

By ,
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Belarus: One year on from the disputed Presidential election



Summary

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Summary

Just over one year has passed since the disputed Presidential election in Belarus which returned President Alexandr Lukashenko for a sixth term in office.

The anti-government protests, that erupted after the election, have been quelled following a crackdown by Belarusian security forces. Lukashenko has consolidated his grip on power, while political opposition in the country has been virtually neutralised. Opposition activists have been jailed or gone into exile abroad. Repression of the Belarusian people has evolved into an unprecedented and systemic State-led campaign of human rights violations, in an effort to silence dissent.

Opposition critics have been targeted, both at home and abroad. In May 2021, a Ryanair flight was diverted and forced to land in Minsk to arrest journalist and government critic, Roman Protasevich. The independent media in Belarus, human rights organisations and civil society groups have all had their offices raided and staff detained in what [Lukashenko has described as a “purge” of “bandits and foreign agents”](#).

Over the course of the last year more than 35,000 people have been detained by the authorities and, at the time of writing, [722 people were being held as political prisoners](#). Detainees have reported widespread abuse and torture at the hands of the security forces.

In July 2021, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Belarus said in her annual report to the UN Human Rights Council that the Lukashenko regime had [“launched a full-scale assault against civil society”](#).

Lukashenko’s survival has largely been attributed, however, to the intervention, and support, of Russia which now holds significant leverage over the regime. At a summit between Presidents Putin and Lukashenko in September 2021, the two leaders agreed to further integrate the two countries’ economies. Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia has also increased over the last year, and by default, expanded Russia’s military footprint in the country.

What has the international response been?

Most Western countries do not recognise the outcome of the August 2020 Presidential election and have widely criticised the Lukashenko regime for its failure to engage in dialogue with the opposition and for its continued repression of the Belarusian people.

EU nations, the UK, the US and Canada have all moved to impose financial and economic sanctions on the regime and have committed to supporting the opposition and Belarusian civil society more broadly. There are questions, however, over what sanctions can hope to achieve in the longer term when Russia remains Belarus' largest trading partner and biggest political supporter. Many commentators have argued that Western sanctions merely [“play into the hands of Russia’s President Vladimir Putin”](#).

Prospects

Where the country, and Lukashenko, go from here is uncertain. The recent push by the Kremlin for greater economic integration, may be followed by demands for closer political union, in what some have described as the [“soft annexation”](#) of Belarus by the Kremlin. Yet, political integration may also no longer be necessary for Putin to achieve his aims in Belarus. The regime's dependence on Russia has become almost irreversible, which keeps Belarus firmly within the Kremlin's political and economic strategic sphere of influence.

Whether Lukashenko can hold on to power is debatable. President Putin has long signalled his desire for [progress on longstanding promises of constitutional reform](#), and fresh elections, albeit undoubtedly on Russia's terms.

On 28 September 2021, Lukashenko confirmed that a constitutional referendum would be held in February 2022. This could provide an opportunity for Lukashenko to step down as President and be succeeded by a figure either of his own choosing, or that of Russia. When announcing the referendum, President Lukashenko vowed [“not to let the opposition come to power”](#).

The proposed referendum has therefore been met with scepticism. While constitutional reform appears on the cards, assuming Lukashenko lives up to his commitments, it is unlikely to deliver the sort of reform that Western countries and opposition activists are demanding. Instead, Lukashenko's crackdown on society seems likely to continue unabated.

1 Background

Belarus gained independence in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union. A new constitution was adopted in 1994 which created the post of President and paved the way for the first free elections in the country.

Alexandr Lukashenko was elected President after securing 80.6 per cent of the vote in the second round. Since entering office Lukashenko has consolidated his power and that of the Presidency.¹ Belarus has been described as the “last European dictatorship” and the 1994 presidential election was the last international election observers have considered either free or fair.²

1.1 2020 presidential election

Belarus held its most recent presidential election on Sunday 9 August 2020.

In the weeks leading up to the election there were large rallies against the incumbent, President Lukashenko, despite an increasing crackdown on the opposition and several arrests.

Leading rival candidates such as Viktor Babaryko, Sergei Tikhanovsky and Valery Tsepkalo were all banned or detained to prevent them from running. Their wives decided to stand for election instead, with Svetlana Tikhanovskaya becoming the face of the opposition movement.

Lukashenko was declared the winner by Belarus’ election authorities, having secured 80 per cent of the vote, delivering him a sixth term in office.

Mass pro-democracy protests

The “official” results have been widely disputed, with supporters of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya insisting she won. Belarusians rejected the outcome, and thousands took to the streets for almost three months in some of the biggest demonstrations the country had ever seen. By November 2020, more than

¹ In 1995 Lukashenko won a referendum that gave the President the power to dissolve the legislature. A second referendum in 1996 increased the powers of the Presidency and extended Lukashenko’s initial five-year term to 2001.

² Presidential elections have been held in 2001, 2006, 2010, 2015 and 2020. Reports of the OSCE election observation missions are available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/belarus>

30,000 people had been detained, 900 faced criminal charges and several people had been killed.³

Ms Tikhanovskaya fled to neighbouring Lithuania, while other prominent opposition figures were arrested after establishing a Coordination Council to ensure the peaceful transfer of power. Belarusian authorities launched a criminal case, accusing opposition figures of attempting the “seizure of state power, and at harming national security”⁴, and placed their names on a terrorist list. In early September 2020, Council member and opposition leader, Maria Kolesnikova, was [detained at the Ukraine border](#) after refusing to be forcibly deported. Other Council members, Anton Rodnenkov and Ivan Kravtsov disappeared.⁵

International response

Russian President Vladimir Putin was the first world leader to congratulate President Lukashenko on his re-election.

Many Western nations, however, refused to accept the legitimacy of another term for Lukashenko, declaring the elections to be neither free nor fair.

“The 9 August presidential elections were neither free nor fair and... Aleksandr Lukashenko lacks any democratic legitimacy”.

[EU Foreign Affairs Council](#), 12 October 2020

The UK immediately called for “independent investigation through the OSCE [Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe] into the flaws that rendered the election unfair, as well as the grisly repression that followed”.⁶ The UK and the EU indicated that they would work together with international partners, to sanction “those who violated democratic values or abused human rights”.⁷ [The UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution](#) calling for the Belarusian authorities to “enter into a political dialogue with the opposition” and to “guarantee respect for human rights law, including civil and political rights”.

Seventeen OSCE participating States subsequently [invoked the Moscow Mechanism on 17 September](#) to examine alleged human rights violations in Belarus.⁸ The [OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights](#) published its report at the end of October 2020. It concluded:

there is overwhelming evidence that the presidential elections of 9 August 2020 have been falsified and that massive and systematic human rights violations have been committed by the Belarusian security forces in response to peaceful demonstrations and protests.⁹

³ Dr Ryhor Astapenia, [“Amid the crisis, Belarusian identity is changing”](#), Chatham House Expert Comment, 30 November 2020

⁴ [“Belarus protests: Maria Kolesnikova detained by masked men”](#), BBC News, 7 September 2020

⁵ Ibid

⁶ [Foreign and Commonwealth Office press release](#), 17 August 2020

⁷ [“EU takes first steps toward Belarus sanctions”](#), Politico, 14 August 2020

⁸ The UK Ambassador to the OSCE made a [joint statement on the invocation](#) on 17 September.

⁹ OSCE, [Note Verbale](#), 358/2020, 29 October 2020

It made 82 recommendations for resolving the political crisis, including:

- New Presidential elections
- An immediate end to the violence
- The release of all those illegally detained
- An independent oversight mechanism on detention conditions
- An investigation into all allegations of torture.

OSCE Participating States have called on the Belarusian Government to implement those recommendations in full.¹⁰

¹⁰ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Recent developments in Belarus: Joint Canada-UK statement](#), 25 March 2021

2

Situation in Belarus one year on

In the year since the disputed Presidential election, the Lukashenko regime has quelled the anti-government protests and consolidated his grip on power. Political opposition in the country has been virtually neutralised, as opposition activists have been jailed or gone into exile abroad, and repression of the Belarusian people is considered to have reached [unprecedented levels](#).

While Lukashenko has been emboldened, his survival has largely been attributed, however, to the intervention, and support, of Russia which now holds significant leverage over the regime.

2.1

Systemic human rights violations

The regime's response to anti-government protests in the latter half of 2020 was met with widespread condemnation from human rights groups, NGOs and Western nations.

“If it was widely seen as an isolated dictatorship before, today Belarus is much worse”.

Janek Lasocki, [RUSI Commentary](#), 1 September 2021

Over the last year, however, the crackdown has evolved from the targeting of protesters into a systemic State-led campaign of human rights violations, in an effort to silence dissent.

According to human rights organisations and the United Nations (UN), over the course of the last year more than 35,000 people have been detained by the police, [722 people are being held as political prisoners](#),¹¹ including prominent opposition figures. Thousands more protesters have fled abroad. Several of those detained have reported abuse and torture at the hands of the security forces.

In July 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur for Belarus said in her annual report to the UN Human Rights Council that the Lukashenko regime had [“launched a full-scale assault against civil society”](#), accusing Belarus of acting like a totalitarian state, trying to forcibly prevent any form of opposition to the regime.¹²

The Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN [has opened an examination into the Human Rights situation](#) in Belarus, after a request from the Human Rights Council.

¹¹ Viasna Human Rights Center, Correct as of 5 October 2021

¹² [Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus](#), 2021

1 Human rights conventions to which Belarus is a State Party

- [Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#)
- [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#)
- [Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#)
- [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)
- [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#)
- [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#)
- [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
- [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)

As a Member State of the [OSCE](#), Belarus also commits to respect human rights and the rule of law and to hold all perpetrators of human rights violations to account.

Belarus is not a Member State of the Council of Europe and is not subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights.

Suppression of the opposition leadership

Over the course of the last year the regime has abducted, imprisoned and expelled virtually all of the opposition leadership in the country.

Politically motivated trials of over a hundred individuals have been conducted behind closed doors and without due process. Many of the activists' lawyers have been stripped of their licences to practice.

In July 2021 Viktor Babaryka, who had attempted to stand as a presidential candidate was sentenced to 14 years in prison on charges of corruption. In early September 2021, prominent opposition campaigners Maria Kolesnikova and Maxim Znak were sentenced to 11 years and 10 years, respectively, for threatening national security, plotting to seize power and extremism.

The sentences were met with widespread condemnation from [the EU](#), [the United States](#) and the British Government, who all called on the regime to respect human rights and for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners. The then Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, said that

“Locking up political opponents will only deepen the pariah status of the Lukashenko regime”.¹³

The forced landing of Ryanair flight FR4978 and the arrest of Roman Protasevich

The unprecedented crackdown on the regime’s critics, and the lengths to which Lukashenko is seemingly prepared to go to silence dissent, was epitomised by the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in Minsk in May 2021, ostensibly for the sole purpose of arresting journalist and critic, Roman Protasevich.

The flight between Athens and Vilnius had been forcibly diverted to Minsk, while in Belarusian airspace, after Belarusian authorities reported that there was a bomb on board the aircraft.¹⁴ Shortly after landing Mr Protasevich and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, were removed from the aircraft and arrested. A number of [KGB agents were also reported to have left the aircraft](#) in Minsk.

Mr Protasevich ran the website Nexta, a prominent opposition platform during the presidential election campaign, which had been covering the anti-government protests. In October 2020 a Belarusian court ruled Nexta was an extremist organisation. Protasevich was placed on a terrorism list by the Belarusian authorities and a warrant was issued for his arrest. Shortly after their arrest, Mr Protasevich and Ms Sapega appeared in videos apparently confessing to their crimes, although it is widely thought that they were speaking under duress.¹⁵

The incident prompted an international outcry, with some accusing Belarus of state-sponsored hijacking.¹⁶

In a [joint statement](#), the G7 countries and the EU deemed it a “serious attack on the rules governing civil aviation” and “a serious attack on media freedom”.¹⁷ They also called on the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) to launch an investigation. Those sentiments were reiterated in [a statement by several members of the UN Security Council](#) who called the act a “blatant attack on international civil aviation safety and on European security and show flagrant disregard for international law”.¹⁸

NATO’s North Atlantic Council also said: “This unacceptable act seriously violated the norms governing civil aviation and endangered the lives of the

¹³ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Press Release](#), 6 September 2021

¹⁴ Belarus claimed that the bomb threat came from Hamas, but the group denied any involvement.

¹⁵ [“Families in anguish over pair held in Belarus”](#), BBC News, 26 May 2021 and [“Belarus parades detained journalist Protasevich at media event”](#), BBC News, 14 June 2021

¹⁶ [Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy](#), [UK Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe](#), and [Michael O’Leary CEO of Ryanair](#), 24 May 2021

¹⁷ [Belarus: Statement by the G7 Foreign Ministers and the EU High Representative](#), 27 May 2021

¹⁸ US Mission to the UN, [Joint Statement on the forced diversion of Ryanair flight FR4978 to Minsk](#), 26 May 2021

passengers and crew”.¹⁹ It also supported calls for an ICAO investigation and expressed support for the measures taken by allies in response to the incident.

In an immediate response to the incident, the EU and UK banned the overflight of EU airspace and access to EU airports by Belarusian carriers.²⁰ Several airlines also suspended flights over Belarus. In the longer term, the UK and EU both confirmed that further sanctions were also under consideration (see: [A fresh round of coordinated sanctions – June 2021](#)).

The Lukashenko regime defended its actions, arguing that it had complied with established international rules and that its actions had been appropriate. It accused the EU and other Western nations of “belligerent rhetoric” and of politicising the situation.²¹ Crucially, the Kremlin extended its support to the regime, describing the situation as a “domestic affair of Belarus”, while accusing the West of “double standards” over similar incidents in the past.²² Russia’s backing for Lukashenko has been regarded as essential for the survival of the Belarusian leader, who has become emboldened on the international stage over the last year as a result (see section 2.2, [Increasing Russian influence](#))

As Keir Giles, writing for Chatham House, observed:

The recent action against a civilian flight between two EU capitals has removed any remaining doubt Belarus is content to continue down the path of becoming a rogue state. There could be no clearer statement that President Lukashenka has turned his back on the West and abandoned any restraint or concern for international censure.²³

Mr Protasevich and Ms Sapega are currently under house arrest in Minsk.²⁴

In May 2021 [the ICAO launched a fact-finding mission](#) into the incident.

Targeting critics abroad

The Belarusian regime is also alleged to have been involved in the death of Vitaly Shishov in Ukraine in August 2021. Mr Shishov was the Head of the Belarusian House in Ukraine (BHU), a group helping exiles who had fled the country. The BHU said “We were warned repeatedly by local sources and our

¹⁹ Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Belarus, NATO, 26 May 2021

²⁰ [European Council conclusions on Belarus](#), 24 May 2021 and Council of the European Union, [EU bans Belarusian carriers from its airspace and airports](#), 4 June 2021; [HC Deb 24 May 2021](#) and [Statement of the UK Civil Aviation Authority](#), 24 May 2021

²¹ [“Belarusian MFA comments on reaction of Western countries to situation with Ryanair’s flight”](#), BELTA, 24 May 2021

²² Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman](#), 24 May 2021

²³ Keir Giles, [“Belarus plane action eases Russian military restraints”](#), Chatham House Expert Comment, 26 May 2021

²⁴ [“Minsk extends house arrest for detained Russian girlfriend of dissident blogger”](#), The Moscow Times, 23 September 2021

people in Belarus about possible provocations, going as far as kidnapping and assassination”.²⁵ Mr Shishov’s death is one in a line of unsolved murder cases involving Belarusian dissidents abroad.²⁶ The regime has denied any involvement. When questioned about the case at a news conference President Lukashenko said that “he was no one to us”.²⁷

Mr Shishov’s death also came only days after Poland granted a humanitarian visa to Belarusian Olympic athlete, Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, who Belarusian officials had attempted to force onto a flight back to Belarus after criticising her coaching staff. Ms Tsimanouskaya said she feared reprisals if forced to return to Belarus. At a press conference on 9 August 2021, President Lukashenko suggested that she had been “manipulated” by foreign forces.²⁸

Suppression of the media and human rights groups

Lukashenko is committed to what he has described as a “purge” of civil society activists whom he has referred to as “bandits and foreign agents”.²⁹ The independent media, non-governmental organisations and human rights groups have been specifically targeted by the regime.

Over the last year several journalists covering the anti-government protests in 2020 have been imprisoned and their websites blocked. The authorities have conducted raids on the offices and apartments of activists and journalists who have been critical of the regime, detaining dozens of people.

In May 2021 [the Government passed several new laws](#) setting out additional restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media. The largest independent media platform tut.by was closed and criminal cases opened against its management and journalists. In July 2021 [the Belarus Press Club was dissolved by the authorities](#) and four senior editors from Nasha Niva, one of the country’s oldest independent newspapers, were detained. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) said at the end of July that 27 media workers were either awaiting trial or serving prison sentences.³⁰ The BAJ itself was closed by the Supreme Court of Belarus at the end of August 2021.³¹

The systemic repression of the independent media has led the NGO, [Reporters without Borders](#), to designate Belarus as the most dangerous country in Europe for journalists.

²⁵ [“Vitaly Shishov, Head of Belarus exiles group found dead in Ukraine”](#), BBC News, 3 August 2021

²⁶ See [“Vitaly Shishov: Belarus dissidents who disappeared and died”](#), BBC News, 3 August 2021

²⁷ [“Lukashenko says sprinter who fled Olympics was manipulated”](#), Politico, 9 August 2021

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ [Meeting of the Belarusian Cabinet](#), 23 July 2021 (in Russian)

³⁰ [“Belarus government blocks media outlet, detains reporters”](#), Associated Press, 8 July 2021

³¹ European External Action Service, [Belarus: statement by the spokesperson on the repression against journalists and the media](#), 30 August 2021

“This purge signals the end of civil society in Belarus as we knew it. It will for sure live on, but likely underground and in exile”.

[Human Rights Watch](#),
23 July 2021

Several human rights and other civic groups, including charities and think tanks, have been similarly targeted. In July 2021 [the authorities moved to close down dozens of groups and organisations](#) after raiding their offices and arresting employees. The raids have been called “unprecedented” and an attack on every element of society. Human Rights Watch estimate that, as of September 2021, 200 civil society organisations have been, or are in the process of being, closed.

The Belarusian human right group, Viasna, has been one of the more high-profile targets. Since September 2020 members of the group have been arbitrarily detained for their participation in anti-government protests. In March 2021 the Belarusian authorities opened a criminal investigation into the group’s activities. In the July 2021 crackdown, law enforcement officers raided the group’s offices and homes, and detained nine members of staff including their leader, Ales Bialiatski.

In mid-September 2021, a coalition of 23 international and Belarusian human rights organisations launched a campaign, [#freeviasna](#), to demand the release of Viasna members still in detention and to “highlight the plight of hundreds of others, who have been prosecuted and jailed solely for exercising their rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression”.³²

2.2

Increasing Russian influence

Belarus is viewed in Moscow as a client state, dependent on Russian energy subsidies and loans³³ and President Putin’s long-term strategy has been the deepening of “Union State” integration between the two countries.³⁴

While heavily dependent on Russia economically, Lukashenko has been relatively successful, thus far, in resisting serious efforts to further Union State integration and has, on occasion, sought closer relations with the EU as a counterbalance to Russian influence.³⁵ In 2019 a series of meetings between Putin and Lukashenko failed to deliver on the promises of greater integration, despite threats by Russia to withdraw preferential economic treatment from Belarus.³⁶

³² [Joint Statement on Belarus: end attacks against the Viasna human rights group](#), 17 September 2021

³³ The Belarusian economy is largely propped up by the import of heavily subsidised Russian oil and the export of refined petroleum products, along with the export of potash fertilisers.

³⁴ Union State integration has been official policy since early 1990s. It proposes broad cooperation between both sides on social and economic policy, governance, security and defence

³⁵ For example, through the [Eastern Partnership](#) initiative which was launched in 2009.

³⁶ This is examined in greater detail in [“Integration on hold for Russia and Belarus”](#), Chatham House Expert Comment, 14 January 2020

Relations between Putin and Lukashenko are thus often described as “uncomfortable” and borne out of necessity rather than any deep-seated allegiance.³⁷

However, the political crisis over the last year has provided Putin with the opportunity to exert greater influence in the country. While initially waiting to see what impact the anti-government protests could have,³⁸ Russia has no interest in prolonged instability in the country and a leader on its own doorstep ousted by a pro-democracy uprising. As the mass demonstrations in the latter half of 2020 threatened to topple the Lukashenko regime, Russia subsequently stepped up its support and became integral to Lukashenko’s survival.

Amidst the protests, Russia [offered security assistance to Belarus](#) if the situation got “out of control” and reaffirmed its “readiness to render the necessary assistance” if Belarus was threatened externally.³⁹ Various packages of financial aid have been agreed, including [a US\\$1.5 billion loan](#) to Belarus, announced during a meeting in Sochi in September 2020. Even prior to the latest political crisis, Russia was already Belarus’ biggest creditor, accounting for 38 per cent of state debt.⁴⁰

Amidst the international fallout of the Ryanair incident in May 2021, Vladimir Putin publicly sided with Lukashenko, accusing the West of “hypocrisy”. Russian security services are also alleged to have assisted Belarusian authorities divert the Ryanair flight to Minsk.⁴¹

At a press conference on 9 August 2021 President Lukashenko requested a further US\$1.5 billion loan from Russia.

Greater economic and political integration – the price of Russian support?

One year on from the Presidential elections Lukashenko has, with Russian support, consolidated his grip on power.

However, the cost to Lukashenko is becoming increasingly apparent. At a summit of the two leaders in Moscow in September 2021, agreements were reportedly reached on measures to more closely integrate the two countries’ economies. An unpublished 28-point roadmap is thought to outline measures to coordinate macroeconomic policies, institute common tax and customs measures and the harmonisation of other financial controls. Russia and Belarus will move to integrate their energy markets, while Russia continues to

³⁷ [“Russia’s power over Belarus is in the spotlight after plane ‘hijacking’ incident”](#), CNBC, 25 May 2021

³⁸ Russia’s initial response is examined in greater detail in [Belarus: where next?](#), House of Commons Library, 14 September 2020

³⁹ President of Russia, [Telephone conversation with President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko](#), 16 August 2020

⁴⁰ [“Integration on hold for Russia and Belarus”](#), Chatham House Expert Comment, 14 January 2020

⁴¹ [“Opinion: a year after anti-Lukashenko protests began, Belarus within Putin’s reach”](#), Deutsche Welle, September 2021

provide Belarus with heavily subsidised gas supplies.⁴² It is also expected that Belarus will be pushed into selling some of its state assets to pro-Kremlin Russian oligarchs.

The agreement did not, however, extend to the introduction of a common currency or any other political or security measures, although a US\$1 billion arms deal was reportedly concluded (see below). President Putin said: “first the economic foundation must be laid before moving further on the political track”.⁴³ The meeting was the sixth between the leaders so far in 2021.

Questions have been asked as to whether the agreements on economic integration will be implemented given that Lukashenko has made similar promises on integration before, to no avail. However, Lukashenko is becoming increasingly indebted to Putin and therefore it is thought concessions are only a matter of time. Further talks are expected in October 2021, with a view to signing several integration agreements in early November 2021.⁴⁴

Lukashenko has suggested that deeper integration will not “deprive his country of sovereignty” and that the measures “are building up our ties as two sovereign states”.⁴⁵

Indeed, several commentators have questioned how far Putin will now want to take the “Union State” concept, given that Belarus is increasingly isolated on the international stage and dependent on Russia’s support for survival regardless. More limited economic integration, the Russian takeover of key Belarusian economic assets and establishing permanent military bases on the borders of its NATO neighbours, and Ukraine, may be all that Putin needs, or demands.⁴⁶ As an opinion piece in Deutsche Welle in September 2021 observed:

Everything the Kremlin is doing points toward the goal of Russia absorbing Belarus in some form or another, even though it may officially remain on the map with Lukashenko as its ruler.

Putin need not repeat his 2014 Crimean operation to gain full control of Belarus — Minsk agreeing to host Russian military bases as well as adopting the ruble as its national currency would suffice.⁴⁷

⁴² [“Putin and Lukashenko move to integrate economies of Russia and Belarus”](#), The Guardian, 9 September 2021

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ [“Belarus leader praises Russia-led drills, eyes \\$1bn arms deal”](#), France 24, 12 September 2021

⁴⁵ [“Lukashenko says Belarus to receive huge military consignment from Russia”](#), Radio Free Europe, 1 September 2021

⁴⁶ See for example: “Russia likely to demand concessions for supporting Belarusian President”, Jane’s Intelligence Review, 17 August 2021

⁴⁷ [“Opinion: a year after anti-Lukashenko protests began, Belarus within Putin’s reach”](#), Deutsche Welle, September 2021

Military cooperation

Russia has already reiterated its commitment to defend Belarus, through the obligations of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, should it be threatened externally.

However, Russia has also exploited the current situation to deepen military cooperation with Belarus over the last year, and by default, expand its military footprint in the country.⁴⁸ Belarus borders NATO nations Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, and also shares a 1,084 km border with Ukraine.



Source: [Nations Online Project](#)

In March 2021 Russia and Belarus signed a five-year strategic partnership agreement for the first time in their history, and announced plans to establish three permanent joint military training bases, one of which would be based in the Grodno region in western Belarus, bordering Lithuania and Poland. Lukashenko reportedly signalled his approval for the establishment of a new Russian air base in Belarus, a proposal which he has historically opposed.⁴⁹ On 9 September the Belarusian Ministry of Defence reported that several Russian Su-30SM fighter aircraft had arrived at Baranovichi air base in the Brest region of western Belarus to form a joint air and air defence training

⁴⁸ Russia maintains two military communications facilities in Belarus, but no permanent bases.

⁴⁹ “Increased bilateral military cooperation elevates likelihood of Belarus accepting permanent Russian military bases”, Jane’s Country Risk Daily Report, 1 September 2021

centre and to conduct air patrols.⁵⁰ It is unclear, however, whether those aircraft signal moves to establish a permanent air base in the country.

Since the beginning of 2021 the Russian and Belarusian armed forces have held a rolling series of military exercises, effectively creating a permanent Russian military presence in the country. Those exercises culminated in early September in Zapad-21, a joint military exercise between the two countries that takes place every four years, which involves tens of thousands of troops. The focus of Zapad-21, which observers suggest involved 200,000 troops, with 12,800 in Belarus, was to war-game the “gradual escalation of tensions across the borders of imaginary countries”.⁵¹

At the Moscow meeting ahead of Zapad-21, President Lukashenko also suggested that the Kremlin had agreed to supply Belarus with US\$1 billion of Russian military equipment by 2025, including aircraft, helicopters and the advanced S-400 air defence system.⁵² Lukashenko has previously set out his ambition to procure advanced weaponry using surplus cash from previous Russian loans.⁵³

⁵⁰ “Russian jets relocate to Belarus to establish joint combat training centre”, Jane’s Defence Weekly, 10 September 2021

⁵¹ “Belarus says exercise Zapad-21 reflects NATO action”, Jane’s Defence Weekly, 22 January 2021

⁵² Russia and Belarus operate an integrated air defence network and Russia has historically helped Belarus to acquire modern air defence systems.

⁵³ “Belarus negotiates purchase of S-400 air defence systems”, Jane’s Defence Weekly, 11 August 2021

3 The West's response

Most Western countries do not recognise the outcome of the August 2020 Presidential election. They have widely criticised the Lukashenko regime for its failure to engage in dialogue with the opposition and for its continued repression of the Belarusian people.

EU nations, the UK, the US and Canada have all indicated their intention to hold the regime to account and over the last year have imposed a number of diplomatic measures intended to both punish the regime, but to also support the opposition and Belarusian civil society more broadly.

3.1 Funding of civil society

In the immediate aftermath of the Presidential election several countries reiterated their support for civil society in Belarus and committed to funding human rights groups, an independent media and other community groups.

In a Statement to the House on 24 September 2020, then Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, made clear “we must support and strengthen civil society and the brave media outlets struggling to shine a light on the repression that we are seeing inflicted by the Belarusian authorities on their people”. Going forward he committed to doubling the UK’s financial support to civil society, providing an extra £1.5 million over the next two years. Of that funding, £800,000 will support an independent media in Belarus.⁵⁴

In March 2021 the UK Government also announced €500,000 in funding to the [International Accountability Platform \(IAP\)](#), a joint initiative led by a coalition of independent NGOs and supported by international partners. The IAP will collect and store evidence of human rights violations and torture by the Belarusian authorities, which may be used in any future international criminal proceedings.⁵⁵

In December 2020, the EU adopted a €24 million assistance package, [EU4Belarus](#). The new package focuses on four key areas:

- Support to civil society and an independent media – in particular local communities and citizen group initiatives.

⁵⁴ HC Deb 24 September 2020, c1171

⁵⁵ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office press release, 24 March 2021

- Support to the youth - including through a scholarship programme for students and young professionals affected by the political crisis.
- Advisory support to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to build up resilience in the current economic downturn.
- Improvements in health resilience - by strengthening the capacity of Belarusian society to respond to the still on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

EU4Belarus is part of a wider €53 million support package announced in August 2020.⁵⁶

Since 1992 the US State Department has provided over US\$1 billion in assistance to Belarus, which focuses on the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Assistance has been specifically targeted on support for an independent media and capacity building for civil society organisations. Over US\$2 million in Covid-related assistance has also been provided.⁵⁷

Measures to support civil society are recognised as important in the face of economic sanctions, which affect specific sectors of the economy and therefore have an impact on jobs and wages.⁵⁸

World leaders have also been meeting with opposition leaders in exile. On 3 August 2021 the UK Prime Minister met with opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in Downing Street. Mr Johnson reiterated the UK's commitment to holding the Lukashenko regime to account and said "the UK stands in solidarity with the people of Belarus and will continue to take action to support them".⁵⁹

3.2 Sanctions

Restrictive measures against Belarus were first introduced by the EU in 2004 in response to the disappearance of two politicians, a journalist and a businessman in 1999/2000. Further restrictive measures were [introduced in 2006](#) against specific individuals after the country's failure to hold democratic elections. They were [strengthened in 2010](#) and again [in 2012](#) after the country's parliamentary elections. An arms embargo was introduced in 2011.

In 2016, the EU, [including the UK](#), [lifted sanctions on 170 Belarusian individuals](#) and three companies, in what was [seen as a reward](#) for an election that was not followed by violent repression, and for the release from prison of political prisoners, including a previous opposition presidential

⁵⁶ ["Threat of new crackdown on protesters as EU signals support for peaceful transition in Belarus"](#), Euronews, 20 August 2020

⁵⁷ US State Department, [US relations with Belarus](#)

⁵⁸ Judy Dempsey, "Can EU sanctions change Lukashenko", Carnegie Europe, 3 June 2021

⁵⁹ [Downing Street press release](#), 3 August 2021

candidate. The arms embargo remained in place, along with some sanctions against individuals listed in connection with the unresolved disappearances which prompted sanctions in the first place.

The reward for a “good” election was subsequently reversed in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. Then UK Foreign Secretary Dominic [Raab said on 17 August](#) 2020 that the UK would work with international partners to “sanction those responsible, and hold the Belarusian authorities to account”.⁶⁰

On 19 August the EU said that the bloc would shortly impose sanctions against a “substantial number of individuals responsible for violence, repression and the falsification of election results”.⁶¹

UK Magnitsky sanctions

In a [statement on 24 September](#), Dominic Raab said the UK would impose “Magnitsky sanctions” on Belarus officials as a matter of urgency,⁶² and was co-ordinating this with the US and Canada. He said that the UK would also co-operate with the EU sanctions process, although it had been delayed.

On 29 September 2020 the UK [sanctioned eight members of the Belarus regime](#), including President Lukashenko, for human rights violations in Belarus after the rigged elections. [Canada announced the same moves](#) on the same day. The US also [designated several top Belarus officials](#).⁶³

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office said:

The sanctions have been imposed in response to the torture and mistreatment of hundreds of peaceful protestors in custody following the fraudulent Presidential elections. The Belarusian authorities have taken no action to hold those responsible to account. Many opposition figures have been arrested or forcibly deported and denied re-entry, in a clear show of Lukashenko’s disdain for dialogue with the opposition and for basic human rights.⁶⁴

The UK sanctions were based on the autonomous post-Brexit sanctions legal regime established by the [Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2019](#), and the [Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020](#). This was the second time the global human rights sanctions regime had been used, but the

Eight individuals, including President Lukashenko are subject to sanctions under the UK’s Global Human rights sanctions regime.

⁶⁰ Foreign and Commonwealth Office Press Release, 17 August 2020

⁶¹ [Conclusions by the President of the European Council: Belarus](#), 19 August 2020

⁶² “Magnitsky” sanctions refers to sanctioning corrupt individuals, after the Russian citizen Sergei Magnitsky, who died at the hands of officials whose corruption he was exposing. For more information see the Commons Briefing Paper [Magnitsky legislation](#).

⁶³ The US has retained sanctions on several individuals, including Alexander Lukashenko, since 2006 and in response to the “fundamentally undemocratic March 2006 elections (US Treasury, [Federal Notice](#), 20 June 2006). A useful summary is available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-belarus/>

⁶⁴ Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Press release](#), 29 September 2020

first time the regime had sanctioned a State leader. [The first round](#) targeted individuals and entities in Russia, Myanmar and North Korea.

UK implementation of EU sanctions

Until the end of the Brexit transition period on 31 December 2020, as well as being able to impose autonomous sanctions using the powers in the Sanctions Act and the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations, the UK was still required to impose EU-derived sanctions.

Initially delayed,⁶⁵ the EU announced amendments to its [sanctions law on Belarus](#) on 2 October 2020. The EU imposed asset freezes on 40 new individuals in connection with the “those responsible for violence, unjustified arrests and falsification of election results”.⁶⁶ Initially, the EU declined to sanction Alexander Lukashenko, the President’s son or his Chief of Staff, to give them the opportunity to meet with Belarusian opposition representatives. In November 2020, however, the EU designated Lukashenko, his son and [13 more Belarusian officials](#) after refusing to engage in dialogue.

[A third round of sanctions](#) were imposed in December 2020. They targeted an additional 36 high-level officials “responsible for the ongoing violent repression and intimidation of peaceful demonstrators, opposition members and journalists, among others”. They also targeted economic actors, prominent businessmen and companies benefiting from and/or supporting the Lukashenko regime.⁶⁷ In February 2021 the Council of the European Union agreed to extend those sanctions until 28 February 2022, after which an annual review will be carried out. The Foreign Affairs Council confirmed that further sanctions remained under consideration.⁶⁸

At the end of the transition period on 31 December, the [Republic of Belarus \(Sanctions\) \(EU Exit\) Regulations](#) 2019 came into force. The regulations replaced, with substantially the same effect, the EU sanctions regime already in place relating to Belarus. Under this legislation, further sanctions were imposed [against 27 individuals in February 2021](#).

⁶⁵ Cyprus had reportedly threatened to veto EU sanctions against Belarus, unless sanctions were also imposed against Turkey over its [gas prospecting activities in the Eastern Mediterranean](#).

⁶⁶ Official Journal of the European Union, [Council Implementing Regulation 2020/1387](#)

⁶⁷ Official Journal of the European Union, [Council Implementing Regulation 2020/2129](#)

⁶⁸ Council of the European Union, [Press Release](#), 25 February 2021

A fresh round of coordinated sanctions – June 2021

EU sanctions now apply to 166 individuals and 15 entities, including President Lukashenko.

In response to escalating human rights violations in Belarus and the forced landing of the Ryanair flight in May 2021, and the arrest of Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega, on 21 June 2021 the UK, EU, United States and Canada announced a fresh round of coordinated sanctions.

In a [Joint Statement](#) all parties expressed their “deep concern regarding the Lukashenko regime’s continuing attacks on human rights, fundamental freedoms, and international law” and called on the regime to “end its repressive practices against its own people”.⁶⁹

The EU Foreign Affairs Council announced that its fourth round of restrictive measures were targeted against a further 78 individuals and eight entities. Specifically, seven individuals and one entity were designated as a direct consequence of the “forced and unlawful landing of a Ryanair flight in Minsk”.⁷⁰ A ban on the overflight of EU airspace and a ban on access to EU airports by any aircraft operated by Belarusian carriers, was introduced.

[The UK updated its sanctions list](#) on 21 June 2021, to include the designation of an additional 11 individuals and two entities, including those specifically identified for their involvement in the landing of the Ryanair flight, such as the organisation responsible for Belarusian air traffic control.

One further entity was added to the [sanctions list on 21 July 2021](#).

Economic sanctions

On 9 August 2021, the first anniversary of the Belarusian presidential election, the UK announced a package of trade, financial and aviation sanctions on Belarus. The sanctions were in response to “the continued undermining of democracy and human rights violations by the Lukashenko regime”.⁷¹

[The package includes:](#)

- Aviation measures to prevent Belarusian air carriers from overflying or landing in the UK.
- A prohibition on technical assistance to President Lukashenko’s fleet of aircraft.
- Trade measures on certain goods originating in, or consigned from, Belarus including potash, petroleum products and tobacco industry goods, and the export from the UK of interception and monitoring goods and technology, and dual-use goods and technology.

⁶⁹ [Belarus: Joint Statement by Canada, the European Union, United Kingdom and United States](#), 21 June 2021

⁷⁰ Council of the European Union, [Timeline – EU restrictive measures against Belarus](#)

⁷¹ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Press Release](#), 9 August 2021

- Financial measures prohibiting the future purchase of transferable securities and money-market instruments issued by the Belarusian state, state-owned banks and the provision of loans.
- Prohibitions on the provision of insurance and reinsurance to Belarusian state organisations.

In addition to those individuals designated under Magnitsky sanctions, a further 92 individuals and nine entities are currently subject to UK financial sanctions.

[HM Treasury](#), 12 August 2021

The UK will also tighten its existing arms embargo on Belarus.

In addition, the UK also placed Russian businessman Mikhail Gutseriev on the sanctions list. Mr Gutseriev is one of Belarus' main private investors and a longstanding associate of President Lukashenko.

These sanctions have been put in place via [an amendment](#) to the Republic of Belarus (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.

The [US](#) and [Canada](#) also announced additional sanctions measures.

The EU had already [banned Belarusian carriers from EU airspace and airports](#) and introduced [a package of targeted economic sanctions](#) in June 2021. Those sanctions included restrictions on the trade in petroleum products, potash and goods used in the production and manufacture of tobacco products. Access to EU capital markets is restricted and the European Investment Bank (EIB) will stop any payments under existing agreements in relation to public sector projects in Belarus and any Technical Assistance Service Contracts. The EIB has [financed projects in Belarus since 2018](#).

Some of the latest financial sanctions on Belarus have been criticised for being [“half hearted”](#) with the UK Government coming in for particular criticism over the role of the [London Stock Exchange in financing Belarusian state projects](#).

The impact of sanctions

Prior to the imposition of sanctions over the last year, trade between Belarus and the EU and UK was reasonably significant. After Russia, which [represents nearly half of all Belarusian trade](#), in 2019 the EU was Belarus' second largest trading partner.⁷² The UK was the country's third largest export market in 2019, accounting for 7 per cent of exported Belarusian goods. The UK was also a main export market for Belarusian fuel products, accounting for 32.1 per cent of total fuel exports.⁷³ In comparison, the US was Belarus' 13th largest export market in 2019, accounting for 0.7 per cent of exported goods.⁷⁴

⁷² European Commission, [Trade: Belarus](#), last updated April 2021

⁷³ [“5 key questions on tighter Belarus sanctions”](#), Politico, 11 August 2021

⁷⁴ [UN Conference on Trade and Development](#). US sanctions against Belarus have, however, largely been in place since 2006.

Between 2019 and 2020, however, the value of Belarus' exports to the UK fell significantly, from \$2.6 billion to \$0.8 billion, a fall of 65 per cent in cash terms. The UK was subsequently Belarus' 7th largest export market in 2020.

Belarus goods exports to the UK, 2016-2020

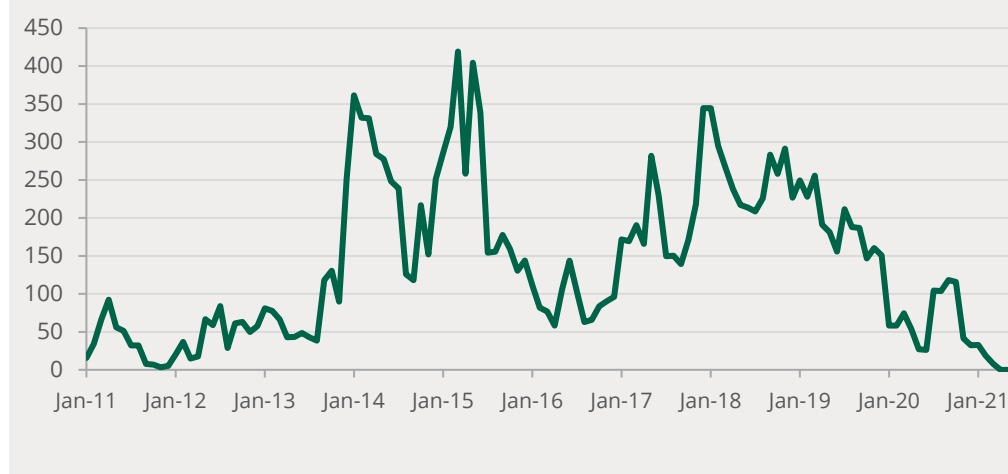
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
\$ millions	1,080	2,382	3,068	2,306	814
% total	4.6%	8.3%	9.3%	7.2%	2.9%

Source: IMF, [Direction of Trade Statistics](#)

Over the same period, the total value of Belarus' goods exports fell by 12 per cent, while exports to Russia, Belarus' single largest export market, fell by 4 per cent. In March 2021, the value of Belarus' goods exports to the UK fell to their lowest level since 2011.

Belarus, goods exports to UK

£ millions, January 2011 - May 2021



Source: IMF, [Direction of Trade Statistics](#)

This fall is thought to be partly due to the disruption to international trade caused by the coronavirus pandemic, although the introduction of sanctions seems to have had an impact. The Belarusian economy is reliant on potash and petroleum exports, both of which were targeted in the latest round of sanctions in August 2021, and therefore an even greater fall in trade is expected.⁷⁵ At the beginning of September 2021, one assessment suggested

⁷⁵ Belarus is the world's second largest exporters of potash behind Canada.

that sanctions have, thus far, cost the country 2.9 per cent of its GDP, or US\$1.68 billion.⁷⁶

At a press conference in August 2021 President Lukashenko addressed the latest round of UK sanctions saying:

You can choke on those sanctions there in the UK. We didn't know what this Britain was for a thousand years, and we don't want to know it now. You are American lapdogs.⁷⁷

“As long as Russia is supporting Lukashenko economically, it will be very difficult to elicit a change in behavior”.

Stefan Meister, [Heinrich Böll Foundation](#), 3 June 2021

In the longer term there are questions over what sanctions can achieve when Russia remains Belarus' largest trading partner and biggest political supporter. Indeed, many commentators have argued that Western sanctions merely “play into the hands of Russia's President Vladimir Putin”, who is using the current political crisis in Belarus to exert greater control over the country.⁷⁸ As long as Lukashenko can rely on Russian support, the impact of Western sanctions is inevitably lessened.

An engineered migrant crisis?

Lukashenko has also been accused of creating a migrant crisis on the EU's borders, in retaliation for progressive sanctions. In immediate response to the condemnation of the forced landing of the Ryanair flight in May 2021, Lukashenko said he would “flood the EU with migrants and drugs”.⁷⁹ More recently he has been accused of encouraging migrants from Africa and the Middle East to enter Belarus by facilitating travel and visas and then transporting them directly to the EU border where Belarusian border guards help them cross illegally.⁸⁰

Latvia and Poland have declared states of emergency on their borders and Lithuania has begun erecting a border fence and deployed the military to patrol the border. The Lithuanian government has called the move by Belarus, an “act of hybrid warfare”.⁸¹ The EU has said it “strongly condemn[s] and reject[s] Belarus' use of migratory pressure” and “its attempts to instrumentalise human beings for political purposes”.⁸² Emergency assistance to Latvia, Lithuania and Poland has been approved by the European Commission.⁸³

⁷⁶ [“Repression and isolation: four ways a stolen elections has changed Belarus”](#), RUSI Commentary, 1 September 2021

⁷⁷ “Lukashenko: you can choke on your sanctions in the UK”, BBC News, 9 August 2021

⁷⁸ [“5 key questions on tighter Belarus sanctions”](#), Politico, 11 August 2021

⁷⁹ [“Belarus dictator threatens to flood EU with drugs and migrants”](#), The Week, 28 May 2021

⁸⁰ [“Belarus dictator escalates EU border migrant crisis”](#), Atlantic Council, 18 August 2021 and [Belarus: speech on behalf of High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell at the EP Plenary](#), 5 October 2021

⁸¹ [“Opinion: A year after anti-Lukashenko protests began, Belarus within Putin's reach”](#), Deutsche Welle, September 2021

⁸² European Union, [Presidency Statement on the situation at the EU's external border with Belarus](#), 18 August 2021

⁸³ Ibid

In early August 2021 the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, said that “NATO is closely monitoring the situation and considering how we can further assist our ally [Lithuania] and maintain safety and security in the region”.⁸⁴ Several commentators have called for NATO to invoke [article IV](#), which calls for consultation among allies when an alliance member is under threat.

3.3 Diplomatic measures

In addition to economic and financial sanctions, there are various diplomatic measures that have been, or could be, introduced. Arguably, however, Lukashenko appears unconcerned with the political repercussions of the current situation and therefore any changes unrelated to sanctions are unlikely to have minimal impact.

End of military cooperation with the UK

On 3 September 2020 the UK Government announced that it had stopped training Belarusian armed forces:

The UK and Belarus have shared a cooperative defence relationship which aims to promote mutual learning and understanding through events such as winter survival training, language training and peacekeeping training.

However, in light of recent events we have decided to suspend our defence engagement programme with Belarus and will keep this under close review.⁸⁵

Mutual training had been taking place over several years. In March 2020, for example, [members of 42 Commando joined Belarusian troops](#) to conduct cold weather training on the two-week exercise in Belarus.

The EU’s Eastern Partnership

The [Eastern Partnership](#) is the EU programme for developing relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. As part of that partnership the EU and Belarus hold dialogue on the reforms needed to modernise Belarus, including possible EU financial support, and several cooperation projects in the areas of border and migration management. In July 2020 a visa facilitation agreement with Belarus entered into force.

In October 2020 the EU Foreign Affairs Council agreed to scale down bilateral cooperation with the Belarusian government, including financial assistance, and increase its support for the Belarusian people and civil society more

⁸⁴ [NATO Secretary General official twitter account](#), 9 August 2021

⁸⁵ [PQ 82147, 3 September 2020](#)

broadly.⁸⁶ In line with the conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Council, the EU has stated that it will “maintain cooperation with Belarus within the Eastern Partnership multilateral framework at non-political level and intensify cooperation with key non-state Belarusian stakeholders”.⁸⁷ All bilateral dialogue was placed on hold, including discussion of the EU-Belarus Partnership Priorities under the Eastern Partnership.

The EU has indicated that it was “ready to substantially step up its political engagement, sectoral cooperation, and financial assistance to Belarus” on the proviso that “its authorities respect the principles of democracy, the rule of law and human rights”.⁸⁸ The EU has called for the Belarusian Government to “engage in an inclusive national dialogue” in support of a “peaceful democratic transition”. In the event of a move toward democracy the EU has promised a €3 billion “comprehensive plan of economic support”.⁸⁹ It has made clear that “a reversal of EU sanctions will only be possible once the authorities in Belarus fully adhere to the principles of democracy and the rule of law, respect human rights obligations and cease all repression”.⁹⁰

A number of commentators had called for the EU to suspend Belarus from the partnership. In June 2021, however, Belarus pre-empted that possibility and suspended its participation. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry said: “we cannot fulfil our obligations under this Agreement amid the sanctions and restriction imposed by the EU”.⁹¹ Belarus also withdrew its representative to the EU.

Relationship with NATO

Belarus is also a [NATO Partner for Peace](#) and contributes to the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. NATO encourages member states and partners to observe democratic norms and particularly to set up proper democratic control of their armed forces. Belarus’s association with NATO could be downgraded, but as NATO was arguing before the 2020 election, that might be counterproductive:

NATO Allies have expressed their concern at the lack of progress in democratic reforms in Belarus. Nonetheless, NATO Allies believe that keeping open channels of communication, practical cooperation and dialogue is in the best interest of regional security.⁹²

⁸⁶ Council of the European Union, [Council conclusions on Belarus](#), 11661/20, 12 October 2020

⁸⁷ European Union External Action Service, [Belarus and the EU](#)

⁸⁸ European Union External Action Service, [Belarus and the EU](#)

⁸⁹ European Commission, [The European Union outlines a €3 billion economic support package to a future democratic Belarus](#), 28 May 2021

⁹⁰ [Belarus: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the first anniversary of the August 2020 fraudulent presidential elections in Belarus](#), 8 August 2021

⁹¹ [“Belarus divorces from the Eastern Partnership: a new challenge for the EU Neighbourhood Policy”](#), Modern Diplomacy, 22 July 2021

⁹² NATO, [Relations with Belarus](#)

4

Outlook

The country is in a protracted political crisis. With the support of Russia and the loyalty of the Belarusian security forces, Lukashenko has, so far, held on to power. However, he is considered a pariah among most of the international community, who have called for free and fair elections as a starting point on the road back to legitimacy.

While Lukashenko appears unconcerned with the views and opinions of the West, he also now has few other options with which to counterbalance the influence of President Putin.

“Lukashenka has become an international pariah whose political future depends almost entirely on the Kremlin”.

Peter Dickinson,
[Atlantic Council](#), 9
August 2021

Where the country, and Lukashenko, go from this point is uncertain. The recent push by the Kremlin for greater economic integration, may be followed by demands for closer political union, in what Brian Whitmore, writing for the Atlantic Council, describes as a “soft annexation” of the country, by Russia.⁹³

Yet, Union State integration, as originally envisaged, may also no longer be necessary for Putin to achieve his aims in Belarus. The regime’s dependence on Russia has become almost irreversible, which keeps Belarus firmly within the Kremlin’s economic and political sphere of influence. As outlined above, economic integration and Russian military bases in Belarus may therefore prove enough for Putin.

It is debatable how long Lukashenko will remain in power as President. Putin has previously signalled his desire for [progress on longstanding promises of constitutional reform](#), including transferring powers from the office of the President, and for fresh elections. On 28 September 2021 Lukashenko confirmed that a constitutional referendum would be held in February 2022. Proposed amendments to the constitution would redistribute power among the President, the Parliament and the Government. New pro-Kremlin political parties have already been set up in Belarus, presumably to give Putin influence within a future Belarusian Parliament.

The referendum presents an opportunity for Lukashenko to step down as President and be succeeded by a figure either of his own choosing, or that of Russia. Russian analyst Dmitri Trenin argues that the Kremlin’s best option is to persuade Lukashenko to retire and go into exile, and to manage the handover to a leadership that would be more acceptable to Belarusians and keeps Belarus as a reliable partner for Russia.⁹⁴ Lukashenko himself has in the

⁹³ Brian Whitmore, [“Soft annexation: inside the Russian takeover of Belarus”](#), Atlantic Council, 31 March 2021. This is a view shared by Michael Carpenter and Vlad Kobets in [“What Russia really has in mind for Belarus”](#), Foreign Affairs, September 2020

⁹⁴ Dmitri Trenin, [Game Over for Lukashenko: the Kremlin’s Next Move](#), Carnegie Moscow Center, 17 August 2020

past alluded to his succession once a new constitution is adopted. Yet, as Dr Ryhor Astapenia observes:

The Kremlin, although interested in a smooth transfer of power to a Russia-friendly alternative, is also hesitant to put pressure on Lukashenka because it does not currently see a better alternative.⁹⁵

When announcing the referendum, President Lukashenko vowed “not to let the opposition come to power”.⁹⁶ Many other analysts have argued that Lukashenko is unlikely to step down, even under possible Russian pressure. Analyst Valery Karbalevich states:

Lukashenko doesn't plan on going anywhere, he is ramping up repressions in order to secure a referendum result he needs. The Kremlin helped him hold on to power, and the referendum is necessary to cement that.⁹⁷

A March 2021 article in Strategic Comments suggested that Lukashenko’s unpredictability made it difficult to assess the credibility of his announcements on constitutional reform and that it “remains hard to imagine him leaving office voluntarily”.⁹⁸

The proposed referendum has therefore been met with scepticism. While constitutional reform appears on the cards, assuming Lukashenko lives up to his commitments, it is unlikely to deliver the sort of reform that Western countries and opposition activists are demanding. For the time being at least, Lukashenko’s crackdown on society seems likely to continue unabated.

⁹⁵ Dr Ryhor Astapenia, “Why the Belarusian revolution has stalled”, Chatham House Expert Comment, 9 February 2021

⁹⁶ [“Belarus leader announces vote on a new constitution in 2022”](#), Associated Press, 28 September 2021

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ “The protest movement in Belarus: resistance and repression”, Strategic Comments, March 2021

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