



Belarus-Russia Relations after the Ukraine Conflict

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Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Abstract	5
Introduction	6
Military disintegration: how to say “no” to your ally	7
Failure of the Eurasian Economic Union and the economic cooperation	10
Discrepancies in foreign policy and conflicts of the elites	14
The Pyrrhic victory of the Russian mass media in Belarus	17
Conclusion	20
About the authors	22
Ostrogorski Centre	23

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Abstract

- Since the Russian-Ukrainian conflict began, the Kremlin has persistently tried to expand its control over Belarus, a process that has had quite the opposite effect as Belarusian government policy became more independent in 2014-2015.
- There has always existed a paradox in the simultaneous contingency and estrangement in Belarusian-Russian relations. Estrangement looks the stronger of the two today, evidenced by the decrease in Belarus' military dependence on Russia and its refusal to allow the establishment of a Russian military base on its territory; the reduction in the Russian economy's role (caused by the Russian economic crisis firsthand) in Belarus; discrepancies in the foreign policy and media spheres; and conflicts between the political elites of both countries.
- The reason for misunderstanding lies in the fact that the Belarusian authorities long for formal integration with an economically strong and politically moderate Russia, which Russia has ceased to be. Furthermore, Belarus is still self-forming. Its state institutions and foreign policy are becoming more independent from Moscow.
- In addition, Belarus has taken no drastic step in its geo-political turn to the West. It remains interested in expanding the space for geo-political balancing, and not in a re-orientation of the country. However, in Russia, some remain concerned that small steps towards the normalisation of relations between Belarus and the West could become an overture to Belarus' further sidling up to the EU and the USA.
- Both countries remain interested in maintaining integration, although this is often simulated or rhetorical. Moscow will keep Minsk in its zone of influence for a long time, taking into consideration the great political and economic significance that Belarus has for Russia. Minsk, for its part, seems unready for total independence, as it depends on Russia economically and counts on the Kremlin's assistance in overcoming its ongoing economic crisis.

Introduction

This paper examines the integration/disintegration tendencies in Belarus-Russia relations since November 2013, when protests started in Ukraine. The ensuing Euromaidan, annexation of Crimea, and war in the Donbass have considerably altered European politics, including relations between Minsk and Moscow.

With the exception of Ukraine, where Russia uses other, primarily military, instruments of influence, Belarus remains the only country in Europe where the Kremlin enjoys significant control over the politics and economy. Moreover, against the background of Ukraine's geopolitical turn, Russia is trying to turn Belarus into an even more dependent state through an increase in its military presence, the use of instruments of economic influence, and deepening economic integration and media propaganda in the country. These actions, however, are having quite the opposite effect.

Despite close relations and the formal joint construction of the Union State, which also provides for integration processes, Belarus and Russia are becoming estranged from each other, in numerous ways.¹ There are two reasons for this.

First, the Kremlin's policy towards Ukraine led to a re-thinking inside Belarusian authoritative circles of the possible steps that Russia could take with regard to Belarus. President Alexander Lukashenka has probably never before taken so

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seriously the possibility of a Russian military operation inside Belarus as he did when he claimed in May 2015 that the Belarusian army needs to be so strong that it is capable of "being thrown from Brest to Vitsebsk in half a night to strike a blow"².

Secondly, the decline of the Russian economy lessens the Kremlin's role as guarantor of Belarus' well-being. In the conditions of slumping prices, shrinking of the domestic market, and declining GDP growth and forex reserves in Russia, diversification of the Belarusian economy has transformed from wishful thinking into a vital necessity.

This paper primarily concentrates on Belarusian-Russian relations from the Belarusian perspective, although the consequences of estrangement are often mirrored with regard to Russia. For example, the Russian authorities can no longer presume that Belarus will support Kremlin policy on the international arena that has not been coordinated with Minsk's position.

Today's conflictogenity of relations and the combination of simultaneous processes of integration and disintegration facilitate mythologisation in many respects. On the one hand, relations between Minsk and Moscow may be imagined in the context of Lukashenka's fight for Belarus' independence from the Kremlin. On the other, Lukashenka can be perceived as a marionette in the hands of the Russian leaders. The aim of this paper is to depict the real state of Belarusian-Russian relations.

¹ Валерия Костюгова, 2010. *Российско-белорусские отношения: условия, состояние, перспективы*, <http://belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/Research_Kostiugova.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

² Еврорадио, 2015. 'О чем на пресс-конференции говорил Лукашенко более 7 часов', <<http://euroradio.fm/ru/press-konferenciya-lukashenko-onlayn>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

Military disintegration: how to say “no” to your ally

Military cooperation has always been the “holy cow” of Belarusian-Russian integration, and the basis for journalists’ and Western experts’ statements presuming that the Belarusian army remains a part of the Russian one³. One of the grounds for such a presumption is the existence of the Integrated Regional Antiaircraft Defense System⁴ which, according to the Russian military, started functioning in 2016. The agreement on its creation was signed back in 2009 and in fact brought nothing new to Russian-Belarusian military cooperation. It looks likely that announcing the establishment of an antiaircraft defense system was aimed at making milder Belarus’ refusal to place a Russian military air base on its territory⁵.

Before the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, in April 2013 Lukashenka stated that creation of the Russian air base was impossible as it was at odds with the sovereignty of the Belarus. However, following that statement the Russian authorities continuously voiced their intention to have a military base in Belarus, alongside two active military facilities on its territory⁶. The conflict in Ukraine and resulting expansion of the NATO contingent in the Baltic States and Poland steered the Kremlin’s desire and magnified the importance of the proposed airbase. Still, its significance depends primarily on the type of planes that would be located there⁷.

Minsk refused to set up the base as it would have weakened its position in relations with Moscow⁸, showing the West how dependent Belarus was and leading to an increase in Belarus’ military dependence on Russia. Belarus would not have been able to appear neutral in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (or, in broader terms, the confrontation between Russia and the West), which would have undermined the process of Belarus’ emancipation on the international arena, which started against the background of the Ukrainian conflict. Russian-Belarusian negotiations on the military base coincided with discussions in the EU about lifting sanctions against Belarus. It looks likely that the Belarusian leader’s refusal to allow the military base to be established was primarily determined by his desire not to overcomplicate relations with the United States and the EU. Furthermore, the Belarusian authorities may have realised the danger that setting

³ Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, 2013. *Wsparcie drogą do podporządkowania. Rosja wobec Białorusi*, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/pw_34_bialorus_pl_net.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁴ Леонид Спаткай, 2015. *Региональная система ПВО Беларуси и России*, <<http://www.bsblog.info/regionalnaya-sistema-pvo-belarusi-i-rossii/>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁵ Siarhei Bohdan, 2016. *Does the Single Air Defence System Bring Belarus Closer to Russia?*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/does-single-air-defence-system-bring-belarus-closer-russia-25295>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁶ The Russian Volga radio location station, situated near Hancavichy, and the 43rd communication centre of the Russian Naval Forces near Vileika.

⁷ Радые “Свабода”, 2016. *‘Рэальная пагроза ў рэгіёне з размяшчэннем базы ўзрасьце — і Захад ня будзе на гэта абьякава глядзець’*, <<http://www.svaboda.org/content/vyniki-hodu-avijabaza/27476929.html>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁸ Siarhei Bohdan, 2015. *Russian Airbase In Belarus: A Long Story With No End In Sight?*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/russian-airbase-belarus-long-story-no-end-sight-23334>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

up the base could pose in terms of provoking a Russia-West confrontation^{9 10}. By now, official Minsk has effectively blocked setting up the airbase¹¹, which is confirmed by the absence of statements from Russian official representatives about creation of an additional military facility in Belarus or Minsk's financial investments in their military aviation. It seems that the issue of the Russian military base has now lost its significance. Besides, should it be necessary, Russia can put the base on its own territory in Kaliningrad at less expense.



Takeoff of the Belarusian MiG-29 plane on the M4 road on 18 May 2016 (© TUT.by)

The refusal to create the airbase reflects a broader trend – i.e. Belarus' attempts to reduce its military dependence on Russia¹². The presence of so many Belarusian military personnel in Russia has always ensured that there is a mental connection between the Belarusian and the Russian armies – it is hard to find any top Belarusian military official who has not studied in Russia¹³. However, the number of Belarusian military cadets at the Russian military's higher educational establishments is decreasing: last academic year there were 447, this year only 374. As explained by one Belarusian military official, “as we gradually launch the specialties we never had before, the number of those who receive their military education abroad is decreasing every year”¹⁴.

⁹ Арсеній Сивіцкіі, Юры Царік, 2016. *Беларусь в ЕАЭС: год спустя (неутешительные итоги и сомнительные перспективы)*, <http://csfps.by/files/files/belarus_in_the_eaec.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

¹⁰ Here we can add an example of a failed attempt to gamble on a Russian-Western confrontation. Former President of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiyev received a \$400m loan from Russia for closing the American military base back in 2009. Bakiyev subsequently transformed the American base into the Center for Transit Transportations and took extra money from the Americans, under the pretext of using it for the new base. It is believed that such behavior in relations with Russia and the West was one of the reasons for the collapse of his regime.

¹¹ Siarhei Bohdan, 2016. *Moscow Gives Belarus Arms and Seems to Abandon Airbase Plans*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/moscow-gives-belarus-arms-and-seems-abandon-airbase-plans-24254>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

¹² Siarhei Bohdan, 2015. *Belarus-Russia Military Cooperation: Can The Kremlin Dictate The Terms?*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-russia-military-cooperation-can-kremlin-dictate-terms-23814>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

¹³ Belarus Profile, <http://belarusprofile.com/be/tags/сілавікі>.

¹⁴ Звезда, 2014. *‘Ваенная адукацыя: новыя спецыяльнасці і будучыя прэферэнцыі’*, <<http://zviazda.by/be/news/20140319/1395177712-vaennaya-adukacyya-novyuya-specyualnasci-i-buduchyuya-preferencyi>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].



Belarus-China military exercises in June 2015
(© Military informational agency "Vaia")

The joint Shield of the Union exercises in 2015 gathered 1.5 times fewer military personnel than the 2011 Shield of the Union or West-2013 exercises (i.e. 8,000 participants compared with 12,000). While military exercises seemed all but impossible without Russia before, today the Belarusian paratroopers practice with the Chinese every year. Although the scope of such training exercises looks miserly in comparison with the exercises with Russia, it shows Belarus' desire to find new partners. Thus, today, in the opinion of analyst Andrei Paratnikau, Belarus' military dependence on Russia is even less, than, for example, Great Britain's military dependence on the United States¹⁵.

China, in general, has become a noticeable partner for Belarus. This is most clearly seen in the joint development of weapons systems by Minsk and Beijing, the multiple launch rocket system fire Polonaise being an example¹⁶. Belarus has chosen to develop its own military equipment as much as possible, including through creation of its own missiles. This is happening with the help of Ukrainian specialists¹⁷. On the international arena, Belarus' military interests are diverging further than further from Russia's. In addition to cooperating with China, Belarus is also helping the Ukrainian army¹⁸ and cooperating with Russia's rivals in the Middle East – it is even being blamed by Russian experts for supporting the Islamic State¹⁹.

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¹⁵ Тэлеканал Белсат, 2014. 'Два на два / «НАТО не будзе намагацца захапіць Беларусь. Большая пагроза для нас – Расея»', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgt_u8eYogc> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

¹⁶ Денис Лавнікевіч, 2015. «Полонез» с китайским акцентом, <<http://www.bsblog.info/polonez-s-kitajskim-akcentom/>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

¹⁷ Александр Алесин, 2016. Москва ищет украинские корни белорусских ракет, <http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2016/04/25/ic_articles_116_191523> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

¹⁸ Денис Лавнікевіч, 2016. Беларускія бонусы в konflikte России и Украины, <<http://www.bsblog.info/belaruskie-bonusy-v-konflikte-rossii-i-ukrainy>> [Accessed 27 May 2016]; Sjarhei Bohdan, 2015. Belarus Helps Ukraine with Military Equipment, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-helps-ukraine-military-equipment-22274>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

¹⁹ Sjarhei Bohdan, 2015. How Belarus Disappointed Russia In Ukraine And Syria, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/how-belarus-disappointed-russia-ukraine-and-syria-24066>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

Unmeasured military integration may be unpopular among the Belarusian authorities not only for geopolitical reasons. For example, wages in the Belarusian army remain several times lower²⁰ than in the Russian army, and it seems natural that increasing contacts between the two would create feelings of resentment among the Belarusian military regarding the Belarusian state's attitude towards them, or even the feeling of collaterality in comparison with the Russian officers. Moreover, Lukashenka and the Belarusian state may lose popularity in the eyes of the Belarusian military.

Failure of the Eurasian Economic Union and economic cooperation

Belarusian manufacturing has historically been oriented to the Russian market. As a result, the Russian economic crisis and falling hydrocarbon prices on the world market are leading to a deterioration in Belarus' trade balance. In many ways, Russia's economic decay is responsible for the fact that in only its first year of existence, the Eurasian Economic Union's (EEU) became a failure for Belarus.



State leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia signing the agreement on the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union. 29 May 2014 (© RIA Novosti)

First, the integration project inherited practically all the tariffs (about 600) that existed in the Customs Union²¹. Belarus, for example, has kept complicated import regulations in the field of tobacco and alcohol products. Due to such

²⁰ Комсомольская правда, 2012. 'Белорусским военным поднимут зарплату до 2 тысяч долларов?', <<http://www.kp.by/daily/25831/2805901>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

²¹ In the EEU, there is a difference between withdrawals, limitations and barriers. The first relate only to exclusion of goods or services from the regulations of functioning of the common market, the second mean the right of the countries to impose measures for limitation of the market regulations, and the third group remain actual obstacles in the functioning of the market. The EEU considers withdrawals and limitations acceptable, while barriers not so. Евразийская экономическая комиссия, 2015. 'О ситуации по устранению препятствующих функционированию внутреннего рынка Евразийского экономического союза барьеров для взаимного доступа, а также изъятий и ограничений в отношении движения товаров, услуг, капитала и рабочей силы', <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/act/integr_i_makroec/dep_razv_integr/SiteAssets/Аналитический%20доклад.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

mechanisms, about two third of goods and services have been withdrawn from the common market of the EEU. Still, Belarus wants to abolish all quotas and longs for liberalisation of the oil and gas market, which would allow Belarus to purchase oil from Russia without having to return large sums in export duties to the Russian budget²². However, energy resources will only be included in the common market from 2025.

Therefore, the EEU is not currently a common market, as declared. Indications of plans to expand the number of trade quotas²³ throws into question the feasibility of the whole integration project. The most probable reason for the slow pace of economic integration is Russia's politicised perception of the EEU. Replication of the European Union's structure and attempts to push a single currency show that the Kremlin sees the EEU not just as an economic union, but as one aspect of the competition between Russia and the West in the post-Soviet space²⁴.

Secondly, economic interaction between the countries has reduced. According to data provided by the Eurasian Economic Commission, the trade turnover of Belarusian goods with the EU countries in 2015 was only 74.8% of that in 2014²⁵. Due to the economic crisis in Russia, the Russian-Belarusian joint project for a new potassium plant in the town of Liuban was frozen, and trains manufactured by Stadler-Minsk were sold to Azerbaijan instead of to Russia, as originally planned²⁶.

The fall in trade between Belarus and Russia is not only because of the economic crisis in Russia. It is also due to the low competitiveness of Belarusian goods. For example, the share of trucks sold by Minsk Automobile Plant on the Russian market is falling faster than that of competitors in the same market²⁷. In the first quarter of 2016, sales of Minsk Automobile Plant on the Russian market decreased by 23.7% in comparison with the first quarter of 2015²⁸.

Volume of exports among EEU countries

Country	Volume of export in 2015 (mln \$)	Comparison of the volume in % with the volume of export in 2014, %
Belarus	10 998.1	68.0
Russia	28 718.6	77.9
Kazakhstan	4 886.8	68.3
Armenia	236.6	73.0
Kyrgyzstan	539.7	84.7

Figures derived from Eurasian Economic Commission, 2015. 'Mutual trade of goods: Statistics of the Eurasian Economic Union', Moscow.

²² Today this happens often.

²³ Арсеній Сивицький, Юрий Царик, op.cit.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Евразийская экономическая комиссия, 2016. 'Взаимная торговля товарами. Статистика Евразийского экономического союза', Москва.

²⁶ Антон Радянкоў, 2016. *5 прыкмет дэградацыі эканамічных адносін з Расіяй*, <<https://ideaby.org/ru-bel-2015-failes>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

²⁷ Завтра твоей страны, 2015. 'Русские и китайцы выдавливают МАЗ', <http://zautra.by/art.php?sn_nid=19176> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

²⁸ TUT.by, 2016. 'В первом квартале продажи белорусских МАЗов в России снизились на 40%', <<http://news.tut.by/economics/493189.html>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

Thirdly, although Belarus has introduced unpopular measures like increasing fees for the import of cars²⁹, the regulations of the economic union serve Russia's interests, as evidenced by the continuing economic wars³⁰. A month before the EEU came into force, there unfolded a new trade war between Belarus and Russia when customs inspections were revived on the Belarusian-Russian border. In summer 2015, the Kremlin took the plunge and prohibited imports of Belarusian meat products to Russia. Although such conflicts are usually resolved after a brief time, they demonstrate why the Belarusian authorities want "the EEU not to be a plaything", to quote Minister for Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei.

In 2011, while justifying the necessity of Belarus joining the EEU, Lukashenka said that, thanks to the EEU and the common market in particular, trade wars would end. This expectation has not come true. Today Belarus has limited political opportunities to influence the development of Eurasian integration, although the key participants of the EEU have a parity rate at the Union's institutions, so Belarus remains capable of promoting its own interests related to technical issues³¹.

Fourthly, the importance of oil and gas, which were the key motivators for Belarus to join the EEU³², have fallen sharply³³. If, with the former high global hydrocarbon prices Belarus received a "dotation" (the difference between the market price and the price of shipment to Belarus) which amounted to as much as \$10bn per year³⁴, then after the sharp decline in oil prices since late 2014 the importance of Belarus' cheap access to Russian energy has lessened as prices for oil and gas in Belarus and the EU countries is equalising³⁵. This is a significant fall, taking into account that energy subsidies from Russia exceeded \$80bn in 2002-2015³⁶. Belarusian oil-processing plants lost their place as the country's leading earners, while the state received only about \$1bn in customs fees instead of the planned \$3bn³⁷.

None of this means that there exists a serious prospect of a sudden change in the Belarusian economy. The country remains economically dependent on the Russian market – according to data provided by the Belarusian Statistics

²⁹ Before 1 July 2011 the fee for importing an automobile was between €0.35 and €5 per 1 cubic cm depending on the capacity of the motor. Thereafter the fees were equalized with the Russian ones – €3 to €5.80.

³⁰ It would be fair to note that Eurasian integration on its own primarily meets Belarusian economic interests.

³¹ Роман Костицын, 2015. *Лоббистские возможности Беларуси в Евразийской экономической комиссии*, <http://belinstitute.eu/sites/biss.newmediahost.info/files/attached-files/BISS_ER_06_2015ru.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

³² Rychor Astapenia, 2015. *Belarus and the Eurasian Economic Union: The view from Minsk*, <http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_belarus_and_the_eurasian_economic_union_the_view_from_minsk> [Accessed 27 May 2016]; Ирина Точицкая, Роберт Кирхнер, 2014. *Участие Беларуси в Евразийском экономическом союзе*, <<http://www.get-belarus.de/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/pp2014r05.pdf>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

³³ Belarus remains nearly 100% dependent on Russia in the sphere of fuel and power resources supply.

³⁴ Алексей Данейко, Дмитрий Береснев, Ирина Колесникова, 2013. *Перспективы функционирования экономики Беларуси в системе ЕЭП и ВТО*, "Банкаўскі веснік" № 10 (591).

³⁵ The Belarusian economic model is based on providing subsidies to industry and agriculture. Having cheap Russian energy in its possession, Belarus could have diversified its production and increased its exports (for example, export of food products to Russia and export of processed energy to the European market). However, the very system, built on huge enterprises, remains inflexible and incapable of adapting to the current circumstances.

³⁶ Дмитрий Болкунец, 2014. *Состояние и особенности российско-белорусского энергетического сотрудничества*, "Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения" № 4.

³⁷ TUT.by, "Надолго или навсегда? Почему в экономике Беларуси больше никогда не будет "как раньше"", <<http://news.tut.by/economics/482080.html>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

Committee, in 2015 38.9% of Belarusian exports³⁸ and 56.6% of imports³⁹ came from or went to Russia⁴⁰. Even the trade which exists today with the European Union (about one fourth of the total trade turnover) remains primarily export of oil products, processed in Belarus from Russian raw materials. In fact, this trade may disappear should the Kremlin decide to stop selling oil to Belarus.

Russia is the biggest investor in Belarus and an important player in Belarus' banking sector. According to the Belarusian Statistics Committee, half of investments in the country come from Russia. Great Britain and Cyprus, where many Russian businessmen (sometimes Belarusian ones as well) register their businesses, remain in the trinity of the biggest investors. Russian banks' finances play a significant role in the Belarusian economy at times of the economic crisis⁴¹.

However, it looks like Russia is no longer perceived as a guarantor of Belarus' economic well-being. Although the Eurasian Fund for Stabilisation and Development approved a new loan to Belarus for the sum of \$2bn⁴² on 28 May, Belarus is continuing intensive negotiations with the International Monetary Fund in pursuit of \$3bn in loans. In addition, the authorities continue to seek opportunities to diversify exports or to expand the roles of other states in the Belarusian economy. For example, China, although its terms do not seem exactly beneficial, has granted restricted credits that are beneficial for import of Chinese goods to Belarus rather than vice versa⁴³. All this proves that Belarusian officials are looking for other ways to restore the Belarusian economy, as Belarus and Russia are likely to remain in recession for a long time to come and are hardly capable of carrying out an independent revival of their own economies.

It looks like Russia is no longer perceived as a guarantor of Belarus' economic well-being

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that new opportunities have emerged for Belarus as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian and Russian-Western conflicts. We are speaking not only about the re-export of Western food products,⁴⁴ but also about industrial niches previously dominated by Ukraine and aimed at export to Russia. For example, Ukraine used to ship train carriages to Russia. Belarus modernised several railroad-warehouse producing plants, and built one such business from the scratch. Belarus can therefore now become a supplier of

³⁸ Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, 'Распределение экспорта товаров по странам – основным торговым партнерам в 2015 году', <http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya_2/dannye-o-vneshnei-torgovle-respubliki-belarus-p_2/raspredelenie-eksporta-tovarov-po-stranam-osnovnym-torgovym-partneram-v-2013-godu> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

³⁹ Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, 'Распределение импорта товаров по странам – основным торговым партнерам в 2015 году', <http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya_2/dannye-o-vneshnei-torgovle-respubliki-belarus-p_2/raspredelenie-importa-tovarov-po-stranam-osnovnym-torgovym-partneram-v-2013-godu> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁴⁰ The key commodity markets in Belarus where Russian companies actively work are energy, oil products, metallurgy, information technologies, chemical fertilizers, construction services, and tourism services. Total investments in big infrastructure projects in the period 2001-2015 accounted for about 65% of FDI.

⁴¹ Ryhor Astapenia, 2014. *Belarus and Russia: Stagnating Together?*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-and-russia-stagnating-together-16640>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁴² The credit agreement shows that Russia is also trying to influence market reforms in Belarus through integration of both countries' economic models.

⁴³ Ryhor Astapenia, 2013. *Lukashenka's Chinese Dream*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/lukashenkas-chinese-dream-14711>> [accessed 27 May 2016].

⁴⁴ Igar Gubarevich, 2015. *Belarus and Russian Food Embargo: a Success Story?*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-and-russian-food-embargo-success-story-23073>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

a series of components to the Russian market. Belarus has not however been admitted to Russia's import substitution programmes⁴⁵.

Discrepancies in foreign policy and elite conflicts

The Belarusian and the Russian elites have been close for a long time. This is a result of the long-term pro-Russian policy of today's Belarusian authorities. Belarus remains the only country of the former Soviet Union where Russian has the status of the state language (naturally, with the exception of Russia), and which has consciously marginalised the national culture. Previously, many imperialistic Russians had a positive attitude towards Lukashenka; they perceived him as a crony due to his pan-Slavic and anti-West steps. Vladimir Zhirinovski, leader of the populist Liberal Democratic party of Russia, illustrates this. He stated that he "had a feeling of kinship towards Lukashenka initially". However, Zhirinovski was subsequently disappointed by Lukashenka as he saw that "Lukashenka's success is based only on Russian help". Negative feelings towards the Belarusian leader appear to have intensified among the Russian elites since the war in Ukraine began, although relations between Lukashenka and Russian President Vladimir Putin or Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev have traditionally been cold.

Russia's aggressive foreign policy and economic decline have become one of the most important motivators for the Belarusian authorities to normalise relations with the West. Data provided by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) shows that since 2013 Belarus has intensified its relations with the European Union, and today contacts with the EU outnumber those with Russia. It is also obvious that official Minsk attaches great importance to relations with Beijing.

Belarus remains the only country of the former Soviet Union where Russian has the status of the state language

The BISS data reflects⁴⁶ the fact that Belarus started normalising relations with the EU and building up contacts with "developing countries"⁴⁷ at the beginning of 2013. This included support for Ukraine's European integration⁴⁸. This shows that the increase in dialogue with the West started not because of Russia's expansionist policy, but for internal reasons. It is nonetheless indisputable that the activation of Belarusian contacts with the world and deepening discrepancies in the foreign policies of Moscow and Minsk in 2013-2014 were in many respects a product of Russia's foreign policy and economic decline.

It is important to note that Belarus' normalisation of relations with the West is not an attempt at a geopolitical U-turn. So far, neither Belarus on the one side, nor the European Union and the United States on the other, have taken any cardinal steps in the form of big economic projects (Belarus still hasn't even managed to obtain a loan from the International Monetary Fund) and contact in the political and military spheres remains at a low level. The interests

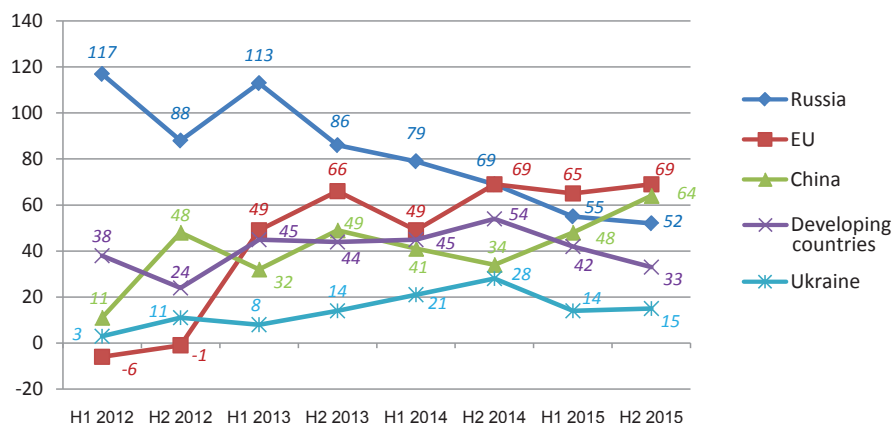
⁴⁵ Арсеній Сивицкіі, Юры Царік, op.cit.

⁴⁶ The Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies assesses positive contacts (like statements, visits, agreements, etc.) between Belarus and other countries on a scale of 1 to 7, and negative – from -1 to -7, every two months. The methodology details are presented at the end of each issue of the Belarus Foreign Policy Index: <<http://belinstitute.eu/be/analyticscomments/belarus-foreign-policy-index>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁴⁷ Андрей Елисеєв, 2015. *Беларусь и развивающиеся страны: в поиске новых «Венесуэл»*, <<http://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2014/page11.html>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁴⁸ Ryhor Astapenia, 2013. *Lukashenka Helps Ukraine Get Closer to the EU*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/lukashenka-helps-ukraine-get-closer-eu-15779>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

Intensity of development of Belarus' foreign political contacts in 2012-2015



Adaptation of information from the Foreign Policy Index BISS: <<http://belinstitute.eu/be/analyticscomments/belarus-foreign-policy-index>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

of Lithuania, which has traditionally been a key lobbyist for dialogue with Lukashenka's regime, serve as a good example. They have been ignored up until now regarding the ongoing construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant in Astravets, at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. This shows that the Belarusian government sees its task not as carrying out a shift in geopolitics, but simply to take advantage of an opportunity to manoeuvre between the West and Russia.

In search of a bigger space on the international arena, Belarus is trying to position itself as a neutral country, keeping a distance from Kremlin policy. Minsk declared itself a place for peaceful negotiations on the Ukrainian conflict and offered its mediation services to the "fraternal Russia" and "amicable Turkey"⁴⁹ after Turkey shot down a Russian SU-24 military plane in November 2015. The government's development of friendly relations with the Kremlin's geopolitical rivals in the Middle East⁵⁰, refusal to introduce a common visa regime⁵¹ and the increasing involvement of China in the Belarusian economy would hardly please the Kremlin.

In the second half of 2015, the volume of Belarus' contact with China, according to BISS' data, surpassed the volume of its contact with Russia. The Russian Federation's Ambassador to Belarus Alexander Surikov has spoken about the necessity of protecting the EEU markets from "unfair competition" many times, directly and indirectly. In many ways, this is connected with the creation of the Great Stone Chinese-Belarusian industrial park, the residents of which will receive considerable tax allowances which will provide them with serious economic benefits when competing with Russian manufacturers⁵². Thus, should

⁴⁹ Definition of the states has been taken from the statement made by Press-Secretary of the Belarusian Ministry for Foreign Affairs.: <http://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/eaaf182c8b63ddc7.html> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁵⁰ Siarhei Bohdan, 2015. *Belarus Turns to Pro-Western Nations in the Middle East*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-turns-pro-western-nations-middle-east-22573>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁵¹ Igar Gubarevich, 2015. *Russia Pushes for Single Visa Space, Belarus Resists*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/russia-pushes-single-visa-space-belarus-resists-21852>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁵² Информационный офис солидарности с Беларусью, 2012. 'Белорусско-китайский индустриальный парк создается вопреки интересам России', <http://belarusinfocus.info/by/p/5490belorussko-kitayskiy_industrialnyu_park_sozdaetsya_vopreki_interesam_r> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

Great Stone take off, there may emerge a conflict between Belarus and China on the one side and Russia on the other.

So far, the leaders of Belarus and Russia have maintained amity at public meetings. However, it seems unlikely that statements from Lukashenka's like "If Crimea is Russian, then most of Russia's territory belongs to Mongolia or Kazakhstan" were positively received in the Kremlin. The increasingly cold tone of Russian experts and the Russian media since the conflict in Ukraine began indirectly proves this. Russian nationalists, who voice their views on websites like Regnum or Sputnik and Pogrom, dislike the desire of the Belarusian elites to maintain their independence, while more liberal circles, to quote Russian political scientist Andrei Suzdaltsev, are unhappy that "Belarus is living at Russia's expense"⁵³ while it maintains its independence in its internal and foreign policy. Although Belarus has not yet become the target for attacks of the biggest Russian state TV-channels, many big Russian media outlets like REN TV and Lenta.ru, or smaller ones like Sputnik and Pogrom or Pravda, have reported on the rise of nationalism in Belarus under the auspices of the Belarusian authorities⁵⁴.

In the second half of 2015,
the volume of Belarus' contact
with China, surpassed the volume
of its contact with Russia

Another channel to disseminate the wave of Russian discontent is the expert community. At the end of 2015-beginning of 2016, two conferences partially or totally dedicated to Belarus were held in Moscow. The first one, titled Russophobia and the Information War against Russia, took place on 25-26 September 2015. At the very beginning of the conference, the organisers handed out a report titled Belarusian Nationalism Stands against the Russian World to participants, while the Belarusian speakers claimed that "Russophobia is spreading in Belarus, crawling from marginal circles to official ones"⁵⁵.

The second conference, titled The BelaRussian Dialogue and organised by Moscow's Higher School of Economics, took place on 25-26 January 2016, with the participation of experts and politicians. The opinion of two participants, which was included in the final communique⁵⁶, about the existence of "an unspoken prohibition on hiring citizens who were educated in Russia to work in Belarusian state bodies", caused controversy. Naturally, most Belarusian speakers claimed that there was no such prohibition and were unhappy about being used to demonize Belarus' image⁵⁷.

Thus, there exists inertia between the broad Belarusian and Russian elites, which will pull them further away from each other. The longer the Russian and pro-Russian experts inadequately assess the motivation of the Belarusian authorities, or advocate weakening Belarusian independence, the more eagerly the Belarusian authorities will strengthen it. A good example of this is the fact that Lukashenka

⁵³ Коммерсант, 2015. 'Живут за счет России', <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2840031>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁵⁴ Alexander Čajčyc, 2016. *Russian Media Attack Belarus: Minsk Remains On the Kremlin Radar*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/russian-media-attack-belarus-minsk-remains-kremlin-radar-24482>> [Accessed 27 May 2016]; Alexander Čajčyc, 2015. *Russian Media Attack Belarus: A Warning For Minsk?*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/russian-media-attack-belarus-warning-minsk-21055>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁵⁵ Информационно-аналитический портал "Евразия", 2015. 'Терпимость к русофобии недопустима', <<http://evrazia.org/article/2738>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁵⁶ Политическое обозрение, 2015. 'Международная конференция "БелоРусский диалог". Итоговое коммюнике', <<http://politoboz.com/content/mezhdunarodnaya-konferenciya-belorusskiy-dialog-itogovoe-kommyunike>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁵⁷ Later, the organizers published the statement of Tatsiana Karatkevich, a presidential candidate at the 2015 election in Belarus and participant of the conference, in which she refuted information about harassment of officials who were educated in Russia: <<http://politoboz.com/content/mezhdunarodnaya-konferenciya-belorusskiy-dialog-obsuzhdenie-itogovogo-kommyunike-zayavleniya>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

gave his first public speech in Belarusian in many years immediately following the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Despite the fact that the process of sovereignisation of Belarus is indeed taking place, Russian experts do not realise that their own expansionist rhetoric remains one of the reasons for the conflict between the broad Russian and Belarusian elites. For instance, Oleg Nemenski, the leading researcher of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, close to the Kremlin, wrote after the video bridge of the Belarusian and Russian experts on 8 October 2015 that Belarusian pro-government experts are united by their “hatred for the Russian world”⁵⁸. In fact, Belarus’ close-to-the-state experts remain pro-Russian; they simply fear that, after the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass, the Kremlin will channel its efforts to destabilise Belarus or involve Minsk in the Russia-West controversy. Their task is to preserve Belarusian sovereignty, not to build an alliance with the West against Russia.

The Pyrrhic victory of the Russian mass media in Belarus

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has demonstrated the importance of maintaining control over one’s media space for Belarusians. The country still lives within a media-system which, although slightly reformed by the Belarusian authorities, remains Russian⁵⁹. Two thirds of Belarusians spend more than an hour in front of the TV-screen daily. The most popular TV-channel in Belarus is ANT, on the basis of which the authors of a report published by the Informational Analytical Centre under the Administration of the President of Belarus, claim that “national TV channels remain the most in demand”. However, at the same time they present data which confirms that the high watchability of ANT is because of the Russian TV shows that it rebroadcasts. The top five most viewed ANT broadcasts include four Russian and one joint Belarusian-Russian show⁶⁰. The situation with the NTV-Belarus and RTR-Belarus channels is similar.

Five most frequently watched TV-channels in Belarus

TVchannel	% of Belarusians who watch the TVchannel at least once a week
ANT	60.3
Belarus 1	53.6
NTV-Belarus	50.6
RTR-Belarus	45.3
Belarus 2	39.3

The data has been provided by the Informational Analytical Centre under the Administration of the President of Belarus.

The dominance of Russia in the printed media is not as evident, as the Belarusian authorities force businesses and institutions to subscribe to Belarusian state newspapers. However, despite its overwhelming financial and administrative resources, the main state newspaper *SB. Belarus Today* lags behind in popularity

⁵⁸ Олег Неменский, 2015. *Видеомост с Минском*, <<http://olegnemen.livejournal.com/532442.html>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁵⁹ 79.9% of Belarusians regularly watch Russian television, according to data from the Belarusian Analytical Workshop in March 2015: Белорусская аналитическая мастерская, 2015. ‘Общественное мнение как предвыборный контекст’, <<http://www.belaw.eu/?p=1412>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁶⁰ Информационно-аналитический центр при Администрации президента Республики Беларусь, 2014. ‘Медиафера Беларуси. Социологический аспект’, <http://iac.gov.by/sbornik/Mediasfera_Belarusi.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

(as measured by the number of Belarusians who read the newspaper in the last month) compared with *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus*⁶¹. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, together with the representative office of the Russian news agency Sputnik opened in Belarus at the end of 2014, and differ from other Russian media platforms - they both operate from inside Belarus and most of their employees are Belarusians. Therefore, they are less capable of serving as promoters of the Kremlin's interests in Belarus.

Among the top ten most popular websites in Belarus there are only two Belarusian ones. According to data from the company Gemius, in January 2015 TUT.by was the fifth most popular website in Belarus, while Onliner.by was ninth. All remaining websites are either Russian or American. Despite the state's dominance in the economy, both Belarusian websites to make it into the top ten are private, and their owners and journalists are criticised by the Belarusian authorities occasionally. Late in 2014, the Ministry of Trade blocked access to Onliner.by for several weeks, and in April 2015 Lukashenka requested "to normalise Yury Zisser", the owner of TUT.by. Still, information regarding popularity of the website should be interpreted with caution as some websites combine an informational role with searching, postal or even trading service functions.

**10 most popular websites in Belarus
(January 2015)**

Position	Website	Viewers (real users)	Penetration (%)
1	google.com	3,296,075	67.6
2	vk.com	2,577,391	52.9
3	mail.ru	2,540,813	52.1
4	yandex.by	2,367,264	48.6
5	tut.by	2,330,714	47.8
6	youtube.com	2,094,922	43.0
7	aliexpress.com	1,536,779	31.5
8	odnoklassniki.ru	1,256,636	25.8
9	onliner.by	1,148,126	23.6
10	ru.wikipedia.org	1,118,616	23.0

Data: Research conducted by Gemius for the European Endowment For Democracy.

Russia's media dominance means that Russian culture remains more popular in Belarus than Belarusian culture. The weak financial condition of Belarusian culture and absence of domestic show-business worsen the situation. What is worse, many Belarusians who find success in Russia, like script writer Andrei Kureichyk, cannot obtain state support for their creative work in Belarus. Some Belarusian artists, like Siarhei Mikhalok, are included on the "black list" of performers, who are not allowed to give concerts, let alone to sing on Belarusian television. This shows that the influence of Russian media and culture is the result of Belarusian policy rather than Russian policy. Moreover, some steps taken by the Russian authorities, like the roll-out of a Belarusian-language version of Russia's Sputnik news agency, or Russian state energy giant Gazprom's support for Belarusian culture, demonstrate that Russia does not want to look like an opponent of Belarusian culture.

⁶¹ Ibid.

However, despite the great importance of the Russian media, its influence is shrinking. According to data provided by the Belarusian Analytical Workshop, the number of people in Belarus who do not watch Russian television has doubled in the past two years (from 10.9% to 20.6%)⁶². This is connected primarily with the negative perception of Russia's role in the conflict in Ukraine and its portrayal by the media. Although most Belarusians consider the annexation of Crimea as fair, about one third changed their attitude towards Russia for the worse after the events in Ukraine⁶³.

In addition, the dominance of Russian media does not correlate with Belarusian public support for Russia's actions. Data collected by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies proves that people approve or condemn the annexation of Crimea regardless of whether they watch Russian television or not. Attitudes towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in many respects remain connected with personal philosophies rather than with the influence of the Russian media⁶⁴.

And, regardless of their approval or disapproval for Russian policy, the Belarusians, when they think about the attitude of the Belarusian state to the conflict, set their own interests, not the Russian ones, as a priority. 58.7% of Belarusians support Lukashenka's position with regard to the Ukrainian crisis⁶⁵, while 74.8% believe that, should Russian troops invade Ukraine, Belarus must prevent such an invasion from happening on its territory⁶⁶.

Regardless of their approval or disapproval for Russian policy, the Belarusians, when they think about the attitude of the Belarusian state to the conflict, set their own interests, not the Russian ones, as a priority

Previously, Russian television only occasionally sent messages at odds with those on Belarusian television. In the case of assessments of the Ukrainian events, however, the difference is long-term and significant. For example, Lukashenka has described the actions of Russia against Ukraine as an illegal aggression and several times spoke positively about the leaders of post-Maidan Ukraine (he called Oleksandr Turchinov "a decent and honest person" and used the words "we are close people" when he spoke with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko). At that very moment, the Russian media was accusing the same figures of an illegitimate takeover.

Such divergences in information provision even forced Belarusian state journalists to criticise Russian television – Pavel Yakubovich, the editor-in-chief of *SB.Belarus Today* stated that the Russian media were biased in their assessment of the events in Ukraine. Moreover, Russian propaganda contributed to the fact that the Belarusian authorities were revising their attitude towards informational and cultural policy. Now, state television increasingly often invites independent experts to the main public telecasting of Belarus, Matter of Principle, and has started translating foreign movies into Belarusian⁶⁷.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is not the only reason for Russia's shrinking role in the civil sphere. The economical decline of Russia has also had an impact,

⁶² Белорусская аналитическая мастерская, op.cit.

⁶³ НИСЭПИ, 2014. 'Национальный опрос 2-12 декабря 2014', <<http://www.old.iiseps.org/data14-121.html>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁶⁴ НИСЭПИ, 2014. 'Телепропаганда и жизнь', <<http://www.iiseps.org/?p=1413>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁶⁵ НИСЭПИ, 2014. 'Национальный опрос 2-12 декабря 2014', <<http://www.old.iiseps.org/data14-121.html>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁶⁶ НИСЭПИ, 2014. 'Телепропаганда и жизнь', <<http://www.iiseps.org/?p=1413>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁶⁷ TUT.by, 'Иностранные фильмы на канале «Беларусь 3» звучат по-белорусски', <<http://news.tut.by/culture/483629.html>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

demonstrated by the growing number of books published in Belarus in the Belarusian and Russian languages. Previously, books in the Belarusian language, says director of the National Book Chamber Alena Ivanova, made up about 10%-12% of the total number of published books annually. Now this percentage is growing. However, this is not due to the increasing circulation of Belarusian-language books, but because of the decline in the Russian book market, which has led to a situation where Belarusian publishing companies print fewer Russian-language books⁶⁸.

Conclusion

Despite Belarus' lessening dependence on Russia, relations seem unlikely to come to the point of a dramatic breakdown in integration.

First, although Belarus is making Russia less important in some respects, it remains overdependent on Russia financially - it continues to receive from Russia loans and "subsidies" – i.e. discounts for oil and gas and access to the common market. Without Russia, Belarus would not be able to sell as much petrol to the West. Russia controls the gas infrastructure of Belarus, supervises the work of oil processing plants, finances construction of its nuclear power plant and has significant influence over production of electric power, produced with Russian gas⁶⁹. Thus, even without reference to current circumstances, it looks like good relations with the country with which Belarus has its longest common border will remain in the Belarusian national interest for a long time to come (maybe forever).

Furthermore, it remains highly important to Lukashenka that Russia acknowledges the results of the presidential elections in Belarus. This reduces his vulnerability should no other big geopolitical actor in the region acknowledge the them. Moreover, in the political domain, it is the Kremlin that makes the Belarusian regime important to the West. Without Russia's aggressive policy, Lukashenka would soon return to his status as an outcast and "Europe's last dictator", whom he ceased to be due to the Russian war in Ukraine⁷⁰.

Secondly, Belarus remains "probably the most important country in Europe for Russia, in pure strategic terms"⁷¹. Therefore, the Kremlin won't allow the total disintegration of the two countries' relationship. For Russia, Belarus is a military "strategic balcony", controls the transit route to Kaliningrad, and important shipments of energy resources to Western countries go through Belarus. The country also has prestige significance for Russia: without Belarus, Russia would lose the only country in Europe that remains its ally, albeit a difficult one. Belarus' escape from the Russian sphere of influence would be a serious defeat for the Kremlin's internal and foreign policy. So, it looks like Belarus' turn in the direction of the European Union is possible only if Russia takes an identical step⁷². Russia sees its influence over Belarus as primeval. As Ukraine proves,

⁶⁸ Андрей Жвалеvский, 2016. *Белорусские идут, или как менялся белорусский книжный рынок в 2015 году*, <<http://az-book.info/beloruskie-idut-ili-kak-menyalsya-beloruskij-knizhnyj-rynok-v-2015-godu>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁶⁹ Ryhor Astapenia, 2014. *Belarus on the Russian Energy Needle*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-russian-energy-needle-16594>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁷⁰ Ryhor Astapenia, 2014. *Belarus is no longer 'Europe's last dictatorship'*, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/12/belarus-no-longer-europe-last-dictatorship>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁷¹ Dmitri Trenin, 2001. *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization*, Moscow, p. 160.

⁷² Еўрападыё, 2009. 'Расія не будзе моцна раўнаваць Беларусь да Еўропы', <<http://euroradio.fm/rasiya-ne-budze-mocna-raunavac-belarus-da-europy>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

attempts by Belarus to turn to the West by itself would prompt destabilising threats from the Kremlin.

Thus, maintaining close relations remains in the interests of both states. Such interests look like they will hold fast regardless of who rules the countries.

Moreover, both countries could benefit if they stop using “buffer integration”⁷³ and Belarusian-Russian relations lost their emotional component. This would remove from the authorities an opportunity to use populism in their mutual discourse and make relations more stable.

Nonetheless, the process of estrangement will continue further, and this is also connected with the generational changes inside the societies. The number of Belarusians who once lived in the same state as Russia - the USSR - is steadily decreasing, a new nomenclature elite is emerging⁷⁴ - the quantity of people who identify themselves as ethnically Russian is reducing⁷⁵, interest in Belarusian culture is reviving⁷⁶, and young people are becoming more open to the world. And the last, but important change: a political class that is accustomed to sovereign power, in which decisions are taken independently, has formed in Belarus.

However, such disintegration is not necessarily connected with discrepancies between the leading elites of Minsk and Moscow regarding the conflict in Ukraine or the economic crisis in Russia. Rather, it reflects Belarus’ selfformation, a slowmoving process that began with the revival of independence back in 1991. Control over one’s own military security, strengthening of the media, normalisation of relations with big geopolitical actors and economical diversification – this is not Belarus’ fight against Russia, but simply the manifestation of state emancipation.

**Attempts by Belarus
to turn to the West by itself
would prompt destabilising threats
from the Kremlin**

⁷³ More about the “buffer integration”: Анатолий Паньковский, 2007. ‘Буферные формы: в Европу через отрицание Европы’ in Ольга Шпарага (сост.) *Европейская перспектива Беларуси: интеллектуальные модели*, Вильнюс, p. 174–192.

⁷⁴ Ryhor Astapenia, 2015. *Who Will Get Positions in the New Government: Conservatives or Reformists?*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/who-will-get-positions-new-government-conservatives-or-reformists-23483>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁷⁵ Vadzim Smok, 2013. *Belarusian Identity - The Impact of Lukashenka's Rule*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/analytical-paper-belarusian-identity-impact-lukashenkas-rule-16369>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

⁷⁶ Ryhor Astapenia, 2014. *Is Lukashenka Trying to Emancipate Belarus from Russian Culture?*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/lukashenka-trying-emancipate-belarus-russian-culture-19510>> [Accessed 27 May 2016].

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Ostrogorski Centre

The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, nonprofit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its work is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results.

Its analysts working in Minsk, Kyiv, London and Berlin understand the challenges of transition in the region because they have lived through it. Educated at the world's leading universities, the centre's experts have cultivated the culture and technical skills required to deliver Western-style analysis.

The mission of the Ostrogorski Centre is to contribute to better understanding of transition processes in Belarus and learn from experience of other countries. The Centre aims to promote reforms and thinking which helps the economy become more competitive, governance more efficient and integrate Belarusian scholars and analysts in pan-European and global networks.

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