need for economic reform has increased the likelihood of this. Individuals from what Artyom Shraibman appropriately terms the ‘technocratic monetarists’ have mounted the most prominent challenges to Lukashenka in recent elections, including former-Belgazprombank director Victor Babarika in this electoral cycle.38 However, being mere managers rather than owners of economic assets, they remain far more vulnerable to the President’s power than ‘oligarchs’ in other former-Soviet Union countries. Illustratively, Belgazprombank offices were raided, and control of its assets turned over to the central bank on 12 June. Babarika was jailed on 19 June, and most of his senior colleagues at the bank now face corruption charges.39 A cabinet reshuffle in June replaced the economic reformists in Lukashenka’s government and empowered the security establishment (the silvoki), who play a central role in enforcing the President’s authority and deterring domestic opponents. They are largely held to be loyal to the President and his son.40

Arguably, this elite structure exacerbates fragility at moments of crisis. In political systems in which power is sufficiently diffuse between different elite groups, elite bargains can provide a pathway out of conflict and toward a new political settlement which reflects altered power dynamics. In Belarus, however, Lukashenka’s
effectiveness at preventing the development of alternative power centres reduces the prospect of this providing a route out of crisis. The centralisation and securitisation of political authority in the Presidential palace makes Belarus a ‘brittle’ regime: states high in capacity but weak in legitimacy which are particularly susceptible to political instability.41

The economic bind

Since independence, state-owned industry in Belarus has played both an economic and socio-political role by providing stable employment and economic security for a large part of the population.42 Lukashenka has traditionally relied on inflating public sector salaries to deliver improved living standards, but increasingly tight fiscal conditions provide limited and shrinking room for manoeuvre.43 These constraints are in part a result of Lukashenka’s efforts to distance Belarus from Russia.

Historically, Belarus has benefitted from heavily subsidised oil and gas from Russia.44 The political impact of this energy relationship is multiplied by Belarus’ reliance on this energy for domestic revenue generation: using both arbitrage generated by the resale of cheap Russian energy on the domestic market and export duties generated by value-added petroleum products.45

Belarus claims changes in Russia’s energy policy will cost its economy up to $11 billion between 2019 and 2024.46 Russia’s so-called ‘tax manoeuvre’ alone is expected to cost Belarus $400 million in lost revenue in 2020, with estimates suggesting this will rise to $864 million in the year 2024.

As a result, Belarus is expected to be required to refinance 75% of its sovereign debt every year for the next several years.47 Here too, Belarus’ vulnerability to Russian economic policy comes to the fore. Last year, the Belarusian Ministry of Finance revealed it owed $7.55 billion to Russia, making it Minsk’s largest creditor. Reports elsewhere have suggested that 70% of Belarus’ external financing comes from Russia.48 Unsurprisingly, Russia has previously played hardball on debt refinancing at times of political tension.49

“The centralisation and securitisation of political authority in the Presidential palace makes Belarus a ‘brittle’ regime”
This poses a political problem for Lukashenka. In simple terms, Lukashenka's capacity to deploy fiscal tools to re-assert his political authority depend to a very large extent on economic policies made in the Kremlin.

Russia has explicitly made further economic support conditional on closer integration of the Union States through a series of controversial roadmaps. These far-reaching constitutional changes would significantly undermine Belarusian sovereignty and are widely held to be unpopular among large parts of the Belarusian public, as well as with Lukashenka himself.50

This has pushed Belarus to seek alternative economic partnerships, most seriously through the EU’s Eastern Partnership programme (EaP) and participation in China’s Belt and Road initiative. However, neither hold much promise as a realistic alternative in the near-term. Large segments of Belarusian industry form part of value chains developed as part of an integrated Soviet economy, which depend on imported energy and export markets in Russia.51 The scale of economic integration between Russia and Belarus is reflected in the close tracking of their respective GDPs, shown below. One consequence of this integration is that Russia’s economic stagnation since 2014 - driven in part by the impact of Western sanctions - has had a spillover effect of economic stagnation in Belarus, a driver of recent political uncertainty. Minsk has estimated that it lost $3 billion as a result of foreign exchange fluctuations caused by Western sanctions targeting Russia.52

### Annual % change in GDP

![Graph showing annual % change in GDP for Belarus and Russian Federation.]  

Source: World Bank Group • Created with Chart apartheid
According to European Commission figures, Russia accounts for some 49.2% of trade with Belarus compared to just 18.1% for the EU as a whole. Importantly, Belarusian exports to the EU countries are primarily in commodities: wood, mineral fuels, and base metals. Belarus imports machinery, transport equipment and chemicals from the EU. In contrast, Belarus exports to Russia consist of value-added goods including vehicles, food products and machinery. Similarly, serious challengers in this electoral cycle have emerged from the embryonic independent private sector. The real question is not whether Belarus can chart an independent economic course; it is whether Lukashenka is willing to absorb the personal political costs required to enable it to do so. The dismissal of several economic reformists in favour of representatives of the Belarusian security establishment suggests that, at least for now, he is not.

Moreover, while much has been made of the ‘soured’ relations between Moscow and Minsk, there are signs that the extent of this may be overstated. Since the emergence of protests, Lukashenka has pointed to foreign interference from both Russia and the West. In spite of this rhetoric, there are signals that he is willing to pursue a more pragmatic approach with Moscow, particularly since European capitals have begun to condemn his repressive approach to elections.

Since early-June, Belarus has announced a willingness to restart Union State integration talks with Russia, with negotiations expected to start in September or October. Following this announcement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Minsk on 19 June where Belarus and Russia signed a visa facilitation agreement which had been delayed since last December by the Belarusian side. On 23 June, Russia also

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While Chinese investment has made its way to Belarus in recent years, its impact on job creation has disappointed as Chinese investors bring their own nationals to work on projects. Ultimately, it is unlikely that Chinese interests in Belarus are sufficient to make a Sino-Belarusian trade relationship a viable alternative in the near-term.

Alternative lines of credit are similarly challenging. The World Bank has warned that Belarus “must urgently rationalise public expenditures” and that donor financing will require structural reforms.

None of this suggests that Belarus lacks economic potential. Its nascent technology sector is an example of what a new economic model may look like. However, the structural reforms required will carry political implications for Lukashenka. Violent protests emerged in 2017 as a result of (poorly targeted) policies intended to address Belarus’ fiscal problems. Similarly, serious challengers in this electoral cycle have emerged from the embryonic independent private sector. The real question is not whether Belarus can chart an independent economic course; it is whether Lukashenka is willing to absorb the personal political costs required to enable it to do so. The dismissal of several economic reformists in favour of representatives of the Belarusian security establishment suggests that, at least for now, he is not.

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announced that it would extend the interest-free period on loans associated with the construction of Astravets nuclear power. It remains to be seen what further concessions Russia will seek to extract from Lukashenka and the extent to which he will be in a position to resist pressure come September. However, it seems likely that at some stage Russia’s security policy objectives are likely to feature in the negotiation.
The road ahead: Considering scenarios

Making firm predictions around immediate political outcomes in Belarus is unlikely to meet with success. However, considering possible scenarios and their relative likelihoods can help policymakers to consider risks and prepare for the kinds of situation they may face. Importantly, using scenario planning as a tool in policy processes can be an important means through which to build the professional networks and contacts between diplomats, defence officials, economists and other technical experts which will be required to respond in a multifaceted way.

The interdependency of significant economic, political and security interests in Belarus means that such an approach is demanded.

Given the relatively limited resources which Belarus has received in Western capitals and Embassies to date, scenario-based workshops may provide a shortcut through which to rapidly develop a base of contextual understanding among a wider set of stakeholders. The scenarios below have been developed by the author following consultation with a range of analysts and commentators covering recent developments in Belarus. They may provide a useful framework for considering such a process. Policymakers may find it useful to consider the scenarios and questions which follow in a workshop-based format drawing together a range of perspectives and expertise from different government settings.

a) How likely do we consider this scenario to be? What are the triggers or trends which make it more or less likely to occur? Can we influence these?

b) If this scenario did occur what are our key interests; our policy options; and the most significant risks?

c) If this scenario did occur how is it likely to viewed by Russia and/or other regional states? How are they likely to respond? How is this affected by our own response? How
does this affect our interests and the risks?

Sustained Repression (most likely)

It is highly likely that Lukashenka will retain power after 9 August elections, and highly likely that he will do so through the continued use of political repression and/or electoral fraud. The most serious opposition leaders facing Lukashenka are already in prison, and the final list of candidates released on 14 July suggest little meaningful electoral challenge for the President. The re-emergence of protests across much of Belarus overnight on 14 July suggest that future demonstrations are likely, and there is little reason to doubt they will not be met with further violence. Given the relatively limited experience and organisational capacity of those protesting, it is unlikely that these will reach a scale and duration which overwhelms the ability of the security services to control them.

This is almost certain to lead to substantial pressure on Western policymakers to reverse the positive trajectory in relations and reimpose some form of political and/or economic sanction on Lukashenka. Belarus’ decision not to invite OSCE observers for the first time since 2010 will further increase the political pressure on the West to impose some form of punishment on the Lukashenka regime. Recent statements by the EU, US and the UK condemn Lukashenka’s conduct and warn of consequences for continued abuse. Taken together, this suggests it is likely that the West will indeed curtail further support in the aftermath of elections and that Belarus will again find itself with a more or less problematic relationship with major Western states.

It is highly likely that given sustained economic pressure Lukashenka would face very strong political incentives to seek a new deal with Russia to resume some form of economic support. There has been a strong emphasis on the downturn in Minsk-Moscow relations since 2014. However, there are also signs that both capitals are still interested in a pragmatic approach and the most recent signs of some thawing in tensions since demonstrations have emerged. It is, however, unlikely any deal would extend to a total capitulation on Union State integration: neither Lukashenka nor the Belarusian public are likely to welcome this, and Moscow is likely to be cautious about any approach which risks Lukashenka’s domestic position becoming entirely untenable. It is more likely that Moscow will take a pragmatic approach toward securing its most essential interests. Given the importance Russia places on security in its near-abroad it is likely this would include concessions in the security sector, including steps which would render Belarusian security guarantees obsolete and/or include the establishment of a permanent military presence in Belarus.

It is possible that Lukashenka would be unwilling or unable to
make a deal with Moscow to secure renewed economic support. However, the domestic political costs for Lukashenka of not taking a deal are high. Under these circumstances, it is likely that Belarus will face a growing economic and fiscal challenge, probably exacerbated by growing pressure from Russia. These would be highly likely to lead to increased political pressure on Lukashenka’s government and likely lead to more frequent public demonstrations.

**Mass Protest (possible but unlikely)**

For the reasons given above, it is unlikely that mass protests will emerge on or after 9 August on a sufficient scale as to overwhelm the repressive capacity of the Belarusian state. It is possible, particularly if the jailed and disqualified opposition figures determined to coalesce around one of the remaining candidates: most likely, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.66 Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that this possibility will grow over the longer-term, assuming that economic conditions remain poor.

It is likely that under these circumstances Lukashenka would be forced to seek Russia’s support to end demonstrations, and possible that Russia would take unilateral steps to secure its interests in Belarus even if he did not. Mass protests in Minsk are almost certain to be viewed as a significant national security concern in Moscow. Russian military doctrine identifies the introduction of unfriendly governments in the former-Soviet republics as a significant national security threat and considers the use of military force to establish control over the situation to avoid any escalation in the threat level as a legitimate policy tool.67

Given this, it is almost certain that intervention would be considered by the Kremlin, and it is possible that a decision to intervene would be taken.68 The exact form of any intervention is difficult to predict but it is highly likely that Russia has a number of options available to secure its more critical interests, and that any intervention would be limited to secure a critical set of objectives. These are likely to include security objectives, including steps which would render Belarusian security guarantees obsolete and/or include the establishment of a permanent military presence in Belarus.

Both covert and overt interventions would be possible. An overt intervention would most likely be a result of a (possibly coerced) invitation from some element of the Belarusian state under the auspices of Union State defence. A covert intervention would most likely make use of the influence of Russian-language information to justify a response to some nationalist threat against ethnic Russians in Belarus, for which some ground has been laid.69
Political Opening (unlikely)

The EU’s policy objectives in Belarus are set out in the ‘Eastern Partnership’, which can be reasonably assumed to approximate the US and UK’s ambitions also. However, the political and economic opening this envisages is **highly unlikely** to be delivered. For example, it is highly unlikely that Lukashenka will lose and concede August elections, or will choose to concede to the demands of any future protest for substantial political reform. Similarly, it is unlikely that any elite bargain between reformist technocrats and the security establishment would emerge to support a transition to such a model.\(^7^0\) It is **likely** that Russia possesses the capacity and will to prevent the emergence of such a bargain. It is **possible** that Moscow would be willing to absorb any diplomatic consequences of doing so: Russia’s interests in Belarus are extensive, and Russia appears to plan on the basis that diplomatic and economic sanctions against it will be maintained by the West in any case. It is **unlikely** that the West possesses the political unity or has sufficient options available which would fundamentally alter this calculation in Belarus.

In the unlikely event that such a transition did occur, it is **highly likely** that this would lead to a corresponding increase in Western political and programmatic support to Belarus: including a significant portion intended to reduce Russian influence. Under these circumstances, it is **highly likely** that Russia would find it necessary to take other measures to improve its security position in the Baltic region vis-à-vis Kaliningrad.
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Policy Recommendations

1. **Western policymakers should invest now in the institutional networks, contextual understanding and strategic planning required to respond to future developments in Belarus based on a fuller and multidimensional understanding of interests and regional security dynamics.** Belarus has received scant attention in Western capitals for most of the post-Cold War era. Desks have limited staff; Embassies are small; and the inter- and intra-institutional networks which draw together different elements of the government machinery are underdeveloped. As a result, policymaking tends to be rooted in catch-all frameworks for relationships with countries in the shared neighbourhood such as the Eastern Partnership. This fails to account for Belarus’ importance for regional security; increases the likelihood of zero-sum policy responses which miss opportunities; and heightens the risk of a confrontation.

   Policymakers should begin work to develop the professional networks between diplomats, military officials, stabilisation and conflict specialists, and economists which will be required to establish a heuristic and multifaceted understanding of Belarus. Timing could not be worse given the all-encompassing nature of the COVID-19 response. However, the risks associated with instability in Belarus for NATO-Russia security dynamics in the Baltics demand such a response. Undertaking a scenario-based policy planning exercise specific to Belarus may provide a useful shortcut to strengthen awareness of complexity, risks, and interests.

2. **Russia and the West should recognise the mutually beneficial role of Belarusian security guarantees and take steps to protect them.** Belarusian security guarantees address threat perceptions and provide a degree of physical distancing between NATO and Russia forces in one of the highest risk areas of the NATO-Russia contact line. This is in both NATO and Russia’s interests: both sides must recognise this and take steps to safeguard it.

   • **For NATO,** a statement from the alliance (rather than from regional allies) which recognises the value of Belarusian security guarantees and commits to respect them would help signal that the importance of Belarus to regional stability was understood in Washington DC as well as in the Baltics. Given the possibility of a growing US troop presence in Poland and the proximity of the US-led Orzysz battle group to the Belarusian border, this is important. NATO allies should also consider ending any future training on Belarusian territory. Such a step may help to ease the perceived threat to Russia from engagement between NATO
and Belarus and increase the likelihood of a balanced foreign policy outside of the security domain. Given the extent of human rights concerns in Belarus, there are good political reasons to forego security sector cooperation in any case.

- **For Russia**, this could include some measure to endorse security guarantees through the Union State structure. This would require Russia to abandon its ambition of establishing an airbase in Belarus. This is arguably a more substantial concession but also serves Russia’s interests by reducing the risk of an accident or miscalculation leading to a dangerous confrontation along the Suwalki Gap. Such a measure will likely require some steps to address the perceived threat which motivates such a deployment. This may include, for example, measures to address the perceived vulnerability of Russia’s ability to sustain air access to its exclave in Kaliningrad. To the extent that NATO allies in the region wish to support Belarus’ capacity to sustain independent security guarantees, it is in their interests to consider this.

3. **Take a tailored and human security-centric approach to economic relations with Belarus.** European governments will come under pressure to reverse improved relations with Lukashenka in the aftermath of repressive elections. They should limit such reversals to the political space and keep lines of economic support open. Relatively low-cost options, such as ending the high-profile visits which Lukashenka has benefitted from in recent years, would send an important signal. It should focus its political energy instead on signalling the importance and value of domestic civil society, while avoiding tying itself to any particular political outcome. However, it is important that international financial institutions (IFIs) and other donors sustain lines of credit to reduce the likelihood of Lukashenka being forced to make risk-laden security concessions to the Kremlin. Shutting these does little to support protestors. Going further, the West should consider how it can reduce the fallout of economic sanctions against Russia on the Belarusian economy. More broadly, the cross-border impact of sanctions against Russia should serve as a reminder of the extent to which sanctions are a blunt instrument with sometimes unintended consequences.

Looking further ahead, a cautious and human-security centric approach to reforms is required. Economic reform programmes sponsored by Western donors often take a technical approach based on deeper integration with Western European markets and approximation of EU acquis. Such an approach in Belarus holds uncertain benefits; is likely to carry unintended social and political consequences; and is more likely to prompt a zero-sum
and competitive approach vis-à-vis Russia. A more gradual approach which prioritises the preservation of economic security for citizens is needed. Moreover, given the extent of market integration between Belarus and Russia, a development model which takes advantage of Belarus’ position between European and Russian markets is preferable. This will require creative thinking to shift away from a zero-sum model of eastern- or western-oriented economies in the shared neighbourhood. This carries wider applicability, but likely requires engagement between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union on how to develop a shared vision for inter-regional integration in the shared neighbourhood. Such an approach is entirely within the parameters of the Eastern Partnership model and carries wider benefits. It will, however, require political energy which is frozen by the state of Russia-West relations.

4. **Take additional steps to address the risks of military confrontation in the region.** Belarus provides a further reminder of the need to address the poorly managed risk of confrontation in the Baltic region. The high-concentration of high-alert military force; deterioration of arms control treaties; and the absence of military-to-military communication is dangerous. Re-establishing military to military communication between operational commanders to manage accidents or crises should be an urgent task for both NATO and Russia. This does not signal a return to business as usual, but a sensible precaution to manage a period of prolonged hostility. Given the associated political sensitivities geographically specific mechanisms in areas of particular sensitivity can provide a useful first step. This might, for example, include steps to improve military transparency around Belarusian borders: including by providing opportunities for observation and unilaterally reducing notification thresholds to reflect modern force postures. Having such mechanisms in place prior to Zapad exercises due to take place in 2021 would make an important contribution to managing risk. In addition, both sides should take forward recommendations already agreed to reduce the risk of an accident: such as the ICAO measures on civil and military aviation over the Baltic Sea from 2017.71
Endnotes


3. According to the European Commission website, the EU and Belarus signed Visa Facilitation and Readmission agreements on 8 January 2020.

4. According to the British Royal Navy website, British Royal Marines from 42 Commando completed the return leg of reciprocal training with Belarusian counterparts from 103rd Guards Airborne Division in March 2020.

5. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo travelled to Belarus on 1 February 2020 and in April 2020, the US nominated Julie Fisher to become the first US ambassador to Belarus in over a decade.

6. According to remarks made by panellists at the International Institute for Peace (IIP) webinar on 8 July 2020; and at the Clingendael Institute's webinar on 14 July 2020.


10. According to consultations and interviews conducted by the author in the preparation of this brief during June and July 2020. On patterns of electoral repression in Belarus and its consequence for Belarus’s political development see Ash, K., ‘The election trap: the cycle of post-electoral repression and opposition fragmentation in Lukashenko's Belarus’, Democratization, 22(6), 2015, pp.1030-1053


13. Interviews conducted by the author with former-Belarusian officials in the preparation of this report in July 2020


16. On the importance of mobilisation and manoeuvrability to Russian security interests in the region see Veelbe, V. and Sliwa, Z., ‘The Suwalki Gap, Kaliningrad and Russia’s Baltic Ambitions’


38. Shraibman, A., 'Does Belarus Election Mark State of New Era?'


45. Mammadov, R., 'Belarus' role in East European Energy Geopolitics'

46. Mammadov, R., 'Belarus' role in East European Energy Geopolitics'


52. 'Lukashenko admits West's anti-Russian sanctions affecting Belarusian economy', Tass News Agency, 27 August 2018 <https://tass.com/economy/1018703>

53. According to European Commission statistics on the EC's Belarus country profile.


57. Shraibman, A., ‘Belarus Reshuffle Produces ‘Wartime Cabinet’


61. ‘Russia, Belarus may return to integration plans this year’, Tass News Agency, 1 July 2020 <https://tass.com/politics/1173651>; also comments made during the 4 June online discussion ‘Russia and Bealrus: The Post-Pandemic Future’ [in Russian, translation of comments provided by the International Strategic Action Network for Security]


64. ‘ODIHR will not deploy election observation mission to Belarus due to lack of invitation’, OSCE Website, 15 July 2020 <Available at https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/457309> [Accessed 24 July 2020]


66. Comments made in private correspondence with author


68. There was a greater diversity in views among those consulted as to whether Russia would countenance direct military intervention in Belarus. Some felt that economic and social influence would be sufficient for Russia to achieve its objectives, and that it was therefore unlikely to consider security interventions.

69. Yeliseyeu, A., ‘Election are approaching, the West is advancing: monitoring of anti-Belarusian propaganda’

70. Some of those consulted felt that the likelihood of an elite bargain is understated here.
