№ 19 (January and February 2021)

MINSK BAROMETER

Monitoring of foreign policy and regional security

Dear readers!

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We are glad to present the nineteenth issue of the Minsk Barometer, which explores Belarus's foreign policy and security situation in the months of January and February 2021.

The unfolding political crisis in **Russia** brings Moscow and Minsk closer in their approaches to stabilizing the situation. Buildup of confrontation with the West and enhancement of military cooperation with Russia are perceived as the main instruments to resolve the crisis in Belarus.

Escalation of the relationship between Belarus and the **European Union** somewhat slowed. Both sides are pondering what has happened and looking into prospects of how bilateral engagement will evolve.

There was a seasonal slack in the relations between Belarus and **China**, with the exception of the political track.

Harsh tone persisted in mutual public rhetoric with the **United States**. At the same time, Minsk is showing its interest in improving the quality of the relationship. The U.S. slapped sanctions on more Belarusian individuals and entities, but for now refrains from large-scale economic restrictions.

Political engagement with **Ukraine** began to escalate into a confrontation. Heightened tensions became discernable in trade and economic contacts as well. Belarus's incumbent authorities as an international entity almost completely disappeared from Kyiv's official discourse.

The regional **security** situation remained unfavorable. That said, the regional dynamic started showing a closer connection with that bilateral (relationship with Moscow). Belarusian security policy was stepped up, which is for the most part connected with its ongoing transformations.

Yours respectfully,

Dzianis Melyantsou,

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Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations,
Belarus's Foreign Policy Programme
Coordinator

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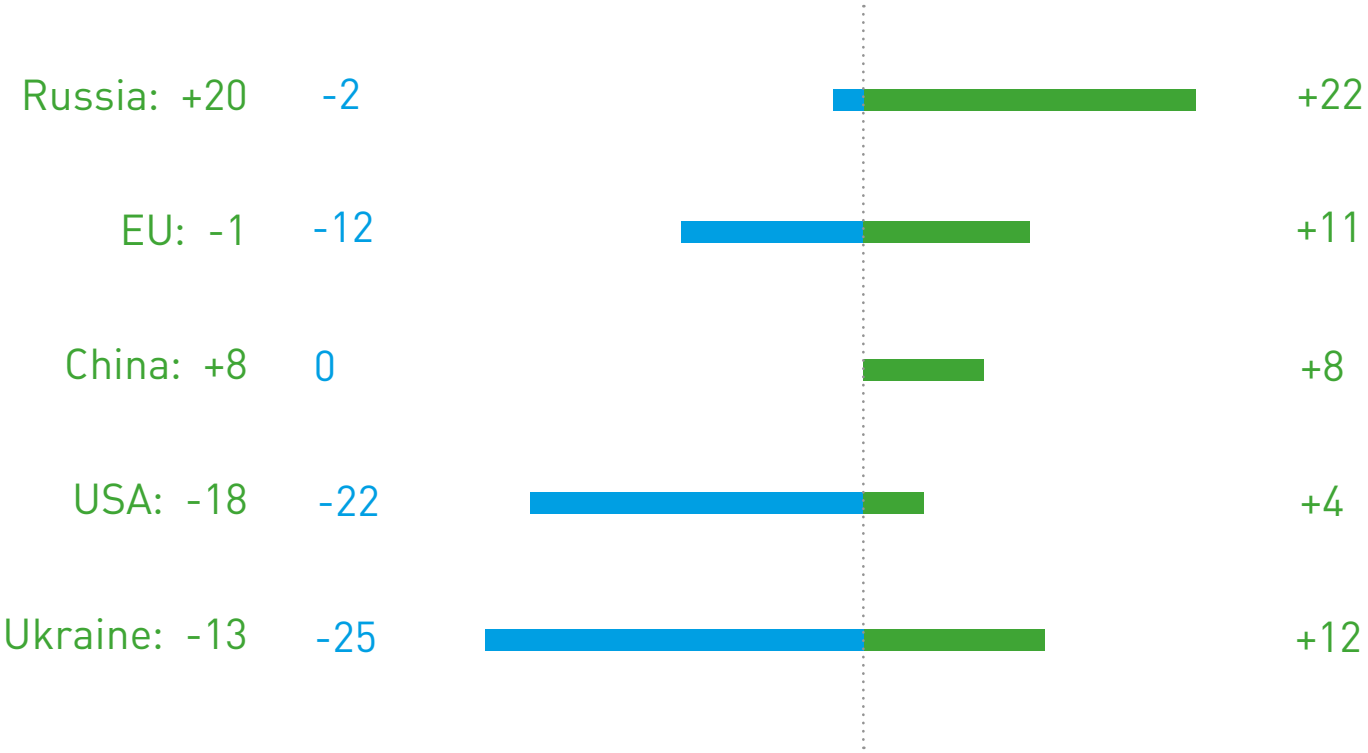
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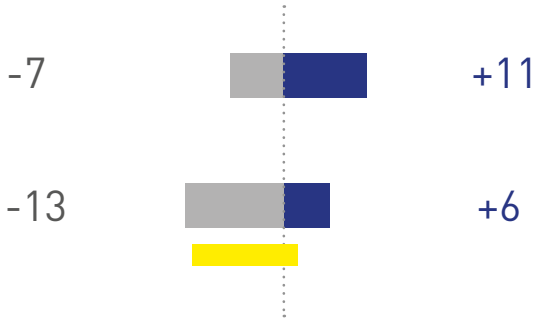
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Security:

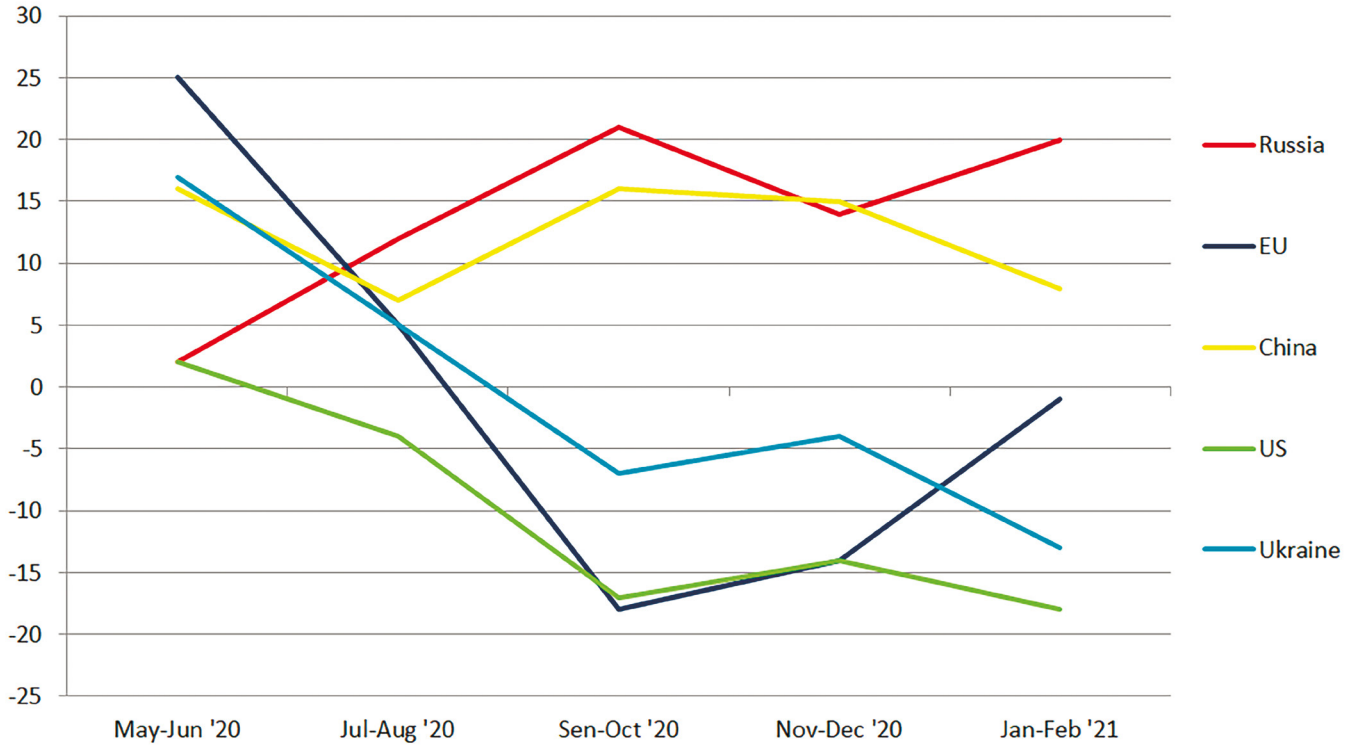


National: +4

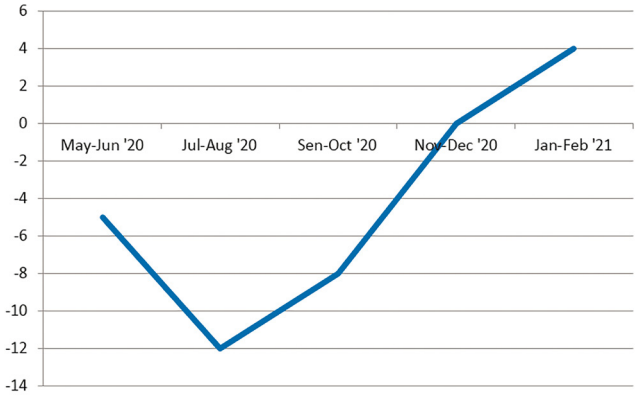
Level of regional tension: -7
(yellow level)

The yellow level implies that military and other activity is observed that is capable of leading to the escalation of tensions. The situation calls for close attention.

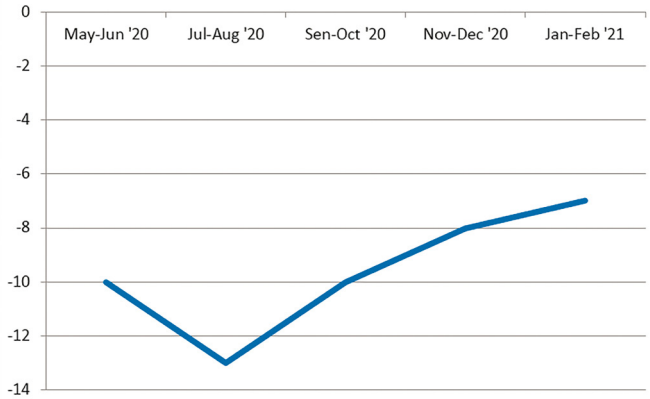
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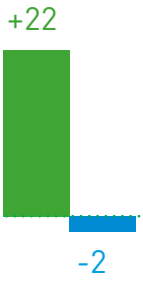
National security



Level of regional tension



Relationship with Russia



Aggregate index: +20
Positive points: +22
Negative points: -2

Trends

1. The unfolding political crisis in Russia is bringing Moscow and Minsk closer in their approaches to stabilizing the situation.

2. Buildup of confrontation with the West and enhancement of military cooperation with Russia are viewed as the key instruments to handle the crisis in Belarus.

Developments and processes

Political agenda

During January and February, engagement with Russia showed rapid progress. First, Minsk made up its mind on the priority dimension for its alliance with Russia. It unhesitatingly picked the military union out of the three original options — a change of its political system, integration, and enhanced military anti-Western collaboration. Second, increased political tensions within Russia prompted Moscow to step up its anti-Western rhetoric and toughen up repression using Belarus as a role model. Third, some issues of the bilateral agenda — symbolically important, albeit not really significant in terms of their real economic impact — were resolved. These include the redirection of some of Belarusian oil product exports to a Russian seaport or cooperation in vaccination against COVID-19.

Economic agenda

The period under review saw a meeting of the two heads of government in Moscow and a joint session with Russia's deputy prime minister in Minsk, let alone telephone consultations.

Minsk invites Russia to invest enormous money in joint production projects (apparently, by including Belarus in Russian state programs), include Belarusian-made products in state and municipal purchases in Russia, and accelerate transition towards the common energy market within the Union State (by applying domestic tariffs to transit of natural gas to Belarus via the territory of Russia).

Theoretically, the inclusion of joint ventures in the Russian state programs is possible, but the Russian side will expect Belarus to put in place reciprocal economic policies. As of now, this seems unlikely, especially after Aliaksandr Lukashenka's speech at the All-Belarusian Assembly, where he made a specific point that the Belarusian state would never kneel to business, as is common practice in Russia. The same applies to government procurement, because Russia never really objected to the involvement of Belarusian goods in Russian programs of state purchases, although exclusively on a reciprocal basis, which the Belarusian side rules out.

The two countries also agreed to jointly manufacture the Russian Sputnik V vaccine in Belarus. The Mozyr-based oil refinery received the first installment of compensation for supplies of polluted Russian crude in 2019 amounting to approximately USD 14 million.

An agreement was signed on deliveries of Belarusian oil products via the Russian Baltic port of Ust-Luga. The document envisages the transshipment of more than 9.8 million tonnes of cargoes by Belarusian companies in Russian ports on the Baltic Sea in 2021–2023, i.e. at least 3 million tonnes a year. Oil products from the Belarusian refineries will be transported to Russian seaports by rail — Russian Railways and Belarusian Railway had signed a respective cooperation agreement just before. An agreement on cooperation in transport security was also inked.

Russia also approved amendments to the terms of its loan originally committed to build the Belarusian nuclear power plant: it was extended until the end of 2022, whereas the due date was postponed by two years to April 1, 2023, and the blended interest rate was replaced by the fixed rate of 3.3%.

Balances of mutual food supplies were signed for the year 2021 (they remained unchanged at the level of 2020), and the tariff for the transit of Russian crude through Belarus was increased by 6% (equal to the inflation rate).

At a meeting with Putin, Lukashenka also promised that, despite the launch of its nuclear power plant, Belarus would keep the volume of natural gas purchases from Gazprom at 20 billion cubic meters annually and, consequently, remain the second- or third-largest purchaser of Russian gas. Excessive amounts of natural gas are projected to be fired by the anticipated new nitrogen fertilizer plant, Grodno Azot-2. The Belarusian side expects to channel the USD 1.5 billion from the unspent nuclear plant loan balance into the construction of the new integrated plant.

Constitutional reform

Public opinion suggests that the Kremlin is keeping an eye on Belarus's constitutional reform (including on the basis of statements made by Russian officials). It is assumed that Moscow is interested in such a reform with a view to stabilizing the ongoing political crisis in Belarus, on the one hand, and exerting influence on the upcoming (sooner or later) transit of power in Belarus, on the other hand.

A commission chaired by the head of the Constitutional Court, Piotr Miklaševič, has been put together in order to carry out a constitutional reform in Belarus. It is assumed that it will submit draft amendments to the Constitution by August 2021, and soon after that, in early 2022, a referendum will be held to address these changes.

Amendments may apply to the status of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly and, possibly, the electoral system. According to an ECOOM poll, most of the Belarusians are opposed to amendments to the Constitution, are hardly ready for an increased role of parties in the political system, and are against the transfer of some of the presidential powers to alternative agencies.

Anti-Western alliance of autocrats

The arrest of Alexey Navalny and ensuing protests in Russia on January 23 and February 1 paved the way for further approximation of approaches taken by Belarus and Russia.

Rhetoric by the state media and repressive practices by the two countries became barely distinguishable. Belarusian and Russian officials describe domestic protests as Western interference in their internal affairs. Somewhere on the edge of Russian discourse, there is still certain condemnation of the unusual brutality of Belarusian security officials, but the trend towards demonstrative ferocity in Russia will very likely negate this minor difference very soon.

The shared objectives and the common enemy (the West) have set the context, in which increased military cooperation between the allies seems inevitable. It was decided to include Belarus in the Russian military training system, establish three joint training and combat centers in the Nizhny Novgorod and Kaliningrad Regions of Russia, as well as a joint air force and air defense training center in Hrodna. There is a possibility that part of the undisbursed loan originally extended for the construction of the nuclear power plant may be used to buy weapons from Russia, including those that Russia has not trusted Belarus to operate (such as S-400).

Forecast

It is quite safe to assume that in the coming months, communication between the two countries in various areas will remain as active as in February 2021.

Joint production of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine is scheduled to begin in Belarus in March (it will probably happen somewhat later). Reorientation of some of Belarus's potash export to Russian seaports may also be negotiated.

Day of the Unity of Belarus and Russia, April 2, will probably be celebrated (more or less) solemnly for the first time in many years. Against this backdrop, some of the roadmaps may be given a boost.

It is likely that military cooperation will become an even more significant topic on the bilateral agenda.

Relationship with the European Union

Aggregate index: -1
Positive points: +11
Negative points: -12



Trends

1. Escalation of the relationship between Belarus and the EU somewhat slowed compared to the previous two months.

2. Both sides are in the process of figuring out what has happened in the bilateral framework since the summer of 2020 and the outlook for the development of relations, given their respective interests, opportunities and psychological traumas.

3. Of all of the EU member states, Belarus has the most strained relations with Poland and Lithuania.

Developments and processes

The months of January and February 2021, just as we predicted in the previous Minsk Barometer issue, proved to be less eventful for the relationship between Belarus and the EU in comparison with the earlier monitored periods. This is attributable to at least two factors. First, at the end of December and in the first half of January, diplomatic contacts traditionally become markedly less active due to New Year celebrations. Second, following the deterioration of the relations and spiraling sanctions–counter-sanctions pattern in the wake of the presidential campaign and against the backdrop of the rapidly unfolding internal political crisis in September–November 2020, both sides embarked on a journey of figuring out what was happening to their relationship.

In Minsk, this process was also connected with the preparation for the Sixth All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which, according to the concept of the authorities, was supposed to approve priorities for the development of the country in the coming years. Unlike the five previous editions of the Assembly, this time it was held half a year after a presidential election, rather than before one. Therefore, its delegates were expected to approve not Lukashenka's election program, but rather the country's domestic and foreign policy priorities in the context of the post-election political crisis and the diplomatic conflict with the West. This circumstance makes the decisions of the most recent All-Belarusian People's Assembly remarkable.

The relationship with the European Union was quite heavily commented on, primarily in the speeches by Lukashenka and Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej. Alongside harsh criticism of the EU for its position in the context of the Belarusian internal political crisis, specific points were made that official Minsk remained interested in further developing its relations

with the EU member states and institutions. Moreover, the foreign minister reiterated the idea that Belarus would like to see the EU as a strong geopolitical actor.

Furthermore, the main foreign policy focus of the entire event was on Belarus's ongoing multi-vector strategy. Lukashenka made it clear that this concept would remain the foundation of Minsk's foreign policy. That is, the incumbents reiterated their understanding of the strategic importance of furthering their relations with all of their major partners, including the EU, and essentially confirmed that they considered the foreign policy pursued in the previous five to six years to be correct. According to Makiej, "everything new that we have created in independent Belarus has been achieved largely due to our balanced foreign policy course." He also believes that Belarus should remain committed to its multi-vector approach, "if it wants to remain a sovereign state."

The minister also said in an interview with RBC on the sidelines of the Assembly that he believes the difficulties in Belarus's relations with the European Union to be temporary, which "should be lived through":

"Indeed, today the European Union is unequivocally calling for sanctions pressure on our country, prompted by those fugitive opponents of the government who are now traveling through European towns and cities. But I guess that sooner or later there will come an understanding that Belarus plays an important role for the European Union as well. And that saving Belarus's statehood, independence and sovereignty are also very important for Europe."

This said, some observers found certain controversy in the proposal voiced by Makiej to make adjustments to the export diversification formula. The previous National Export Support and Promotion Program included a target to evenly distribute export flows between the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the EU and the "far arc" on a "one-third each" basis. The foreign minister suggested initiating a discussion about the feasibility of redistributing the proportions so that Russia and the EEU countries account for about 50% of Belarusian export supplies, and the other two dimensions, for 25% each.

Naturally, this suggestion attests to Minsk's lesser ambition in its relations with the EU compared with previous years. At the same time, it is a mere reflection of the current reality. In previous years, as positive dynamic in the relationship with the EU began to form growing expectations in both Belarus and the EU, Minsk actively sought a greater presence of its commodities in the European market. However, those attempts failed to bring about any significant breakthrough, the most obvious reasons being the poor competitive capacity of Belarusian goods, high protectionist barriers in the EU market, and bureaucratic tardiness of the EU institutions, as well as the desire of European officials to link further progress in economic cooperation with social and political conditionality. Suffice it to recall that the economic relations between Belarus and the EU are still governed by the treaty of 1989 between the USSR and the European Economic Community, which can hardly contribute to any expansion in trade turnover.

Despite its strategic aspiration to maintain and promote relations with the EU, Minsk continued demonstrating its intention to respond sharply to any actions or decisions of its European partners, as long as it considers them to be unacceptable. There were no particularly high-profile conflict situations during the period under review, but some diplomatic friction did occur. For example, on January 22, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry published negative comments about Estonia, which initiated another informal Arria-formula meeting on Belarus in its capacity of a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. On February 18, official Minsk reacted in a similar way to the statement made by the EU Delegation on behalf of the EU member states and the Embassies of the United States, the United Kingdom and Switzerland with regard to the actions of Belarusian investigative authorities. The spokesperson for the Belarusian Foreign Ministry dropped a hint that Minsk would resort to quite radical retaliation: "Belarus reserves the right to ensure that the authors of the statement can continue to 'coordinate arrangements with respect to the human rights situation' in their respective states." This message was also included in the diplomatic notes, which the Foreign Ministry sent to all of the embassies that signed the statement.

A similar tone was heard in the Foreign Ministry's comments about the participation of the EU diplomats in court hearings and their visits to Belarusian NGOs. Minister Makiej made a separate remark that "some ambassadors from the European Union disseminate anti-state information in Belarus." He noted that for the time being the authorities left such actions by heads of diplomatic missions without any official reaction, but were planning to give a "very hard" response. In his words, "if an ambassador explicitly picks a line that is pointed against the authorities of the country, in which such an ambassador is deployed, then such an ambassador should not hold their position."

At the same time, the period under review was marked by a relatively large number of bilateral meetings between the leadership of the Foreign Ministry and the EU ambassadors. Many of those meetings were purely formal, such as the introduction of the new deputy minister in charge of relations with the EU to diplomats. Siarhiej Aliejnik was appointed deputy foreign minister back in July 2020, but he only became responsible for Belarus's relationships with the EU in early 2021, following the death of Alieh Kraŭčanka, who used to supervise Belarus's contacts with Europe.

Another notable positive development was related to nuclear security. On February 9–10, experts from the European Commission and the European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group (ENSREG) visited the site of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant as part of a partnership review of the National Action Plan following the stress tests of the plant. The group included nine experts from Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. The visit had been scheduled to take place in mid-December 2020, but was canceled at the last moment, for which Minsk and Brussels blamed each other. An ENSREG mission is expected to work in Belarus in May–June 2021 in the follow-up of the concluded technical visit.

The competed visit was mired in negativity as well, though. Immediately following it, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the Belarusian nuclear plant. In response, the Ministry of Energy of Belarus ritually accused MEPs of political bias and double standards. The ministry emphasized that the resolution had been published even before the preliminary report was released by ENSREG experts summarizing the findings of their technical visit.

Another story that continued throughout the two months under review concerns the redirection of transit flows for Belarusian export commodities from Lithuania to Russia. As we noted in our previous reports, the process was kick started by Lukashenka's demand to give up on logistics cooperation with Lithuania in response to Vilnius's position on the political situation in Belarus. Previously, BNK (UK) Limited, a subsidiary of Belarusian Oil Company, had temporarily suspended deliveries via the seaport of Klaipeda. On February 19, Russia and Belarus signed an intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in the transportation and transshipment of Belarusian oil products intended for export to third countries via Russian seaports. The document provides for transshipment of over 9.8 million tonnes of cargoes by Belarusian customers in Russian ports on the Baltic Sea in 2021–2023. Russian Transport Minister Vitaly Saveliev claimed that Belarusian suppliers would enjoy lower transshipment rates compared to those charged by the Baltic States.

According to Belstat, in January 2021, two-way trade between Belarus and the European Union amounted to USD 956.8 million (up by 29.6% from January 2020). Belarusian exports reached USD 624.4 million, a hike by 79.4% from the first month of 2020. Import from the EU countries amounted to USD 332.4 million (down by 14.8% year-on-year). Belarus reported a surplus of its trade with the European Union of USD 292 million.

Forecast

After the rapid escalation of the diplomatic conflict in August–December 2020, a sort of stalemate stabilization is observed in the relations between Belarus and the EU. This is a classical situation for the majority of conflicts, which cannot be resolved on the terms put forward by a single party. Under the circumstances, the initial active phase of confrontation subsides, whereas the conflicting parties begin to adapt to the new status quo in their relations. However, it is hard for them to start making steps towards each other. First, each side is afraid to make visible concessions and thereby lose face. Second, complete mistrust and hostility dominate in the relations, as all or almost all previously effective channels of communication have been disrupted. Third, the political crisis in Belarus is still in its active phase, which causes a certain degree of uncertainty on both sides and increased nervousness of official Minsk.

The menace of the current situation lies in the high probability of additional and often avalanche-like crisis outbreaks. In this respect, March 25, Freedom Day, will become an important landmark, when a new outburst of protests may take place in Belarus. If the scale of protest activity fails to measure up to the level observed in autumn 2020, stalemate stabilization in the relationship between Belarus and the EU will continue. All the more so because the EU is increasingly voicing off-the-record doubts about the overall strategy to reduce the level and intensity of contacts with Minsk. Feeding these doubts is the absence of any positive impact of the restrictions the EU imposes, as well as the comprehension that the EU's pressure is pushing Minsk even further into Moscow's embrace.

However, new diplomatic tensions are possible even if this scenario prevails. The criminal cases and prison sentences passed on journalists and human rights activists in Belarus are pushing the EU member states and institutions towards a more substantial discussion of a fourth package of restrictions. Minsk, for its part, will continue to respond to new sanctions with additional socio-political constraints and increased repression within the country, as well as targeted diplomatic actions against individual EU member states.

Relationship with China



Aggregate index: +8
Positive points: +8
Negative points: 0

Trends

Decreased overall activity due to seasonal factors amid relatively fast-paced political engagement.

Developments and processes

The start of 2021 saw the traditional seasonal slowdown in the bilateral relations between Belarus and China, except for the political track.

In late January, Lukashenka and Xi Jinping had a telephone conversation. In the follow-up Minsk and Beijing published reports of the conversation with traditionally different focuses, albeit this time the discrepancy was insignificant. The Belarusian side emphasized the success of Belarusian exports in its press release, along with opportunities for the expansion of the presence of Chinese financial and banking organizations in Belarus, and the declaration of the years 2021–2023 as the years of regions. Based on the publicly available reports, no new agreements were reached; the conversation looked more of an overview and covered all of the traditional areas: anti-COVID-19 collaboration, involvement of Belarus in the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the development of the Great Stone China–Belarus Industrial Park.

In January, Belarusian Ambassador to China Jury Sianko made his first regional trip to participate in the official opening ceremony of the Consulate General of Belarus in Chongqing. He had meetings at the Foreign Ministry of China, International Department of the CPC Central Committee, and other agencies.

In February, Lukashenka presented a report at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, where he, among other things, spoke positively about China as a "friendly" country and a "great state", thanked China for its support, but also made it clear that "our Russia has been and will remain the main economic partner and strategic ally." Lukashenka mentioned his willingness to organize the production of a Chinese vaccine against a new type of coronavirus in Belarus. A written statement in support of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly was sent by the former Chinese ambassador to Belarus, Cui Qiming; however, the incumbent Chinese ambassador to Belarus, Xie Xiaoyong, did not participate in the sessions of the congress for the first time.

Lukashenka's extremely positive statements are somewhat out of harmony with the place that China occupies in the annual report of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry — the brief description of cooperation with China is placed in the document after Russia, the EEU, the CIS countries and Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine.

In February, an Air China flight delivered to Belarus a batch of the Sinopharm vaccine (100,000 doses) as free aid from China under the agreement reached during the January conversation between Lukashenka and Xi Jinping. Minister of Health of Belarus Zmicier Pinievič noted that Belarus could have its own production of the Chinese vaccine. Belarus thus joined Pakistan, Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, etc., as one of the countries that accepted Chinese assistance of this kind.

At the end of 2020, China became Belarus's second-largest foreign trade partner after Russia (unless we view the EU as a single bloc). Despite the pandemic and mobility restrictions, two-way trade between Belarus and China amounted to USD 4.6 billion (up by USD 0.8 billion), Belarusian export deliveries increased, while imports dropped. Trade in services with China expanded (contributed 15% to the total increase in turnover), the service export/import ratio leveled off, while the deficit of trade in services shrank by almost 10 times.

In February, Belarus and China signed an international agreement (by exchange of letters) on the implementation of the 3rd phase of social housing construction at the expense of Chinese technical and economic aid. The agreement envisages the limit of financing both for the entire project phase (RMB 222 million, or about USD 34 million) and specific limits for Belarusian regions. Financing is provided within the framework of the previously signed agreements on Chinese technical and economic assistance.

Great Stone

During the period under review, there was no increase in the number of the CBIP residents; however, an agreement of intent was signed to cooperate in the promotion of a project in Chinese traditional medicine, alongside a memorandum of cooperation with the Minsk National Airport to build transport and logistics infrastructure, a memorandum of scientific and technical cooperation with the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, and a memorandum of understanding with the Mariel Special Development Zone (Cuba). In February, InCata LLC (Belarus) was registered as an investor (resident status pending) with a research and technology park project featuring a start-up accelerator.

Forecast

The year 2020 turned out good for Belarus in terms of bilateral trade in commodities and services with China. Given the intensified export effort of Belarus with respect to both goods and services, we can assume that the trade targets set by the government for 2021 (+7% from 2020) will be achieved. The opening of the Consulate General of Belarus in Chongqing will further expand opportunities for Belarusian export to southern Chinese provinces and regional engagement as a whole.

New funding by the Chinese side will remain difficult, except for operations within the framework of Chinese technical and economic aid — it appears that projects of this sort will be the likeliest cooperation format in the current political and economic environment.

Relationship with the U.S.

Aggregate index: -18
Positive points: +4
Negative points: -22



Trends

1. Harsh tone remains in mutual public rhetoric. However, Minsk also shows interest in improving the relations.

2. The U.S. is expanding its list of restrictions, but still refrains from extensive economic sanctions.

Events and developments

Rhetoric and contacts

In January and February, the U.S. continued to monitor the political situation inside Belarus and, just as during the previous period, actively commented on developments in the country. The Department of State and the U.S. Embassy in Minsk issued a number of statements condemning the Belarusian authorities and supporting the protest movement.

As early as January 1, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo met with former Belarusian political prisoner Vitali Shkliarov and his family in Washington. On this occasion, Pompeo wrote in his Twitter: *"Vitali Shkliarov suffered 3 months of wrongful detention in Belarus. A huge team effort from the Medical Service at the Department of State, Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs [Roger D. Carstens] and our teams in Kyiv, Minsk and Washington brought him home in October 2020."*

On January 2, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor of the U.S. Department of State called for an immediate release of all those unjustly detained in Belarus and said the authorities "should immediately cease violence and detentions of the innocent."

During the monitoring period, the Department of State made three more statements on Belarus. On January 19, the U.S. foreign policy authority welcomed the decision of the International Ice Hockey Federation to move the 2021 Hockey World Championship from Belarus and urged Lukashenka to end the pressure campaign against athletes. On February 6, support was voiced for *"a peaceful and inclusive dialogue that bolsters an independent, sovereign Belarus with a government that preserves its people's fundamental rights."* On February 11, Department Spokesperson Ned Price called on the Belarusian authorities to interact in an inclusive discussion with the population and release all those who are unjustly detained and imprisoned illegally. Price said the United States will continue to stand in solidarity with the people of Belarus and *"all those facing appalling cruelty in the exercise of democratic freedoms."*

On February 4, Courtney Austrian, Chargé d'Affaires at the U.S. Mission to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), told the OSCE Permanent Council that for the sake of Belarus's future, the U.S. renews its call to the Lukashenka regime to engage in open dialogue with Ms. Cichanoŭskaja and other members of Belarus's growing civil society and opposition. According to the U.S. diplomat, *"those members of the Lukashenka regime and its security services who perpetrate brutality against peaceful protestors, members of opposition parties, and independent journalists need to understand that their current impunity will not last forever — sooner or later, they will answer for their abuses."*

During the period under analysis, the U.S. Embassy in Minsk either unilaterally or together with other Western embassies published six statements criticizing the actions of the Belarusian leadership. These statements mostly condemned the continuing harassment of journalists of private media and human rights activists. The statement published on February 11 reads that the All-Belarusian People's Assembly "is neither genuine nor inclusive of Belarusians' views and therefore does not address the country's ongoing political crisis."

For its part, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry on February 18 issued a harsh response to the joint statement made by the embassies of the U.S., the EU and several Western countries concerning the persecution of journalists and human rights activists. Spokesperson Anatol Hlaz referred to the statement as "a ridiculous act", as well as dictate, blatant pressure and an attempt to interfere in internal affairs. According to him, the statement of the embassies *"demonstrates not only its authors' disregard for the sovereign rights of Belarus, but also ignorance of the legislation of our country and attempts to put themselves above the law enforcement and judicial systems of the country."*

Despite the sour relations, on January 28, Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej said that official Minsk was interested in constructive engagement with the new White House administration: "When it comes to the prospects of our relations with the U.S., we have always said that we aim to have equal, close, constructive cooperation. We understand the role the United States is playing in the world today, we understand that it is the number one superpower, therefore we are interested in having normal engagement with that state."

Lukashenka's rhetoric regarding the United States became somewhat alleviated as well. In his address at the 6th All-Belarusian People's Assembly, he noted that further escalation of tension was not beneficial for Belarus, and that *"it is in our common interests to return to normal interaction, full-fledged economic cooperation."* Lukashenka recalled that the EU, the U.S. and other Western countries made repeated statements about their support for the sovereignty of Belarus. In his opinion, the effect of these statements will manifest itself in the long term, rather than within the scope of the current aggravations and misunderstandings.

On January 10, Lukashenka said in an interview with Nailia Asker-zadeh of Rossiya-1 that Minsk would promote its relationship with Washington: *"It's a high-tech, powerful country, the world's leading country — the United States. And we want and will seek to build up our relations with it."*

On February 22, chief of the international military cooperation department at the Defense Ministry Alieh Vojnaŭ spoke at a briefing for foreign military attachés and noted a consistent build-up of the American military presence along the borders of Belarus. This process called for Belarus's *"appropriate response, whereas the exercises held jointly with the Russian Federation in September 2020 were strategic deterrence arrangements."* The foreign attachés were informed that "in case Western countries continue the policy towards escalation of tension the Republic of Belarus reserves the right to take some additional measures in the sphere of national security in 2021. The possible measures are not specified, though.

On January 14, Chargé d'Affaires of the U.S. Embassy in Belarus Jeffrey Giauque met with Deputy Foreign Minister Siarhiej Aliejnik. The American diplomat said the United States was concerned about the human rights situation in Belarus.

Sanctions

On February 18, the U.S. introduced a third package of restrictions against Belarus. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that 43 Belarusian individuals *"responsible for undermining Belarusian democracy"* were subject to an entry ban. They include high-ranking justice sector officials; law enforcement leaders and rank-and-file personnel who *"detained and abused peaceful demonstrators";* judges and prosecutors involved in sentencing peaceful protesters and journalists to prison terms; and academic administrators who threatened students for participation in peaceful protests.

According to the Secretary of State, *"the United States remains alarmed by the Lukashenka regime's continuing violent crackdown on peaceful protesters, pro-democracy activists, and journalists."* The February 16 raids on human rights organization Viasna, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, and independent trade union workers, as well as the February 18 sentencing of journalists Katsiaryna Andreyeva and Darya Chultsova are particularly troublesome.

In February the resolution entitled "Supporting the people of Belarus and their democratic aspirations and condemning the election rigging and subsequent violent crackdowns on peaceful protesters by the illegitimate Lukashenka regime" was introduced in the U.S. Congress.

The resolution reads that the House of Representatives considers the presidential election on August 9, 2020 to be neither free nor fair, and does not recognize Aliaksandr Lukashenko as the legitimate president. The resolution condemns human rights violations by the Belarusian authorities, calls for an end to any further violence against peaceful civilians and the immediate release of all those detained for participating in peaceful protests.

The document also calls on Lukashenka and the Belarusian authorities to engage in an open and constructive dialogue with the opposition members and other stakeholders to bring about a peaceful transition of power. The Coordination Council established by Sviatlana Cichanoŭskaja is recognized as *"a legitimate institution to participate in a dialogue on a peaceful transition of power."*

In addition, the resolution calls for further targeted sanctions for human right violations and rigging the election coordinated between the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Canada, and other allies and partners.

Ambassador

During the period under review, the process for the ambassadors of the two countries to return to their respective embassies was not followed up despite the conspicuous number of newsworthy events associated with the process.

For example, in early February, U.S. Ambassador-designate Julie Fisher visited a number of European countries and met with local officials and representatives of the Belarusian opposition in exile. On February 3, Fisher discussed the situation in Belarus with Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Marcin Przydacz. According to the U.S. Embassy, *"Ambassador Fisher underlined that the U.S. is concerned by the Lukashenka regime's continued violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of Belarusian people."* In Warsaw, Fisher also met with Pavel Latushka, the head of the National Anti-Crisis Management.

On February 4, Fisher met with Sviatlana Cichanoŭskaja in Vilnius. According to the former presidential candidate's office, they discussed the bilateral relationship between Belarus and the U.S., as well as possible options for addressing the political crisis in Belarus. Cichanoŭskaja and Fisher spoke about ways to end violence and have political prisoners released, as well as to ensure the effectiveness of the Belarus Democracy Act and the OSCE Moscow Mechanism. On February 6, Fisher and Cichanoŭskaja placed wreaths at the tomb of Konstanty Kalinowski.

This conduct of the U.S. ambassador-designate naturally irritated official Minsk. However, so far its comments have been quite cautious. Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej noted only that *"if the newly appointed ambassador presents her vision of the development of relations between Belarus and the U.S. at the Department of State based exclusively on the information she gathered in Vilnius, Warsaw and Stockholm, it will be a lop-sided vision."*

As for the date of Fisher's visit to Minsk, it remains unannounced. During the media briefing on February 9, Spokesperson for the Department of State Ned Price said that he had no update on Fisher's plans to go to Belarus.

There were no reports about the appointment of the Belarusian ambassador to the United States, either.

COVID-19 and other areas of cooperation

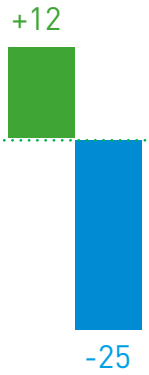
On January 5, the U.S. European Command donated a blood gas analyzer to the Chief Military Clinical Medical Center of the Armed Forces of Belarus in Minsk in order to counteract the spread of COVID-19. The Belarusian Defense Ministry expressed its gratitude to the United States Forces in Europe and the U.S. Embassy for their assistance.

Forecast

In the coming months, the relations with the United States will likely aggravate. This is connected with both the probable outburst of protests in Belarus on March 25 and ensuing harsh response of Belarusian law-enforcers and the revision of previously "frozen" U.S. restrictions against Belarusian petrochemical enterprises. In 2008, the imposition of these sanctions resulted in the expulsion of the U.S. ambassador and remarkable staff reductions at the U.S. Embassy in Minsk.

During the next monitoring period, we will most likely observe the finale of the ambassador exchange drama. Based on the above, there is a high likelihood that the process will be suspended.

Relationship with Ukraine



Aggregate index: -13
Positive points: +12
Negative points: -25

Trends

1. Political engagement between the two countries was not just non-existent at both official and unofficial levels in January and February 2021, but started to escalate into confrontation.

2. There was growing tension between the two countries over the issue of trade and economic cooperation in commodities that appear to be sensitive to Russia, the EU, Ukraine and Belarus — primarily in the fuel and energy sector, as well as the transit of energy products.

3. Belarusian official authorities were almost completely erased as an international entity from Kyiv's official discourse, especially after Cichanoŭskaja's public recognition of Crimea as a Ukrainian territory.

Events and developments

Politics and economy

The first two months of 2021 became the period for Ukraine to wait for Joe Biden to officially assume his office as president of the United States and to outline the first contours of the new foreign policy of the U.S. administration. Given that the issue of sanctions is currently the central one for the Western world — to which Ukraine belongs in geopolitical terms — in the context of the Republic of Belarus, and given the political and economic implications of the restrictions, the two separate components of the Belarus–Ukraine engagement — politics and economy — merged into a single universal problem, with respect to which each country will apply its own diametrically opposed approaches.

A new format of relations is taking shape — that based on value-driven confrontation, rather than cooperation.

These processes were taking place amid the disclosure of incriminating evidence against Lukashenka and Belarusian special services, the so-called "Sheremet tapes", as well as the upgrade of the status of import and transit of energy products from Belarus all the way to a national security priority by Ukrainian officials. Furthermore, in January, Ukraine put Belarus on the list of COVID-19 Red Zone countries, although back in December 2020, Belarus was still in the Green Zone, according to Ukraine's national epidemiological threat classification. Strangely enough, it returned to the Green Zone in late February, after the announcement of extended U.S.' restrictions against Belarus.

The documentary "Strike from the Flank" aired by a top-rated 1+1 Media TV channel controlled by Ihor Kolomoyskyi, which showcased documents that allegedly testified to the implementation by the Belarusian authorities of plans to create, jointly with Russia, automated reconnaissance posts on the border with Ukraine, to which the Russian military and special services will have access (this, according to the author of the documentary, suggests an imminent threat of a Russian attack on Ukraine from the territory of Belarus), became an addition to the list of negative reports about Belarus during the period under review.

Special attention should be paid to the import and transit of energy products from Belarus and via the Belarusian territory from Russia. Representatives of various branches of power refer to the import of electricity, oil products, gasoline, and natural gas from the Republic of Belarus as problem-ridden or even unacceptable.

Specifically, in early January, the acting minister of energy spoke about problems with the import of natural gas and electricity from Belarus and Russia, which posed a threat to the national security of Ukraine. Shortly afterwards, the Ministry of Energy of Belarus said in a comment that electricity trade must not be politicized, as this can compromise the energy and economic stability of both countries.

On February 19, the day when new U.S. restrictions were applied to a number of Belarusian officials, Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council announced its intention to nationalize a number of private enterprises that have strategic importance in ensuring Ukraine's national security. These private enterprises include the oil product pipeline Prykarpat-Zapadtrans, in which Mikalaj Varabiej, a Belarusian businessman, who is on the U.S. and EU lists of restricted persons, controls a 51% shareholding.

In addition to this, on the same day, members of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine explored the possibility of banning electricity import from Belarus in the context of Ukraine's preparation for accession to the EU's common energy system.

Ukraine's campaign to identify Belarusian companies that Ukrainian officials believe to be working to undermine national security also included chipboard traders: Ukraine began an anti-dumping investigation into imports of chipboard from Belarus and Russia at knock-down prices. All of the above issues are massively politicized.

The monitoring period concluded with messages about the threat of a Russian attack on Ukraine from the territory of Belarus, which were made public in a report by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service. This information was broadly covered in the Ukrainian media.

Against the backdrop of these events, reports about the commencement of vaccination against COVID-19 in Ukraine and about the start of production of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine in Belarus with potential for sales to third countries look insignificant, as do one-time reports about emergency supplies of electricity from Belarus due to severe weather conditions in Ukraine, or the call by the Belarusian ambassador to Ukraine to maintain trade and economic relations.

Also symptomatic is the fact that the only known contact between the Belarusian and Ukrainian authorities was the unofficial visit of Verkhovna Rada member Yevhen Shevchenko (Servant of the People faction), during which he attended the 6th All-Belarusian People's Assembly.

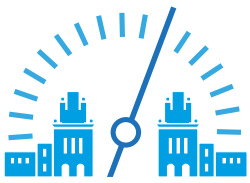
Forecast

Ukraine's foreign policy moves will follow suit of the U.S. and EU counterparts: this applies to both sanctions and the U.S.' sectoral interests in the region which call for stopping Belarus and Russia from intensifying their work in the fuel and energy complex with the purpose of

ousting the Russian Federation and the entire network of enterprises associated with Russia and critical for the transit of its energy resources from the European energy market.

The U.S. policy of sanctions in the region is becoming more intense, including, according to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, a policy aimed to counter corruption. The sanctions against Ihor Kolomoyskyi and Mikalaj Varabiej are a vivid example of how this policy is put in place. In this regard, other trade and economic areas that are not related to the strategic interests of the United States may remain beyond conflicts between Ukraine and Belarus.

Security Barometer: status of national and regional security





Trends

1. Regional security concerns remained during the period under review. A new negative trend associated with Belarus intensified — the regional dynamic started showing a closer connection with that bilateral (relationship with Moscow), for example, the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the increased number of Russian military exercises were combined with the Kremlin's headway in having Minsk make certain concessions, particularly regarding the scope and the format of the Zapad (West) exercise, and the proposed abandonment of the neutrality aspiration prescribed by the effective Constitution.

2. Belarus stepped up its security efforts, which stems from its ongoing internal transformations. Externally, those transmutations were connected with the expansion of cooperation with Moscow, while domestically, they were caused by a significant securitization of Belarus's policies.

1. National security

Overall status of national security

Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makiej stated on February 11 at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly that *"Belarus's constitutional aspiration to neutrality does not meet present-day challenges."* Head of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff of Belarus Pavel Muraviejka made a similar statement.

Personnel reshuffles in security agencies

The trend towards the involvement of security agencies in domestic processes remained a considerable element of Belarus's security policy. The 2020's last issue of Spetsnaz magazine that featured an interview with Deputy Interior Minister Mikalaj Karpienkaŭ was released in January 2021. Karpienkaŭ spoke about the formation of volunteer patrol squads out of former security officers to deal with internal political confrontation outbreaks, while adding that some of the tried and tested citizens on patrol would be armed.

However, everything is ambiguous in terms of securitization. The top leadership of the country has replaced all chiefs of security agencies responsible for law enforcers' actions since August 2020, but the attitude to the military is different. Former Chief of General Staff Aliaksandr Valfovič was appointed state secretary of the Security Council on January 26. *"We need to profoundly organize or, possibly, reorganize the work of the Security Council of Belarus"* based on the experience of Russia and Kazakhstan, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka said on February 25 at the meeting with Valfovič. This must be about the increased role of the Security Council, as Lukashenka stressed that the Council *"should hold regular meetings to address fundamental national security and defense issues." "Security is multilateral today,"* he said. The government is apparently thinking about the role of law enforcement agencies and their reasonable involvement in political processes, judging by what Pavel Muraviejka said in February. He called for a revision of the National Security Concept, stating that *"some internal factors are underestimated in the doctrine." "The degree of patriotism in society is declining. A patriotically-minded doctor, teacher, diplomat, journalist or IT specialist is as important to the country as a person wearing military uniform. National unity is a key factor for security, well-being and national development,"* he said.

Lukashenka met with State Border Committee Chairman Anatol Lappo on February 1 to issue a border protection resolution for 2021. The State Border Committee reported *"no identified threats to border security in 2020."* The development of infrastructure on the Ukrainian border will continue this year. Anyway, it is still less strictly guarded than the other sections. For example, the Chojniki outpost "remotely monitors" more than 100 km of the border.

Increasing role of Russia

Security has grown more important in the bilateral relationship with Russia. During the telephone talk on February 23, the presidents of Belarus and Russia mainly focused on this particular topic. The only unrelated matter was unified taxation. Military-industrial cooperation, strengthening of joint defenses and response to information attacks were on the agenda.

The Russia–Belarus Zapad (West) exercise became an important political topic as early as January. At the meeting with Lukashenka on January 18, Defense Minister Viktar Chrienin reported on army buildup during the previous five years and preparations for West-2021 exercise scheduled for September. According to Chrienin, the number of operational and combat training events was increasing *"not only in the Baltic States and Poland, but also in Ukraine." "Seemingly isolated in terms of place, time, programs and the troops involved, those exercises show that Western countries continue to seek a way to deal with the "Belarus salient."*

The West-2021 scenario is reportedly based on step-by-step escalation of the military and political situation. It became known that it was Russia that insisted on holding the exercise in both countries to rehearse the application of the Belarus–Russia regional force grouping.

On February 8–12, the Belarusian and Russian military held a joint command post exercise of the Joint Regional Group Command, probably in the territory of Belarus, as part of the preparation for West-2021.

Politically, given the reaction of the neighboring states, the West exercise already helped the Kremlin narrow the space for Belarus's political maneuver, driving Minsk into the niche that Moscow wants it in. This is evidenced by the harsh statement made by Ukrainian Defense Minister Andriy Taran on February 26. *"Apart from Crimea, there is a possibility of a military threat to Ukraine from the north, where the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus are planning to conduct a large-scale military exercise in 2021 [West-2021],"* he said.

Also, from February 19 to March 31, a Belarusian military delegation is conducting a joint terrain reconnaissance for some bilateral tactical exercise with Russia at the Mulino training ground in the Nizhny Novgorod Region. The planned exercise must be quite large, considering that Commander of the tank army of the Russian Western Military District Sergei Kisel was present at Mulino.

In February, a Russian official Internet portal published drafts of Belarus–Russia intergovernmental protocols on the extension of the lease of two military facilities in Belarus by Russia for 25 years. The drafts have already been approved by the Russian government.

Training and equipment of the army

A joint exercise of the air force and air defense was held on January 13–14. Units were put on yellow alert and redeployed to designated areas to cover critical facilities with a focus on *"low-altitude and low-speed aerial targets"* (UAVs and reconnaissance balloons). Air force units operated from three permanent and two tactical airfields, engaging control targets and involving over 2,000 troops and more than a dozen aircraft.

A comprehensive check of the combat and mobilization readiness of the armed forces began on January 25. It presumably lasted about three weeks at all firing ranges and terrains, ending with performance tests and tactical exercises.

From February 15 to March 12, the Asipovičy range hosted a camp assembly of artillery and missile units of the Western Operational Command, particularly the 111th artillery brigade, the 841st artillery group of the 11th infantry brigade and the 350th artillery group of the 6th infantry brigade.

The 7th annual field training for governors under the title "Military Security and Defense of the Republic of Belarus" was held on February 18 at the Hoža training ground. The participant practiced operational coordination and the application of territorial defense troops together with the army and border guards for border protection, and martial law enforcement.

Armament

Air Force and Air Defense Commander Ihar Holub reported on January 14 that contracts were signed for the supply of the Mi-35 strike helicopters and the second batch of the Su-30SM jets. Pre-contract technicalities concerning the supply of the S-400 and Pantsir-S air defense systems were addressed.

There was certain progress in the Belarusian missile program. In January, the State Military-Industrial Committee made a report about the plan to conduct field tests of a missile with a range of up to 300 km in 2021, and continued development of a missile with a range of 70 km for the Buk air defense system.

A ceremony of handing over around 40 units of digital communication equipment to the military took place on February 19. According to Alieh Bielakonieŭ, head of the House of Representatives' National Security Commission, *"The main peculiarity of the transferred communication systems was their focus on the tactical command level. Battalion commanders were provided with satellite communication devices for the first time."* Army communications chief Alieh Miščanka underlined that the country obtained military communication equipment of domestic manufacture for all environments and bands. *"Previously, radio communication had been the main option for the troops, and now the emphasis is put on satellite communication based on the national satellite communications system,"* he said.

International contacts of the Belarusian army and security agencies

Head of the Defense Ministry's International Military Cooperation Department Alieh Voinaŭ took part in the OSCE High-Level Military Doctrine Seminar on February 9–10. Speaking about specific arrangement to handle regional security priorities, he called for working out new conventional arms control regulations, confirming the ban on the deployment of missiles with a range of over 500 km on the continent, taking confidence-building steps in line with the Vienna Document, reinstating the Open Skies Treaty (OST), and pursuing "deterrence" policy with regard to the permanent or temporary deployment within respective domestic territories of additional foreign contingents and facilities. It is noteworthy that for the first time in 30 years, the Russian delegation refused to participate in the seminar, citing biased attitude to their country.

On January 5, the United States European Command donated medical diagnostic equipment to the Belarusian army as part of the coronavirus pandemic response program. At a briefing for foreign defense attachés, Voinaŭ refrained from his usual criticism of some foreign countries, and thanked the representatives of China, Azerbaijan, the UK and the U.S. for helping the Belarusian army cope with the pandemic.

2. Regional Security

Overall situation in the region

Although the ceasefire was in force in eastern Ukraine, the situation has been deteriorating since late January, as the number of shelling and bombardment episodes increased. Kyiv reported a considerable number of casualties (eight dead) for the first time since last summer.

Open Skies Treaty

On January 15, Russia announced its withdrawal from the OST, saying that the United States had already pulled out of it on November 22, 2020, and that no agreement to modify the OST with the European parties was possible. Many experts consider the Treaty meaningless without Russia and the U.S., yet some of them believe that *"Belarus may as well stay in, while Russia may lease out its Open Skies aircraft to its ally. By this means, the Belarusian authorities can play the role of an intermediary between Russia and Europe. However, given the rampant political crisis in Belarus, European countries would hardly welcome this scenario."*

On January 20, Minsk indeed stated its special position on the Open Skies Treaty. Without criticizing Russia, the Foreign Ministry of Belarus stressed that the treaty was basically undermined by America's withdrawal, and recalled that *"Belarus had repeatedly advocated the Treaty as a tool for ensuring transparency and predictability in the defense sector."*

On January 26, Russia and the United States exchanged notes on the extension of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. On January 28, both chambers of the Russian parliament ratified — taking just half a day, that is, fast as never before — the extension of the Treaty until 2026.

CSTO

Chief of Joint Staff of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Anatoly Sidorov told reporters about the plan to achieve arms compatibility. Once the required procedures have been completed, the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Forces armament plan will be submitted to the presidents of the CSTO member states for approval. This will lay a foundation for the expansion of military procurement, primarily purchases of Russian materiel.

Exercises in the region

In January and February, the Russian army held 36 exercises (at the battalion level and above), and NATO and Ukraine held eight exercises (data incomplete) in close proximity to the Belarusian border. Winter-20 command and staff exercise conducted in January in Poland with the use of an American computer program stands out, as the Polish army practiced operations without NATO assistance, but on the assumption of possessing American weapons that are expected to be supplied in the coming years (Patriot, HIMARS, F-35A). According to media reports, the exercise ended on the fifth day of a simulated conflict, in which the Polish army suffered a defeat, and Russian troops advanced to the Vistula line. Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak called it misuse of data, but, judging by what he said later and by further coverage in the Western media, the result of the simulation was largely just that.

Commander of the Joint Forces of the Ukrainian army Serhiy Nayev said in February that the Ukrainian Joint Efforts strategic command and staff exercise scheduled for September would be larger than last year's (12,000 personnel). The exercise is projected to take place at all Ukrainian training ranges and the Black and Azov Seas without involving NATO.

Regional forces buildup

Polish President Andrzej Duda said in January that Warsaw would ask the new U.S. Administration to increase the number of U.S. troops in Poland. However, it became known a week later that the Joe Biden Administration put the decision on the withdrawal of 12,000 American troops from Germany (they were expected to be partly redeployed to Poland) on hold and began to reconsider the matter fundamentally.

Armament

In 2021, the Taman infantry division of the Russian Western Military District will receive 18 Koalitsia-SV self-propelled 152 mm howitzers (for the first time) and 18 new full-tracked Khrizantema-S missile defense systems.

The Russian Defense Ministry officially reported that "equipment deliveries to the fuel supply service of the Western Military District had doubled in the past five years," and the first detached maintenance battalion of the combined arms army of the Western Military District was formed to service the units stationed in the Smolensk, Bryansk, Voronezh, Kursk and Moscow Regions.

A small-size missile ship was added to the Russian Black Sea Fleet on January 30. One more patrol ship built in February will join the Black Sea Fleet in November. A total of six new ships will enter the Black Sea Fleet this year. This is a striking contrast with the Russian Baltic Fleet, which has not been notably reinforced. This is further noteworthy given that the Polish Navy began dismantling two of its Kobben class submarines in late January, and only one submarine remains in its Navy. Judging by the armament changes made by the sides, the epicenter of the confrontation with Russia is shifting from the Baltic to the Black Sea region.

In February, the Lithuanian army received fifteen special-purpose Daimler AG trucks of German manufacture. Ten more will be supplied before the end of this year.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Andriy Taran said on February 19 that his ministry was reactivating the Sapsan (Grom-2) tactical missile system project, which is more than 80% complete. Ukraine plans to enter into a contract on the first Sapsan battalion as early as 2021. In January, the minister announced *"intensified missile shield buildup."*

Infrastructure

The Russian Western Military District command reported in early January that 138 infrastructure facilities would be commissioned in 2021, including 70 residential buildings for contract servicemen in Yelnya (Smolensk Region), Klintsy (Bryansk Region) and Valuyki (Belgorod Region).

Overhaul of 16 out of 20 quays at the Baltic Naval Base was reported to have been completed in late January. All infrastructure facilities will be commissioned within a year. Renovated quays can accommodate both available and anticipated Class 3 to Class 1 vessels.

Forecast

Negative regional trends persist in the region. Although they are unlikely to have far-reaching international implications, they remain destructive in terms of regional stability and cooperation.

Belarus, which has been building its security architecture for years in order to meet its own needs without much publicity and unpegged to the Kremlin's interests, is now shifting to greater defense integration with Russia, and what we see is just the beginning of this process. Therefore, further procurement of weapons, expanded training of joint forces and the emergence of new defense entities can be expected.

Domestically, the Belarusian authorities have managed to suppress massive protest manifestations. However, the price tag included, among other things, a functional restructuring of the state machinery, security and defense agencies, and creation of duplicate and often less formal security institutions. Their role will remain unchanged for the time being (to the detriment of other government agencies), and will become apparent once again this spring, the time of traditional opposition rallies. The country's leadership is moving towards increasing and consolidating the disproportionate role of security agencies (since the summer of 2020), although it is well aware of the trouble that this policy may cause.

Appendix 1

Catalogue of events underlying the relations development indices

Relationship with Russia

Date	Event	Score
4 January	Lukashenka and Medvedev have a telephone conversation	+1
10 January	Lukashenka is interviewed by Rossiya 1	+1
10 January	Lukashenka and Putin have a telephone conversation	+1
22 January	Makiej and Lavrov have a telephone conversation	+1
26 January	Haloŭčanka and Mishustin meet in Moscow	+1
29 January	Lukashenka: powers that be do not need a strong and independent Russia	+1
3 February	Russia donates its vaccine to Belarus.	+1
3 February	Agreement on cooperation between Russian Railways and Belarusian Railway	+1
3 February	Russian Deputy Prime Minister Borisov visits Minsk	+1
8 February	Food balance is signed at the 2020 level	+1
11 February	All-Belarusian People's Assembly: declarations of an even greater focus on Russia	+3
12 February	Lukashenka speaks about business at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly	-1
12 February	Lavrov on readiness to sever relations with the EU	+1
15 February	Makiej's interview for RBC	+1
18 February	Lukashenka comments on integration at his meeting with Rapota	+1
19 February	Agreement on transshipment of Belarusian oil products	+1
22 February	Lukashenka meets with Putin	+2
25 February	Board session of the Foreign Ministries	+1
25 February	Meeting of the Security Council of Belarus attended by the Russian ambassador	+1
January–February	"Pulsing" operation of the nuclear power plant	-1
January–February	Revision of nuclear power plant loan terms	+1
Total		**+20**

Relationship with the EU

Date	Event	Score
14 January	Aliejnik meets with Austrian Ambassador Aloisia Wörgetter	+1
18 January	Aliejnik meets with EU Ambassador Dirk Schuebel	+1
22 January	Sharp comment by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry on Estonia, which, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, initiated another informal Arria-formula meeting on Belarus	-1
28 January	Aliejnik meets with German Ambassador Manfred Huterer	+1
28 January	Joint statement by the two permanent commissions of the House of Representatives condemning the actions of Latvia in relation to Russian-speaking journalists	-1
5 February	Aliejnik meets with French Ambassador Nicolas de Lacoste	+1
8 February	Aliejnik visits Rome, meets with Sebastiano Cardi, Director General for Political and Security Affairs at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation	+1
9-10 February	Visit of experts of the European Commission and the European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group (ENSREG) to the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant site as part of the partner review of the National Action Plan following the stress tests of the plant	+2
11 February	Makiej's proposal to reduce the EU's share in the export diversification formula voiced at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly	-1
11-12 February	Statements about the preserved interest in developing relations with the EU at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly	+2
12 February	Negative comment by the Ministry of Energy in response to the European Parliament's resolution on the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant	-1
12 February	Aliejnik meets with Swedish Ambassador Christina Johannesson	+1
16 February	Aliejnik and Šestakoŭ meet with Italian Ambassador Mario Baldi	+1
18 February	Sharp comment by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry on the statement by the EU Delegation on behalf of the EU member states and the Embassies of the U.S., UK and Switzerland concerning activities of the Belarusian investigative authorities	-1
19 February	An intergovernmental agreement between Belarus and Russia on transportation and transshipment of Belarusian oil products via Russian seaports, which replaces similar cooperation between Belarus and Lithuania	-2
24 February	Negative comments by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry on the participation of EU diplomats in court hearings and visits to non-governmental organizations	-1
27 February	Negative statement by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry about the commemoration of "cursed soldiers" in Hajnowka, Poland	-1
January–February	Numerous negative materials in the official media and statements by the country's leadership about the EU; direct accusations against individual EU member states of interference in Belarus's internal affairs and attempts at military influence	-3
Total		**-1**

Relationship with China

Date	Event	Score
11 January	Belarusian Ambassador to China Sianko presents copies of his credentials to Director of the Protocol Department of the Chinese Foreign Ministry Hong Lei	+1
20 January	29th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Belarus and China	+1
26 January	Telephone conversation between Lukashenka and Xi Jinping	+1
28 January	Official opening ceremony of the Consulate General of Belarus in Chongqing	+1
4 February	Agreement on the implementation of the 3rd phase of the project to build social housing in Belarus	+1
11 February	Positive statements by Lukashenka about China and Belarus–China relations during his address to the All-Belarusian People's Assembly	+1
12 February	Spring Festival greetings to Xi Jinping from Lukashenka	+1
19 February	A batch of Chinese vaccine arrives in Belarus (Chinese gratuitous aid)	+1
Total		**+8**

Relationship with the U.S.

Date	Event	Score
1 January	Michael Pompeo's meeting with Vitali Shkliarov. Negative statements about Belarus	-1
2 January	Statement by the Department of State about repression in Belarus and demand to release all detainees	-1
5 January	United States European Command donates medical equipment to the Belarusian Armed Forces	+1
10 January	Lukashenka tells Rossiya-1 TV channel that Belarus will build up relations with the U.S.	+1
15 January	Statement by the U.S. Embassy on repression	-1
14 January	Aleinik meets with Chargé d'Affaires of the U.S. Embassy in Belarus Jeffrey Giauque	+1
19 January	Statement by the Department of State about the pressure on athletes	-1
28 January	Makiej: official Minsk is interested in the arrival of the U.S. Ambassador to Belarus and constructive interaction with the new White House administration	+1
Early February	Julie Fisher, U.S. ambassador-designate to Belarus on a European tour and her meetings with representatives of the opposition	-2
5 February	Chargé d'Affaires at the U.S. Mission to the OSCE: impunity of representatives of the Lukashenka regime will not last forever	-1
6 February	Statement by the Department of Sate about repression in Belarus	-1
7 February	Statement by the U.S. Embassy in support of protesters	-1
8 February	Statement by the U.S. Embassy concerning the trial of Belsat journalists	-1
11 February	Negative statement by U.S. Embassy with regard to the All-Belarusian People's Assembly	-1
11 February	Lukashenka's statement at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly: criticism of the U.S. over the sanctions	-1
11 February	Statement by the Department of Sate about repression in Belarus	-1
17 February	Joint statement by Western Embassies condemning persecution of journalists and human rights activists	-1
18 February	A resolution on Belarus is introduced in the Congress	-1
18 February	Harsh response of the Foreign Ministry to the joint statement of Western Embassies	-1
18 February	Statement by the U.S. Embassy condemning the verdict against the Belsat journalists	-1
19 February	List of restrictions expanded	-2

Date	Event	Score
22 February	Minsk vows to take additional steps in national security "in case Western countries continue their policy of escalation of tension"	-1
25 February	Makiej on the pressure from the Western countries	-1
January–February	Delay in the return of the ambassadors	-1
Total		**-18**

Relationship with Ukraine

Date	Event	Score
1 January	Poroshenko said he sanctioned the PMC Wagner operation during his presidency, but it failed due to leaks	-1
4 January	Publication of records in which the alleged chief of the KGB of Belarus discusses ways to eliminate Lukashenka's opponents, including Sheremet	-2
4 January	Ukrainian Interior Ministry: Belarusian Sheremet tapes do not contradict the investigation's version	-1
5 January	Ex-special forces officer, who publicized the Belarusian Sheremet tapes is ready to testify	-1
5 January	Belarus resumes export of electricity to the UES of Ukraine starting in January 2021; there is no export from the Russian direction	+1
6 January	Acting Minister of Energy of Ukraine says there is a problem with natural gas and electricity export by Belarus	-1
9 January	In 2020, 78% of Ukraine's gasoline import was from Belarus (up by 11% year-on-year)	+1
12 January	Ministry of Energy of Belarus calls to not politicize the issue of electricity supplies to Ukraine	+1
12 January	Ukraine places Belarus on COVID-19 Red Zone; at the end of December 2020, Belarus was in the Green Zone	-1
15 January	New Belarusian special supplier of oil products New Oil Company starts working in the Russian and Ukrainian markets	+1
18 January	Documentary "Strike from the Flank" focusing on alleged plans of Russia and Belarus to establish joint reconnaissance posts on the border with Ukraine	-1
19 January	Belarus makes urgent deliveries of electricity to Ukraine	+1
21 January	Foreign Minister of Ukraine and Minister of Culture jointly issue a statement condemning repression of journalists and freedom of speech in Belarus	-1
22 January	Lukashenka expresses his condolences to Ukrainians in connection with the fire in a nursing home in Kharkiv	+1
30 January	Belarus Prosecutor General's Office announces its intention to declare the white-red-white flag illegal	-1
4 February	KIIS poll: Lukashenka is the most popular foreign president in Ukraine	+1
7 February	Action of solidarity with Belarusian protesters in Kyiv	-1
9 February	Interview of the Belarusian ambassador to Ukraine to Nash television channel: the two countries need to maintain two-way trade at USD 4.5 billion	+1
11 February	Lukashenka on Ukraine at the VI All-Belarusian People's Assembly: the common market of the Eurasian Economic Union lost a lot after Ukraine withdrew from the CIS, but we hope that Ukraine will return	+1
11 February	Verkhovna Rada member Shevchenko (Servant of the People faction) unofficially visits the VI All-Belarusian People's Assembly	+1
12 February	Cichanoŭskaja recognizes Crimea as Ukrainian territory and urges the Ukrainian authorities to put pressure on official Minsk	-1

Date	Event	Score
13 February	Ukraine puts Belarus on the list of COVID-19 Green Zone countries	+1
13 February	Belarus is for the first time among the participants of an online marathon organized by the LRT Lithuanian public television; the marathon "Together to Victory!" is dedicated to the fight against the Russian occupation	-1
19 February	The authorities mull extending sanctions against Prikarpat-Zapadtrans, in which Belarusian Mikalaj Varabiej controls 51%	-2
19 February	Ukraine considers extending sanctions against Belarus after the U.S. imposed additional restrictions and in anticipation of a similar move by the EU Council	-2
19 February	Members of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine discuss the need for adopting a bill to prohibit electricity import from Belarus	-2
23 February	Ukraine starts anti-dumping investigation into import of chipboard from Belarus and Russia	-2
24 February	Ukraine withdraws from the CIS agreements on civil aviation and on use of airspace of 1991	-2
26 February	Consular department of the Ukrainian Embassy in Belarus partially resumes visa issuance to enter Ukraine at the visa center	+1
26 February	Estonian intelligence service reports threats of an attack by Russia against Ukraine from the territory of Belarus	-1
26 February	Belarus will start making the Russian Sputnik V vaccine; as soon as the domestic requirement has been met, Belarus will be able to export the vaccine; the issue is politicized	-1
Total		**-13**

Appendix 2

Catalogue of events underlying the security indices

Date	Event	National security	Regional tension
January-February	Escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine	-1	-1
January-February	8 exercises of Ukraine and NATO	0	-1
January-February	36 exercises of Russia	0	-1
January	Statement by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry about the possible arming of volunteer patrol squads	-1	0
Early January	Rearmament of the Taman infantry division of the Russian Western Military District	0	-1
Early January	Reports on the construction of military infrastructure in the western regions of Russia	0	-1
13-14 January	Joint air force and air defense exercises	+2	0
14 January	Statements by the Belarusian air force and air defense commander on major arms purchases	+2	-2
15 January	Beginning of Russia's withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty	-1	-1
25 January–mid-February	Comprehensive inspection of the armed forces of Belarus	+3	+3
26-28 January	Extension of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty	0	+1
Late January	Decommissioning of two Kobben class submarines of the Polish Navy	0	+1
Late January	Completion of the main part of the overhaul and modernization of the Baltic Naval Base of the Russian Federation	0	-1
January-February	Preparation for the West-2021 exercise	-1	-1
January-February	Commissioning of the small-size missile ship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet	0	-1
9-10 February	Participation of the Belarusian Defense Ministry's delegation in the OSCE high-level seminar on military doctrines	+1	+1
11 February	Statements on the abandonment of Belarus's aspiration to neutrality at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly	-1	-1
15 February -12 March	Camp assembly of artillery and missile units of the Western Operational Command	+1	0
18 February	Annual military security and defense field training for Belarusian governors	+1	0
19 February	Supply of digital communications facilities to military units of the Belarusian army, transition of the battalion command to satellite communications	+1	0

Date	Event	National security	Regional tension
19 February	Reactivation and increased financing of Ukraine's Sapsan tactical missile system project	-1	0
24 February	Statement by Ukraine's Joint Forces commander on the unprecedented scale of the upcoming Joint Efforts strategic exercise	-1	-1
Total		**+4**	**-7 (Yellow)**

Appendix 3

Colour scale of regional security tensions

Colour Value	Numerical Value	Interpretation
White	higher than -1	Low likelihood of escalation. A 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 tensions. The situation calls for cautious attention.
Yellow	from -7 to -12	Military and other activity is observed that is capable of leading to an escalation of tensions. The situation calls for close attention.
Orange	from -13 to -17	Military preparations in the region. Growing tensions. The situation is threatening.
Red	-18 and lower	A dramatic escalation of tensions. The conflict is virtually unavoidable. A pre-war situation.

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