Mapping the Uncertainty: Security in Eastern Europe is becoming less sustainable

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Political crisis in Belarus

The unprecedented street protests in the wake of the August 2020 presidential election have had a profound impact on both Belarus's domestic policy and international relations within the region. The polarization of society and ensuing political confrontation threaten the very existence of sovereign Belarus. The normalization of the country's relations with the West and Minsk's identity as a donor of regional stability have both been de facto undermined. In its foreign policy, Belarus has brought back its focus on Russia, whose role and influence have markedly increased.

The crisis did not come as a surprise. Domestic and foreign policy tensions had been on the rise long before the ballot day. The Belarusian power-wielding agencies, including the army, started playing an unprecedented role in the domestic political process. On July 16, State Secretary of the Security Council Andrey Raukou stated in Viciebsk that the use of the armed forces to ensure security inside the country is in line with the new, unpublished military doctrine of 2018.

As it encountered a spree of post-election protests, the country's leadership opted for greater involvement of the army in the political process, citing the danger of external interference. On August 21, Aliaksandr Lukashenka accused the U.S. and the EU of

orchestrating protests in Belarus, in parallel with building up military presence near the country's western borders.

Despite official denials by the Lithuanian side, the Belarusian presidential election must have influenced the U.S. military exercise in Lithuania. The U.S. troops arrived in Lithuania earlier (in early rather than mid-September) and stayed longer (not two weeks, but almost two months) than originally declared before the presidential election in Belarus. Against that backdrop, Lithuanian Defense Minister Raimundas Karoblis said there was a real threat that Russia would send its troops to Belarus.

Massive arrests were made at numerous rallies and protesters were subjected to disproportionate use of force by law enforcement agencies. On the other hand, opposition supporters were using force against law enforcers as early as August. Later, amid ongoing protests, the security challenge kept growing more daunting, clearly emphasized by numerous attempts to block roads and street traffic, and instances of disruption of railway service starting in late October.

The Belarusian leadership made an unprecedented move engaging public organizations associated with the state in clashes with the opposition. When appointing his aides and controllers in the regions on October 29, Lukashenka called for people's guard units to redouble their public security effort by involving former servicemen.

The authorities also started to strengthen the security hierarchy. On October 29, the president appointed his aides and controllers in Hrodna and Brest Regions and the city of Minsk. Lukashenka instructed his newly appointed aides to ensure public security in the regions, while insisting that their competence would also include an "army component" since they are supposed to rely on military units in respective regions, but would also have to engage with other security agencies.

Against that backdrop, contacts were ongoing with the Russian leadership, which has sought to enhance its military presence in Belarus (including through continuous military exercises), while pushing the Belarusian leadership towards a constitutional reform.

Regional security situation

Amid the relative slowdown of the regional arms race and certain positive trends — such as improvements in the situation in the East of Ukraine — the region has faced new negative trends. Some of them appeared to be quite unexpected, although they were not improbable, for example, the spike in Russian military activities in Belarus,

unprecedented flights of strategic aviation in the region, and growing likelihood of a significant number of nuclear weapons being deployed in the region. Others were quite predictable: the crisis in Belarus and the growth of the U.S. military presence in Poland.

This landscape is lacking any discussion about the region's prospects in terms of the region itself, rather than from the perspective of the allies of NATO/U.S. or Russia. Even the Belarusian non-government media chose to minimize their reports about the first flights made by Russian strategic bombers over Belarus's territory, deliberately shrugging off any possible link between the use of strategic aviation and the geopolitical implications of the processes taking place inside the country.

There is a major deficit of regular discussions and dialogue on specific issues, which can shape the regional security situation, between experts, professionals, politicians and public figures. Instead, the irrational component of the rhetoric spouted by senior government officials in the countries of the region appears to thrive.

In April, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) said in its report that global military expenditure probably reached an all-time high in 2019, up 7.2% from the level of 2010. Russia became the fourth largest spender globally with USD 65.1 billion, and the top 40 countries with the highest military expenditures included two more countries of the region: Poland (20th, USD 11.9 billion) and Ukraine (35th, USD 5.2 billion).

Even the COVID-19 pandemic did not bring about any significant mitigation of the confrontation in the region. In May, it became obvious that Russia and NATO had failed to agree to cancel exercises and curtail military activities during the pandemic. Having proposed to scale down military activities, Russia continued to conduct significant exercises, including in the region. By the end of July 2020, more than 14,600 tonnes of missiles and ammunition had been fired in the course of combat training in the Western Military District, which represents an increase of the intensity of military training by 4% year-on-year. In 2019, more than 16,300 tonnes of ammunition were fired, up 8% from the level recorded in 2018. NATO members responded to the pandemic differently, for example, Lithuania cancelled the May draft and exercise for reservists, and the scale of many exercises in the Baltic States and across Europe was reduced.

An undoubtedly positive trend was the introduction of additional ceasefire control arrangements by the warring parties in Eastern Ukraine on July 27. As a result, full and comprehensive ceasefire was generally observed by all parties.

Hoping for powerful allies

Following a meeting between the Polish and U.S. presidents on June 24, it was officially announced that the U.S. contingent in Germany would be reduced to 25,000 from 34,500. Some troops will be withdrawn to the U.S., and some will be deployed to Poland and other countries. The U.S. contingent in Poland may increase to about 5,500 from 4,500 currently. On August 15, the U.S. and Poland signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement to formalize these plans. The two countries also agreed to establish infrastructure in Poland to house 20,000 U.S. troops.

On July 9, Latvian Defense Minister Artis Pabriks said that his country, too, is ready "to invest to receive a certain number of American troops on Latvian soil." On September 9, he went on to say that he had already addressed the U.S. military with a relevant proposal and vowed that the request had been made before the crisis in Belarus unfolded.

On June 11, the U.S. Congress approved a USD 250 million security assistance package to Ukraine for FY2020. The following day, Ukraine became an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, which improves its access to NATO programs and exercises, as well as information exchange.

The escalating political crisis in Belarus was accompanied by the growing prominence of Russia in Belarus's national security. Under the pressure of protests, Lukashenka turned to the Kremlin for help. After a meeting with his counterpart Vladimir Putin in Sochi on September 14, he said he was compelled, together with the Russian president and the defense minister, to build up the Union State's overall defense system. The number of planned joint events involving the Russian military significantly increased. The sudden fourfold expansion of the *Slavic Brotherhood* exercise that was held near Brest on September 14–25 and incorporated some never-before-seen components was also symptomatic: long-range transfers of troops and hardware, mass airlift delivery of Belarusian and Russian units, and use of strategic aviation.

Regional security and weapons of mass destruction

As small nations keep drawing their powerful allies into the process of ensuring their own security, confrontation within the region started spilling beyond the framework of conventional weapons. This scenario has been on the table for years. In February 2020, it was reported that a classified war game was played by the National Security Council late in the Obama administration, with its scenario envisaging the Russian invasion of one of

the Baltic States and an attack on Germany. As a response, the participants explored the possibility that a few nuclear weapons would be fired at Belarus, even though, in the game, it had no involvement in the Russian attacks.

On May 16, the U.S. ambassador to Poland spoke about the possible deployment of nuclear weapons in the Polish territory, and on June 2, Russian president Putin signed the "Fundamentals of State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence" and for the first time Russia published its nuclear doctrine. It was relatively clear that Moscow had opted for the 'launch under attack' concept (thereby abandoning the widely presumed doctrine of a retaliatory strike in response to the use of nuclear weapons by its enemy).

Despite the Vienna strategic stability negotiations between the U.S. and Russian interagency working groups, tensions in the region persisted. On May 29, two U.S. B-1 Lancer bombers flew over Ukraine, and in September–October, both NATO and Russia expanded the use of strategic aviation in the region. In September, Russian Aerospace Force Commander-in-Chief Sergey Surovikin said that the U.S. B-52 bombers made a practice flight towards Estonia's Tapa training ground and back over the water areas of the Baltic and North Seas, reaching the range of using cruise missiles for a simulated missile strike at targets in the Kaliningrad Region and other western regions of the country. He went on to say that August saw a 30% increase in the number of NATO flights near the Russian borders compared with the previous year. On September 4, 14 and 23, the U.S. B-52H bombers flew over Ukraine and near Crimea. The Ukrainian Air Force command declared that this patrol work would be performed on a regular basis.

Against this foreign policy backdrop, the September *Slavic Brotherhood 2020* exercise included a flight by two Russian Tu-160 strategic bombers along the Belarus–NATO and Belarus–Ukraine borders, whereas six Tu-22 long-range bombers flew over the territory of Belarus and dropped bombs at the Ruzhansky range.

Build-up of forces amidst reduced transparency

On May 22, the U.S. officially notified the signatories to the Open Skies Treaty of its decision to begin the withdrawal procedure. The treaty permits each state-party to conduct short-notice reconnaissance flights over the others' territories.

Russia and Ukraine continued to actively build up their military infrastructure. Russia reported the completion of new military facilities in the western regions of the country almost on a monthly basis. For example, in 2019, some 80 military infrastructure facilities to accommodate newly formed units in the Western Military District of Russia, including

in Smolensk and Bryansk Regions, were commissioned. In July 2020, Ukraine was reported to launch a program to restore 15 military airfields, including in the vicinity of the Belarusian border.

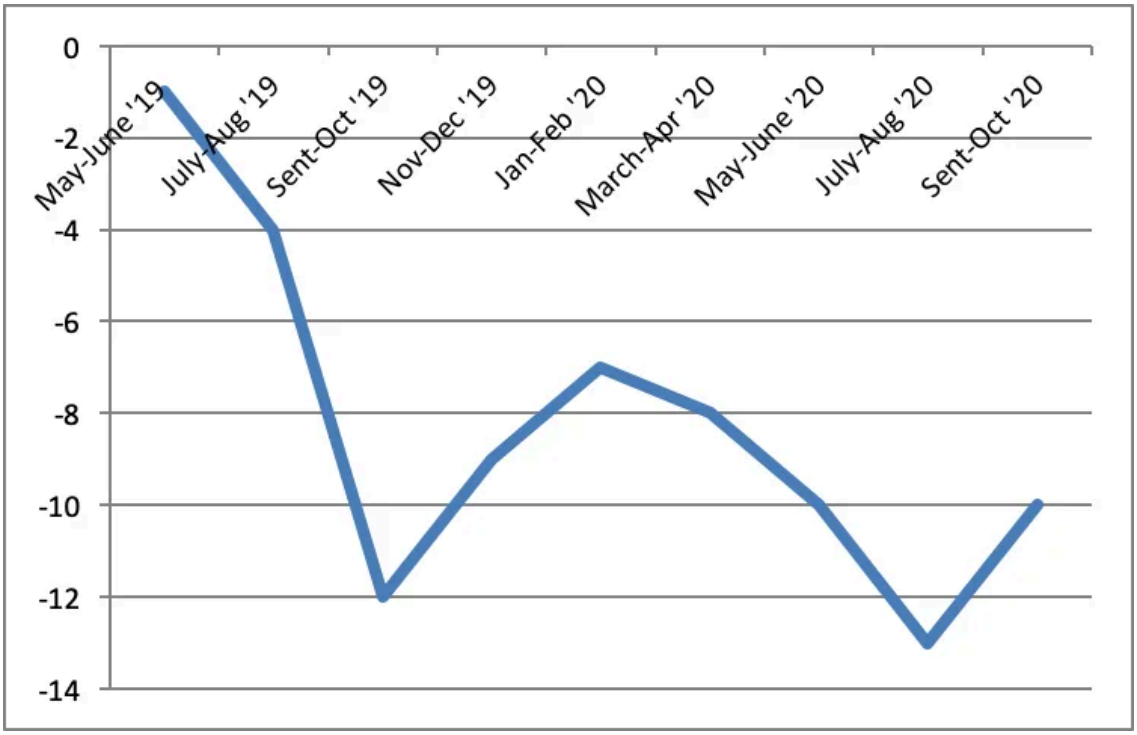
On December 19, 2019, the Security Council of Belarus adopted a new country defense plan and the concept for building and developing the armed forces for the period to 2030. According to the document, within the next decade, it is planned to increase defense spending to 1.5% of GDP (from approximately 1% currently), while maintaining the size of the army at the same level. In November 2019, Belarus started receiving Su-30SM fighters from Russia, which were purchased back in 2017. In August 2020, Minsk signed contracts for the delivery of Russian BTR-82A APCs and Mi-35 attack helicopters, thereby disrupting its long-term policy to focus its rearmament efforts on preparations for more limited defensive operations.

All countries of the region received considerable arms supplies throughout the year.

Change in regional tensions

The Minsk Dialogue experts calculate the Regional Tensions Index on a regular basis as part of the Minsk Barometer foreign policy and security monitoring. The index provides a digital representation of the level and quality of military activities along the perimeter of the Belarusian borders. The final assessment uses a modified Torino scale. The results of the monitoring corroborate the assumption that the militarization of the region continues: military and other activities are observed increasingly more often, capable of bringing about escalation.

Level of regional tensions



Scale of regional security tensions

Color value	Numerical value	Interpretation
White	higher than -1	Low likelihood of escalation. Non-threatening situation
Green	from -2 to -6	Presence of military activities, which do not pose a direct threat and will not necessarily lead to the escalation of tension. Situation calls for cautious attention.
Yellow	from -7 to -12	Military and other activity is observed that is capable of leading to the escalation of tension. Situation calls for close attention.
Orange	from -13 to -17	Military preparations in the region. Growing tension. Situation is threatening.
Red	-18 and lower	Sharp escalation of tensions. Conflict is virtually unavoidable. Pre-war situation.