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Belarus in the Co-Aggressor Trap: Getting out of It and Resolving the Political Crisis of 2020

Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies

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The authors of the report make a brief analysis of the international and internal situation of Belarus on the eve of and in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian war of February 24, 2022 and the inertia of the political crisis of 2020. The authors characterize this situation as a complex existential crisis in the history of modern Belarus, threatening the very existence of the Belarusian statehood, and offer recommendations for its possible resolution.

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Foreword

This report is a brief analysis of the international standing and domestic situation in Belarus in the run-up and amid the Russia-Ukraine War that started with Russia's invasion on February 24, 2022¹. The authors characterize this situation as the most severe crisis in the history of modern Belarus threatening the very existence of the Belarusian statehood and offer recommendations for the possible resolution of this crisis.

This report was prepared on the initiative of its authors and reflects their understanding of the current situation, the national interests of the Republic of Belarus and realistic scenarios of possible further developments. The creation of the report was not supported financially, organizationally, informationally or otherwise by Belarusian or external donors, political actors or other entities or persons. However, it became possible due to a broad exchange of views with representatives of the expert and diplomatic community as well as international organizations, current and former officials (including those who were previously directly involved in resolving military and political crises in various parts of the world) from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific regions.

The authors do not claim their estimates, hypotheses, ideas, and initiatives presented hereby 'the ultimate truth'. Many aspects of the events of 2020-2022 in and around Belarus require in-depth and careful study with open access to all key sources of information. The authors rely mainly on open and personal sources, present a general picture of what is happening and formulate pressing questions. The attempts to answer those questions, they hope, could launch a meaningful dialog both within the Belarusian society and between Belarus and the outside world to search for the ways out of the complex existential crisis in which the Republic of Belarus finds itself due to the Russia-Ukraine War and the inertia of the political crisis of 2020.

The authors, to the best of their abilities, are ready to assist both in finalizing the presented recommendations, implementing any of them and organizing relevant communications. However, they do not claim such participation, nor do they claim any form of acknowledgement of their authorship of the roadmap and any proposed measures if the use of these measures by others would contribute to the goal outlined above.

This report was originally published in Russian on September 20, 2022.

¹ The report uses the concept of "war" in the sense of military conflict as a sociopolitical phenomenon in which contradictions between states are resolved through the use of military force in various forms and in various ways. The term "special military operation" used by Russian officials and propaganda narratives reflects only the way the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation are used against Ukraine in the framework of Russian legislation, but does not reflect the essence of what is going on.

Summary

1. Belarus found itself in the 'co-aggressor trap' due to a number of erroneous tactical steps and strategic miscalculations, actions and inactions of the Belarusian leadership on the eve and at the initial stage of the Russia-Ukraine War, as well as the inertia of another critical event - the domestic political crisis of August 2020 unprecedented in its international consequences and their impact on the country. Although the Armed Forces of Belarus do not take part in direct military action against Ukraine, both the Ukrainian side and the international community perceive Belarus as an accomplice to Russia's military aggression. The attribution of the status of co-aggressor to Belarus is largely due to the fact that Russia's military aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022 involved extensive use of the territory and infrastructure of Belarus, and the Belarusian side did not prevent or impede such use. Being in the co-aggressor trap, Belarus cannot influence the actions of the main aggressor (Russia) or the development of the situation as a whole, but bears all, and in some areas - more extensive - costs than the main aggressor.
2. A great advantage and asset of the Belarusian side is that Belarusian servicemen did not engage in combat operations against Ukraine and Belarus did not become a party to the conflict. However, with the ongoing defeat of Russian troops in Ukraine and future de-occupation of that country's territory, this asset will prove insufficient and will depreciate quickly. First, the AFU will seek to transfer hostilities to the enemy's territory in order to force the enemy to admit defeat. In these circumstances, the continuing deployment of Russian troops on the territory of Belarus and the continuation of missile attacks against Ukraine from the Belarusian sky create legitimate grounds for retaliatory strikes on the territory and in the sky of Belarus by the AFU. Second, there is a high probability that the Russian side, seeking to avoid a military defeat in Ukraine, will decide to use nuclear weapons against the AFU using the sky and/or the territory of Belarus for the strike. In this case, Belarus would become a legitimate target for a retaliatory nuclear strike by NATO countries.
3. Thus, Belarus' immediate escape from the co-aggressor trap as well as its overall withdrawal from the Russia-Ukraine war on its own free will rather than due to the emerging external or internal circumstances, constitutes the most important imperative of the national security of the Republic of Belarus at the moment. Such a step can create conditions for minimizing foreign policy and economic costs of the war for Belarus and potentially - help Belarus fit into the new postwar regional geoeconomic and geopolitical order on terms that meet the national interests of Belarus.
4. Determining Belarus' future status, role, its prospects for escaping from the co-aggressor trap and withdrawal from the Russia-Ukraine war and the strategic implications of this war for Belarus requires answers to the following crucial questions:
 - a. Was the Belarusian top military and political leadership aware of and involved in the Kremlin's planning for the war against Ukraine?
 - i. The aggregate data indicates that all of Minsk's actions and statements on the eve of the war were not due to participation in a campaign of strategic disinformation of Ukraine and the international community, but to a lack of awareness of the real plans of Russia's top leadership. They were motivated by the desire to convert their geopolitical loyalty into political and economic dividends from Moscow by holding large-scale joint exercises with Russia;
 - b. Did the Belarusian side provide the territory of Belarus to Russian troops for

preparing for the prospect of the Russia-Ukraine war evolving into a regional war on the territory between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea in 2023. For Belarus, this prospect is unacceptable. Neither the people nor the authorities of Belarus are prepared to bear costs inherent in this scenario which, moreover, are not counterbalanced by any significant potential gains.

- d. What will be the new postwar geopolitical and geoeconomic order in the region after the war ends and Belarus' place in it?
 - i. The West is no longer afraid of an escalation in the confrontation with Russia and has guaranteed all-round support for Ukraine. The conflict between Russia and the West is being institutionalized. At the same time, both Ukraine and its allies in the Ramstein coalition are preparing for the scenario of transformation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict into a regional war with the expansion of hostilities to the region between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. Belarus' inability to exit the war is fraught with losing its own statehood, turning into a gray area and being displaced to the periphery of world development. Meanwhile, Ukraine is already ensuring its place in the new post-war regional geoeconomic and geopolitical order, including accelerated prospects for European integration, implementation of a large-scale post-conflict reconstruction plan (Marshall Plan for Ukraine) and inclusion in a new system of regional security based on a system of bilateral and multilateral guarantees, and in the future - NATO membership.
 - ii. Belarus still has an opportunity to reverse the adverse trends affecting its post-conflict prospects, to withstand geopolitical shocks and ensure its future development and prosperity. For this purpose, the Belarusian side needs to return to the practical implementation of the concept of 'donor of regional security and stability' and 'integration of integrations' taking into account the emerging post-conflict geopolitical realities in the region, including the disintegration of the post-Soviet space and the inevitable crisis of Eurasian integration. It involves pairing China's Belt and Road initiative with prospects for deeper economic integration with the EU. The transformation of Belarus into an industrial and logistics hub within the Belt and Road Initiative in Eastern Europe economically and infrastructurally integrated into European and other Western markets will allow Belarus to become a kind of 'European Hong Kong' even despite the fact that the main focus in development of the Belt and Road Initiative along the China-Europe route now shifts from the Eurasian route via Russia and Belarus to the southern (Trans-Caspian) route. Obviously, against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Kazakhstan becomes a crucial actor in shaping this new order. This country is now turning into Belarus's crucial partner in linking the Belt and Road Initiative and European integration in the post-Soviet space, and so do other states located along this route (Central Asian, Eastern and Central European states, Turkey, Azerbaijan, etc.).
5. Belarus is currently dealing with three crises: a domestic political crisis that has lasted since 2020; a foreign policy crisis that has taken threatening forms since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war; and an economic crisis caused by the sanctions policy of Western countries. In existing real-world conditions, these three crises are interrelated and their resolution is interdependent. Any strategy of both the Belarusian side (the Belarusian authorities, the opposition, other forces) and external actors in relation to Belarus will be focused, in one way

or another, on the resolution and/or management of these crises. Accordingly, in these circumstances, the fundamental national interests of the Republic of Belarus are to:

- a. resolve the political crisis, restore and expand the functionality of the Belarusian state, overcome or mitigate divisions in Belarusian society, create effective mechanisms for the reproduction of Belarusian statehood, including mechanisms of popular participation and political transition while uncompromisingly safeguarding the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Belarus, ensuring its independence in taking key decisions in foreign and domestic policies;
 - b. restore and expand the international agency of Belarus, exclude the use of integration mechanisms in the post-Soviet space for undermining the sovereignty, independence and national interests of Belarus, ensure a peaceful withdrawal of Belarus from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, freeze and lift anti-Belarusian sanctions, normalize and deepen relations between Belarus and Ukraine, the EU and NATO countries, move to equal rights pragmatic cooperation with the Russian Federation, obtain security guarantees for Belarus under the new regional security architecture;
 - c. restore access of the Belarusian economy to all international markets and to key donors of advanced technologies and capital, open the way for safe and voluntary return to Belarus of all Belarusians who left the country for political reasons in 2020-2022 (as well as political refugees from earlier periods), elaborate, ensure international support and implement a plan of economic reforms in Belarus to achieve economic growth rates exceeding the world average.
6. The Western sanctions policy of August 2020 - January 2022 against Belarus, as well as 2020 'geopolitical U-turn' of Minsk that provoked sanctions, Belarus' anti-Western policy and policy of domestic repressions, were based on a quite specific assessment of geopolitical realities in the region by the parties in 2020. On the part of the West, this assessment was reduced to the recognition of Belarus as part of Russia's 'special interests' zone, assuming that Russia tries to ensure its own national security interests and remains a responsible actor capable of negotiating. On the part of Belarus, this assessment was reduced to assuming a higher priority of cooperation between Russia and the West for these two parties, their reluctance to enter an all-out confrontation, including on the Ukraine issue. As a consequence, Minsk assumed a lack of reliable partners in the EU and NATO which could provide critical support for Belarus in a potential confrontation with Russia should it occur in case of the latter's aggressive actions. Accordingly, at the time of the political crisis, the Belarusian leadership chose the only perceivable available option - to rely on Russia's support in exchange for geopolitical loyalty. However, developments in Ukraine since February 2022 have made both of these assessments irrelevant. The geopolitical realities that existed in 2021-2022 have changed significantly, opening up opportunities to normalize relations between Belarus and the West (including Ukraine) on terms acceptable to all parties. However, the rigidity of the West's position and the lack of a clear position of the Belarusian leadership, including its dependence on Moscow, make it difficult to organize communication between them. As a result, despite the foreign policy and military and political defeat in Ukraine, the Russian side continues to determine the scope and direction of Belarus' foreign policy activities and influence Minsk's communications with the EU, NATO, and specific Western countries using this influence in its own interests and against the national interests of Belarus.
7. The key obstacle to the normalization of relations between Belarus and the West (including Ukraine) is the lack of basic trust between the parties (and equally, of basic trust between the different 'camps' within Belarusian society). Moreover, this applies not only to Belarus 'in

general' but also to specific officials who discredited themselves with direct misinformation during the preparation and initial stage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. After two years of active sanctions pressure of the West against Belarus, the same is true for the attitude of the Belarusian leadership to the EU and NATO countries, as well as to Ukraine. Under the influence of Russian sources, as well as its own and its closest entourage's attitudes, but most importantly, due to its dependence on Moscow, the Belarusian leadership refuses to analyze rationally Western policies and to search for real points of understanding with the West. In this situation, developing and discussing a roadmap for normalizing relations between Belarus, on the one hand, and Ukraine and Western countries, on the other, taking into account the new geopolitical realities could pave way for overcoming this mutual distrust. Such a roadmap, representing a sequence of mutually conditional actions by the parties, would make it possible to build and strengthen mutual trust in parallel with the resolution of urgent issues on the current agenda that are relevant to the parties involved. At the same time, officials who have not lost the trust of their counterparties due to the events in Ukraine could be appointed to negotiate on both sides. All parties have sufficient human resources to appoint such negotiators.

8. Withdrawing from the Russia-Ukraine war and returning to pre-war status quo would not be enough to overcome the complex existential crisis that Belarus is now facing. The most sensitive Western economic sanctions against Belarus were imposed for the political and migration crises, as well as the Ryanair landing incident in 2020-2021. The lifting of Western sanctions imposed for 'complicity in war' is an important, but insufficient condition for overcoming the crisis of development prospects. In turn, the solution to this crisis is possible only after overcoming the domestic political crisis of 2020 which resulted from a divide within the Belarusian society. Belarus' withdrawal from the Russia-Ukraine war creates conditions for finding a peaceful solution to the crises that Belarus faces. Meanwhile, keeping Belarus in the co-aggressor trap and refusing to overcome the national divide creates preconditions for their forceful resolution in the future. Therefore, the roadmap consists of two interrelated and interdependent parts: 1) Ending 'complicity' in Russian aggression against Ukraine, escaping from the co-aggressor trap; 2) Political settlement.
9. The presented roadmap is a variant of resolving the three crises in which Belarus finds itself based on mutually respectful dialog and mutual concessions of the parties involved. The alternative to this approach is 'confrontation until a victorious end' which will equally and unnecessarily increase costs for Belarus and Ukraine and its Western allies, Belarusian authorities and Belarusian society, as well as the Belarusian opposition.
10. The restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, Russia's early withdrawal from the war with Ukraine, and the beginning of profound domestic reforms in Russia are equally in Russia's long-term national interest as they let the country return to peaceful development. Given the collapse of the current system of arms control and strategic stability in Europe, Moscow's hypothetical physical control over Ukrainian territory would not solve any of the country's national security issues, but would only create new threats and challenges for it. At the same time, attempts to achieve such control through aggression cost Russia enormous human and material resources, and the threat of international isolation dramatically deteriorates the country's already complicated development prospects. Therefore, Russia's early withdrawal from the war, even at the cost of admitting a military defeat in Ukraine, could have positive consequences for its development. Such developments would be equally promising for the bilateral relations between Belarus and Russia, allowing the positive aspects of economic integration between the two countries to be preserved in the future.

Introduction: Belarus in the Co-Aggressor Trap

Due to a number of erroneous tactical steps and strategic miscalculations, actions and inactions of the Belarusian leadership on the eve and at the initial stage of the Russia-Ukraine war, Belarus found itself in a co-aggressor trap. Most of these misguided decisions were made possible by the inertia of another critical event - the political crisis of August 2020, unprecedented in its domestic and international consequences and their impact on the country. The two crises are interconnected and partly interdependent. However, it is the geopolitical crisis in the region that currently poses the greatest existential threat to the Belarusian nation since the first days of its independence. Its resolution can pave the way for the peaceful resolution of the domestic political crisis of 2020.

Since the end of March 2022, due to the defeat of Russian troops in the northern regions of Ukraine and their withdrawal, the territory of Belarus ceased to play a significant role in the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine. For that reason, Russia's pressure on Minsk on the issue of joining the war decreased significantly from the second half of April. Against this backdrop, the Belarusian leadership itself tried to return to its former constructive role in the region in some aspects while taking advantage of the emerging economic opportunities within the framework of a closer alliance with Russia. This attempt, for obvious objective reasons, was ignored by Ukraine and its Western partners.

Thus, Belarus is 'stuck' in the status of an accomplice to aggression (in the co-aggressor trap). Therefore, its claims to participate in negotiations on a peace settlement following the Russia-Ukraine war, to receive security guarantees, and to be recognized as an equal participant in international communication in the region look weak. Previous actions of the Belarusian side, starting with the 'geopolitical U-turn' on August 7-10, 2020, and including the forced landing of the Ryanair plane, participation in the aggravation of the migration crisis and other steps, gave Minsk the reputation of an irrational, dependent actor in the international arena incapable of negotiating with partners.

Thanks to the heroic resistance of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the territorial defense and the entire Ukrainian people, as well as to the support of Ukraine's international partners, the Ukrainian side succeeded in stopping the general offensive of Russian troops in the first phase of the war and forced Moscow to abandon its initial goals of invading Ukraine, limiting them to the capture of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as the south of Ukraine. The course of military operations shows that the Russian side will not be able to achieve even these more modest goals, and the war may end in defeat for the Russian Federation.

Therefore, Belarus' immediate escape from the co-aggressor trap as well as its overall withdrawal from the Russia-Ukraine war on its own free will rather than due to the emerging external or internal circumstances could create conditions for minimizing foreign policy and economic costs of the war for Belarus and potentially - help Belarus fit into the new postwar regional geoeconomic and geopolitical order on terms that meet the national interests of Belarus. This new regional order will be shaped not only by Russia's defeat in Ukraine. It will emerge as the consequence of Russia's strategic defeat at the hands of the Ramstein Coalition (states supporting Ukraine under US leadership) and respective significant reduction of Russia's weight and role in the international arena, shrinking of its sphere of influence to the borders of 1991 and, as a consequence, a new phase of disintegration of the post-Soviet space, especially in its European part. This strategic defeat will be inflicted regardless of whether or not Russia is able to keep some of the Ukrainian territories under its control for some time.

Adapting to this new geopolitical and geoeconomic order requires not only passive observation, but pro-activity and attempts to influence its future contours. Only this will guarantee that Belarusian national interests are taken into account in the future.

Determining Belarus' future status, role, its prospects for escaping from the co-aggressor trap and withdrawal from the Russia-Ukraine war and the strategic implications of this war for Belarus requires answers to the following crucial questions:

- Was the Belarusian top military and political leadership aware of and involved in the Kremlin's planning for the war against Ukraine?
- Did the Belarusian side provide the territory of Belarus to Russian troops for committing military aggression against Ukraine of its own free will and by prior agreement with Russia?
- Is the Belarusian leadership and Belarusian society ready to continue to bear the foreign policy and economic costs of the war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine?
- What will be the new postwar geopolitical and geoeconomic order in the region after the war ends and Belarus' place in it?
- What steps should be taken to withdraw from the war as soon as possible in order to minimize the costs and losses to the Belarusian state and society, and to prevent the transfer of hostilities to the territory of Belarus?

The answers to these questions will determine not only the degree of guilt and responsibility of the Belarusian state and society before Ukraine after the war, but also the ability of Belarus to regain its agency in the international arena and prevent the scenario of the country's slide into a gray zone in the center of Europe.

Failure to find strategic answers to these questions and to use the emerging opportunities to get out of this war in the best interests of the Belarusian nation and the Belarusian statehood will have the most dramatic consequences. Apart from the risks of Belarus' transformation into a gray zone, the hostilities of Russia-Ukraine war may shift to the territory of Belarus in the near future. This might happen not only due to the very fact of the Russian troops' presence in the country, but also because Russia's use of Belarus' territory to invade Ukraine has made this war possible on the current scale. More dramatic scenarios cannot be ruled out, including a nuclear escalation on the part of Russia in which Belarus is assigned the unenviable role of an object of a likely counterstrike by NATO countries.

Thus, the Republic of Belarus critically needs to develop and implement a strategy that will allow:

- to withdraw from the war and restore close friendly relations with Ukraine; to get out of the economic and technological blockade of Western countries and their allies in other regions;
- restore Belarus' normal relations with the EU, USA, UK, and other countries, and get rid of the toxic status in the eyes of partners from other regions, including China and other remote states;
- prepare for a new phase of disintegration of the post-Soviet space and reduction of Russia's geopolitical and economic weight in the world which would prevent it from acting as a donor of economic and military support for Belarus;
- receive security guarantees on par with Ukraine and take its rightful place in the new international security architecture in the region;
- finally, find a solution to the political crisis of 2020 as its inertia will continue to affect the prospects for development and the international position of Belarus even after the withdrawal from the Russia-Ukraine war.

Determining the Status of Belarus in the Russia-Ukraine War Ignorance of the Kremlin's Plans or a Campaign of Strategic Disinformation?

Although the Belarusian side avoided the involvement of the Belarusian Armed Forces in military aggression against Ukraine and is not a party to the conflict in the Russia-Ukraine war, Ukraine and its international partners perceive Belarus as a co-aggressor by virtue of providing its own territory and military infrastructure for Russia's armed invasion of Ukraine.

The circumstances preceding the use of the Belarusian territory by Russian troops and the degree to which the Belarusian top military and political leadership was aware of the Kremlin's aggressive intentions are one of the cornerstone issues.

It is well known that Russian troops began to deploy on the territory of Belarus in January 2022 to participate in a joint operational exercise 'Union Resolve-2022'. Its final phase was held from February 10 to February 20, 2022.

According to the information disseminated by the Belarusian side through diplomatic and military channels to its international partners, including Ukraine, after the exercise the Russian troops were supposed to start leaving the territory of Belarus and return to their permanent deployment places in Russia as early as February 22. Similar assurances, including a complete denial of the very possibility of Russian troops using Belarusian territory to invade Ukraine, were given by the Belarusian military leadership to their Ukrainian counterparts². But this did not happen because of the decision of the presidents of Belarus and Russia on February 19-20 to extend their presence on the territory of Belarus for a comprehensive combat readiness check of the response forces of the Union State.

Can one argue that:

- The Belarusian top military and political leadership had already been aware at that time of the Kremlin's plans to attack Ukraine?
- And all the statements by Minsk about the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory of Belarus and the impossibility in principle of an attack on Ukraine were part of a campaign of strategic disinformation?

Although a number of Belarusian pro-government propagandists claimed at the beginning of the conflict with Ukraine that the top leadership of Belarus was well aware of the Kremlin's plans and even participated in their development, we will venture to assume the opposite.

Judging by indirect and direct evidence, the decision to launch the so-called special military operation in the current format of a full-scale invasion against Ukraine was taken in a very narrow circle of Russian high-ranking officials and representatives of special services after the February 21, 2022 meeting of the Russian Security Council³. It was adopted in an atmosphere of absolute secrecy,

² Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin and head of the State Border Committee Anatoly Lappo assured their Ukrainian counterparts that Belarusian territory would not be used for an attack on Ukraine // <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3496376-oleksij-danilov-sekretar-radi-nacionalnoi-bezpeki-i-oboroni.html>.

³ Although Western sources claim that Russian President Vladimir Putin consulted with Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, and Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov before deciding to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-20/putin-s-war-in-ukraine-has-russian-elites-fearing-global-isolation>), other evidence suggests that this decision was made under the influence of high-ranking

without the involvement of the army high command which was preparing for an entirely different scenario. This implied scenario envisioned Russia's recognition of the independence of the separatist entities DPR and LPR within their de facto borders, rather than within the administrative borders of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and deployment of a Russian military contingent there as a 'peacekeeping' force. The grouping of troops which the Russian command has periodically deployed since spring 2021 along the border with Ukraine, was intended to put psychological pressure on the Ukrainian leadership and its Western partners and to force them to implement the Minsk agreements under the 'Steinmeier formula'. It was supposed to solve the same task of exerting psychological pressure in the February 2022 - to restrain a possible military response of Ukraine to the Kremlin's recognition of the independence of the separatist entities.

This is the scenario that the Kremlin began to announce even to its Western partners - the United States, Germany and France - in mid-February⁴. And this is the scenario Minsk must have expected following the decision to extend the deployment of Russian troops on Belarusian territory after the completion of the joint exercise 'Union Resolve 2022'.

Thus, the aggregate data indicates that all of Minsk's actions and statements on the eve of the war were not due to participation in a campaign of strategic disinformation of Ukraine and the international community, but to a lack of awareness of the real plans of Russia's top leadership. They were also motivated by the desire to convert Belarus' geopolitical loyalty to Russia (by holding large-scale joint exercise) into political and economic dividends from Moscow.

Voluntary accomplice or forced hostage to aggression?

Initially, official Minsk intended to use the Joint Operational Exercise 'Union Resolve 2022' which later grew out of schedule into a comprehensive test of the Union State's response forces, as part of an escalatory dominance strategy in response to sanctions pressure from the West⁵. It is clear from the background information on the topic that the initiative to hold major joint Belarusian-Russian exercises dates back to 2020, the period after the outbreak of the political crisis in Belarus⁶ which led to unprecedented external pressure from the West.

However, the Kremlin had its own strategic and tactical calculations. As we pointed out in our earlier works, starting with 'Russia's New Geostrategy' (2015)⁷ and 'Belarus in the Context of the Russia-NATO

representatives of Russian special services and security agencies who did not have the necessary military training of an operational-strategic level and were unable to plan and assess the consequences of conducting such a large-scale military operation.

⁴ This scenario is called "negotiated de-escalation" or, in the words of US President Joseph Biden, 'small invasion' <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/19/politics/russia-ukraine-joe-biden-news-conference/index.html>

⁵ Lukashenka: if they start deploying armies against the Union State, put it on the brink of survival by all kinds of sanctions, intimidate it and threaten it, then Belarus and Russia "will break their backs" // <https://www.belta.by/president/view/s-nami-luchshe-ne-svjazyvatsja-lukashenko-predostereg-zapad-ot-popytok-napast-na-sojuznoe-gosudarstvo-480572-2022/>.

⁶ "Lukashenka suggests that Russia should think about new military exercises <https://www.belta.by/president/view/svoi-interesy-my-dolzny-bljusti-lukashenko-predlozhit-rossii-podumat-nad-novymi-voennymi-uchenijami-407000-2020/>.

⁷ One element of Russia's new geostrategy manifested by the military conflict with Ukraine in 2014, is: moving the line of strategic defense from its borders to a line running through the western border of Kaliningrad Oblast, Belarus, Ukraine, Transnistria, the southern borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Eastern Europe and through the eastern and southern borders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan in Central Asia. See: Russia's New Geostrategy: Implications and Challenges for the International Security Architecture //

Confrontation' (2016)⁸, the key objective for the Kremlin was to establish unilateral military and political control over Belarus, including free military access to its territory and infrastructure. Without this control and access, Russia's further expansion of the strategic defense perimeter and its ability to project military power to the western strategic direction would not be possible.

Between 2014 and 2020, the Belarusian leadership resisted all attempts and forms of deepening military and political integration and establishing a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus that would undermine Minsk's strategic autonomy from Moscow. Even after the outbreak of the political crisis in August 2020 when the window of opportunity for balancing foreign policy narrowed sharply, Minsk agreed only to the creation of joint combat training centers under national subordination.

As a result, the Kremlin found another opportunity: using Minsk's desire to demonstrate geopolitical loyalty in exchange for political and economic dividends through joint military exercises, Moscow was able to deploy a large-scale military force on the territory of Belarus numbering over 30,000 Russian troops by the beginning of the war on February 24, 2022.

It is the fact that in the early morning of February 24 the military aggression of Russian troops started from the territory of Belarus as well as Russia and this defines Belarus as an aggressor in terms of international law and in the eyes of Ukraine and its allies.

However, taking into account the above-mentioned circumstances, the ignorance of the Belarusian top military and political leadership about the real aggressive intentions of the Kremlin and the use of joint exercises by the latter to cover up the intentions to concentrate Russian troops for the purpose of subsequent invasion, the answers to the following questions are even more important:

- In the context of the comprehensive readiness check of the response force of the Regional Group of Forces of the Union State - who gave the orders to the Russian troops at the time of the invasion of Ukraine from the Belarusian territory?
- Was the use of Russian troops against Ukraine carried out on the basis of directives of the Supreme State Council of the Union State (SSCUS), as it must have been?
- How voluntary was the provision of Belarusian territory to Russian troops for aggression against Ukraine, given its suddenness to the Belarusian leadership?
- Did the Belarusian leadership have the ability to actually prevent Russian military aggression from the territory of Belarus against Ukraine and does it have it now?

Despite the fact that the Russian troops involved in the invasion of Ukraine were part of the response force of the Regional Group of Forces of the Union State and were formally under the Belarusian/joint command, at the beginning of the conflict on February 24, they were clearly directly subordinated to the Kremlin which directed their actions with directives and orders from the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of Russia, Vladimir Putin.

The Belarusian top leadership was unilaterally notified of the use of the territory of Belarus by Russian troops to carry out military aggression against Ukraine at around 5 a.m. on February 24, 2022⁹. Only

<https://forstrategy.org/files/new-russian-geostrategy.pdf>.

⁸ Belarus in the context of the Russia-NATO confrontation: Threats and challenges to sovereignty, independence, and national security. Strategic Conclusions and Recommendations // <https://forstrategy.org/files/belarus-russia-nato.pdf>.

⁹ Putin informed Lukashenko about the situation on the border with Ukraine and in Donbass // <https://www.belta.by/president/view/putin-proinformiroval-lukashenko-o-situatsii-na-granitse-s-ukrainoi-i-na-donbasse-486581-2022/>.

after that did the Belarusian leadership promptly convene a meeting with the military to work out a response to what was happening¹⁰.

The first reaction of the Belarusian side which denied any direct involvement of the Belarusian Armed Forces in the Russian invasion of Ukraine indicated that the start of hostilities from the territory of Belarus came as a complete surprise, and the international legal consequences of these events were not adequately addressed. In terms of international law, the situation in which Belarus found itself implied only two interpretations:

- 1) Belarus voluntarily allowed Russian troops to use its territory to commit aggression against Ukraine, and therefore is an aggressor party (f);
- 2) Russia has used Belarusian territory unilaterally in violation of bilateral agreements, national legislation and international law which suggests that Belarus itself has been subjected to an act of armed aggression by Russia (e).

General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX) of December 14, 1974¹¹:

Any of the following actions, regardless of the declaration of war, subject to and in accordance with the provisions of Article 2¹², will qualify as an act of aggression:

(f) The act of a State in permitting its territory, which it has placed at the disposal of another State, to be used by that other State for an act of aggression against a third State;

(e) The use of armed forces of a State stationed on the territory of another State by agreement with the host State in violation of the conditions set forth in the agreement, or any continuation of their presence in such territory upon termination of the agreement;

Since the start of the war, Russian troops have been deployed and have been acting on the territory of Belarus on formally illegal grounds, not only in terms of violating international law, including the UN Charter, but also in terms of Belarus' national law and bilateral agreements.

The Russian side has violated:

- 1) Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, its previous¹³ and new editions (in force from March 15, 2022)¹⁴;
- 2) Military Doctrine of the Union State¹⁵, Directive of the Supreme State Council of the Union

¹⁰ Lukashenka quickly assembled a meeting with the military //

<https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-operativno-sobiraet-soveschaniye-s-voennymi-486616-2022/>.

¹¹ Definition of aggression // https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/aggression.shtml.

¹² The use of armed force by the first state in violation of the UN Charter is prima facie evidence of an act of aggression.

¹³ Article 18. "In its foreign policy the Republic of Belarus shall proceed from the principles of equality of states, non-use of force or the threat of force, inviolability of frontiers, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference in internal affairs and other generally recognised principles and norms of the international law. The Republic of Belarus aims at making its territory a nuclear-free zone, and the state neutral'.

¹⁴ Article 18. "The Republic of Belarus excludes military aggression from its territory against other states.

¹⁵ Article 14. "The Union State does not regard any state or coalitions of states as its adversary and builds relations with all states on the basis of equal partnership and cooperation.

Article 15. "The participating States reaffirm their commitment to political and non-military measures for the settlement of disputes. At the same time, they express their firm determination to ensure military security with all the forces and means at their disposal, in accordance with international law'.

State on joint actions, Plan of application of regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation, Regulation on the Joint Command of regional grouping of troops (forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation, etc.

Thus, one can argue that at the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, Belarus partially lost sovereignty over the territories occupied by Russian troops. The latter started the military aggression against Ukraine by order of the Kremlin, contrary to the political will of the Belarusian state and society, having illegally withdrawn from subordination to the Belarusian / joint command on the territory of Belarus.

The Belarusian side was unable to prevent the Russian troops from using its territory for objective reasons, both due to the sudden and unexpected Russian invasion of Ukraine in the format of the so-called SMO, and due to the scale of the Russian military presence in Belarus (30 thousand) and on the border with it, including the reserve 'invasion corps' in the Pskov, Bryansk and Smolensk regions (15 thousand) ready to move into Belarus in case of local resistance.

Theater of war or space of peace?

The UN General Assembly overwhelmingly recognized Russia's February 24, 2022 attack on Ukraine as an act of aggression in resolutions ES-11/1 of March 2, 2022¹⁶ and ES-11/2 of March 24, 2022¹⁷. The actions of Russian troops in the course of this aggression involved massive violations of international humanitarian law, customs and the law of war, including war crimes. This was confirmed, among others, by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres during his visit to Moscow on April 26, 2022.

By Resolution ES-11/1 of March 2, 2022, the UN General Assembly recognized the Republic of Belarus as an accomplice to Russian aggression against Ukraine. The official position of Ukraine proceeds from the fact that Belarus is not just an accomplice, but acts as an aggressor in this war¹⁸. In this regard, several questions seem important at the moment:

- What military-political implications emerge for Belarus, given its status as an accomplice/aggressor in the eyes of Ukraine and its allies?
- Does this status envisage the transfer of hostilities to the territory of Belarus and if so, under what conditions?
- What military and political implications will Russia's strategic defeat have for Belarus?
- Are there scenarios to prevent the transfer of hostilities to the territory of Belarus?

Almost immediately after the start of the war, the Ukrainian side was ready to launch retaliatory missile strikes against the military infrastructure of Belarus used by Russian troops¹⁹. However, the

¹⁶ Approved by a vote of the representatives of 141 countries, with 5 votes against and 47 abstentions or no votes. // <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/293/36/PDF/N2229336.pdf?OpenElement>.

¹⁷ Approved by a vote of the representatives of 140 countries, with 5 votes against and 48 abstentions or no votes. // <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3966630>.

¹⁸ General Staff of the AFU: "The self-proclaimed leadership of the Republic of Belarus continues to deny involvement in the war against Ukraine, freely providing territories for the deployment of units of the armed forces of the Russian Federation, airfield and transport networks, as well as locations for the deployment of cruise and ballistic missile launchers. At the same time, according to international legal instruments, a country that provides its airspace, its territory for strikes against a third country can be considered an aggressor <https://www.facebook.com/100069092624537/posts/284155327230886/>.

¹⁹ Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council Alexander Danilov: Ukraine may launch a preventive missile strike on Belarus if relevant decision is taken // <https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/804818.html>.

timely diplomatic intervention of the President of France Emmanuel Macron²⁰ who held urgent talks with Aliaksandar Lukashenka and Volodymyr Zelensky, contributed to a deal between Minsk and Kyiv and, consequently, prevented Ukrainian counterattacks against Belarus²¹. However, the continued active use by Russian troops of Belarusian territory for performing missile and bomb strikes and as a land corridor for the invasion of northern Ukraine undermined this deal.

One of the obvious reasons why the transfer of hostilities to the territory of Belarus is a realistic scenario is the continued military presence of Russian troops taking part in military aggression against Ukraine. Although their numbers are significantly reduced compared to the start of the war, this presence generates significant risks that imply potential missile attacks on their locations as well as critical and military infrastructure facilities in Belarus.

Although the Belarusian Armed Forces are not engaged in direct military action against Ukraine, Kyiv views Belarus as an aggressor state and its Ramstein Coalition allies agree with this view. According to the Ukrainian side, a war on the current scale would not have been possible without Belarus granting its own territory to Russian troops for invasion. There is a discussion at the expert level, as well as in some political circles in Ukraine and in the West, of a forceful change of regime in Minsk to replace it with regime friendly to Kyiv and thus prevent a possible next invasion of Russian troops from the north in the future. Some discussions have gone even further: some experts propose not to wait for the Belarusian Armed Forces to enter the war on the orders of the Kremlin or to participate jointly with Russian troops in a new invasion from the north, but to draw Belarus into direct military confrontation which would result in a deep domestic political crisis due to the unwillingness of the Belarusian society and the army to fight and to bear not only diplomatic and economic costs, but also loss of human lives.

Thus, Ukraine supported by its Western allies does not rule out a military operation against Belarus in the future. The goal of such potential operation is to drive it out of the war and transform Belarus into a friendly state that does not pose a threat from the north and blocks Russia's use of its territory for aggression against third countries. The interests of Ukraine and other neighboring EU and NATO member states, as well as the United States, largely converge on this point. Therefore, Ukraine's transfer of military operations to the territory of its adversaries (Belarus and Russia) with the support of the Ramstein Coalition is not so much due to the presence in the Belarusian national units in the AFU who oppose the current Belarusian authorities and are ready to conduct combat operations in the future on the territory of Belarus. This scenario is due to the very logic of the Russia-Ukraine conflict which implies the restoration of the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders and the defeat of its enemies on their own territory, and to the emerging geopolitical dimension of the war.

After Ukraine not only withstood the onslaught of a swift Russian invasion in the first days and weeks, contrary to the predictions of Western intelligence, but also launched an effective counteroffensive, the Russia-Ukraine War turned from a lost battle into an opportunity for the United States and

²⁰ This diplomatic intervention was part of the French intelligence operation codenamed "Alicia" aimed at neutralizing Belarus' direct involvement in the war against Ukraine <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2022/03/07/alicia-the-french-operation-that-neutralised-lukashenko,109738322-art>.

²¹ The essence of the deal between Kyiv and Minsk mediated by Paris was probably as follows: as long as the Belarusian armed forces are not directly involved in Russian military aggression against Ukraine, the Ukrainian side refrains from launching missile attacks on Russian and Belarusian facilities on Belarusian territory during the period of Ukraine-Russia negotiations on Belarusian soil. Thus, Minsk was able to gain the status of a negotiation platform for a while, and also got an additional argument in discussion with the Kremlin to explain its avoidance of direct involvement in the conflict and limit it to providing secure deployment to the Russian grouping on the territory of Belarus // <https://t.me/forstrategy/139>.

Western allies to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia. Although there is currently no consensus in the US Administration as to how severe a strategic defeat should be inflicted on Russia²², Washington clearly needs to limit its ability to wage war in Europe in the future which requires undermining its sphere of influence in the region. Belarus is at the very epicenter of this geopolitical confrontation because its territory is crucial for Russia's projection of its military power in the western strategic direction.

These regional geopolitical consequences of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine have already manifested themselves in the expansion of NATO northward with accession of Finland and Sweden, as well as the prospect of acceleration of the European integration for Ukraine, Moldova and, conditionally, Georgia. Despite the fact that the West continues to increase sanctions pressure and deepen the isolation of the Belarusian authorities, it does not give up its geopolitical rivalry with Russia for Belarus as it becomes crucial for achieving the Kremlin's strategic defeat.

It is no coincidence that US President Joe Biden said that a Russian invasion of Ukraine threatens chaos in Europe and European countries could face the fate of Belarus whose territory is freely used by Russian troops for aggression. Thus, the current position and role of Belarus pose a threat to the United States and its allies.

At the same time, there are intensive discussions on the need to include free Belarus in the anti-Putin coalition as it is crucial for defeating Russia in its war with Ukraine. In this geopolitical scenario, Belarus is so far a weak, but symbolically a key member of the anti-Putin coalition²³. The main proponents of inclusion of Belarus into the anti-Putin coalition are Poland and Ukraine, with the tacit support of some Western elites, primarily the United Kingdom and the United States. The promotion of the European perspective for Belarus by the centers of the Belarusian democratic opposition in exile also contributes to Belarus' turning into an object of intense geopolitical confrontation.

The adoption of the Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022 by the US Congress and its approval by the administration of US President Joseph Biden, as well as the creation of a global pro-Ukrainian coalition in Ramstein for a long-term response to Russian aggression was a turning point in the war greatly increasing the chances of Ukrainian victory and increasing the probability of Russia's strategic defeat which even Russian military strategists and the intelligence and security community behind them had warned about shortly before the start of the conflict²⁴. To administer the lend-lease,

²² Some representatives of the US intelligence community and the White House are in favor of striking a deal with Russia by dividing Ukraine into two parts (pro-Western and pro-Russian) based on the experience of the Korean War in the 1940s-1950s. Former commander-in-chief of the Joint Forces in Europe James Stavridis predicts that the conflict between Ukraine and Russia will follow the Korean scenario. The war in Ukraine may end in 4-6 months with a "frozen conflict", with the new status quo after the end of hostilities possibly being close to the outcome of the Korean War // <https://www.businessinsider.com/nato-commander-stavridis-ukraine-russia-war-frozen-korean-war-putin-2022-5>.

²³ The Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza published an article by Paweł Kowal, MP of the Polish Sejm from the "Civic Coalition" and deputy to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Commission, entitled "Include Free Belarus in the anti-Putin coalition". Quote: We are looking for allies on other continents while anti-Lukashenka Belarus remains a forgotten asset of the West in its war with Putin // <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,28589458,wlaczmy-wolna-bialorus-do-koalicji.html>

²⁴ For example, Colonel Mikhail Khodoryonok, former commander of the 1st direction group of the 1st Directorate of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, pointed not only to the quantitative and qualitative insufficiency of the Russian Armed Forces for a successful military campaign against Ukraine, but even predicted the reincarnation of Lend-Lease, along the World War II model, by the US and NATO to support Ukraine. See: Predictions of bloodthirsty political scientists. Of rapturous hawks and hurried cuckoos // https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2022-02-03/3_1175_donbass.html Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, former head of the Main Directorate for International Military Cooperation of the Russian Defense

the USA is creating a special operational command that will work exclusively in the Ukrainian (and probably, in the future, Belarusian) direction as part of an as yet unnamed operation designed to last at least until 2024.

By the end of 2022 or mid-2023, Ukraine will have set the stage for a strategic counteroffensive supported by the Ramstein Coalition to restore territorial integrity. By that time it will have one of the most combat-ready armies in the world, numbering up to 1 million people, replete with modern weapons and military and special equipment, including high-precision weapon systems capable of striking infrastructure facilities and troops in operational depth, as well as having at its disposal a special operations corps²⁵ which conducts aggressive offensive subversive campaigns on the front lines and behind enemy lines. It would be naïve to believe that the Ukrainian side would give up plans to carry out a kind of act of retribution for the betrayal that the Belarusian leadership committed, according to Kyiv, in February 2022 violating the security guarantees given back in 2014²⁶.

The Kremlin will inevitably consider such developments, as well as the prospect of strategic defeat in this war, as an existential threat to the very existence of Russia as a state and to the political regime ruling this country. This scenario significantly increases the risk of the Kremlin launching tactical nuclear strikes against Ukrainian positions and Ukrainian cities as part of the 'escalation for de-escalation' concept²⁷, especially if hostilities are transferred to Russian territory and Crimea. Russia would thus seek to reverse the unfavorable evolution of the conflict and force Kyiv and Western capitals to negotiate on Kremlin's terms. However, it also seems almost inevitable that this scenario would not provide the Russian leadership with a quick victory in the war against Ukraine, but would lead to increased military and other assistance to Kyiv from the international community. It will also inevitably become a trigger for the United States and other allies in the Ramstein Coalition (supported by much of the international community) to enter into direct military confrontation in Ukraine, as well as expand the conflict zone all the way to an open military clash with Russia and Belarus²⁸. At the same time, this scenario would trigger a chain of irreversible political processes inside Russia that would lead to the removal of the ruling regime from power.

The implementation of such an apocalyptic scenario automatically transforms Belarus into a

Ministry, also emphasized that Russia's use of military force against Ukraine would not only be a grave crime, but would also call into question the existence of Russia itself as a state. See: Appeal of the All-Russian Officers' Assembly to the President and citizens of the Russian Federation // http://www.ooc.su/news/obrashhenie_obshherossijskogo_oficerskogo_sobraniya_k_prezidentu_i_grazhdanam_rossijskoj_federacii/2022-01-31-79.

²⁵ Retired Major General Mike Repass, former commander of US Special Operations Command Europe, believes that the US and its allies should create a "Ukrainian strategic force" consisting of five brigades of up to 40,000 soldiers capable of conducting offensive operations // <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/04/opinions/bergen-repass-ukraine-interview/index.html>.

²⁶ Not only did the Belarusian side fail to prevent Russian troops from freely using Belarusian territory for an invasion, but it also failed to give 24 hours' notice of the impending invasion, as agreed in February 2014 between the Belarusian and Ukrainian leaders.

²⁷ On the use of nuclear weapons to de-escalate hostilities // <http://militaryarticle.ru/zarubezhnoe-voennoe-obozenie/1999-zvo/8995-o-primenenii-jadernogo-oruzhija-dlja-dejeskalacii>.

²⁸ Nuclear escalation by Russia in the conflict with Ukraine has become a standard scenario in simulation games. The US and some other Western allies have been working on formulating responses to such a scenario, ranging from intensifying supplies of military and technical assistance to Ukraine, to entering its territory in a war against Russia, to retaliatory nuclear or conventional (non-nuclear) strikes against both Russia and its allies, including Belarus or Syria where Russian troops are deployed, as part of the "horizontal escalation" concept. In any case, it follows from the results of these simulations that a direct military response from Western allies will be formulated in one form or another if the Kremlin decides to give Ukraine a doomsday. This will bring Russia's strategic defeat even closer.

convenient potential first target for the United States/NATO in case of a possible nuclear escalation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict²⁹. According to scenarios from the Pentagon's 2019-2021 strategic simulation games, Belarus would represent a convenient target for a strike against Russian troops in Belarus in case Moscow uses nuclear weapons against Europe (including Ukraine). This choice of target, according to US strategists, will avoid a sharp escalation and leave room for a resumption of negotiations with Moscow³⁰. The Kremlin, in turn, taking into account the results of these simulations, assumes the possibility of a tactical nuclear strike on facilities in Ukraine from the territory or airspace of Belarus. The use of Belarusian territory and airspace for tactical nuclear strikes is considered by the Kremlin as a way to minimize the risks of retaliatory strikes on Russian territory in case the United States/NATO decides to respond. In this case, these decisions, as in the case of the February 24 invasion, will be unilateral, the Belarusian side will not be notified by the Kremlin beforehand, but will have to face the totality of dramatic consequences of this move.

Thus, for the Kremlin, Belarus serves not only as a springboard for an offensive to the south and west, but also as a buffer territory designed to contain the spread of hostilities to the Russian territory or 'cover' it from a retaliatory nuclear missile strike by the United States and its allies in the event of the use of weapons of mass destruction against Ukraine. Belarus, in turn, risks turning into a new theater of hostilities which Russia is unlikely to be able to maintain control over and which the Kremlin has neither the resources nor the desire to defend if the Russia-Ukraine military conflict is further escalated to the level of a regional war³¹. Moreover, by the end of 2022 - beginning of 2023 the Russian Armed Forces will face a deficit of artillery ammunition, the exhaustion of high-precision and missile weaponry, service wear of artillery barrels, and a shortage of armored vehicles. Due to its technological dependence on European suppliers and Western sanctions, Russia will not be able to continue full industrial production of weapons and replenish its arms stocks that are being spent at high speed³².

Thus, by early 2023 the war will call into question the very ability of the Russian Armed Forces to defend the Russian territory from the transfer of hostilities to it without announcing mass mobilization and the use of nuclear weapons, not to mention ensuring the effective defense of its allies, including Belarus. However, neither mass mobilization in Russia nor the use of nuclear weapons can reverse the course of the war in favor of the Kremlin whereas they are fraught with destabilizing the domestic political situation inside Russia³³.

The significant reduction in the military presence of Russian troops on the territory of Belarus in recent months (compared to their numbers at the beginning of the war) was a partial illustration of this trend. Although in the future the Kremlin may again use the territory of Belarus for a new raid against Ukraine

²⁹ For example, one of the command post exercises that took place back during the Barack Obama administration assumed that Russia launches a nuclear strike on targets in Europe as part of the "escalation for de-escalation" doctrine // t.me/forstrategy/47.

³⁰ The Senseless Danger of the Military's New "Low-Yield" Nuclear Warhead // <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/02/low-yield-warhead-nuclear-weapons-navy-trident-submarines.html>.

³¹ Thus, facing a technologically advanced enemy during the Second Karabakh War in the fall of 2020 in the form of Azerbaijan-Turkey coalition, Russia chose not to provide military support to its ally Armenia. See: Russia's Karabakh Gambit: Forcing an Ally to Surrender // <https://forstrategy.org/ru/posts/20201119>.

³² Goodbye, weapons! By the end of the year Russia will be left almost without shells, artillery and armored vehicles // <https://theins.ru/politika/254514>.

³³ In addition to the political risks, mass mobilization looks odd against the backdrop of the current demographic situation in Russia. Besides, the country lacks sufficient armored vehicles to equip the mobilized units. Both factors will prevent the deployment of an adequate number of new ground formations that could only be effective when they rely on the use of thousands of tanks and many thousands of armored fighting vehicles of existing models.

in order to constrain the AFU's grouping of forces and assets in the north to prevent their participation in a strategic counteroffensive in the east and south, the presence of a new Russian invasion corps in Belarus will be unable to ensure the country's security as the Ukrainian side receives long-range artillery and missile systems from its Ramstein Coalition allies.

One of the Kremlin's main motives for using Belarusian territory and airspace for missile and bomb attacks is to provoke a retaliatory missile strike by Ukraine against Belarusian military infrastructure in places where Russian troops are deployed. From the point of view of the Kremlin strategists, such a retaliatory missile strike should facilitate the entry of the Belarusian Armed Forces into direct military action against Ukraine. However, for the time being, the Ukrainian side will refrain from such steps. This is due to the lack of necessary military capabilities. But as soon as the end of 2022 - early 2023 Kyiv may have enough means to deliver regular strikes against the Russian troops in Belarus. There is a possibility that by this time Ukraine and its Western allies will be ready to move military action to the territory of Belarus, at least to places where Russian troops are deployed.

Thus, the risks of the transfer of hostilities from Ukraine and its Western allies to the territory of Belarus arise under the following conditions:

- Russian troops remain in Belarus and use its territory and airspace for missile and bomb strikes against Ukraine;
- the Kremlin's intends to use Belarusian territory for a new 'march on Kyiv' in order to restrain the AFU in the north and divert forces and funds intended for a strategic counteroffensive in the south and east;
- the Kremlin forces the Belarusian side to take part in direct military action against Ukraine on Russia's side;
- the Armed Forces of Belarus enter the war against Ukraine as a response to counterattacks by the AFU provoked by Russian missile and bomb strikes from the territory of Belarus;
- Russia intends to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus and use its territory and airspace for a tactical nuclear strike against Ukraine and/or NATO member states.

If these conditions are met, a transfer of hostilities to Belarus on behalf of Ukraine and its allies in the Ramstein Coalition becomes virtually inevitable. It will be virtually impossible for Belarus to survive in such an encounter.

To avoid such a scenario, official Minsk should ensure that Russian troops stop using Belarusian territory for aggression against Ukraine and withdraw from the country, and enter into peace talks with Ukraine and its partners.

Otherwise, Russia will not be able and/or willing to provide any military support (as was the case with Armenia during the Second Karabakh War in autumn 2020 or the aggravation of the crisis in September this year) if Belarus faces military threat both from Ukraine and its Western allies. The latter are actively preparing for the prospect of the Russia-Ukraine war evolving into a regional war on the territory between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea in 2023.

This is evidenced by the results of the NATO Madrid Summit which identified Russia and indirectly Belarus as the most significant and direct threat to the security of allies, peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region³⁴. In the final communiqué, the leaders of the member states of the Alliance condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine and, among other things, called on Belarus to end its

³⁴ "Moscow's military build-up, including in the Baltic, Black Sea and Mediterranean regions, along with military integration with Belarus, challenges our security and interests" // https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf.

complicity in this aggression³⁵. In response to this strategic threat, the Alliance has taken a number of politico-military measures. First of all, it is the decision to create a new model of organization of the armed forces of the alliance by increasing the rapid deployment force (RDF) to 300,000 troops. The eastern flank of NATO, where there is only one possible enemy, Russia, is named as the most important one. Here in the Baltic States and Poland, NATO plans to create long term stores of heavy weapons and military equipment. It is there that eight (originally four) battalion tactical groups have already been deployed. They are planned to be increased to the level of brigades³⁶.

If the plans approved in Madrid are brought to life, the command of the Alliance will have an RDF that will exceed the number of all Russian ground troops as foreign experts estimate it.

Thus, the measures taken show that the US and NATO are preparing for the transformation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict into a regional war on the territory between the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea.

Gray Zone or 'European Hong Kong'?

Despite the fact that the Russia-Ukraine war is now in its eighth month, contrary to the original plans for a 'lightning war' in 3-5 days, the Russian leadership still has not abandoned its original goals of dismantling Ukraine as a nation state. Unable to achieve a decisive breakthrough in its favor with military means due to high casualties and losses of military equipment, the Kremlin is relying on the so-called war of attrition. This war of attrition is waged as much against Ukraine as it is against its allies in the West. It is based on the expectation that both Kyiv and the Western capitals will be exhausted due to the negative global economic, political and humanitarian consequences of this war (energy, food, migration, domestic political crises, etc.). In turn, according to the Kremlin strategists, such an outcome suggests that Ukraine will be left alone vis-a-vis Russia which will eventually lead to its downfall in the absence of Western economic and military aid and will force Kyiv and Western capitals to accept Russia's conditions.

However, recent events indicate not only that Ukraine and its allies are ready for such a confrontation, but also that they themselves intend to impose on Russia a strategy of attrition. It is not unlike the one the West used against the USSR during the Cold War which eventually led to a strategic defeat and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The West perceives Belarus as one of the targets in this strategy, although it can be dealt with a certain delay. This strategy involves limiting socio-economic and technological development, imposing an arms race and a costly conflict against Ukraine, and provoking a collapse in Russia's energy prices that would prevent the Kremlin from continuing to finance the war with Ukraine.

The implementation of this strategy has already manifested itself in a number of initiatives:

- the decision to increase the NATO Rapid Deployment Force from 40,000 to 300,000 (in the 1960s, the Mobile Forces of NATO Allied Command Europe were created to deter Soviet expansionism);
- imposing on the Russian Federation a costly conflict in Ukraine (similar to the failed Afghan

³⁵ Madrid Summit Declaration // https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm.

³⁶The current RDF should be ready to go into battle 15 days after receiving the order. Now the task is as follows: over 100,000 should be combat-ready within ten days, another 200,000 within 10 days to a month. And half a million - in time from a month to six months. NATO documents explicitly stated that from now on the troops will be trained for combat operations in specific regions. See Cold War of Attrition. What the decisions of the NATO summit mean for Russia // <https://republic.ru/posts/104344>.

campaign of the Soviet troops) and an arms race through the creation of the NATO Innovation Fund (one may recall Reagan's Star Wars program)³⁷;

- in attempts to limit Russia's revenues from energy sales (US pressure on Saudi Arabia to increase oil production brought down oil prices by half in the 1980s, now the G7 is preparing to introduce a price cap on oil and gas prices, with the full support of China and India);
- in sectoral sanctions and a technological embargo designed to curb Russia's economic and industrial development (in 1949, the US and Western allies created the Coordinating Committee on Export Controls, better known as CoCom, for this purpose)³⁸.

Unlike the USSR, Russia is not an independent technological center capable of creating closed-cycle production. The Russian leadership has failed most of the import substitution programs announced in 2014 with the exception of some areas in the agriculture sector³⁹. And the whole strategy of import substitution has been reduced only to partial substitution of the source of imports from Western to non-Western states⁴⁰. This was despite the fact that external conditions and sanctions regimes have remained more favorable for Russia over the past eight years than they are now. At the same time, China itself, on which the Russian side pins great hopes in implementing import-substitution programs, is not eager to accelerate the supply of technological equipment, focusing on the need to

³⁷Attempting to provide an adequate response to the NATO military build-up would require putting the Russian economy on mobilization mode to produce the necessary amount of weapons and military equipment to make up for its losses. In Madrid, NATO decided to an Innovation Fund which will invest a billion euros over the next 15 years in startups that focus on dual-use technologies. Finally, Reagan's "Star Wars" program opened up a new, ultra-expensive area of the arms race - the development of missile defense systems and the means to overcome them. All of this combined with the desire to produce a maximum number of armaments led ultimately to the collapse of the fundamentally inefficient Soviet economy.

³⁸ Restrictions on socioeconomic development of Russia and Belarus through sectoral sanctions and technological embargoes are largely a reincarnation of the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (COCOM) established at the initiative of the United States in 1949 to oversee the supply of goods and technology by Western countries to the USSR and its allies and to implement their "controlled technology gap" strategy. COCOM included 17 countries: USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, Great Britain, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Turkey. Six other states cooperated with the committee without being members: Austria, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, and Switzerland. COCOM maintained three lists of goods and technologies: one with a total export ban, one with limited exports, and one without export restrictions but with end-use controls. Any member of the committee could veto a sale proposed by another member of the committee. COCOM did not cease operations until 1994.

³⁹ By 2015, the Russian government had developed and approved more than 20 import substitution programs. They aimed to sharply reduce the share of imports in engineering, machine tools, light industry, pharmaceuticals and other industries by 2020-2021. During 2015-2020, the Russian government allocated almost 3 trillion rubles for import substitution in industry. But there was no official summing up of the results of import substitution programs for the first five-year period. At the end of 2019, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, instead of summarizing the preliminary results of the program, "synchronized" its timeline with the national project to develop exports, and in fact - simply moved the timeline to 2024. The Russian government has not presented any new document updating import substitution targets since the war with Ukraine started. The last comprehensive assessment of effectiveness of import substitution for the five years of this policy came in 2019 authored from the Center for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-Term Forecasting (CMASTF) founded in 2000 by economist Andrei Belousov who has served as First Deputy Prime Minister since 2018. In terms of import substitution, there was virtually no progress during this period: essentially, the policy was indeed implemented only in the manufacturing industry (but not the economy as a whole) and only for a short period in 2014-2015. Overall, from 2015 to 2019, the ratio of imports to value added remained virtually unchanged. See: "In the spirit of Juche ideas". Russia has spent eight years and three trillion on import substitution: what has been achieved? // <https://thebell.io/v-dukhe-idey-chuchkhe-rossiya-potrtila-na-importozameshchenie-8-let-i-tri-trilliona-chego-udalos-dobitsya>.

⁴⁰ Klishas says import substitution program fails // <https://www.vedomosti.ru/economics/news/2022/05/19/922658-klishas-provale-programmi-importozamesheniya>.

facilitate the export of raw materials from the Russian Far East⁴¹.

Characteristically, the first decisions taken under the new import substitution strategy (after the start of the war with Ukraine) were aimed at organizing 'parallel imports', that is, circumventing the Western technological embargo, rather than creating Russia's own production capabilities. However, in the best case scenario, according to analysts of the Central Bank of Russia, Russia's technological isolation will only lead to massive use of outdated technology ('reverse industrialization') resulting in production of goods that will be of lower quality and more expensive than imported analogues⁴². In addition, restrictions on technology imports will reduce productivity in Russia: some activities will simply become impossible (for example, production of microprocessors), and a significant part of investment will be aimed not at improving efficiency, but at replacing the technologies in use to analogues that are not subject to sanctions.

Optimistically, the technological embargo will reduce the potential rate of economic growth of the Russian Federation from the previous 1.5-2% per year to 0-1% in the medium term, according to estimates by the Russian analytical credit rating agency ACRA⁴³. Technological isolation in general and reverse industrialization in particular will lead to a decline in the standard of living of Russian society: machinery, cars, building materials, and tetrapack milk will either be in short supply or become unaffordable for most Russians because of their high prices. A bright illustration of the critical situation with the sovereign technological base were the 'aviation cannibalism', the decline in car production, the unprecedented outflow of personnel and brain drain from high-tech industries, as well as the large-scale growth of parallel imports of high-tech and industrial products through intermediary countries, etc.

In the 'stress' scenario, associated with the intensification of sanctions pressure, strengthening of the transport and logistics blockade and the imposition of an embargo on Russian energy resources in one form or another, the Russian economy will return to the pre-war level of 2021 only by 2030 or even later⁴⁴.

Similar scenarios await the Belarusian economy, given that Belarus faces similar sanctions measures from the West, but with a certain delay, and has a more modest ability to mitigate the sanctions' effects.

Even in the 'pre-crisis times', the gap in well-being between Belarus and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was growing rapidly. With a GDP growth rate of 2% per year (the average growth rate over the past 12 years), it would take Belarus more than 250 years to catch up with Poland and indefinite time to catch up with the rest of the countries in the region. It would take more than 70 years to catch up with the Czech Republic with Belarus' GDP growth of 3% a year, about 50 years to catch up with Latvia, more than 60 years to catch up with Lithuania, and about 40 years to catch up with Poland. Even with 5% growth in the country's GDP, the gap will still be significant. For example, it would take Belarus 22 years to reach the current level of life of the Czech Republic, 14 years for

⁴¹ Machine tools do not go to meet the oil // <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5548724>.

⁴² What the trends tell us. Macroeconomics and Markets Bulletin of the Research and Forecasting Department of the Bank of Russia (April 2022) // https://www.cbr.ru/Collection/Collection/File/40953/bulletin_22-02.pdf.

⁴³ How the sanctions against Russia work, how patriotic channels take over Telegram, and the main thing about the military action of the week // <https://thebell.io/kak-rabotayut-sanktsii-protiv-rossii-kak-patrioticheskie-kanaly-zahvatyvayut-telegram-i-glavnoe-o-boevyh-dejstviyah-za-nedelyu>

⁴⁴ Russia Privately Warns of Deep and Prolonged Economic Damage // <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-05/russia-risks-bigger-longer-sanctions-hit-internal-report-warns>.

Poland and Latvia, and 19 years for Lithuania.

This is not to mention the states of the Asia-Pacific region where the center of the world system is shifting. Belarus need an annual 6-7 percent GDP growth over the next ten years. In this case, Belarus would be able to catch up with living standards Central and Eastern European countries within this period of time⁴⁵.

However, under the current conditions of isolation from many foreign markets, lack of access to modern technology and sources of capital, as well as increasing risks of military action on its territory, Belarus is doomed to degradation and transformation into a gray area in the center of Europe. It is obvious that Russia cannot replace all of Belarus' broken trade, economic and technological ties with the outside world and ensure peaceful and sustainable development of Belarus.

Thus, the West is no longer afraid of an escalation in the confrontation with Russia and has guaranteed all-round support for Ukraine. The conflict between Russia and the West is being institutionalized. At the same time, both Ukraine and its allies in the Ramstein coalition are preparing for the scenario of the transformation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict into a regional war with the expansion of hostilities to the region between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. Belarus' inability to withdraw from the war is fraught with losing its own statehood, turning into a gray area and being displaced to the periphery of world development. Meanwhile, Ukraine is already ensuring its place in the new post-war regional geo-economic and geopolitical order, including accelerated prospects for European integration, implementation of a large-scale post-conflict reconstruction plan (Marshall Plan for Ukraine) and inclusion in a new system of regional security⁴⁶ based on a system of bilateral and multilateral guarantees, and in the future - NATO membership.

Belarus still has an opportunity to reverse the adverse trends affecting its post-conflict prospects, to withstand geopolitical shocks and ensure its future development and prosperity. For this purpose, the Belarusian side needs to return to the practical implementation of the concept of 'donor of regional security and stability' and 'integration of integrations' taking into account the emerging post-conflict geopolitical realities in the region, including the disintegration of the post-Soviet space and the inevitable crisis of Eurasian integration. It involves pairing China's Belt and Road initiative with prospects for deeper economic integration with the EU. The transformation of Belarus into an industrial and logistics hub within the Belt and Road Initiative in Eastern Europe economically and infrastructurally integrated into European and other Western markets, will allow Belarus to become a kind of 'European Hong Kong' even despite the fact that the main focus in development of the Belt and Road Initiative along the China-Europe route now shifts from the Eurasian route via Russia and Belarus to the southern (Trans-Caspian) route. Obviously, against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Kazakhstan become another active participant in Eurasian integration. This country is now turning into Belarus's main partner in linking the Belt and Road Initiative and European integration in the post-Soviet space, and so do other states located along this route (Central Asian, Eastern and Central European states, Turkey, Azerbaijan, etc.).

Belarus clearly needs to investigate what domestic actors opposed the deepening of strategic cooperation between Beijing and Minsk, and why Belarus failed to perform as an industrial and logistics hub on the Belt and Road during the favorable period between 2015 and 2020. But this could be done in a separate study. However, it is clear that the series of events following the August 2020 presidential election, starting with the political crisis, the Western sanctions pressure that followed,

⁴⁵ How to bring back economic growth? // <https://beroc.org/media/press/kak-vernut-rost-ekonomiki/>.

⁴⁶ See proposals of the Ermak-Rasmussen Group on International Security Guarantees for Ukraine // https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/i-files-storage/01/15/93/cf0b512b41823b01f15fa24a1325edf4_1663050954.pdf.

the logistical blockade due to the forced landing of the Ryanair plane and the migration crisis and, finally, the Russia-Ukraine war make the prospect of Belarus' further 'no change' development scenario more than gloomy.

It is worth noting that the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, Russia's early withdrawal from the war with Ukraine, and the beginning of deep domestic reforms in Russia are equally in Russia's long-term national interest as they let the country return to peaceful development. Given the collapse of the current system of arms control and strategic stability in Europe, Moscow's hypothetical physical control over Ukrainian territory would not solve any of the country's national security issues, but would only create new threats and challenges for it. At the same time, attempts to achieve such control through aggression cost Russia enormous human and material resources, and the threat of international isolation dramatically deteriorates the country's already complicated development prospects. Therefore, Russia's early withdrawal from the war, even at the cost of admitting a military defeat in Ukraine, could have positive consequences for its development. Such development would be equally promising for the bilateral relations between Belarus and Russia, allowing the positive aspects of economic integration between the two countries to be preserved in the future.

A strategy for escaping the 'co-aggressor' trap

Three existential crises in Belarus and their interdependence

Currently, Belarus is facing three crises which together pose a threat to the very existence of the Belarusian state.

The first crisis is a political crisis that has lasted since 2020. As a result of numerous mistakes of the Belarusian leadership and interference of the Russian Federation in the presidential election of 2020, the Belarusian authorities lost the support of a significant part of Belarusian society. Ignoring the position of these people led to mass protests and forced the authorities to bet on repressive domestic policies. These policies not only undermine the functionality of the state, make it impossible to establish the rule of law, and squeeze qualified and productive workforce out of the country, but also constantly generate more splits in society and gives rise to communities of discontent in the country, thereby creating new grounds for expanding the domain of repression. This policy is a policy of self-destruction of Belarus and, due to the presence of two other crises, can not lead to a resolution of the political crisis in Belarus. As far as one can judge, the Belarusian authorities are well aware of this circumstance, and therefore make attempts, while continuing repressions, to normalize domestic politics on their own terms, by means of the so-called political amnesty announced for the 'National Unity Day' (September 17, 2022), implementing political reforms, and so on. However, in our view, the attempt to 'solve' the political crisis by suppressing and 'cutting off' the discontented part of society from 'the rest of Belarus' has limited prospects.

The second crisis is the crisis of the international role and agency of Belarus. In an attempt to gain the favor of the Kremlin, the Belarusian leadership made yet another 'geopolitical U-turn' in 2020 replacing accusations of election interference against Russia with absurd and groundless accusations against the West, not only political but also geopolitical in nature. No substantiation of these accusations, despite numerous promises, has ever been presented to the Belarusian society. After August 2020, the Belarusian leadership has consistently and solely by its own will (or by coercion from the Kremlin, given its interference in the 2020 presidential election in Belarus) destroyed its international positions, trying to play an escalation game in relations with the EU, the US and other Western partners. In the end, by abandoning its role as a donor of stability and security, Belarus ended up in the co-aggressor trap.

The third crisis is an economic crisis and a crisis of development prospects. The losses from the sanctions imposed on Belarus are not even close to being compensated by the increased opportunities for Belarusian exporters in the Russian market due to restricted competition there. The Belarusian economy, even in alliance with Russia, is not technologically self-sufficient and will not be able to maintain or increase its technological level under the current or additional sanctions. Besides, the sanctions and the accompanying economic shocks exacerbate the previously serious problems and imbalances in the Belarusian economy.

In existing real-world conditions, these three crises are interrelated, and their resolution is interdependent. Any strategy of both the Belarusian side (the Belarusian authorities, the opposition, other forces) and external actors in relation to Belarus will be focused, in one way or another, on the resolution and/or management of these crises. Accordingly, in these circumstances, the fundamental national interests of the Republic of Belarus are to:

- resolve the political crisis, restore and expand the functionality of the Belarusian state, overcome or mitigate divisions in Belarusian society, create effective mechanisms for the reproduction of Belarusian statehood, including mechanisms of popular power and political

transition while uncompromisingly safeguarding the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Belarus, ensuring its independence in taking key decisions in foreign and domestic policy;

- restore and expand the foreign policy capabilities of Belarus, exclude the use of integration mechanisms in the post-Soviet space to undermine the sovereignty, independence and national interests of Belarus, ensure a peaceful withdrawal of Belarus from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, freeze and lift anti-Belarusian sanctions, normalize and deepen relations between Belarus and Ukraine, the EU and NATO countries, move to equal rights pragmatic cooperation with the Russian Federation, obtain security guarantees for Belarus under the new regional security architecture;
- restore access of the Belarusian economy to all international markets and to key donors of advanced technologies and capital, open the way for safe and voluntary return to Belarus of all Belarusians who left the country for political reasons in 2020-2022, elaborate, ensure international support and implement a plan of economic reforms in Belarus to achieve economic growth rates exceeding the world average.

Positions of the parties and their incompatibility

Currently, the Russian side is the only entity that has a coherent strategy with regard to the Republic of Belarus. This strategy was developed before the political crisis of 2020 in Belarus, and the crisis itself was the result of its implementation. This strategy is to deprive Belarus of strategic autonomy from Moscow and turn the country into a 'gray zone' gaining unilateral control over the key assets, foreign and domestic policy of Minsk and providing free access to Belarusian territory for the projection of force in the western strategic direction. Implementing this strategy in 2020, the Russian side resorted to a well-tested scenario of provoking a domestic political crisis in Belarus and its subsequent international isolation (on a smaller scale such scenarios have already been implemented in 2006 and 2010). In contrast to previous crises, in 2020, the Belarusian side could count on the friendly and neutral position of the EU and NATO countries to resist Moscow's pressure. However, the gradual rejection of policies of domestic reforms and normalization of relations with the West in 2017-2019 and the abrupt 'geopolitical U-turn' in August 2020 made eliminated this position. As a result, the Russian side significantly succeeded in implementing its priorities in Belarus dramatically reducing Minsk's strategic autonomy. Moscow did not succeed in getting the Armed Forces of Belarus involved in the war against Ukraine.

The process of normalization of Belarus' relations with the EU and NATO countries in 2014-2016 was based on the fulfillment by the Belarusian side of two basic conditions: 1) implementation of domestic reforms and abstention from mass repressions; 2) non-participation in aggression against Ukraine and prevention of the use of Belarusian territory for any form of aggression against Ukraine or other countries neighboring Belarus. The political crisis of 2020 with its characteristic mass repressions and Lukashenka's 'geopolitical U-turn' were a violation of both mentioned conditions. This was the key reason for the West's change of heart.

Between September 2020 and February 2022, the West's new position included three key demands: 1) an end to political repression and the release of political prisoners; 2) the beginning of a meaningful dialog between the authorities and the opposition and Belarusian society; 3) holding new elections under international observation. As Minsk tried to play the escalation game (the Ryanair incident, attempts to put pressure on the EU through the migration crisis, etc.) other, situational demands were added to these basic ones. Finally, since Belarus fell into the 'co-aggressor trap,' another fundamental demand has been added to them: an end to all forms of Belarus' complicity in the aggression against

Ukraine.

The Belarusian authorities, in turn, still lack a coherent, consistent position on the critical situation in which Belarus finds itself. They deny the domestic political crisis, deny their involvement in the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and downplay (and previously denied) the significance of Western sanctions for the Belarusian economy. At the same time, they maintain a high level of domestic repression (indicating a continuing domestic political crisis), support Russian aggression in their rhetoric and wage an information war against Ukraine (exacerbating their international isolation), call sanctions 'economic genocide' (recognizing their powerful effects) and demand their cancellation without any preconditions. The contradictory position of the Belarusian side stems from its dependence on Moscow and the impossibility for Minsk to openly discuss the international and domestic situation not only with Western partners, but also within Belarus itself.

Since the defeat of Russian troops in northern Ukraine, the Belarusian side has started to show a greater tendency toward multi-vectorism and some caution with regard to Ukraine. However, the lack of a realistic prospect for normalizing relations with Western countries and the dependence on Moscow make this policy inconsistent and deliberately weak, and therefore futile. The Russian side constantly pushes Belarus to further demonstrate geopolitical loyalty which leads to the deepening of its international isolation. This, accordingly, means that forcing Belarus into an initiative offensive against Ukraine is not one of the Kremlin's top immediate priorities. In this matter, it is more interested in provoking a missile and artillery strike by Ukraine on the territory of Belarus (in response to Russian strikes against Ukraine from the territory of Belarus) and the subsequent forced entry of Belarus into the war with a request to deploy a large mass of Russian troops into the territory of Belarus.

The Western sanctions policy of August 2020 - January 2022 against Belarus, as well as 2020 'geopolitical U-turn' of Minsk provoking it, Belarus' anti-Western policy and policy of domestic repressions, were based on a quite specific assessment of geopolitical realities in the region by the parties. On the part of the West, this assessment was reduced to the recognition of Belarus as part of Russia's 'special interests' zone, assuming that Russia tries to ensure its own national security interests and remains a responsible actor capable of negotiating. Accordingly, Western countries did not intend to seriously compete with Russia for Belarus and support Belarus' struggle for independence and sovereignty. On the part of Belarus, this assessment was reduced to assuming a higher priority of cooperation between Russia and the West for these two parties, their reluctance to enter an all-out confrontation, including on the Ukraine issue. As a consequence, Minsk assumed a lack of reliable partners in the EU and NATO which could provide critical support for Belarus in a potential confrontation with Russia should it occur in case of the latter's aggressive actions. Accordingly, at the time of the political crisis, the Belarusian leadership chose the only perceivable available option in these circumstances - to rely on Russia's support in exchange for geopolitical loyalty.

However, developments in Ukraine since February 2022 have made both of these assessments irrelevant. First, Ukraine's heroic resistance to Russian aggression forced the West to change its position and seriously engage in supporting Ukraine and competing with Russia in Eastern Europe. Second, Russia's attack on Ukraine was the result of the victory of aggressive, chauvinistic circles within the Russian elite whose goal is not the security and development of Russia, but the destruction of the West in its former form (including its institutional foundations - the EU, NATO and others), the revision of the existing world order and the radical expansion of Russia's sphere of influence in the western and southern directions. This agenda excludes the very possibility of agreements between the Russian side and the EU and NATO countries (as well as China).

Thus, the geopolitical realities that existed in 2021-2022 have changed significantly, opening up opportunities to normalize relations between Belarus and the West (including Ukraine) on terms

acceptable to all parties. However, the rigidity of the West's position and the lack of a clear position of the Belarusian leadership, including its dependence on Moscow, make it difficult to organize communication between them. As a result, despite the foreign policy and military and political defeat in Ukraine, the Russian side continues to determine the scope and direction of Belarus' foreign policy activities and influence Minsk's communications with the EU, NATO, and specific Western countries, using this influence in its own interests and against the national interests of Belarus.

Roadmap as a way to converge positions

The key obstacle to the normalization of relations between Belarus and the West is the lack of basic trust between the parties and equally, of basic trust between the different 'camps' within Belarusian society. Moreover, this applies not only to Belarus 'in general', but to its specific officials. A number of Belarusian high-ranking officials have irrevocably discredited themselves with statements made on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These individuals indicated that after the completion of the joint exercise on February 20, Russian troops would be completely withdrawn from the territory of Belarus, and also confirmed guarantees of Ukraine's security 72 hours or less before the aggression denying the preparations of Russian troops for an attack on Ukraine. In the political practice of civilized countries, it would have been impossible for these officials to further perform their duties unless their respective statements were a deliberate lie which was intended to provide information cover up for the aggression. In any case, it is no longer possible for the Ukrainian side and its allies to interact with these officials. By and large, the same logic applies to the Western countries' assessment of Lukashenka's role, since he violated the guarantees he gave in 2014-2015 as a condition for the normalization of relations between Belarus and the EU and the United States.

After two years of active sanctions pressure of the West against Belarus, the same is true for the attitude of the Belarusian leadership to the EU and NATO countries, as well as to Ukraine. Under the influence of Russian sources, as well as its own and its closest entourage's attitudes, but most importantly, due to its dependence on Moscow, the Belarusian leadership refuses to analyze rationally Western policies and to search for real points of understanding with the West. This policy only exacerbates the crises that Belarus faces and is fraught with a complete loss of sovereignty, turning the country into a gray area.

In this situation, developing and discussing a roadmap for normalizing relations between Belarus, on the one hand, and Ukraine and Western countries, on the other, taking into account the new geopolitical realities could pave way to overcome mutual distrust. Such a roadmap, representing a sequence of mutually conditional actions by the parties, would make it possible to build and strengthen mutual trust in parallel with the resolution of urgent issues on the current agenda that are relevant to the parties involved. At the same time, officials who have not lost the trust of their counterparties due to the events in Ukraine could be appointed to negotiate on both sides. All parties have sufficient human resources to meet appoint such negotiators.

Below we provide some suggestions that could form the basis of a draft roadmap for the normalization of relations between Belarus and its Western partners including Ukraine. The implementation of these suggestions and the proposed approach as a whole would be most consistent with our understanding of the interests of the Belarusian side, of the Republic of Belarus as an independent sovereign state. In order to remain realistic in our proposals and to take into account the interests of specific participants in the process (that is, on the Belarusian side - the current Belarusian authorities in the state they are in today), we provide 'extreme points' that meet the interests of the relevant participants. One side in the road map is the current Belarusian authorities, and the other side is,

depending on the specific point of the road map, either Ukraine and/or Western states (EU and NATO) and/or the Belarusian opposition and civil society in exile as a legitimate representative of the interests of a significant part of Belarusian society that opposes the current Belarusian authorities.

General principles - ending the war, saving the economy, finding a political settlement

The development, negotiation, adoption and execution of the roadmap are possible only if the parties are committed to the following principles and first steps.

1. The parties are interested in ending the confrontation and moving toward the normalization of relations. Moreover, they are equally interested in this, ready to make mutual concessions and provide guarantees for a positive outcome.
2. The goal of the Republic of Belarus is to withdraw from the war against Ukraine, ensure protection of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belarus, ensure guarantees of its security, create conditions for its peaceful, free and sustainable development. The EU countries, NATO, Ukraine and the Belarusian opposition in exile fully share these goals with respect to Belarus. Belarus' escape from the co-aggressor trap does not imply entering into a conflict with the Russian Federation, and neither side has the right to demand that the Belarusian leadership take such a step.
3. The Republic of Belarus gives unequivocal answers to the fundamental questions outlined above regarding its complicity in Russia's aggression against Ukraine:
 - a. The Belarusian top military and political leadership was not aware of the Kremlin's plans to attack Ukraine and was not involved in the planning of this war.
 - b. The Belarusian side did not provide the Russian side with the territory and infrastructure for military aggression against Ukraine on its own initiative, but was forced to take this step due to political pressure and demands of Moscow without prior consent.
 - c. Russian troops are on the territory of Belarus and are conducting military operations against Ukraine in violation of Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus which prohibits the use of Belarusian territory for aggression, as well as of the UN Charter.
 - d. The Belarusian side does not want to bear further foreign policy and economic costs associated with Russia's aggression against Ukraine and seeks to completely distance itself from this conflict.
 - e. The Belarusian side seeks to return to its role as a donor of stability and security in the postwar period, to receive security guarantees from all neighboring countries, regional states and extra-regional players, and to restore and freely develop economic relations with all neighboring and far off countries and associations and other regional initiatives.
 - f. The Belarusian side is ready to take actions necessary to withdraw from the war as soon as possible to minimize associated costs and losses to the Belarusian state and society, and to prevent the transfer of hostilities to the territory of Belarus, but it seeks the respect of its own national interests, including security interests.
4. Other participants of the negotiations take into account the official position of the Belarusian side set out in paragraph 3, and proceed from Minsk's commitment to this position as long as the actions and statements of the Belarusian side (during the discussion of the road map or during its implementation) do not give reasons to doubt this commitment. In turn, the Belarusian authorities also act on the presumption of good faith of other negotiating parties and sincerity of their official position, assessments and intentions and recognize, taking into account the events of 2020-2022, the legitimacy of interests of foreign partners regarding stable and predictable political and economic development of Belarus.

5. The parties appoint negotiators by mutual agreement (provided there are no objections from all negotiating partners). No change of negotiators is allowed, except in case of death or serious illness of one of them. In this case, the new negotiator begins work in the same manner, that is, with the consent of all parties to the negotiation.

Stages of implementation

The start of negotiations on a road map for the normalization of relations is a 'zero', preliminary step in the implementation of this road map that could be taken even before it is finalized. Further steps can be implemented in the following order. The roadmap itself is proposed to be an international, legally binding document, signed by representatives of all involved and interested parties.

Ending 'complicity' in Russian aggression against Ukraine, escaping from the co-aggressor trap		
Actions of the Belarusian side	EU, NATO, Ukraine counter-action	Notes, explanations
<p>1. Proclamation of non-involvement of Belarus in the war against Ukraine and restoration in full force of Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus which excludes military aggression from its territory against other states. Proclaiming the creation of an international verification mechanism for the implementation of this declaration.</p>	<p>Abstention from imposing new sanctions against Belarus on any grounds for 120 days and imposing new sanctions for participation in the aggression against Ukraine for the entire period of the verification mechanism.</p>	<p>The Declaration is sent to the UN Secretariat and read out at an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly.</p>
<p>2.1. Denial of practical support for Russian aggression against Ukraine (provision of arms and ammunition, infrastructure).</p> <p>2.2. Enforcing a ban on the use of Belarusian territory for launching Russia's missile strikes against Ukraine (first from the ground and then from the air) in the nearest future.</p>	<p>Freezing sanctions (under the EU's 6th and 7th sanctions packages) imposed against exports from Belarus for its complicity in Russia's aggression against Ukraine and creating a special mechanism to minimize the impact of sanctions on the Belarusian economy.</p>	<p>Creation of a special mechanism to guarantee the commitment of the Belarusian side to its obligations. Part of the funds that the Belarusian side will receive from the resumption of exports resulting from the sanctions freeze is accumulated in a special account under UN control for use at later stages of the roadmap. The share of export revenues to be placed in this special account, as well as the conditions for their use will be decided in the process of negotiations. But the funds made immediately available to Minsk should be sufficient to support the operating activities of state enterprises hit by the sanctions. The implementation of this mechanism with its extension to the 4th and 5th packages of EU sanctions in the future will allow to mitigate sanctions and preserve the share of Belarusian exporters in international markets (see point 9).</p>

<p>3. In case it is impossible to implement paragraph 2.2. due to the position/actions of the Russian side and/or as part of further confidence-building measures, Minsk will initiate the deployment of a permanent joint UN peacekeeping and monitoring mission on the Belarusian-Russian and Belarusian-Ukrainian borders through an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly (since the UN Security Council is unable to effectively perform its functions to maintain peace and security in the region). Peacekeepers from China, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Switzerland, Austria, Finland, Sweden and other states, among others, can take part in this mission.</p>	<p>The peacekeeping and monitoring mission provides monitoring of the situation on both sides of the border (to which the Ukrainian side will give its consent) and thus serves as one of security guarantees for the Republic of Belarus in the implementation of the road map.</p>	<p>If these measures are implemented, critical imports of necessary medicines, medical materials and equipment, and other goods into the Republic of Belarus may resume as part of the freezing of sanctions imposed for complicity in the aggression against Ukraine. However, these measures must be accompanied by monitoring to exclude re-export of the relevant products to the Russian Federation. A violation of the re-export prohibition regime will lead to the resumption of the corresponding import restrictions.</p> <p>The joint UN peacekeeping mission includes a dedicated contingent of the Armed Forces of Belarus as well as contingents from other countries under UN command (the mission commander could be a representative of the PLA PRC peacekeeping forces), will remain on the territory of Belarus until the end of the Russia-Ukraine war, during the post-conflict reconstruction of Ukraine and the transitional period in Belarus (see paragraph 8).</p> <p>The mandate of the peacekeeping mission includes enforcement of Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus in full force and effect on the Belarusian territory.</p>
<p>4. Simultaneously with point 1 Belarusian leadership initiates peace negotiations with Ukraine with mediation of the UN and Turkey. These negotiations should focus on Belarus' withdrawal from the war, as well as mutual security and non-aggression guarantees between Belarus and Ukraine at the time of negotiations and after their completion in the form of a peace agreement.</p>	<p>Ukraine undertakes not to transfer military actions and not to commit acts of military aggression against Belarus in the future.</p>	<p>The goal of these negotiations should also be to reduce the amount of reparations and contributions imposed by the Ukrainian side on Belarus, and ideally to cancel them in return for providing additional good services for Ukraine.</p>
<p>5. Simultaneously with point 4, Belarus starts a series of negotiations with the states in the Ramstein coalition and their friendly countries</p>	<p>The Ramstein coalition, above all the NATO bloc, undertakes to refrain from transferring military action to the territory of Belarus during the negotiations and after their</p>	<p>While Ukraine has practically secured its place in the new regional geoeconomic and geopolitical order (prospects for deeper integration with the EU, security guarantees from allies) emerging against the background of the Russia-Ukraine</p>

with the mediation of the UN and Switzerland on the provision of security guarantees for Belarus and modalities for future cooperation after the end of the Russian-Ukrainian War, in the case of Belarus' fulfillment of points 1-4.	completion. Ukraine and its allies in the Ramstein coalition abandon the idea of establishing an international tribunal against Belarus for complicity in military aggression against Ukraine.	war, Belarus risks turning into a gray area. A return to the concept of Belarus as an industrial and logistics hub in Central Europe as part of the policy of 'integration of integrations' and the 'Belt and Road' initiative with deep institutional integration into the European market would help it avoid this gloomy prospect.
6. Belarusian governments sets out the initiative to deploy a UN humanitarian hub on the territory of Belarus for the needs of Ukraine.	The initiative implies restoring foreign country's logistical links and trade and economic cooperation with Belarus for Ukraine's humanitarian needs.	This initiative will allow Belarus to obtain a number of exemptions from the sanctions regimes imposed before the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as begin to restore access to the Ukrainian market.
Political settlement		
7. The cessation of new detentions and trials against opponents of the government.	The unfreezing of diplomatic relations and contacts.	This step will send a signal about the restoration of direct channels of communication with Western states.
8. The declaration of a transitional period and the introduction of a special state of emergency until 2025-2027 (transitional period, the timeframe is to be negotiated by key stakeholders).	Western countries refuse to impose new economic sanctions for the duration of the special state of emergency (subject to clause 7, which is verified by a special monitoring mission) and lift sanctions concerning the work of international financial development institutions (IMF, EIB, EBRD, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, etc.).	Although economic sanctions are still in effect, access to development financial instruments will partially reduce their burden and restructure the economy to meet the needs of a new stage of development. Development funds are under international control, and the list of projects is determined on the basis of the most critical infrastructure needs. During the special state of emergency, spontaneous strikes, rallies, demonstrations and meetings are banned.
9. Simultaneously with point 8, the Belarusian leadership proclaims a large-scale political amnesty for opponents convicted between 2020 and 2022, as well as those in political exile.	Western nations canceling personal sanctions, extend the special mechanism to minimize the effects of sanctions (see comments on point 2.1) to other sanctioned sectors of the economy (under the 4th and 5th sanctions packages) imposed before the start of the Russia-Ukraine war due to the political crisis.	Overcoming division and restoring trust in society are the first steps toward a return to normality. A large-scale political amnesty applies to opponents of the authorities, both inside and outside Belarus. It is not limited to participants in the events of 2020 - 2022, but further extends to those in political exile from earlier periods. Anti-Belarusian sanctions are in effect, but the sanctioned sectors of the Belarusian economy are covered by a special UN mechanism that distributes export revenues between a special account under UN control and the Belarusian state or enterprises.

<p>10.1. Establishment of a 'group of wise persons' under the auspices of the UN to facilitate dialog between the Belarusian authorities and civil society and the opposition, and to prepare the ground for deepening political reforms in the country.</p> <p>10.2. Establishment of a 'group of friends of Belarus' which could include states that have previously taken various initiatives to resolve the Belarusian political crisis (Austria, Finland, Turkey, Switzerland, Germany, France, USA, etc.), as well as other important partners (China).</p>	<p>Restoration of diplomatic relations to the level of 2020, freezing of personal sanctions against the top leadership of Belarus.</p> <p>Rejection to establish and recognize Belarusian governments in exile.</p> <p>The recognition of Lukashenka as de facto legitimate political leader of Belarus (President of the Republic of Belarus) during the transition period.</p>	<p>The establishment of direct contacts between the top leadership of Belarus and Western partners is a necessary step to begin the process of dialog and normalization of relations with Western countries. Despite the rejection of Western countries to recognize Lukashenka as a legitimate leader, he remains in de facto control of the situation in Belarus, enjoying virtually full authority (except for his inability to guarantee full implementation of Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus). Therefore, the recognition of his status by Western partners after the enforcement of Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, provided that the previous points of the road map are implemented and only for the period of the special state of emergency is a logical and necessary step.</p> <p>Russia joins the 'Panel of the Wise' and the 'group of friends of Belarus' only after it withdraws from the war with and concludes a peace agreement with Ukraine, signed with the legitimate Ukrainian authorities and recognized by the international community.</p>
<p>11. Establishment within Belarus of a Truth, Reconciliation and Political Refugee Repatriation Commission, with the mediation and participation of the UN, the OSCE, 'the Panel of the Wise', and others.</p>	<p>Abstention of Western countries and the opposition from establishing an international tribunal against the Belarusian authorities for the events of 2020 - 2022.</p>	<p>An independent investigation of the causes and actions of the parties (authorities, opposition, civil society) during the political crisis of 2020, as well as - subsequently - the incident with the forced landing of the Ryanair airline, the emergence of the migration crisis on the EU-Belarus border is an important mechanism for understanding the existential disaster in which the Belarusian society and state found themselves. Understanding what happened is important both because of the unprecedented harsh economic sanctions imposed on Belarus by Western countries and because these events undermined the country's further prospects for participation in the Belt and Road Initiative along the China-Europe route.</p> <p>The Truth, Reconciliation and Political Refugee Repatriation Commission can only shed light on the events of 2020-2022 if there is full cooperation and acknowledgement of the mistakes and actions that led to these crises.</p> <p>Testimonies of the parties of their own actions, inactions and misdeeds (crimes) are sent to the Commission and guarantee immunity from further prosecution or rehabilitation (except for crimes against humanity). Refusing to testify</p>

		<p>does not guarantee future prosecution.</p> <p>Lukashenka has permanent immunity and is not covered by the mandate of the Commission.</p>
<p>12.1. Concluding a political settlement agreement between the Belarusian authorities, civil society and the opposition.</p> <p>12.2. Launch of a comprehensive inclusive dialogue between the political opposition/civil society and the Belarusian authorities mediated by the UN, OSCE, and individual states in the 'Friends of Belarus' group on ways to deepen political reform, state development strategy, and parameters for the transit of power in Belarus.</p>	<p>The abstention of the opposition and the Western countries supporting it from implementing forceful regime change in Belarus.</p> <p>Security guarantees and immunity for Lukashenka and his family.</p>	<p>The parties' commitment to finding a peaceful solution to the political crisis is an important condition for preventing its escalation or recurrence in the future.</p> <p>Dialog between the authorities, the opposition, and civil society can take place under the auspices of the All-Belarus People's Assembly (ABPA). Its composition must ensure the inclusive and non-discriminatory participation of all the most active social groups. The quantitative and qualitative composition, the procedure for electing delegates, and the rules of procedure are elaborated during negotiations and with the assistance of the relevant international institutions, and are based on the principles of competitiveness, diversity and representation.</p> <p>Creation of e-ABPA (electronic ABPA) based on the experience of civic digital initiatives of 2020, the introduction of the tool of electronic referendums as a deliberative mechanism.</p>
<p>13. The deepening of the constitutional reform - the transformation of Belarus into a parliamentary-presidential republic in order to create a highly competitive political environment and widely involve Belarusian society.</p>	<p>Freeze of all current sanctions restrictions, unfreeze of all technical assistance.</p>	<p>Participation of all interested and politically active groups of the Belarusian society is ensured through the development of representative parliamentarism and e-democracy ensuring direct involvement of citizens in discussing the pressing problems of society and decision-making.</p>
<p>14. Holding new parliamentary and presidential elections in 2025-2027 under international observation and control (UN, OSCE, etc.)</p>	<p>Full lifting of sanctions restrictions and normalization of relations, subject to compliance with international obligations and standards, access to the UN special account, as well as funds established to support the development of Belarus.</p> <p>Support for the implementation of the economic and political reform agenda.</p>	<p>Participants and candidates of previous presidential campaigns do not participate in new presidential elections. There is no ban on their participation in political parties, parliamentary elections, or elections at any other level.</p>

Conclusion

The authors do not claim the presented draft roadmap and/or its specific points to be final. Obviously, in many respects those can and should be adjusted based on the developments, changes in the potential of the parties, and the very course of the negotiation process. The authors of this paper aimed to demonstrate how a version of resolving all three crises that Belarus faces today simultaneously could look like based on mutually respectful dialog and mutual concessions. The alternative to this approach is 'confrontation until a victorious end' which will equally and unnecessarily increase costs for Belarus and Ukraine and its Western allies, Belarusian authorities and Belarusian society, as well as Belarusian opposition.

We hope that the roadmap, as well as this report as a whole, will contribute to the launch of a meaningful dialog between Belarus and its foreign partners, as well as within Belarusian society on the ways out of the complex existential crisis in which the Republic of Belarus finds itself amid the Russia-Ukraine war and the inertia of the political crisis of 2020.

РОССИЙСКАЯ
ФЕДЕРАЦИЯ

РЕСПУБЛИКА
БЕЛАРУСЬ

Черниговское
направление

ОГВ "Север"

Сумское
направление

Российские государственные войска ВС РФ
по сле учения "Самая ответственность-2022"

Житомирское и Киевское
направления

ОГВ "Восток"

Зона ответственности
ОГВ "Северск"

ОГВ "Северск" и группа войск ОГВ "Средний"
в составе ВС РФ и ВС Украины
в ходе учений "Самая ответственность-2022"

УКРАИНА

Волын

Зона ответственности

ОГВ

Учреждение

Учреждение

Учреждение