Research report

ROLE AND IMPACT OF SMALL STATES IN PROMOTING PEACE AND SECURITY IN EASTERN EUROPE. THE CASE OF BELARUS

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Against the backdrop of the near collapse of the global arms control system, which undermines the foundations of strategic stability, engagement between the small member states of NATO and the CSTO is of particular importance for regional security in Eastern Europe.

Belarus is the only regional actor that is motivated to promote inter-bloc cooperation and possesses a relevant practical infrastructure for that.

Minsk preserves its objective interest in alleviating regional security tensions.

Minsk Dialogue
Мінскі дыялог
Минский диалог

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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1

INTRODUCTION

The escalating geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West have reanimated (albeit with marked differences) the logic of inter-bloc confrontation characteristic of the Cold War era. Under the circumstances, the critical mass of engagement between politico-military blocs is once again reduced to relationships between the great powers and regional hegemons that are playing first fiddle within the blocs. As a rule, major state actors seek to increase the political weight and legitimacy of the alliances in which they are involved by building intra-bloc solidarity and integrity. In some cases, as was the recent case within NATO, the core of the alliance — the United States — has started to skew toward unilateral decision-making and expects its allies to simply follow its lead.

It is only natural that researchers of international relations tend to focus on the interests and initiatives of major states, especially the superpowers. It is these actors that outline the rules of the game in world politics and set global trends. They are the ones primarily responsible for chalking out the development patterns of military blocs and other international organizations. However, the exclusive focus on the leading states frequently leaves many important details beyond the framework of analysis. The great powers and regional hegemons are surrounded by a large number of less powerful states, which, despite their unimpressive characteristics, are capable of introducing serious changes and distortions into the international agenda.[1] Especially given their membership in various international organizations and their overall increased capacity compared to the Cold War period.[2]

Therefore, the role and policies of the small members of politico-military alliances should never be overlooked, despite the fact that they frequently operate in the shadow of the great powers. Their multiple vulnerabilities and narrow room for maneuver make small states a lot more sensitive to changes in the military and political landscape. Because of this, they have a particularly well-developed sense of danger, self-preservation instinct, and propensity to minimize security risks,[3] which often prompt these smaller countries to take decisive actions that can produce both positive and negative impacts on military blocs and regional security in general. Specifically, they can either encourage major actors to develop "designs for regional stability"[4], or, conversely, prevent mutually beneficial agreements.

This factor gains most significance in the course of structural changes in the system of international relations, especially during the times when the former model no longer fulfills its basic functions of ensuring peace and security, whereas the configuration of the emerging model is not yet clear. That is, in periods of increased uncertainty and, to use James Rosenau's term, "turbulence": when "the structures and processes that normally sustain world politics are unsettled and appear to be undergoing rearrangement."[5]

The contemporary world has obviously entered this historic realm. The system of international relations established after the conclusion of the Cold War, based on the U.S.' "unipolar moment" and liberal principles,[6] is developing into a new quality through erosion and transformation. This process is accompanied, inter alia, by disrupted effectiveness and undermined authority of international law, diminished functionality of international organizations, and dissemination of the transactional model of relationships even among allies. The situation being what it is, scholars have already started arguing about the onset of the post-Alliance era,[7] when stable politico-military blocs are giving way to ad hoc, project-based coalitions of states.

Project centricity and transactionalism are indeed routinely becoming the pillars of international security engagement. The establishment of ad hoc coalitions based on shared interests appears to be increasingly widespread, given the

1 Gaertner, H. (1999) 'Small States and Alliances'. In: Reiter, E. and Gaertner, H. eds. *Small States and Alliances.* Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.

2 Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations (2015) "Another Yalta is Impossible". Non-paper, https://minskdialogue.by/en/research/documents/another-yalta-is-impossible.

3 Preiherman, Y. (2019) 'Belarus: A Country Stuck In-Between Euro-Atlantic Security.' In: Futter, A. ed. *Threats to Euro-Atlantic Security: Views from the Younger Generation Leaders Network.* London: Springer International Publishing.

4 Duke, S. W. (1999) "Small States and European Security". In: Reiter, E. and Gaertner, H. eds. *Small States and Alliances.* Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, p. 50.

5 Rosenau, J. N. (1990) *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 8.

6 Krauthammer, C. (1990) "The Unipolar Moment". *Foreign Affairs*, 70 (1): 23–33.

7 Heisbourg, F. (2020) 'Predation and Predators in the Post-Alliance Era'. *Strategic Assessment,* 23 (1): 69–74.

frequent failure to reach consensus within both the UN Security Council, the main global authority for maintaining peace and security, and individual politico-military blocs. However, this trend is probably not yet enough to declare the end of the post-Alliance era and, consequently, draw the conclusion that classical alliances are gradually being phased out.

At the very least, amidst "turbulence" and ensuing dysfunction of international institutions, it is on politico-military blocs that the matters of war and peace in many parts of the world will continue to rely. If alliances can no longer play their stabilizing role, the challenges and threats to security in some regions of the world will quickly begin to expand exponentially.

RESEARCH QUESTION

In Eastern Europe, which is the focus of our discussion, two politico-military blocs are of fundamental importance in terms of regional security: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In this regard, the research question posed in the title of this report — *What are the role and influence of small states in ensuring peace and security in Eastern Europe?* — can virtually synonymously be reworded into the question: **What are the role and influence of small states in the evolution of the relationship between the two key politico-military alliances that are crucial for Eastern Europe?**

Many years of observation of the region suggest two basic patterns of conduct of small Eastern European states that are members of the alliances. The first model boils down to their constant willingness to additionally accentuate the challenge of confrontation and need for containment of the opposing politico-military bloc and thereby maintain the degree of geopolitical tension in order to address their own issues. The second model, on the contrary, is aimed at reducing the degree of tension between the alliances and promoting a conciliatory agenda. In particular, by furthering inter-bloc communication and cooperation.

Both models, as well as the factors that determine their choice by the small Eastern European countries participating in NATO and the CSTO, will be discussed in more detail in the report. However, it is the second — conciliatory — model of conduct that is of particular interest for the study, since the authors proceed from the general assumption that it has a more favorable effect on the status of peace and security in the region. At the same time, this study is not limited to value-based arguments to support the premise that all of the small states in Eastern Europe should adopt this model of conduct. The objective of research is to identify the feasibility of using the capacity of the Eastern European member states of NATO and the CSTO to foster constructive engagement between the alliances as they maintain the fundamental tenets of the regional security system. Therefore, the focus of the report that is based upon the findings of the study is on ways to reduce inter-bloc tensions in Eastern Europe through the agency of small states.

This wording of the research question also appears to be quite exciting from an academic point of view. The bulk of the available academic literature on small states' involvement in politico-military blocs is centered on aspects such as the rationality of small countries' choice of an alliance or refusal to participate in alliances,[8] the impact of alliances on the foreign policy discretion of small states,[9] and the alliance dilemma often faced by small states ("entrapment" vs. "abandonment").[10] In the wake of the Cold War, scholars have also been paying increasing attention to the changing balance of benefits and costs of small states' involvement in alliances.[11]

The issue of the role and opportunities of small nations in relationships between blocs has been scrutinized by scholars a lot less often, though. Specifically, when a small country is a member of one politico-military bloc, but seeks bilateral and multilateral relations with member states of other alliances. In our work this case is explored in terms of Belarus.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, KEY CONCEPTS AND STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The term "small state" is universally applied in the theory of international relations with no emotional connotation whatsoever, both in English- and Russian-language sources. There are two main approaches to determining the size of states in international relations: quantitative and qualitative. In the former case, the quantitative indicators of the "weight" of a country are placed front and center, such as the area, population, GDP, foreign trade or defense spending.[12] There is no universally accepted quantitative criterion for categorizing a country as small, but sometimes the "frankly subjective, if not arbitrary" definition proposed by David Vital is

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8 See, for example, Bailes, A.J.K., Thayer, B. and Thorhallsson, B. (2016) "Alliance Theory and Alliance 'Shelter': The Complexities of Small State Alliance Behaviour". *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, 1(1): 9–26; Karsh, E. (1988) *Neutrality and Small States*. Abingdon: Routledge.

9 See, for example, Reiter, E. and Gaertner, H. eds. (1999) *Small States and Alliances*. Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.

10 Snyder, G.H (1984) "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics", *World Politics*, 36(4): 461–495; Cha, V.D. (2000) "Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea". *International Studies Quarterly*, 44: 261–291.

11 See, for example, Walt, S.M. (2009) "Alliances in a Unipolar World". *World Politics*, 61(1): 86–120; Archer, C., Bailes, A.J.K. and Wivel. A. (2014) *Small States and International Security: Europe and Beyond*. London and New York: Routledge.

12 Prasad, N. (2009) 'Small but Smart: Small States in the Global System'. In: Cooper, A. F. and Shaw, T. M. eds. *Between Vulnerability and Resilience*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.44.



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used: a population of 10–15 million in the case of economically advanced countries and a population of 20–30 million in the case of underdeveloped countries.[13]

In the latter case — using the qualitative approach — the main characteristic of a small state is its natural need to adapt to the existing security environment and inability to shape this environment independently.[14] To use Robert Keohane's definition,

> most international systems contain some [small] states that can do little to influence the system-wide forces that affect them, except in groups which are so large that each state has minimal influence and which may themselves be dominated by larger powers."[15]

Our study also makes use of the qualitative approach to determine the size of a country in the system of international relations and regional security. Therefore, we consider Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (representing NATO) and Belarus (a member of the CSTO) to be small Eastern European countries involved in the respective alliances.

The alliance/politico-military bloc is understood in this study as "a formal association of states bound by the mutual commitment to use military force against non-member states to defend member states' integrity."[16] We also assume that "an alliance is based on a written, mostly voluntary, formal agreement, treaty, or convention among states pledging to coordinate their behavior and policies in the contingency of military conflict."[17]

The study employed the qualitative case study methodology.[18] It used the following methods for collecting and processing data:

- analysis of documentary sources;
- event analysis;
- semi-structured in-depth interviews with incumbent and former officials and experts (a total of 21 interviews were conducted, some of them anonymously and "off the record" — see the List of Interviews), p.25.

The core of the case study was formed by the track record of cooperation between small states of NATO and the CSTO

13 Vital, D. (1967) *The Inequality of State: A Study of Small States in International Relations*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 8–9.

14 Amstrup, N. (1976) 'The Perennial Problem of Small States: A Survey of Research Efforts'. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 11(3), p. 178; Panke, D. (2010) *Small States in the European Union*. Aldershot: Ashgate, p. 15.

15 Keohane, R. (1969) 'Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics'. *International Organization*, 23 (2), p. 296.

16 Gaertner, H. (1999) 'Small States and Alliances'. In: Reiter, E. and Gaertner, H. eds. *Small States and Alliances*. Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, p. 2.

17 Krause, V. and Singer, D. (1999) 'Minor Powers, Alliances, and Armed Conflict: Some Preliminary Patterns'. In: Reiter, E. and Gaertner, H. eds. *Small States and Alliances*. Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, p.16.

18 George, A. L. and Bennett, A. (2005) *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press.

after 2014, i.e. after the onset of a full-scale regional security crisis in Eastern Europe amidst the military conflict in Donbas. For the purposes of the study, the interrelationships between the member states of the two politico-military blocs are mostly viewed as the engagement between the blocs themselves. From a military perspective, bilateral cooperation between individual states representing competing/opposing/hostile alliances ultimately brings about a reduction of the level of conflict and contributes to confidence-building between the blocs. In addition, the study examines publicly available, rather than secret, forms of contacts and interaction, which would be inconceivable in the context of small member states of NATO and the CSTO without respective consultations and information exchange with allies.[19]

The main part of the report begins with an examination of the drivers that both impede and facilitate cooperation between the small Eastern European countries of NATO and the CSTO. We refer to the correlation of these factors as the "clash of global projects vs. commonality of regional interests" dilemma. It is followed by a detailed analysis of Belarus's interests, which between 2014 and 2020 required Minsk to arduously promote a conciliatory agenda in inter-bloc relations. The outlook for this focus to remain in Belarus's foreign and defense policies in the context of the domestic political crisis of 2020 and its international implications is addressed separately. The conclusion offers a series of practical recommendations aimed at maintaining pragmatic inter-bloc engagement and further utilizing Belarus's capacity in order to minimize regional tensions in Eastern Europe.

19 Interview with a former official at the Ministry of Defense of Belarus, 17.11.2020.

2

SMALL STATES AND POLITICO-MILITARY ALLIANCES: CLASH OF GLOBAL PROJECTS VS. COMMONALITY OF REGIONAL INTERESTS

THE CLASH OF GLOBAL PROJECTS

The role and capacity of the small states of the CSTO and NATO in the promotion of relationships between the two blocs are dictated and restrained by the intrinsic inter-bloc discrepancies. Specifically, these include differences in the respective political models and norms, as well as the lack of commonality of ideas (to use the remarkably apt German term, **Ideengemeinschaft**). There is a certain diversity of political systems, norms and standards within the blocs, but it takes a backseat when it comes to inter-bloc relationships.

Naturally, this does not rule out the possibility for politico-military alliances to build constructive relations on the basis of shared interests **(Interessengemeinschaft)** — and correspondingly, for their small member states to influence these processes. For example, in recent years, Belarus has repeatedly demonstrated its ability and political will to run counter to Russia's policy, which dominates in the CSTO, on a number of essential issues and to promote the idea of military cooperation in Eastern Europe. This also served as a manifestation of the desire of a small member state of the alliance to assert its local interests, which in some ways contradict the global logic of the inter-bloc confrontation. Minsk's general line was traditionally reduced to the need to alleviate military and political tensions in the Eastern European region and to suppress the unwinding of the "security dilemma" between the two alliances by all means available. In some cases, Belarus — through an ad hoc coalition with other CSTO member states — contrived to predetermine the ultimate policy of the entire bloc.

However, this situation, as a rule, is not mirrored on the opposite side. The dynamic is different within NATO. The degree of cohesion within the NATO bloc (which is further strengthened by EU structures and programs with respect to a number of security issues on the European continent) is markedly higher than that of any post-Soviet interstate association, including the CSTO.[20]

The international crisis that Eastern Europe faced after the developments in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 became a vivid example.[21] Whereas within the CSTO, the crisis itself and its global implications revealed the relevance of mutual trust and the need for collective engagement in the development and implementation of politico-military solutions, in NATO, on the other hand, additional security guarantees for the eastern member states of the alliance became a new priority.[22] Despite the differences in assessments of risks and threats that cannot be ruled out in an association with three dozen members, the NATO summits in Wales (2014)[23] and Warsaw (2016)[24] adopted "monolithic" resolutions in the context of the Ukrainian crisis, including the decision to create multinational forward-deployed combat groups in Poland and the Baltic States.

The commitment to practical confirmation of security guarantees to Eastern European members in conditions of the European security crisis (and, accordingly, reassurance of the latter by the entire Alliance) is superimposed on the more global process, as the major members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are rethinking the framework for contemporary international relations. This process is reflected in their altering defense and foreign policy doctrines, which inevitably influence the adaptation of the strategic vision on

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20 Interview with Adam Reichardt, 5.11.2020; interview with a leading research fellow of a think tank operating for the benefit of the Government of the Russian Federation, 05.12.2020.

21 Kucharczyk, J. and Mesezhnikov, G. eds (2015) *Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*. Warsaw: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

22 Interview with Liana Fix, 05.02.2021.

23 NATO (2014) "Wales Summit Declaration", https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm.

24 NATO (2016) "Warsaw Summit Communiqué", https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.



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the part of the entire bloc. For example, the emphasis on the PRC and Russia as the key strategic challenges that Washington needs to respond to in the U. S. National Security Strategy adopted by the Donald Trump administration has naturally determined the "current of thought" for all of the NATO allies.[25]

As a result, the nature of confrontation between the two blocs since 2014 has once again become profound and, in many ways, even ideology-driven. The lack of at the very least basic mutual confidence and the high degree of attribution bias towards each other, leading to the perception of any action by the opposite side as solely malicious, have become the most significant obstacles to engagement between NATO and the CSTO. For example, Russian experts commonly emphasize the "lack of predictability in the acts of the West" as the key issue.[26] They insist that this also applies to fundamental strategic issues: in the medium term, tensions between the blocs can begin to de-escalate only if "NATO finds an effective way to clarify the logic of its actions and provide guarantees of non-aggression" to Russia and the other CSTO member states.[27] However, identical judgments are common among Western experts, but this time with respect to Russia: "Russia is perceived as a comprehensive threat, including that military", "Moscow's activities over the past 10–15 years confirm that the suspicions the West harbored about it were justified", "Russia is automatically associated with a threat from the East", "although Germans do not sense a direct threat from Russia, they know that the Eastern European members of NATO think otherwise", etc.[28]

Such a vicious circle of mutual attribution biases incites the classic scenario of a regional "security dilemma".[29] What is meant here is confrontational dynamic, where one side reinforces its military capabilities out of fear of potential aggression by the other side in the context of a nonexistent or dysfunctional institutional security architecture and low levels of mutual trust. At the same time, the party that builds up its own military capacity (through both national armament programs and intensification of politico-military cooperation with its allies) perceives its acts solely as a defensive response. However, the other side inevitably observes and evaluates them through the prism of concerns over its own security, while permanently keeping in mind the possibility of a hidden agenda and long-term aggressive plans of the opponent. As a result, the psychological and physical confrontation grows stronger and spirals up. Moreover, as "security dilemma" theorist Robert Jervis notes, «[e]ven if they can be certain that the current intentions of other states are benign, they can neither neglect the possibility that the others will become

25 White House (2017) "National Security Strategy of the United States of America", https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

26 Interview with Yulia Nikitina, 16.11.2020.

27 Interview with a representative of Russia in one of the subgroups of the OSCE Tripartite Contact group, 05.12.2020; former high-ranking official, 25.01.2021.

28 Interviews with Łukasz Kulesa, 20.01.2021; Anna Maria Dyner, 22.01.2021; Liana Fix, 05.02.2021.

29 Herz, J. (1951) *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Jervis, R. (1976) *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Tang, S. (2009) "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis". *Security Studies*, 18: 587–623.

aggressive in the future nor credibly guarantee that they themselves will remain peaceful."[30]

The small Eastern European NATO members are located within the immediate contact zone between the two blocs and are therefore most sensitive to the dynamic of confrontation between them, as well as to their own heightened vulnerability to this dynamic. Moreover, their perceptions are additionally shaped by the historical narratives of Russia's hostility that dominate in their respective societies.[31] These factors compel states to constantly draw the political and military attention of their allies to the situation in the East, thereby effectively contributing to an even greater windup of the "security dilemma" spiral.[32] This may be exemplified by a quote from Polish Chief of General Staff Rajmund Andrzejczak, who said: "According to NATO, Russia is the so-called main threat, and we adhere to that, as this is our raison d'etat. It is a direct, or even physiological, existential threat."[33]

As a result, the general message by NATO's major states about the growing strategic threat coming from Russia and its allies is being permanently amplified by the Eastern European countries of the bloc. This is leading to a "raise game" in regional security, even by countries that have no rational reason for being interested in it.[34]

In fact, across the entire Eastern European region and even more broadly in the Baltic Sea region, Belarus was the only actor throughout 2015–2020 that consistently sought to "lower the bets" and bring down the degree of the "security dilemma".[35] However, the global political situation as a whole was not conducive to such a regional agenda, despite its local rationality and comprehensibility. Some experts note that Minsk would have had much better prospects of becoming a mediator between Russia and NATO in 2004–2008, when tensions and mutual aversion had not yet reached the level observed after 2014, but "the idea never entered Lukashenka's head back then."[36]

Indeed, before 2014, Minsk had no strong geopolitical motivation to actively promote a conciliatory agenda in regional security (see Chapter 3), whereas most politicians, diplomats, and experts in the NATO countries were unaware of the added value of Belarus as a stabilizing security factor in Eastern Europe before the events in Crimea and Donbas. On the Western mental map, Belarus signified exclusively a problem in terms of the human rights and democracy situation. According to all of the NATO member states, substantive communication with the Belarusian leadership was conditional on domestic political issues, as the security situation remained quite favorable and did not necessitate conversations with the authoritarian leader of Belarus. Moreover, few experts in Poland and the Baltic States perceived Minsk as an independent international security actor, at least when political narratives were developed and strategic documents were drafted,[37] although assessments were sometimes different in the other NATO states.[38] Many smaller NATO member states were perceived in Minsk in a similar fashion.[39]

Finally, another factor limiting the capacity of the small members of NATO and the CSTO to initiate inter-bloc collaboration is the "overlapping" of various institutional frameworks in the perception of security and international cooperation. In the EU, for example, there is a widespread opinion that NATO is not the only framework to pursue engagement. Many European politicians and experts share the understanding that even in security matters, the "Europe" project is the chief priority, that is, the association of states with a common space in the political, economic, ideological and security spheres. In the words of Vaclav Havel, known for his pro-Euro-Atlantic views, "Europe is a single political entity whose security is indivisible."[40] Although these words came at a time when Havel was arguing for the admission of small Eastern European nations to NATO and the EU, they certainly reflect the beliefs of influential political quarters in the region and across the EU.

Not surprisingly, the Treaty on European Union designates the EU's common defense policy as "an integral part of the common foreign and security policy."[41] Moreover, the common security and defense policy "includes the progressive framing of a common Union defense policy."[42] Such a comprehension, somewhere even subconscious, is a result of the West's victory in the Cold War, and by the early 2000s, a "European security architecture", which at the institutional level incorporated NATO, the EU,

30 Jervis, R. (2001) "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?" *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 3 (1): 36–60.

31 Interview with the ambassador of a European state, 13.11.2020.

32 Interview with a diplomat from an EU member-state, 05.12.2020.

33 Andrzejczak, R. (2020) "We Will Hit with Full Power", http://polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/30270?t=We-Will-Hit-with-Full-Power.

34 Interview with head of a think tank operating for the benefit of the Government of the Russian Federation, 04.12.2020.

35 Makei, U. (2018) "Speech at the 25th OSCE Ministerial Council", https://mfa.gov.by/press/statements/b5d427eb6975bc0f.html.

36 Interview with Yulia Nikitina, 16.11.2020.

37 Interview with Adam Reichardt, 05.11.2020; interview with Łukasz Kulesa, 20.01.2021; interview with Anna Maria Dyner, 22.01.2021.

38 Interview with the ambassador of a European state, 13.11.2020; interview with Liana Fix, 05.02.2021.

39 Interview with Andrej Savinych, 20.11.2020; interview with a representative of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, 21.01.2021; interview with a former high-ranking official, 25.01.2021.

40 Havel, V. (2020) "Europe: A Single Political Entity whose Security is Indivisible", https://www.irishtimes.com/news/europe-a-single-political-entity-whose-security-is-indivisible-1.1103489.

41 EU (2012) "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union", Art. 42, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

42 *Ibid.*



Foto: odkb-csto.org

the OSCE and, in some aspects, the Council of Europe, had emerged.[43] On the one hand, Russia and its allies remain full members of some of these organizations. On the other hand, three decades after the adoption of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, the place of these countries in the pan-European security architecture still remains unfound.[44] At the same time, the glaring contradictions in the domain of human rights and democracy, as the developments in Belarus in the wake of the presidential election of 2020 demonstrated yet again, have potential to completely "override" the mutually beneficial agenda for cooperation in the field of military security.[45]

Belarus's perception of the regional security architecture is shaped in a somewhat similar way — going beyond the framework of the CSTO. In this case, the Eurasian framework is chosen instead of that Euro-Atlantic, i.e. with the inclusion of China and de facto with the aim of further assigning a key role to Beijing. This trend can be observed in numerous statements by Belarusian officials. Specifically, Aliaksandr Lukashenka believes: "Only a multipolar world can hold and save our planet from destruction. No system can stand on a single pillar for a long time. The more such footings, the stronger the system. China is one of the pillars of this multipolarity and stability. We are extremely interested in having this pillar strengthened on a permanent basis […] If China is powerful and strong, Belarus will be sovereign and independent. Because China is our friend, a shoulder we can always lean on."[46]

We can already descry the gradual merger of international military cooperation structures and mechanisms, which have been built within the format of the three organizations: CIS, SCO, and CSTO.[47] This process is welcomed by official Minsk. It is symptomatic that when calling back in October 2019 for the parties involved in regional confrontation "to return to the cooperation-based concept of European security," Aliaksandr Lukashenka suggested "adopting a strategic document to strengthen international security in the Euro-Atlantic region on a broader scale" and made a point that "today it is impossible to address these issues without the People's Republic of China."[48]

43 Goda, S. (2015) "European Security Architecture and the Conflict in Ukraine", *International Issues and Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 1–2: 3–4.

44 Interview with head of a think tank operating for the benefit of the Government of the Russian Federation, 04.12.2020; interview with an analyst at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Research, 21.11.2020.

45 Interview with Quincy Cloet, 21.11.2020; interview with Łuk asz Kulesa, 20.01.2021.

46 President of Belarus (2016) "State visit to the People's Republic of China", https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-predsedatelem-vsekitajskogo-komiteta-narodnogo-politicheskogo-konsultativnogo-soveta-kitaja-juj-14530.

47 Bohdan, S. (2020) "The World HandCOV'd: CSTO: in search of *raisons d'être*", *Minsk Dialogue*, https://minskdialogue.by/research/opinions/odkb-v-poiske-smyslov-sushchestvovaniia.

48 President of Belarus (2019) "Participation in the international conference 'European Security: Stepping Back from the Brink'", http://president.gov.by/by/news_by/view/udzel-u-mizhnarodnaj-kanferentsyi-eurapejskaja-bjaspeka-adystsi-ad-kraju-bezdani-22178/.

Both in the case of Eastern European NATO member states and Belarus, such broad-scale approaches may prevent politicians and the general public from understanding genuine regional security needs and dynamic as such. Furthermore, they may distort the appreciation of their capabilities and responsibilities in the context of regional security.

COMMONALITY OF REGIONAL INTERESTS

Slow and timid though it may be, the inception of inter-bloc cooperation — perhaps not even perceived as such — could still be observed after 2014 notwithstanding all of the aforesaid obstacles to engagement between the CSTO and NATO. It was small member states of the two blocs that initiated it: in some cases officials and, in other cases, nongovernmental actors. Moreover, this cooperation evolved both at the level of ideas and strategic concepts, and at the level of ongoing practical interaction.

A relatively recent example of engagement at the conceptual level is Lukashenka's cautious support in the course of his meeting with Rolandas Paksas on May 3, 2019 for the former president's proposal regarding the demilitarization of the Kaliningrad Region and the entire Baltics, which was initially publicized back in December 2018. Lukashenka's positive response to the proposal is known from Paksas' words, while the official website of the Belarusian head of state offered no report, which attests to Minsk's discreet attitude towards the issue.[49]

At the same time, Belarus repeatedly declared its willingness to support a phasedown of military activity in the region. It demonstrated this readiness during the redeployment of its troops (e.g. actual withdrawal of some units from the Ukrainian border, including after 2013, to the central regions; decommissioning of important military infrastructure facilities), army reform (reduction in force; disbandment of a perceptible number of units across the country; steady trend towards the renouncement of offensive weapons all the way until the 2020 election), and longstanding objections to the permanent presence of Russian troops in its territory (not only in the form of an air base, but also Russia-controlled Iskander ballistic missile system).

However, practical cooperation seems to be a more important and illustrative indicator of mutual interest. If we turn to the developments of recent years, it becomes obvious that prior to the political crisis in Belarus in 2020, interaction between the small member states of NATO and the CSTO had been developing incrementally.

One dimension of engagement focuses on attempts to preserve the fundamentals of regional arms control and confidence-building measures. As major global players withdraw from international treaties aimed at ensuring the transparency of their military endeavor, small NATO and CSTO member states continue to adhere to them. For example, this has long been the case with such a fundamental document as the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). Russia suspended its participation in the CFE Treaty and, accordingly, abandoned the system of verification inspections stipulated by the treaty back in 2007; whereas in March 2015, it withdrew from the treaty entirely. Despite this, Belarus did not follow in its ally's footsteps and remained an active CFE Treaty signatory. Furthermore, under the bilateral treaties on regional confidence-building measures with Lithuania (of 2001) and Latvia (of 2004), Minsk managed to secure the commitment of Vilnius and Riga to exchange information under the CFE Treaty, although these two countries are not signatories.[50] Therefore, this mechanism appears to be effective for the CFE Treaty standards to de facto continue to positively influence the NATO–CSTO relationship in the region wherever they turn out to be in direct contact.

In many respects, a similar dynamic is likely to be observed after the U.S. announced its withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty (OST), and Russia followed suit. Smaller NATO and CSTO member states, bound by allied obligations to the leading actors within these blocs, play an important role by continuing to provide each other with access to information and enabling inspections of their military activities (for example, Belarus used to conduct and receive five to six inspections every month under the CFE Treaty and the OST before the pandemic). The effectiveness of these efforts clearly depends as much on the ability of small states on both sides to engage with each other, as on their cooperation with their allies.

The situation around the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) is more ambiguous, though. Minsk had stubbornly defended the treaty through the efforts of its diplomats and top leadership, and even when it seemed there was no hope, Lukashenka said, albeit not without reservations: "We will by no means be the initiators of bad things leading to the destruction of this treaty. Moreover, we will never deploy such missiles in the territory of Belarus to complicate the situation (unless it threatens our security)."[51]

Against the backdrop of the near collapse of the global arms control system, which undermines the foundations of strategic stability, relevant engagement between the small member states of NATO and the CSTO is of particular importance for regional security in Eastern Europe. However, the relationships between small states in other

49 TASS (2019) "Former president of Lithuania: Lukashenka speaks in favor of demilitarization of the Baltic Region", https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/6399061.

50 Interview with a representative of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, 21.01.2021.

51 BelTA (2019) "Lukashenka: there are encouraging reports about medium-range and shorter-range missiles", https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-pojavilas-obnadezhivajuschaja-informatsija-svjazannaja-s-raketami-srednej-i-menshej-dalnosti-362368–2019/.



Foto: depositphotos.com

dimensions are at least as meaningful for regional stability and, more generally, for the containment of tensions between NATO and the CSTO. Their origins can probably be traced to the dual approach to the controversy between the two blocs, including within the Eastern European region, which had been taken by both Russia and NATO by the spring of 2018.

On the NATO side, this ambivalence was obviously in no small measure due to the policy of the Donald Trump administration. Both the U.S. and NATO had established working contacts with the Russian side (for example, between NATO's Supreme Allied Commander for Europe and chief of the Russian General Staff) and sought to revive the NATO–Russia Council.[52] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg made regular declarations of his willingness to combine deterrence with dialogue, i.e. to conduct a "dual policy."[53] Washington, on the other hand, while criticizing Russia's policy in the region, as well as channeling substantial funds into Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia to finance their purchases of ammunition, equipment and military training, urged the Baltic leaders using Trump as its mouthpiece to engage in dialogue and improve the relationship with Russia.[54]

The official visit of Belarusian Chief of General Staff Aleh Bialakoneu to Latvia on September 25–27, 2018 became a notable development in cooperation at the level of Eastern European member states of NATO and the CSTO in recent years. During Bialakoneu's talks with Latvian Chief of Defense Leonīds Kalniņš, not only bilateral military cooperation was addressed, but also "regional security and allied obligations of the parties." The fact that the meeting was also significant for the NATO–CSTO engagement is also apparent from the following: according to official reports, contacts between the Belarusian Air Force and Air Defense Forces and Latvian Air Force were explored, which is especially important amid Russia's and NATO's concerns about each other's military activities in the Baltic airspace.[55]

Similar contacts had taken place with Poland. Amidst the escalating confrontation between NATO countries and Russia, the Defense Ministries of Belarus and Poland conducted annual consultations in 2016, 2018, and 2019.[56] Further, during his visit to Warsaw on March 12–14, 2019, the chair of the Council of the Republic, the upper house of the National Assembly, Mikhail Miasnikovich discussed with President Andrzej Duda, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and other top Polish officials the issue of a U.S. military base. The base is another crucial point in

52 US Department of State (2018) "Foreign Ministers Setting Stage for NATO Summit, Secretary General Says", https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1504441/foreign-ministers-setting-stage-for-nato-summit-secretary-general-says/.

53 Kommersant (2018) "NATO lets Russia into its new home", https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3618182.

54 Jackson, D. and Korte, G (2018) "Donald Trump to Baltics: I've been tough on Russia, but want better relations", *USA TODAY*, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/04/03/donald-trump-meets-baltic-leaders-worried-russia/480957002/.

55 BelTA (2018) "Belarus and Latvia may conduct joint flight information exchange training", https://www.belta.by/society/view/belarus-i-latvija-mogut-provesti-sovmestnuju-trenirovku-po-obmenu-informatsiej-o-poletah-319286-2018/.

56 Ministry of Defense of Belarus (2019) "Within the Framework of Bilateral Military Cooperation", https://www.mil.by/ru/news/84876/.

terms of NATO deployment in the region and the CSTO's attitude to it. According to Miasnikovich, "the Polish side […] assured […] that this should in no way lead to any kind of escalation of tension. The Polish side […] has heard our concerns. There will be appropriate dialogues at the level of defense ministers and in the Foreign Ministries."[57] As follow-up of that discussion a multilateral meeting of representatives of the General Staffs of Belarus, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine focusing on confidence- and security-building measures in the region was held in Warsaw as early as on March 28.[58]

Another small NATO state, Estonia, also sought to contribute to the promotion of cooperation, which in every aspect apart for its name could be considered within the context of the NATO–CSTO engagement. On June 12, 2019, a delegation led by Eve Vungo, the director of the International Co-operation Department at the Estonian Ministry of Defense, paid a visit to Belarus.[59] The delegation explored not only and not so much the status and prospects of bilateral cooperation in the military sphere, as regional and international security issues.

These and some other contacts yielded specific results. For example, on June 18–19, 2019, a technical agreement was signed between the Defense Ministries of Belarus and Poland envisaging exchange of information on the air situation near the joint state border and the flights of military aircraft in the airspace of Belarus and Poland in the course of a visit of Belarusian Air Force and Air Defense Commander Ihar Holub to Poland.[60] On July 26, 2019, Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs made an official visit to Belarus, where he met with Belarusian Defense Minister Andrei Raukou, while on August 18–19, Latvian Chief of Defense Leonīds Kalniņš was in Minsk on an official visit.

The United States became progressively more openly involved in the regional relationships. On August 30, 2019, Trump's National Security Adviser John Bolton visited Minsk, where he met with Aliaksandr Lukashenka. On the following day, State Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus Stanislau Zas participated in a meeting at the Office of the National Security Bureau (BBN) in Poland attended by Bolton, as well as the BBN Chief Paweł Soloch and Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine Oleksandr Danylyuk.[61] Zas had yet another meeting with the head of the National Security Bureau of Poland, Paweł Soloch, to address the current situation and confidence-building measures on November 4, 2019.[62]

Belarus's contacts with Eastern European NATO member states were taking place in the context of enhanced engagement with the bloc's leading states, especially the U.S. and the UK. Naturally, much in this relationship remains unknown to the general public. One example is the December 3, 2019 meeting of representatives of the Defense Ministry of Belarus and the Department of Defense of the United States in Minsk — virtually nothing is known about it, not even the name of those present. Minsk was making efforts to further its cooperation with the United Kingdom as well. On November 5, 2019, a working meeting between representatives of the Ministries of Defense of Belarus and the UK was held in London, which made it possible for representatives of the Corps of Royal Marines to participate in exercises in the territory of Belarus in 2020.[63] Contacts with Germany were contrastingly less extensive: the visit by Thomas Silberhorn,[64] parliamentary state secretary of the German Ministry of Defense, in November 2018, was the only notable development.

Despite concrete ample evidence, Belarus's intensified relationships at the level of small member states of NATO and the CSTO on the one hand, and involvement of the leaders of the blocs on the other hand went mostly unnoticed in the expert community. In the meantime, it must be acknowledged that at the turn of 2019 and 2020, before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, engagement of the small states of the two blocs was steadily increasing.

On November 12, 2019, Hrodna hosted consultations between the Ministries of Defense of Belarus and Poland centered on the planning of bilateral military cooperation with the participation of Tomasz Kowalik, the director of the Military Foreign Affairs Department at the Ministry of National Defence of Poland.[65] Lithuania's military contacts with Minsk date from the mid-2010s; however, for a number of reasons (primarily the controversy over the Belarusian nuclear power plant) Vilnius's stance on shaping NATO's and EU's policies

57 TUT.by (2019) "Miasnikovič, Duda discuss the establishment of the Fort Trump U. S. military base", https://news.tut.by/economics/626703.html?crnd=64805.

58 Ministry of Defense of Belarus (2019) "Within the Framework of promoting the 'belt of neighborliness'", www.mil.by/news/85607/.

59 Minsk Dialogue (2019) "Minsk Barometer No. 9", https://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/reports/pdf/MB_9_ru.pdf.

60 Vo slavu Rodiny (2019) "Ministry of Defense Informs", https://vsr.mil.by/rubrics/aktualno/the_ministry_of_defence_informs—-/.

61 TUT.by (2019) "Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus Stanislau Zas meets with U. S. Trump's advisor in Poland", https://news.tut.by/economics/651689.html.

62 BelTA (2019) "Zas discusses international security issues with Polish counterpart", https://www.belta.by/politics/view/zas-obsudil-s-polskim-kollegoj-problematiku-mezhdunarodnoj-bezopasnosti-368080–2019/.

63 SB Belarus segodnia (2019) "London plays host to a meeting of representatives of the Belarusian, British Defense Ministries", https://www.sb.by/articles/v-londone-proshla-vstrecha-predstaviteley-minoborony-belarusi-i-velikobritanii.html; BelTA (2020) "Belarusian and British military to exchange experience of tactical and engineer training", https://www.belta.by/society/view/belorusskie-i-britanskie-voennye-obmenjajutsja-opytom-takticheskoj-i-inzhenernoj-podgotovki-382147–2020/.

64 VoenTV (2018) "Minister of Defense of Belarus meets with the parliamentary state secretary of the German Federal Ministry of Defense", https://www.voentv.mil.by/ru/news-ru/view/ministr-oborony-belarusi-vstretilsja-s-parlamentskim-gosudarstvennym-sekretarem-federalnogo-ministerstva-oborony-germanii-3390–2018/.

65 Ministry of Defense of Belarus (2019) "Within the Framework of Bilateral Military Cooperation", https://www.mil.by/ru/news/94715/.

on Minsk appears to be most critical. For instance, Defense Policy Director at the Lithuanian Ministry of National Defense Robertas Šapronas made a visit to Minsk on December 4, 2019.[66] He said in the course of the meeting, which intended to restore Lithuania's relations with Minsk: "Tensions and complete lack of trust in relations between Russia and the West have never been extrapolated in any way to Lithuania's bilateral relationship with Belarus, despite the disparate integration priorities of our countries. I believe this to be a very important positive factor for security in our region."[67]

In an interview with Belarusian military newspaper, Aleh Voinau, head of the Defense Ministry's International Military Cooperation Department, noted that the number of international military cooperation events had increased by more than 20% in 2019 from the 2018 level.[68] About 500 events were held in 2018, which compares to more than 600 in January–November 2019 (including 140 with Russia during the 12 months of 2019).

Voinau also spoke about progress in developing the "good-neighborhood belt", as evidenced by the quadripartite meeting of the deputy chiefs of General Staffs of Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania. He also said he hoped that the positive momentum would be maintained and apply to the level of larger NATO states: "We expect significant positive developments in our relationships with the UK and Germany. We also hope that the so-called ice age in our relations with Poland will become a matter of the past." Commenting on specific achievements, Voinau said, "we have managed to obtain reports on multinational headquarters and battalion task forces in the territories of Poland and the Baltic States." This exchange of information obviously contributed to increased transparency not only between Belarus and NATO, but also as part of inter-bloc engagement.[69]

High hopes were pinned in 2020 on further expansion of military cooperation. In February, Minsk hosted the 4th round of consultations of Belarus and NATO experts on confidence- and security-building measures, attended by William Alberque, Director of NATO's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Non-Proliferation Centre.[70] In early March, the aforementioned Belarus–UK exercise "Winter Partisan" was held at a training ground near Vitebsk.[71] However, the pandemic and the Belarusian political crisis that broke out in summer 2020 brought about a collapse of all of the recent achievements in the relationships between the small states of NATO and the CSTO in the Eastern European region.

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66 Interfax (2019) "Belarus, Lithuania discuss prospects of military cooperation", https://interfax.by/news/policy/vneshnyaya_politika/1268279/.

67 Delfi (2015) "Lithuania, Belarus sign a military cooperation plan for 2016", https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/politics/litva-i-belarus-podpisali-plan-voennogo-sotrudnichestva-na-2016-god.d?id=69806922.

68 Vo slavu Rodiny (2019) "A Celebration of Belarusian Military Diplomats", https://vsr.mil.by/rubrics/data_v_kalendare/the_celebration_of_the_belarusian_military_diplomats/.

69 Interview with a former official at the Ministry of Defense of Belarus, 17.11.2020; interview with a diplomat of an EU member state, 05.12.2020; interview with an expert in conflict resolution working for the benefit of the Government of the Russian Federation, 27.01.2021.

70 Foreign Ministry of Belarus (2020) "On the meeting of Deputy Foreign Minister A. Dapkiunas with Director of the Arms Control, Disarmament, and WMD Non-Proliferation Centre of the NATO International Secretariat", https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/b9e5e12268a6f7d9.html.

71 Euronews (2020) "Belarus–UK 'Winter Partisan'", https://ru.euronews.com/2020/03/05/british-soldiers-in-belarus.

3

BELARUS'S SECURITY INTERESTS AND POLITICO-MILITARY ALLIANCES

THE LOGIC OF JOINING THE CSTO

Just like for any small state, the main objective of Belarus's foreign and defense policy is to protect and preserve its independence and sovereignty.[72] Unlike larger states, in most cases the price tag of a mistake is unacceptably high, which is one of the factors behind the specific nature of Minsk's international conduct. Therefore, Belarus is primarily interested in building such a configuration of the regional security system, which would best contribute to achieving the main objective of its foreign policy. Because of its peculiar geopolitical position within the area, where interests of major centers of power clash, Minsk has traditionally had to resort to maneuvering in its foreign policy endeavor and put in place a multi-vector agenda to a greater or lesser degree.[73]

In the early 1990s, immediately after the country gained independence, there was an active discussion in Belarus about the possibility and feasibility of declaring neutrality, which, according to some politicians and experts, could have contributed to the implementation of the fundamental national interests in the long run. As a result of debate, a provision envisaging Belarus's aspiration to neutrality was included in the country's Constitution of 1994. Despite this constitutional provision, Belarus's neutrality never materialized due to the specific political and military realities that existed in the region and inside the country at that time.

Given the country's historical experience, the structure of its economy and trade and economic ties, as well as cultural and other connections, the choice was made in favor of a comprehensive alliance with Russia, including in the military sphere. In practice, Belarus joined the Collective Security Treaty alongside Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as early as the end of 1993. Later, in 2002, it was decided to transform the treaty-based system into a full-fledged international organization of regional collective security.

The logic of the Belarusian leadership underlying the decision to join the CSTO can be attributed to the essential national interests of the country (preservation and strengthening of the state, support for social and political stability, protection of security) and understanding by its political elite of the country's place globally and within the region (a small state with its economy reliant on Russia and having significant strategic importance to the latter). It was dictated not so much by the imperatives of the community of interests together with other member states of the bloc in the field of security or a common understanding of threats, as by the comprehension of how crucial it was to accommodate Russia's military and political interests.[74] In exchange, Minsk sought support for the long-term stability of the political system established in Belarus and an enabling environment for economic engagement. In other words, Belarus's membership in the CSTO became part of the big strategic deal between Minsk and Moscow, with its foundation having been laid even before Aliaksandr Lukashenka came to power.[75]

At the same time, Minsk's interest in the CSTO as such was virtually negligible. The Regional Task Force and security guarantees from Russia were sufficient to maintain Belarus's military security.

Despite the seeming diversity of its participants, the CSTO is geographically highly specialized. Central Asia has been the bloc's only real focus since the 1990s. It is only there that the infrastructure and forces permanently associated with the CSTO are deployed, and the overwhelming majority of the military security measures that are honed within the CSTO are aimed at countering threats related to that region.[76]

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72 Mosser, M. W. (1999) 'Engineering Influence: The Subtle Power of Small States in the CSCE/OSCE'. In: Reiter, E. and Gaertner, H. eds. *Small States and Alliances*. Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, p. 64.

73 Preiherman, Y. (2019) "The reports or a multi-vector policy are greatly exaggerated", *Minsk Dialogue*, https://minskdialogue.by/research/opinions/slukhi-o-kontce-mnogovektornosti-silno-preuvelicheny.

74 Interview with a former official at the Ministry of Defense of Belarus, 17.11.2020.

75 Interview with Aliaksandr Alesin, 10.11.2020.

76 Bohdan, S. (2020) "The World HandCOV'd: CSTO: in search of *raisons d'être*", *Minsk Dialogue*, https://minskdialogue.by/research/opinions/odkb-v-poiske-smyslov-sushchestvovaniia.



Foto: odkb-csto.org

This follows from both official statements[77] and the specific character of exercises conducted by the CSTO. Most of them are designed to counter the tactics of radical Islamic groups. At the same time, the fact that the CSTO failed to respond to the events in Kyrgyzstan in 2009 proved that the willingness of the bloc to pursue real multilateral action even within Central Asia is low.

In other areas, the activities that are formally associated with the CSTO are low-profile, and the relations between the member states of the bloc are intrinsically bilateral. Therefore, the member states outside the Central Asian region are represented in exercises related to the region to the least possible degree. An example is the series of training events of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF), which took place on October 8–29, 2019 consecutively at six ranges in Russia, Belarus and Tajikistan and were linked together as the "Battle Brotherhood" exercises.[78] They practiced actions to contain a border conflict and counter extremist organizations and illegal armed groups. A total of 10,000 troops from six countries were involved in the exercises; however, the main portion of the maneuvers took place in Russia's internal regions, whereas the key, final, stage — the joint exercise "Unbreakable Brotherhood-2019" — took place in Tajikistan (October 21–29). Belarus was represented by only one peacekeeping company of the 103rd Independent Airborne Brigade.[79]

STRUCTURAL SECURITY CHANGES FOR BELARUS

Almost 20 years after the CSTO was inaugurated, Belarus's interests, both in politics and security, have considerably evolved towards the need for ensuring a more stable foreign policy balance, maneuverability and independence. Several factors made the decisive contribution to this process.

First, the eastward expansion of the European Union and NATO and the accession of most of Belarus's neighbors into these associations brought about a completely new geopolitical reality. There was now a need for Minsk to build constructive and beneficial relationships not only with the individual neighbors, but also with these blocs.

Second, the gradual evolution of the country's economy and foreign trade led to changes in the structure of external economic activity. The Western dimension began to gain more weight than ever before. For example, the proportion

77 See, for example, Dudina, G. and Karabekov, K. (2019) "Troops are Ready for Peace", *Kommersant*, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4173462.

78 CSTO (2019) "Battle Brotherhood-2019", https://odkb-csto.org/training/the_brotherhood_of_war_2019/.

79 VoenTV (2019) "Belarusian peacekeepers leave for Tajikistan to participate in the joint exercise 'Unbreakable Brotherhood-2019'", https://www.voentv.mil.by/ru/news-ru/view/belorusskie-mirotvortsy-ubyli-v-tadzhikistan-dlja-uchastija-v-uchenii-nerushimoe-bratstvo-2019-3733-2019/.

of the European Union in Belarusian export deliveries in some years around the middle of the first decade of the 21st century exceeded that of Russia.[80]

Third, Russia began to put increasing pressure on Minsk and other capitals of the post-Soviet states seeking to include them into integration associations under its aegis, which would directly compete with European and Euro-Atlantic structures. Russia's gradual overcoming of the major crisis of the 1990s and the buildup of its military strength enabled it to pursue its goals in the area of "privileged interests" more persistently.[81] Some examples of this are the conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014–2015). Moscow's conduct alongside the incessant trade conflicts with Minsk (especially those concerning energy resources), offered powerful incentives for the Belarusian leadership to seek opportunities to diversify its foreign policy and foster more active security cooperation with all of its neighbors.

This became especially relevant after the Ukraine events of 2014–2015. The ensuing significant all-round deterioration of the relations between Russia and the West resulted in Minsk's engagement with the EU and NATO becoming less problematic and tense compared to Moscow's relationships with Europe and the North Atlantic bloc for the first time since 1991.

On the one hand, this new structural situation gave rise to additional security challenges and threats to Belarus. Any further escalation of tensions between Russia and NATO (especially given the degradation of communication channels and confidence-building measures between Moscow and Western capitals) could have augmented the risks of military incidents and crises, which would most likely "scratch" the Belarusian territory. More globally, Minsk was facing a chance of being dragged into the growing geopolitical Russia–West clash as Moscow's ally, but without actually having a say.[82] As Russia's actions in Crimea made clear, Moscow is not inclined even to inform its allies in advance about its intended activities concerning issues within the direct competence of the CSTO and that inevitably have an immediate impact on its allies' security.

On the other hand, Belarus's interest in allied relations with Russia remained obvious. This circumstance, together with the need to minimize the risks posed to its own security against the backdrop of structural changes in international relations caused by the Ukraine crisis, became a strong incentive for Minsk to pursue a conciliatory agenda in the relationship between the two politico-military blocs responsible for the security situation in Eastern Europe. Previously, in a markedly more favorable regional security environment, Minsk had no such peacemaking motivation. Moreover, Minsk had no opportunities to further the peacebuilding agenda, because Belarus's relations with Western states had chronically been worse than those of Russia. After 2014, the orientation towards closer cooperation with NATO and primarily its members from among Belarus's neighbors with a view to alleviating regional security risks accorded with Minsk's interests most patently.

Fourth, public opinion has significantly evolved in Belarus since it gained independence. Back in the early 1990s most of the Belarusians were in favor of a union or even merger with Russia, whereas now their geopolitical preferences have significantly shifted in favor of the country's complete independence.[83] Concepts of non-affiliation with any bloc or ideas — especially typical of Belarusian society — about the need for mutually beneficial cooperation with all blocs and organizations, even if such cooperation is complicated by the deep contradictions between these organizations, also became increasingly popular. The evolution of public sentiments served as additional motivation for the Belarusian administration to pursue, more confidently, a multi-vector foreign policy, including with respect to security matters. At the same time, Minsk itself never questioned Belarus's commitments to collective security.[84]

BELARUS'S INFLUENCE WITHIN THE CSTO AND THE UNION STATE

Belarus's ability to influence decision-making within the CSTO is limited by several factors. First of all, we need to reiterate that Minsk is mostly interested in being a member of the bloc due to its importance to Russia. That is, Belarus is making use of the CSTO — and so are the other member states — to effectively consolidate its bilateral relations with Moscow, including by maintaining the allied level of trust.[85] The CSTO itself is of secondary importance to Belarus because of the significant differences in the priorities of its members. Security issues can and are more straightforwardly addressed by Minsk and Moscow at the bilateral level within the framework of the Union State, without employing the more complex multilateral mechanisms of the CSTO.

Furthermore, the CSTO is still in the process of establishing itself as a fully fledged international organization. It has a limited set of mechanisms and programs of engagement, which in itself narrows the room for potential application of

80 BelStat (2020) "Official Statistics. Foreign Trade", https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/realny-sector-ekonomiki/vneshnyaya-torgovlya/.

81 Rossiyskaya gazeta (2008) President Medvedev's Five Principles, 1 September, https://rg.ru/2008/09/01/princypi.html.

82 Preiherman, Y. (2020) "Pandemic Heightens Need to Reset Belarus-Russia Ties", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/27/pandemic-heightens-need-to-reset-belarus-russia-ties-pub-81909.

83 Melyantsou, D. (2015) "Reforum: Geopolitics and Reforms: which can reformers rely on?", *BISS*, https://belinstitute.com/sites/default/files/2020-05/BISS_Blitz04_2015ru.pdf.

84 Interview with a high-ranking representative of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, 15.11.2020; interview with a former official at the Ministry of Defense of Belarus, 17.11.2020.

85 Interview with Alexander Iskandarian, 05.12.2020.

Belarus's initiatives. For example, unlike NATO, the CSTO has no: common intelligence, common air defense system, common military training centers, situational center, regional headquarters, joint command of rapid reaction forces, common research programs, and many more.

Nevertheless, Belarus has a track record of attempts to influence decision-making within the CSTO. By pursuing such initiatives, Belarus, as a rule, seeks to materialize its interests in some area that is well beyond the CSTO. For example, in 2009, Aliaksandr Lukashenka boycotted the signing of an agreement on the establishment of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) within the CSTO, which actually undermined its legitimacy.[86] By protracting the signing of a package of documents that appeared to be important to Russia, the Belarusian president was seeking a happy end to yet another "milk war" that had erupted between the two countries not long before. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that Belarus's demarche was made ahead of the meeting between the Russian president and U. S. President Barack Obama, where Moscow had planned to showcase its weight in the region by leading a NATO-like bloc with its own rapid response task force. The move by the Belarusian side proved to be effective, as obstacles to the access of Belarusian goods to the Russian market were removed quite quickly.

The talks over the deployment of a Russian air base in Belarus can serve as indirect evidence of Minsk's potential influence on the Kremlin's military security policy in the post-Soviet space, albeit not formally within the framework of the CSTO. Belarus remained the only CSTO member without a full-scale Russian military base.

The plan to establish an air base in Belarus was originally announced by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in April 2013: "We hope to have a wing here by 2015. In 2013, we will create an airfield service detachment and deliver the first standby combat fighter wing."[87] However, Lukashenka soon denied that statement, saying that what was really meant was the purchase of Russian-made fighters.[88] Nevertheless, the Russian side continued to bring up the air base deployment issue at the official level and in public space, which pointed to ongoing intricate negotiations and the pressure that the Kremlin put on Minsk. That pressure grew particularly strong during the hot phase of the Ukraine–Russia conflict of 2014–2015.[89]

For Russia, an air base near Ukraine's northern border would contribute to essential leverage with respect to both Ukraine and Belarus. In the military and strategic context, such an airbase was not really significant. However, on the one hand, it would have become an additional threat and an instrument of psychological pressure on Kyiv, while on the other hand, it could have demonstrated Belarus's loyalty as an ally and enabled Russia to accumulate its personnel and arms in its territory in case of need, as it had happened in Crimea before its annexation.

For Belarus, the deployment of a Russian military base was unacceptable for several reasons. Such a move would have implied increased risks to Belarus's sovereignty and an additional threat in case of a rift with Moscow over the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Given Minsk's attempts to facilitate the resolution of that conflict, it would also be equivalent to a failure of its peacekeeping policy and the associated improvement in its relations with the West at best. The worst-case scenario would envisage a severance of the relationship with Ukraine, which is strategically important to Belarus.

As a result, Aliaksandr Lukashenka managed to persuade the Russian leadership to abandon its ambition to have its own military base in Belarus. He motivated his position by the fact that Belarus is perfectly capable of ensuring its own security and the security of the western border of the Union State.[90] He also emphasized that the fly-in time of a modern warplane from the nearest Russian air base to the western borders of the Union State was only a matter of minutes. Nevertheless, the Russian leadership remained unhappy about Belarus's reluctance to host the base, referring to it as an "unpleasant episode".[91] One of the repercussions of Moscow's indignation was its refusal to sell Belarus Su-30SM fighters at a reduced rate, despite the agreements within the CSTO and the Union State.[92]

The non-deployment of a Russian air base and the protraction of the creation of the CRRF of the CSTO demonstrate Minsk's ability to counter Russia's pressure within the system of politico-military integration. The above examples also reflect two important interconnected trends in the relationship between Belarus and Russia as military allies, which became especially conspicuous after 2014:

1. Russia views Belarus less and less as a **de facto** — rather than an exclusively **de jure** — military ally. As a consequence, it is not interested in supporting the

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86 RBC (2009) "CSTO states sign CRRF deal without Belarus", https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/06/2009/5703d4a49a79477331808ecd.

87 Interfax (2013) "Russian MiG to land in Minsk", https://www.interfax.ru/russia/303204.

88 President of Belarus (2013) "A working visit to the Khoiniki District of the Homiel Region", https://president.gov.by/ru/events/aleksandr-lukashenko-posetil-s-rabochej-poezdkoj-xojnikskij-rajon-gomelskoj-oblasti-5331.

89 Alesin, A. (2018) "Issue of a Russian air base in Belarus is off the table. But Moscow has other issues to table", https://naviny.online/article/20180116/1516081802-vopros-rossiyskoy-aviabazy-v-belarusi-zakryt-no-u-moskvy-est-drugie.

90 Sputnik.by (2018) "Lukashenka on a Russian military base: there is no need to have it here", https://sputnik.by/defense_safety/20181106/1038507335/Lukashenko-o-rossiyskoy-voennoy-baze-ona-zdes-ne-nuzhna.html?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop.

91 Kommersant (2019) "Lavrov calls Belarus's refusal to deploy a Russian base an unpleasant episode", https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4104137.

92 Reform.by (2019) "Zas tells how Russia suggested deploying a base instead of selling aircraft".



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development and strengthening of the Belarusian armed forces as an autonomous unit within the CSTO or the Union State.[93] On the contrary, the Kremlin seeks to replace the Belarusian army with its own forces, weapons, and military equipment. This is one reason behind the persistent attempts to deploy an air base in Belarus.

2. Frustrated by Russia's unwillingness to offer its allies military and economic backing, the Belarusian leadership saw no other options but to rely more on its own strengths and increasingly diversify its foreign and security policy. This ultimately leads to a gradual transformation of the Belarusian army in accordance with the needs of the country, not the military bloc, to which it is a party. In terms of the development of the armed forces, the top priorities for the Belarusian leadership are the Air Force and Air Defense, Special Operations Force (SDF), Territorial Defense System, and missile formations.[94]

INFRASTRUCTURE AND AREAS OF BELARUS'S COOPERATION WITH NATO

Prior to the political crisis that erupted in Belarus in August 2020, Minsk focused on building a multi-vector foreign policy to the extent permitted by the Belarusian reality. That priority was also manifested in international military cooperation, which Belarus substantially diversified and intensified after 2014.

Bilateral agreements on additional confidence- and security-building measures with Ukraine and the three neighboring NATO member states (Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia) back in the early 2000s served as an important infrastructure foundation for Minsk's endeavor. These measures correspond to the provisions of Chapter X of the Vienna Document.[95] and envisage:

— additional military information evaluation visits and inspections of the specified areas;
— additional exchange of information on armed forces and expert meetings;
— mutual notification of major military activities below the notification thresholds agreed in the Vienna Document.[96]

In pursuance of the provisions of those arrangements the Republic of Belarus hosted an additional 32 inspections of the specified areas and 61 evaluation visits in its territory from 2002 to 2020. For its part, Belarus conducted 28 inspections of the specified areas and made 62 evaluation visits to Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine during the same period.[97] Both Minsk and its partner countries have always emphasized their satisfaction with the quality of dialogue and cooperation within the framework of the said agreements, and especially after 2014, when the

93 Interview with Andrej Savinych, 20.11.2020.

94 Minsk Dialogue (2018) "Minsk Barometer No. 2", https://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/reports/pdf/MB2_ru.pdf.

95 OSCE (2011) "Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures", https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/86597.pdf.

96 Foreign Ministry of Belarus (2004) "On the conclusion of agreement and additional confidence- and security-building measures between Belarus and Poland", https://mfa.gov.by/print/press/news_mfa/ad8a4607e58bf3ff.html.

97 Defense Ministry of Belarus (2020) "Arms control", https://www.mil.by/ru/military_policy/arms_control/#dogovor.

significance of the regional security agreements increased dramatically.[98]

An overall increase in the number of confidence-building measures between Belarus and NATO was additionally observed. Specifically, meetings of representatives of Belarusian state agencies and NATO concerning the involvement in the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) Planning and Review Process were held on an annual basis.[99] Back in 2010, Belarus made an agreement with NATO on rail transit, thereby becoming part of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) for the transit of non-military cargoes to Afghanistan as part of the operation of the International Security Assistance Force.[100] In 2013, an additional agreement was reached to expand the terms of previous agreements on the transit of NATO armored vehicles.[101] Those processes contributed to the policy of normalization of Belarus's relationship with the U.S., which started in 2015–2016.

In December 2019, the former chief of the General Staff of Belarus, Major General Aleh Belakoneu, said that Belarus was ready for joint exercises with NATO and that negotiations on possible formats were underway.[102] At the same time, he made a specific remark that Russia should remain a strategic ally. The main obstacle to having joint exercises and to Belarus's participation in NATO missions is the incomplete process of entry into force of the data security agreement, which establishes minimum standards for classified information protection. Importantly, Belarus's membership in the CSTO by itself does not impose a ban on a member's participation in NATO exercises and missions. Armenia is an example of such cooperation.

On the whole, Belarus offers more transparency of its military activities compared to Russia, which has been repeatedly noted by the NATO leadership. For example, unlike Russia, Belarus remains committed to the CFE Treaty, and the Belarusian Defense Ministry publishes much more detailed information about the operation of the Belarusian army as against the Russian Defense Ministry. The same holds for joint military exercises. It was Minsk that ensured the broad presence of foreign observers at the Zapad-2017 Belarus–Russia exercise.[103]

The ad hoc neutrality of Belarus with regard to the Russia–Ukraine conflict over Crimea and Donbas is also illustrative in this context.[104] Minsk did not recognize the legitimacy of Russia's annexation of Crimea and offered its services in resolving the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, as well as played host to numerous conferences and negotiations aimed at de-escalating international tensions. These peacekeeping efforts had a positive effect on both Belarus's security and the Belarus–NATO relationship.[105]

That said, as it pursues its foreign and defense policy the Belarusian leadership makes sure it takes into account Russia's interests and possible risks for Belarus in case it ignores these interests. Therefore, official Minsk has never challenged its membership in the CSTO and security and defense cooperation with Russia in general.[106] This aspect should be recognized as another important component of the Belarusian model of "**ad hoc** neutrality".

IMPLICATIONS OF BELARUS'S INTERNAL POLITICAL CRISIS OF 2020

Since 2018, the observed increased intensity of contacts between the small countries of NATO and the CSTO had potential to evolve into a more sustainable inter-bloc cooperation format. However, the positive momentum was interrupted by the political crisis that unfolded after the August 2020 presidential election in Belarus and the regional geopolitical revolution that followed,[107] during which Minsk's defense policy made a dramatic unprecedented turn toward Moscow.

Following the 2020 presidential campaign, Belarus and the West apparently returned to the cycle in the relations that characterized their engagement previously: slow normalization all the way up to a presidential election — deterioration after the election — **slow and painful normalization as the two sides get accustomed to the post-election status quo**. This time, however, the situation is complicated by both the unprecedented scale of protests in Belarus and the context of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West, which further narrows the room for official Minsk's foreign policy maneuver. Moreover, at the peak of the internal political crisis, the Belarusian administration was forced to ask the Kremlin for help and thereby update its already forgotten anti-Western rhetoric. Its content was reduced to accusing the U.S.

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98 Interview with a representative of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, 21.01.2021.

99 Interview with Aliaksandr Alesin, 10.11.2020.

100 Socor, V. (2013) "Silent Partner: Belarus in NATO's Northern Distribution Network", *The Jamestown Foundation*, https://jamestown.org/program/silent-partner-belarus-in-natos-northern-distribution-network/#.UgQPbW3OC8s.

101 *Ibid.*

102 TUT.by (2019) "Belakoneu: Belarus is ready for joint exercises with NATO; negotiations on possible formats were underway", https://news.tut.by/economics/664390.html.

103 Interview with Yury Derevyanko, 11.11.2020.

104 Melyantsou, D. (2019) 'Situational Neutrality: A Conceptualisation Attempt', *Minsk Dialogue*, http://minskdialogue.by/en/research/opinions/situational-neutrality-a-conceptualization-attempt.

105 Interview with a former official at the Ministry of Defense of Belarus, 17.11.2020.

106 Interview with a high-ranking representative of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, 15.11.2020; Interview with a former official at the Ministry of Defense of Belarus, 17.11.2020.

107 Interview with Anna Maria Dyner, 22.01.2021.



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and other countries of the political West of orchestrating a revolution in the country.[108]

However, the overall stabilization of the political situation inside Belarus, which had been completed in broad terms by the end of 2020,[109] prevented the most undesirable aftermath of the request for Russia's help. First, the pool of law enforcers put together by Vladimir Putin at the request of his Belarusian counterpart,[110] was never deployed in the territory of Belarus, nor were any other military and police units. Second, there was no forceful deepening of integration within the framework of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, which would have led to the loss of a significant portion of Belarus's sovereignty.

Given these circumstances, the Belarusian leadership resumed its multi-vector policy rhetoric as early as the start of 2021. For example, in his address at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly on February 11, Aliaksandr Lukashenka noted that Belarus was interested in having "balanced and diverse relations with the outside world […]". He also noted: "This is the essence of our multi-vector concept, which raises so many questions even among our brothers. There is no need to criticize us for allegedly sitting on two chairs. Our ultimate objective is to diversify international, primarily economic, relations," he said.[111] He underlined that relations with the European Union were important for Belarus even in the new political environment.

In his report at the Assembly, Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei **de facto** suggested giving up the country's aspiration to neutrality, which is stipulated in its Constitution.[112] In his opinion, this provision no longer meets the requirements of the current situation. At the same time, he also spoke in favor of maintaining a multi-vector approach, which "does not rule out the prevalence of a certain single vector."[113]

It is therefore safe to assume that despite the markedly strengthened role of Russia in Belarus's foreign and defense policy in the wake of the internal political crisis, official Minsk's strategic interests have not undergone similarly marked changes. The long-term imperative to achieve stable foreign policy equilibrium, even amid the currently prevailing Russian vector, is still maintained. This enables us to speak about possibilities for Minsk to normalize its relations with the West and Belarus's continued interest in promoting a conciliatory and peacemaking agenda in Eastern Europe. Consequently, Belarus's interest in the establishment of constructive engagement between the CSTO and NATO remains valid.

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108 BelTA (2020) "Seven phases of the scenario to eliminate Belarus — Lukashenka speaks about opponents' real plans", https://www.belta.by/president/view/sem-etapov-stsenarija-po-unichtozheniju-belarusi-lukashenko-rasskazal-ob-istinnyh-zamyslah-opponentov-406999-2020/.

109 At least judging by the scale of the street confrontation and the analytically visible prospects of its resumption in the spring of 2021.

110 Poliakova, V. (2020) "Putin says a pool of law enforcers has been put together for Belarus", *RBC*, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/08/2020/5f478b809a7947e8079f1cb7.

111 President of Belarus (2021) "Sixth All-Belarusian People's Assembly", https://president.gov.by/ru/events/shestoe-vsebelorusskoe-narodnoe-sobranie.

112 BelTA (2021) "Makei: the aspiration to neutrality that is stipulated in the Constitution fails to meet the requirements of the current situation", https://www.belta.by/politics/view/makej-zakreplennoe-v-konstitutsii-stremlenie-k-nejtralitetu-ne-sootvetstvuet-tekuschej-situatsii-428284-2021/.

113 BelTA (2021) "Belarus needs to keep pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy — Makei", https://www.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-dolzhna-i-dalshe-priderzhivatsja-mnogovektornoj-vneshnej-politiki-makej-428266-2021.

4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the period between 2014 and 2020, a very cautious, and therefore gradual, buildup of engagement between the small Eastern European members of NATO and the CSTO was observed. A series of factors hindered cooperation. They included general geopolitical tensions, frequent misalignment of interests, diametrically opposed assessments of challenges and threats, and conflicting historical narratives in respective societies. However, the rational comprehension of their intrinsic vulnerabilities (at least by some elites) in the event of a hypothetical military clash in Eastern Europe facilitated the understanding by those states of the need for dialogue and collaboration.[114] As a result, the dilemma "clash of global projects vs. commonality of regional interests" has not yet been resolved in the region (and will not be even in the long run); however, it no longer paralyzed the capacity for expanding mutually beneficial cooperation.

Initial mutual confidence was beginning to accumulate in Eastern Europe, along with communication experience at various levels and in various formats. Through this process, small countries from the opposed blocs began to better understand each other's motivations and logic, which scaled down the overall attribution bias in the perception of the opposing side.[115] This contributed, albeit slowly and not ubiquitously, to the awareness among Eastern European countries of their own responsibility for the situation in the region, which, however, did not negate the absolute priority of their relationships with their allies within their respective politico-military blocs.

Belarus played a key role in this process — after 2014, the country considerably reinforced its attempts to bring down regional tensions. Minsk's conciliatory policy reflected its understanding of its own security interests amid engendered structural transformations in Eastern Europe and across the entire system of international relations.

The political crisis that erupted in Belarus in the summer of 2020 and its international fallout in the form of a comprehensive diplomatic conflict between Minsk and Western capitals curbed the development of the positive trends observed in recent years. At the peak of the internal political confrontation, the Belarusian leadership turned to harsh anti-Western rhetoric, accusing NATO member states not only of supporting the opposition, but also of preparing a possible military invasion of Belarus.[116] As a result, Aliaksandr Lukashenka ordered to redeploy about half of the operational strength to the borders with Lithuania and Poland due to "the increased concentration of NATO troops near the western borders."[117] Those developments must have made serious adjustments to the status of regional security and the immediate prospects of successful inter-bloc cooperation. Some diplomats and experts even believe that all of the achievements of the previous five to six years have been nullified.[118]

However, from the strategic point of view, the Belarusian crisis and its international ramifications have brought very slight changes to the regional security situation in Eastern Europe so far.[119] Minsk's objective and easy-to-understand interest (at least as soon as the situation inside the country has stabilized) in maintaining its effort to alleviate regional security tensions still remains. NATO is still interested in minimizing military risks and at least limited improvement in military transparency. Besides, as was noted above, the numerous contacts that have taken place in recent years helped the two sides to get to know and understand each other better. Building on this foundation, "oddly enough, even despite the general shock that the Belarusian developments caused in the West, both sides are actually having

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114 Interview with Yulia Nikitina, 16.11.2020.

115 Interview with the ambassador of a European state, 13.11.2020; Interview with a high-ranking representative of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, 15.11.2020; Interview with Anna Maria Dyner, 22.01.2021.

116 BelTA (2020) "Lukashenka: this foul-up has been orchestrated, is being planned and managed by the U.S.", https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-nam-gotovili-etu-zavarushku-planirujut-eto-i-napravljajut-ssha-403655-2020.

117 TASS (2020) "Lukashenka says was forced to redeploy half of armed forces to the western border", https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/10000571.

118 Interview with the ambassador of a European state; 13.11.2020; Interview with Quincy Cloet, 21.11.2020.

119 Preiherman, Y. (2021) "Europe's long-standing front. How the Belarusian crisis will affect the security of the Baltic States", *Carnegie Moscow Center*, https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83535.

fewer illusions concerning each other than before."[120] This factor may also help avoid the worst-case future scenarios in regional security.

Moreover, Belarus is the only regional actor that is not only independently motivated to promote inter-bloc cooperation, which is due to the country's peculiar geographic and geostrategic position, but also possesses a relevant practical infrastructure to pursue its objective. What is meant here is the unique network of bilateral agreements on confidence- and security-building measures, which Minsk has signed with all of the neighboring NATO members and Ukraine. It is owing to this that even in this new political environment, Belarus objectively retains its ability and capacity to abate the regional "security dilemma" described in the report.

In order to further develop this capacity for the sake of peace and security in Eastern Europe, Minsk and other regional actors should pay heed to the following recommendations.

1. In the short- and medium-term, the central task is to **prevent the regional situation from descending into hard massive confrontation between the two politico-military blocs.** Given the escalating contradictions between Russia and the West, as well as the diplomatic conflict between Belarus and the West, it is mandatory that operational verification and confidence-building toolkit within the network of bilateral agreements on confidence- and security-building measures remain in place. Belarus and Eastern European member states of NATO should ensure the highest possible level of transparency of their military activities, permanent exchange of information about exercises and disposition of troops, and preservation of direct channels for the military to effectively communicate.

2. Against the backdrop of the near collapse of the global arms control system, which undermines the very foundations of strategic stability, engagement between the small member states of NATO and the CSTO with a view to shoring up the regional arms control skeleton is of particular importance for ensuring regional security in Eastern Europe. To this end, **it is necessary to identify and agree on a minimum level of cooperation that would be binding on all countries in the region within the framework of key arms control agreements**, from which major actors have already withdrawn or have announced their intention to withdraw: CFE Treaty, INF Treaty, and OST.

3. In the context of the international implications of the Belarusian internal political crisis, the **challenges of non-perception by the small states of NATO and the CSTO of each other's international personalities and their attribution bias towards each other have become increasingly relevant again. In addition to the proposed crisis management instruments, the negative impact of these challenges should be minimized through active expert (Track II) diplomacy.** It is inherently more flexible than official diplomacy, and in conditions of grave crises remains, de facto, the only channel of communication to not only notify the opposite side of decisions taken, but also account for the logic behind decision-making.

4. **Belarus must remain a platform for inclusive regional security dialogue.** There is simply no other place of this kind elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and therefore the loss of the Minsk platform for official and expert diplomacy cannot be recovered. Accordingly, the preservation of the Belarusian platform objectively serves the shared interest of all security stakeholders and actors in Eastern Europe, rather than Minsk's unilateral needs.

5. Given the allied commitments between Russia and Belarus, as well as the special importance that Moscow and Minsk attach to each other, **maintaining the capacity of the latter as a driver in reducing regional tensions is only possible if all of the legitimate interests of Russia are accommodated.** In this context, official Minsk's statement about the possible abrogation of the neutrality clause that is part of the current Constitution may play a positive role in the long run.

6. The Belarus–Russia exercise West-2021 slated for September 2021 will inevitably cause a new outburst of negative emotions and confrontation in Eastern Europe. **The organizers of the exercise should therefore consider options to maximize its transparency.**

7. In the longer term, **Minsk needs to elaborate a comprehensive conceptual vision of its own regional role, which would respect the interests of all security stakeholders and actors in Eastern Europe as fully as possible.**

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120 Interview with a high-ranking representative of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, 15.11.2020.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Adam Reichardt, Editor-in-Chief of New Eastern Europe, co-host of the Talk Eastern Europe podcast, online, 05.11.2020

Aliaksandr Alesin, independent military expert, Minsk, 10.11.2020

Yury Derevyanko, former officer at the Department for International Military Cooperation of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk, 11.11.2020

Ambassador of a European state, Minsk, 13.11.2020

High-ranking representative of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, Minsk, 15.11.2020

Yulia Nikitina, Associate Professor at MGIMO Moscow State Institute for International Relations; leading research fellow of the MGIMO Institute for International Studies, online, 16.11.2020

Former official at the Ministry of Defense of Belarus, Minsk, 17.11.2020

Andrej Savinych, Chair of the Standing Commission for International Affairs of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly, Minsk, 20.11.2020

Analyst at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Research (BISR), Minsk, 21.11.2020

Quincy Cloet, Managing Editor of Visegrad Insight, online, 21.11.2020

Head of a think tank operating for the benefit of the Government of the Russian Federation, Moscow, 04.12.2020

Representative of Russia in one of the subgroups of the OSCE Tripartite Contact group, Moscow, 05.12.2020

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Alexander Iskandarian, Director of the Caucasus Institute (Armenia), Moscow, 05.12.2020

Diplomat of an EU member state, Moscow, 05.12.2020

Łukasz Kulesa, Deputy Head of Research at The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM); Senior Associate at the European Leadership Network, online, 20.01.2021

Representative of the Foreign Ministry of Belarus, Minsk, 21.01.2021

Anna Maria Dyner, analyst at The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), online, 22.01.2021

Former high-ranking official, Moscow, 25.01.2021

Independent expert in conflict resolution working for the benefit of the Government of the Russian Federation, Moscow, 27.01.2021

Liana Fix, Programme Director for International Affairs at Körber-Stiftung, online, 05.02.2021

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ABOUT MINSK DIALOGUE COUNCIL ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The Minsk Dialogue was launched as a Track-II initiative focused on international affairs and security in Eastern Europe in early 2015. Its first international conference titled The EU, Russia and the Shared Neighbourhood: Bridging the divide took place in March 2015.

The mission of the Minsk Dialogue is to offer an open and geopolitically unbiased platform for research and discussion on international affairs and security in Eastern Europe.

In its work the Minsk Dialogue pursues the following main goals:

- To promote greater security in Eastern Europe.
- To help Belarus to advance its sovereign interests in the system of international relations.
- To enhance the potential of the Belarusian expert and academic communities in the fields of international relations and security.

The Minsk Dialogue experts produce analytical reports, policy papers, commentaries, backgrounders, and conference non-papers, which are widely distributed among the relevant international stakeholders. Regular Minsk Dialogue events gather international experts, as well as high-level officials and diplomats.

In May 2018, the inaugural Minsk Dialogue Forum gathered over 500 participants from 59 countries. The Forum's title — Eastern Europe: In search of security for all — has now become the Minsk Dialogue's motto.

In October 2019, the Second Forum brought together more than 700 participants from 62 countries. The 2020 Forum was held online.

Minsk Dialogue's Advisory Council assists the organization in its strategic development and in establishing itself as an authoritative voice in international expert and diplomatic communities. And the members of the Expert Council participate actively in implementing the organization's research agenda. The Advisory and Expert Councils include reputable Belarusian and foreign academics, experts, and diplomats.

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Research report

ROLE AND IMPACT OF SMALL STATES IN PROMOTING PEACE AND SECURITY IN EASTERN EUROPE. THE CASE OF BELARUS

Against the backdrop of the near collapse of the global arms control system, engagement between the small member states of NATO and the CSTO is of particular importance for regional security in Eastern Europe.

Belarus is the only regional actor that is motivated to promote inter-bloc cooperation and possesses a relevant practical infrastructure for that.

Minsk preserves its objective interest in alleviating regional security tensions.

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