

Challenging Sanctions: What Price Is Belarus Willing to Pay to Maintain the Autocratic Regime?

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Abstract: *Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and state building process for Belarusian newly formed government till the elections held in August 2020, ensuring the continuity of one of the last autocracies in the world, circumstances have altered cases. It is the kind of challenge the European Union never expected to deal with, especially following the Minsk signing of the Memorandum of Understanding to create the OSCE-led Advisory Monitoring Group in 1997. This paper will examine and explore the different stages in the rise of a repressive regime, the buffering role that Belarus plays in the stage of sanctions, as well as the economic implications that a partnership between the EU and Belarus might have had in the case of a successful OSCE mission and European External Action Services (EEAS) to six Eastern Europe States, including Belarus. The potential outcomes would indicate improved quality of life, more business opportunities, liberalization of economic activity and financial assistance.*

Keywords: *Sanctions, EU, Belarus, Buffer State.*

Introduction

Russia has consistently shown its willingness to take extensive measures to guarantee Belarus remains under its sphere of influence and maintains a close relationship. Nevertheless, sanctions imposed on Belarus have negatively impacted the country's economy. The harsher the EU sanctions against Belarus are, the more dependent the country becomes on Russia. Due to the restrictive measures imposed on Russia, the latter has also become dependent on Belarus both from an economic and political point of view. Despite the fluctuations that define the EU-Belarus relationship, the EU remains dedicated to aiding the people of Belarus in their pursuit of democracy and the protection of human rights. Unquestionably, Belarus is playing a buffering role in the 'war of sanctions' between the EU and Russia. This article explores the scenario of a closer and wide-ranging relationship between Belarus and the West with possible consequences for both parties.

Introduction

Lukashenko has successfully established one of the most centralized authoritarian systems in the post-Soviet region, and possibly even globally. His natural political instincts have aided him in creating a governing system that aligns with his approach towards the Belarusian population and external influences, despite the absence of notable natural or strategic resources in Belarus (Shraibman, A., 2018). Under his rule, the country has been referred to as a "hard autocracy."

It could be contended that the intimate alliance with Russia played a significant role in strengthening autocracy in Belarus (Nechyparenka, Y, 2020). Resurfaced recollections of the Soviet era increased Belarusians' allegiance to Russia while diverting their attention from Western perspectives. Russia's diplomatic and economic support though comes in exchange for the privatization of strategic assets in favour of Russian stakeholders (Yakoutchyk, K.2015). It is important to acknowledge that when economic conflicts and other differences between Minsk and Moscow have arisen, Lukashenko has displayed a streak of independence and has sought European support strategically to enhance his bargaining power, as noted by Shraibman (2018).

Soon after seizing power in 1994, Lukashenko changed the law in his favour and thus gained the authority to hire and fire regional leaders. Later on, by 1996, he had made changes to the constitution that granted him even more presidential power. At the same time, he maintained full control of the economy, unlike previous leaders (Way, L.A, Levitsky, S. 2006). In countries like Belarus, where the state controls approximately 80 per cent of the economy, autocrats have unthinkable freedom to discourage opposition through harassment and intimidation before it can grow stronger (Way and Levitsky, 2006). To minimize or even remove all threats to the political system he has put in place, Lukashenko carefully tests bureaucrats for loyalty, suppresses any attempt to seize power, and annihilates mass protests (Shraibman, A., 2018). By 2005 his regime took all necessary non-legislative and legislative measures to prevent the spread of democracy advocating Non-Governmental Organisations. The original success of Lukashenko was attributed to his populist rhetoric, as the chair of the parliamentary anti-corruption committee; he branded his political opponents as corrupt and pleaded for gradual economic reforms and a brand new role for the state to protect socially vulnerable segments of the population (White and Korosteleva, 2005). Using language accessible to the people (Marples, 1999: 103-104), he mastered a political strategy that involved populist speeches that appealed to the majority's sentiments on issues of economic policy and national identity (Frear, 2019; Way, 2015:129). Lukashenko has managed to build himself the image of a strong man capable of protecting Belarus from external threats and preventing economic and social disruption (Bennet, B., 2011: 289).

EU Targeted Measures against Belarus

When implementing sanctions, it is crucial to focus on targeting individuals whose behavior is expected to change, ensuring the maximum impact. The targeting process should aim to minimize any detrimental humanitarian effects or unintended repercussions on non-targeted individuals (Council of the European Union, 2004, p. 2). Belarus has faced sanctions from the European Union since 2004. Initially, these measures consisted of individual sanctions and an arms embargo, which were imposed in response to the disappearance of four individuals, including two opposition politicians, a journalist, and a businessperson. In 2011, an arms embargo was implemented, and on February 15, 2016, the Council made the decision to lift sanctions against three companies and 170 individuals. However, the arms embargo remained in place, along with restrictive measures targeting the four individuals. This decision was based on recognizing the progress made by Belarus, which contributed to the improvement of EU-Belarus relations, the European Union further sanctioned Belarus following the presidential

elections in 2020 (European Council, 2022). Following the 2020 presidential elections, the European Union imposed additional sanctions on Belarus. Despite independent exit polls indicating Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the opposition representative, as the victor, Belarus's Central Election Commission declared Lukashenko as the winner with over 80% of the votes. Violent actions were carried out by the police against peaceful protesters, resulting in detentions, torture, and loss of life. The EU denounced the elections as lacking freedom and fairness, leading to the gradual implementation of five sanctions packages from October to December that year. These measures were directed at a total of 195 individuals and 35 entities who were accused of engaging in electoral misconduct, inciting and going as far as organizing illegal border crossings, and committing human rights violations. The list primarily targets influential figures in political leadership, the economy, and the judiciary, including President Aleksandr Lukashenko and his son Viktor Lukashenko, propaganda outlets, senior officials of the Internal Ministry and its forces, the Chair of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of Belarus, the Prosecutor General, as well as the Chairman of the national state television and radio company (European Council, 2022).

The EU's response is a direct consequence of the Belarusian authorities' unacceptable actions of violence, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and detentions against peaceful protesters (European Council, 2022). In the wake of the incident involving the hijacking of a Ryanair aircraft to apprehend Raman Pratasevich, further measures were enforced in June 2021. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a UN agency, publicly condemned the incident and affirmed that Belarus had violated the Chicago Convention, also referred to as the Convention on International Civil Aviation, to which it is a signatory.

According to Article 3 of the aforementioned Convention, the use of weapons against civil aircraft during flight is strictly prohibited, and the safety of all passengers must take precedence in the event of interception. The Belarusian authorities violated established regulations and breached the Convention by deploying a MiG-29 fighter aircraft, armed with air-to-air missiles primarily intended for military use, to intercept a civilian aircraft carrying civilians. In response to this act of aerial terrorism, the European Union swiftly imposed a comprehensive ban on Belarusian air carriers, prohibiting them from operating from EU airports and flying over EU airspace (Chandrasekaran, 2022). Belarus is generally seen as one of the most sanctioned countries in the world (Miadzvetskaya, Y.2021). In December 2021, further measures were implemented in response to the Belarusian government's exploitation of migrants from the Middle East and its ongoing human rights violations. By inciting illegal crossings of migrants, the government aimed to destabilize the European Union and divert attention from Lukashenko's continuous human rights abuses, creating a crisis at the EU borders. The sanctions imposed in 2021 consisted of five packages, which included individual sanctions such as travel bans and asset freezes. Additionally, there was an arms embargo and restrictions on dual-use goods, technology for military purposes, and communication interception equipment. The measures also included a prohibition on providing insurance or reinsurance to public bodies, agencies, and the Belarusian government, partial trade restrictions on potash, petroleum, and gaseous hydrocarbon products, and limitations on Belarus's access to EU capital markets. The initial three EU sanctions packages against Belarus were introduced on democracy-related grounds, while the sanctions following the Ryanair plane incident aimed at addressing security-

related objectives (Miadzvetskaya, Y.2021). Sanctions are posing increasing challenges for cross-border payments. Numerous correspondent banking relationships have been significantly affected, leading to higher compliance costs, loss of foreign credit lines, and delays in cross-border payments, particularly for remittances. This has prompted banks to explore alternative solutions and seek new correspondent banks, with Asia being among the potential options (IMF, 2021). On February 24, 2022, the Council made the decision to extend the sanctions against Belarus for one year, until February 28, 2023. The EU has made it unequivocally clear that Belarus's involvement in Russia's unwarranted and unprovoked military invasion of Ukraine is unacceptable. As a direct consequence of Belarus' decision to maintain a strong relationship with Russia, based on mutual support, and also because of the repeated violation of international human rights laws, the EU has taken restrictive measures against individuals and entities involved. Additionally, the EU has suspended all economic ties with Belarus, including financial assistance, and imposed a ban on oil and gas imports from Belarus. These sanctions are significantly impacting the Belarusian economy, which heavily relies on energy exports. In 2022, various measures were implemented, including trade restrictions, a SWIFT ban on five Belarusian banks, a prohibition on transactions with the Central Bank of Belarus, limitations on financial inflows from Belarus to the EU, and a prohibition on providing euro-denominated banknotes to Belarus (European Council, 2022).

The European Union's sanctions against Belarus form an essential component of a comprehensive strategy aimed at exerting pressure on the government to promote human rights and democratic principles. The EU is collaborating closely with other international partners to maintain these pressure points on the Belarusian government. As of March 2022, the EU's sanctions on Belarus align with the majority of Russia-related restrictive measures and focus on targeting the Belarusian financial sector, dual-use goods exports, as well as the imports of wood, cement, steel, and rubber products. Considering that such punitive measures may lead to unforeseen and unintended consequences, the EU must find the most effective approach to dealing with Belarus while recognizing that its people are being held hostage by a repressive regime (Miadzvetskaya, Y.2021).

Partnership with the EU

The The European Union has been open to becoming a partner of Belarus in various areas since 1991 when Belarus became independent. The EU has supported Belarus through economic assistance and trade agreements. The European Union and Belarus entered into a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1995, which established a framework for bilateral relations and provided for regular political dialogue and cooperation on sectoral issues, including human rights. But in 1996, when it was more than clear that Belarus was heading towards autocracy, the EU started imposing the first set of sanctions (Portela, C., 2011). Starting from the early 2000s, the European Union's connection with Belarus has faced significant challenges due to the country's declining human rights situation. In response to the government's suppression of civil society and the political opposition led by President Alexander Lukashenko, the EU has implemented sanctions targeting Belarusian officials accountable for human rights abuses. These sanctions encompass travel restrictions and the freezing of assets (Council of the European Union, 2009b). The relationship between the EU

and Belarus reached a crucial juncture with the onset of the energy crisis in January 2007. Following Russia's announcement of a substantial rise in energy prices imposed on Belarus, the trade balance was severely impacted. Belarus, recognizing its crucial role as a transit country where 60 percent of trade between the European Union and Russia passed through its territory, sought support from the EU. In a brief period, Belarus and the European Commission commenced "structured discussions" on energy, marking the initiation of the first energy-related negotiations. This initiative set the stage for subsequent reconciliation efforts, including the authorization given by Belarusian authorities for the establishment of a European Commission office.

The establishment of these enhanced communication channels laid the groundwork for a significant breakthrough in relations the subsequent year. Breaking away from its previous condemned policies, the autocratic regime established by Lukashenko in Belarus initiated a privatization program in the spring of 2008, accompanied by measures aimed at attracting foreign investment. The liberation of important opposition figures, like Klimov and Kozulin, from imprisonment in August, marked a favorable change, leading the Council to acknowledge the new possibilities for dialogue and deepened cooperation between Belarus and the European Union (Council of the European Union, 2009b).

Additionally, Belarus' refusal to recognize the breakaway entities that emerged from the Georgia war in the summer of 2008 demonstrated the leadership's shift from unconditional support for Russia toward a closer alignment with the EU. The Belarusian leadership realized the importance of increased Western investment and thus softened its stance. Consequently, the promise of cooperation and its associated benefits, such as enhanced trade, foreign investment, and assistance, proved to be more persuasive than CFSP blacklists (Portela, C., 2011). In 2011, in response to presidential elections widely regarded as fraudulent, the European Union expanded its range of sanctions against Belarus to include a larger number of individuals and entities, particularly those involved in electoral misconduct and violations of human rights. In 2015, following arresting several high-profile opposition figures, the EU again expanded its sanctions against Belarusian officials. President Lukashenko's support to Russia during the Russia- Ukraine military conflict has triggered a new set of sanctions from the EU, which include restrictive measures against crypto-assets. Despite the fluctuating nature of the EU-Belarus relationship, the European Union maintains its steadfast commitment to supporting the people of Belarus in their pursuit of democracy and promoting respect for human rights. Apart from these, the EU also actively provides financial aid to civil society organizations operating within Belarus that are dedicated to advancing these objectives. Furthermore, the EU collaborates with like-minded partners, including Canada, the United States, and Switzerland, to bolster independent media in Belarus and facilitate the dissemination of accurate information about the true state of the economy and politics to the Belarusian population.

The Success of OSCE AMG - a Turning Point in the Subsequent Evolution of Belarus and Europe

The worldwide proliferation of security matters has amplified the importance of multilateral cooperation. Numerous problems regarding security can be tackled more diligently on a regional scale because regional actors have more common political interests, and because of the economic interdependencies, close neighborhood interaction, and cultural affinities among the partners. The OSCE has earned itself a prominent position among these entities. Historically, the OSCE is regarded as a particular European success story. The contribution of the organization to the peaceful transformation in Eastern Europe and the ending of the Cold War is incontestable. Being the only pan-European organization, the OSCE offers not only an overarching framework for cooperation but also a whole set of practical tools and mechanisms for mitigating the potential violent conflicts whether between or within state boundaries (Giessmann, H.J., 2001). During a summit of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in December 1997, European representatives were met with favorable responses from Belarusian officials regarding the proposal to establish an OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) in Minsk. Two months later, in February 1998, the AMG office was opened with the objective of guiding Belarus towards political pluralism and democracy. The Council of Europe played a role in preparing this initiative, and its Directorate General of Political Affairs maintains close communication with the AMG to explore avenues for collaboration. The AMG focuses on three main areas: assisting in the formulation and implementation of new legislation, supporting the establishment of democratic institutions, and promoting human rights education (Behrendt, W., 2000). Although the OSCE is primarily known as a non-economic organization, it recognizes the significance of economic and environmental matters within its comprehensive approach to security. These issues are deemed essential for achieving peace, enhancing stability, and fostering prosperity throughout the entire OSCE region. The OSCE's main objective is to facilitate the coordination of the annual OSCE Economic Forum, which seeks to encourage the transition from centrally planned economies to free-market economies. This transition is crucial in assisting nations as they strive to meet essential environmental regulations (Pihl Lorentzen, K., 2007). It is important to highlight the crucial role that the AMG has undertaken and continues to fulfill in convincing both the EU and Belarus to embrace the concept and principles underlying these discussions, and in effectively facilitating their engagement in the negotiation process (Behrendt, W., 2000). Under the leadership of President Lukashenko, Belarus has seemed more reluctant to cooperate with the OSCE. As a result, the cooperation was not as positive and productive as it could be. The hesitancy was particularly evident within the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group. The main purpose of OSCE was to assist in promoting democratic institutions in Belarus. After its establishment, the relationship between the OSCE and Belarus became increasingly tense. The Belarusian government was displeased with the OSCE's operations and activities within the country, leading to the denial of visas and visa renewals for OSCE personnel in Belarus. This is the reason why, by the end of October 2002, the Organization had no international staff remaining in Belarus. A new agreement was reached between the Belarusian Government and the OSCE, resulting in the establishment of a new mission called the OSCE Office in Minsk on January 1, 2003. This new mission replaced the previous OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group and operated under a revised mandate. Regrettably, the Belarusian government is still exhibiting reluctance towards collaborating with the OSCE, and as a result, tangible outcomes from this partnership remain constrained (Pihl Lorentzen, K., 2007). Recognizing Belarus as a

medium-sized country, it is crucial to acknowledge its "balancing strategy" with larger regional powers. To foster cooperation between the European Union and Belarus, it is vital to take a look at the bigger picture, to comprehend the geopolitical complexities. Each Eastern region state, including Belarus, possesses different social norms and demands a tailored approach to promote shared values. Enhanced interest-based technical cooperation has the potential to strengthen Belarus' commitment and facilitate its integration into the international framework of norms and standards (Korosteleva, E.A., 2016). If Belarus had chosen to adhere to global standards of democracy and human rights, the EU, through its Neighborhood Policy, could have facilitated improvements in the quality of life for the Belarusian people. This would have fostered deeper economic and trade relations, increased business opportunities, and led to a significant rise in European financial assistance (Pihl Lorentzen, K., 2007). The gradual liberalization of the economic activity would have fueled the enthusiasm of Belarusian entrepreneurs, especially in the medium- and high-tech sectors (Marozau et al., 2021).

Belarus - Russia's Last Ally or a Country Playing its Own Game?

Belarus may well be considered the most pro-Russia country from the former Soviet bloc. However, in recent years, Belarus's relations with Russia have become increasingly complex. Despite sharing a common linguistic and cultural background, and Belarus serving as a strong military ally and relying on Russia's economic resources, President Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly demonstrated the great value he places on Belarusian sovereignty and independence (Shraibman, A., 2018). Belarus has been a key Russian ally for years, but history has shown that sometimes, should the situation require it, the country can move away from its close relationship with Russia. Russia plays a significant role in bolstering the Belarusian economy by providing subsidized crude oil at prices below the market rate. In return, Belarus refines the crude oil and engages in international trade. The resulting profits make up a substantial portion of Belarus's gross domestic product, accounting for nearly 15 percent of the country's GDP, while its exports to Russia constitute 41 percent of its total exports. This dependence on Russia highlights the influential position Russia holds in shaping Belarus's future. Moreover, Belarus holds the distinction of being a founding member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and participating in the associated Customs Union, which later evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union. Alongside these affiliations, the two countries have a distinct bilateral integration framework known as the Union State (Chandrasekaran, 2022). In February 2014, after the Euromaidan protests resulted in the removal of President Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine, Lukashenko took a cautious approach in his dealings with Kyiv. Despite his earlier criticisms of the protests, Lukashenko regarded Euromaidan as a controversial and unacceptable method of addressing political issues. Similarly to Moscow's standpoint, he depicted the conflict in Donbas as an internal "civil war" and warned Ukrainians about the potential repercussions of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Nevertheless, Lukashenko never formally acknowledged Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, as a constituent part of the Russian Federation, despite requests from Russia to do so (Mudrov, 2020). In general, Lukashenko's foreign policy was centered around sustaining functional relations with Kyiv, indicating his acknowledgment of the economic and political significance of Belarus's neighboring country to the south, with whom it shares a border spanning over one thousand

kilometers. Lukashenko's public display of positive sentiments during negotiations with post-Maidan Ukrainian presidents did not go unnoticed. During his meeting with Volodymyr Zelensky in Zhytomyr, Ukraine, in October 2019, Lukashenko expressed his unwavering support and partnership, stating that Belarus would always be the kindest and most reliable supporter of Ukraine. He reassured Ukraine that they would never encounter any issues at the Belarusian border (President.gov.ua, 2019). Amidst the growing tensions between Russia and the West, Russia has consistently shown its determination to maintain Belarus as a dependable partner within its sphere of influence. During a period when Russia faced severe sanctions imposed by the West, Belarus played a significant role as an intermediary by importing goods from European countries and facilitating their export to Russia, and vice versa. This strategic cooperation provided geopolitical advantages to Russia, aiding in mitigating the profound crisis it was confronting. In response, Russia extended substantial financial support and unwavering political backing to Belarus (Chandrasekaran, 2022).

Belarus-Russia Interdependence in Terms of Sanctions

There is no doubt that Belarus and Russia are highly interdependent countries. The two countries have been working together for years in several areas, including military, economic, and political cooperation. Nevertheless, the current wave of sanctions imposed by the European Union (EU) on Belarus has presented a significant challenge to this relationship. In response to the sanctions, Russia has taken several steps to support its fellow Eurasian country. For instance, Russia has continued to supply oil and gas to Belarus despite the Western sanctions, helping to keep Belarus' economy afloat. In addition, Russia has also increased its financial support for Belarus, providing billions of dollars in loans and aid. While Russia is trying to help Belarus weather the storm of Western sanctions, there are also signs that Moscow is using the situation to its advantage. For instance, Russian state-owned media outlets have been working hard to portray the EU and U.S. as enemies of Belarus, while painting Russia as a friend and ally. In addition, some Russian officials have suggested that Moscow could use the crisis in Belarus as an opportunity to increase its influence in the area. The latest sanctions, implemented on March 2nd and 9th, and further reinforced on April 8th, 2022, underscore the EU's strong condemnation of Belarus' role in Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. This involvement is deemed unprovoked and unjustified, encompassing strategic planning, granting permission for the transportation of Russian troops and military equipment through Belarus, and even the launch of ballistic missiles from Belarusian territory. Despite Lukashenko's repressive actions, the West initially hesitated to impose comprehensive sanctions on Belaruskali, a major global producer of potash fertilizers, responsible for more than 15 percent of global potassium exports. However, the outbreak of war prompted a complete ban on the company. In addition to losing access to lucrative markets in Ukraine and Europe, Belarusian fertilizers faced disruption in transportation routes through Ukrainian and Lithuanian seaports, which had a detrimental impact on the self-reliance of the industry. Consequently, all available options for export that Belarus has at the moment depend on its oldest ally, Russia. Belarusians are left with two alternatives: either dedicate a significant amount of time and financial resources to constructing their own port facilities near St. Petersburg, or employ existing infrastructure by providing substantial discounts to outperform their Russian competitors.

Consequently, the decline of Belarus's potassium exports by an estimated 50 per cent in the first half of 2022 (with official data being classified by the authorities) is expected and not surprising. It is highly probable that additional reductions will take place, given that most recorded deliveries took place in the first quarter. Another industry largely affected in terms of significant losses of vital rents for the autocratic regime in Belarus is the gas industry. This is the direct consequence of the military operation in Ukraine. Following Poland's imposition of national sanctions on Gazprom, Russia responded by suspending gas deliveries through the pipeline between Yamal and Europe. It is worth noting that the section of the pipeline that runs through Belarus is owned by Gazprom. In 2011, the company reacquired the section for \$5 billion. Despite this ownership, Minsk had been imposing transit fees on the pipeline, estimated at \$300-400 million per year. However, with the recent developments, all that revenue has now disappeared. Prior to the conflict, the affordability of Russian gas represents a compelling motivator for Moscow to push for deeper integration with Minsk. The elevated energy expenses currently present a peril to Belarusian manufacturers, as their Russian counterparts could potentially drive them out of the market. Presently, Belarus can still procure gas from Russia at a fixed rate of \$128 per 1000 cubic meters, which without a doubt is comparatively cheap. However, this agreement is renewed annually, and the military operations have severely weakened Minsk's bargaining position for future gas negotiations. Belarus finds itself dependent on a Russian pipeline without any alternative customers downstream. Due to Belarus's energy-intensive economy and Russia's decline in European markets, Belarus has emerged as Gazprom's third-largest foreign customer, following China and Turkey. As one of Gazprom's last major clients, the gas giant may seek to extract maximum benefits, while the Kremlin could continue to promote the idea that the easiest and most cost-effective way to obtain cheap Russian gas is by joining Russia (Samorukov, M., 2022). Figures show that the harsher the EU sanctions against Belarus are, the more dependent the country becomes on Russia.

How Far Does Loyalty to Russia Go? Will Belarus Bear the Costs of Sanctions Imposed on It That Target Russia?

Due to the restrictive measures imposed on Russia, the latter has also become dependent on Belarus both from an economic and political point of view. The European Union has been vocal in its criticism of the Belarus government's human rights record and has called for an end to the violence against peaceful protesters. In response to the Belarus government's continued crackdown on dissent, the EU imposed sanctions against Belarusian officials. Russia is a key player in the region and has significant economic ties to Belarus. However, Russia has also been critical of the EU's involvement in Belarus, accusing the bloc of interfering in Belarusian affairs. Despite these tensions, the EU has continued to sanction Belarusian officials. In 2019, the sanctions list was expanded to include more than 170 individuals and seven entities. The EU has also said that it is prepared to impose further sanctions if necessary. The situation in Belarus remains volatile and there is no end in sight to the violence or repression. As long as these conditions persist, it is likely that the EU will maintain its current course. Belarusian society, for the most part, leans towards a pro-Russian stance, although there is also a notable pro-European minority. While aligning with Moscow, the majority of Belarusians are unwilling

to compromise their sovereignty and bear the burden of Russian foreign policy. President Lukashenko's choice to offer systematic support to Russia has not always served the country's best interest. Sometimes, that has translated into sanctions imposed on both Belarus and Russia that affected the first country's economic growth. A quick look at Belarus's main sources of revenue reveals the significant political and economic transformations brought about by the Kremlin's intervention in Ukraine. An illustrative case can be seen in the two major oil refineries located in Novopolotsk and Mozyr. Over the course of nearly 30 years, the President of Belarus has consistently opposed the attempts of Russian magnates to gain control of these refineries, maintaining a firm grip on them as state-owned assets. The resilience displayed by Lukashenko can be attributed to the crucial role the refineries played in sustaining the autocratic regime. At their pinnacle in the early 2010s, these refineries constituted over one-third of Belarus's overall exports and provided up to thirty percent of the government's budgetary income. Lukashenko leveraged oil trading arrangements to establish special alliances with Russian oil giants, who advocated for his interests within Russia. In 2005, Russia initiated a campaign to gradually replace Belarus's oil export duty with a production tax, aiming to undermine the country's oil-related income. As of the start of 2020, Belarusian oil refineries continued to constitute roughly twenty-five percent of the country's total exports and contributed approximately twenty percent of its budget revenues (Samorukov, M.2022). The Kremlin's decision to involve Belarus in the armed hostility against Ukraine, using Belarus as a base for its northward incursion, had detrimental consequences for the Belarusian refineries. This led to the deprivation of access to both Ukrainian and European markets. In the summer of 2022, Belarusian exports of oil products to the EU nearly doubled compared to the previous year, as the country faced more severe penalties. Deliveries to Ukraine also significantly decreased, dropping 13-fold from \$249 million in January to \$19 million in May. Although certain unofficial supplies may persist amidst the war and sanctions, their magnitude and profitability are significantly lower compared to pre-military conflict levels. Currently, Russia remains the only significant market where Belarusian oil products can be sold (Samorukov, M.2022). In early October, Moscow and Belarus reached an accord has been reached to extend the suspension mechanism to Belarusian refineries, commencing from 2023. However, this agreement came at a significant cost. Russia compelled Belarus to sign a new tax agreement that required coordination of adjustments in indirect taxes and excise duties with the Russian capital. Moreover, the agreement provided Russia with access to all information regarding the indirect taxes imposed in Belarus. Belarus relinquished its autonomy in indirect taxation to synchronize the Belarusian refineries with their Russian counterparts. This suggests a change in which aspects of Belarusian sovereignty are not traded for added advantages any longer, but rather must be relinquished for the sake of equality (Samorukov, 2022). The evolving nature of EU sanctions presents a challenging situation for the European Union regarding Belarus. Firstly, it becomes crucial to differentiate between the Belarusian people and their authorities, as the human dimension holds significance for the future EU-Belarus relations. Secondly, it is important to distinguish Belarus from Russia. While there may be a rationale for aligning sanctions against Belarus and Russia, Belarus should be treated as a separate entity on the EU's agenda, rather than being lumped together with Russia. To formalize cooperation within the Eastern Partnership and the European Political Community, the EU could consider revisiting the conditions outlined in October 2020 for easing EU restrictive measures against Belarus in the future, provided that an agreement

between Russia and Ukraine is reached and Russian troops are fully withdrawn from Ukraine. The EU will also need to determine which sanctions can be relaxed in the future, considering the six Belarus-specific sanctions packages and related measures that were enacted in response to Belarus's support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These measures include both initiatives aimed at promoting democratic principles and those with security-oriented objectives. Although such preparatory analytical work might seem premature in the current context, it is important to acknowledge that circumstances can change (Miadzvetskaya, 2022).

Conclusions

This paper has argued the relations between the European Union and Belarus and the latter's dependency on Russia on its all-state front. From 1996 to 2014, the EU emphasized engaging more proactively towards Belarus using a technocratic approach, building long-term relations, and encouraging investment, trying to tackle Belarus' so-called bending to Russian policy as far as impunities are concerned. In the 2014 Crimean war, Belarus remained neutral and tried to mediate between Ukraine and Russia, a firm position that made the West and the EU freshly recoup engagement with an undemocratic government.

Presidential elections in 2020 changed the scenario for the EU as President Lukashenko desired to stick to his government policy and imprison political opponents. As a direct consequence of this decision, the EU took strict and harsh restrictive measures towards Belarus. Furthermore, the Ukraine-Russia military conflict fueled this hostility of the EU, which resulted in an extension of sanctions, and Belarus now finds itself cornered and left with no choice but to look towards Russia again. The preservation of the Belarusian autocratic regime seems to be in no danger with constant support from Russia, but the lack of basic necessities and nontrade engagement with the rest of the modern world is taking a toll on the ordinary people of Belarus, who are the ones having to pay the enormous price, which can only bring about more turmoil.

Acknowledgement

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Ms. Iuliana Robertina Lucaciu for her exceptional guidance and unwavering support throughout the completion of this article. Her expertise, insightful feedback, and dedication have been invaluable in shaping the outcome of this work and I am truly grateful for her mentorship and contribution.

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Appendix

Table no. 1 History of Europe Union's Sanctions against Belarus

Year	Sanctions Imposed	Details
1994	Arms Embargo	Embargo on trade in arms and related material.
1996	Visa Ban	EU imposed visa ban on President Lukashenko and other high-ranking officials.
1998	Freeze on Bilateral Cooperation	Suspension of the EU-Belarus Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.
2000	Visa Ban Expansion	Visa ban extended to additional officials.
2004	Asset Freeze	Freeze on assets of President Lukashenko and other individuals.
2006	Arms Embargo Expansion	Expansion of arms embargo to include equipment that could be used for internal repression.
2011	Asset Freeze and Visa Ban Expansion	Asset freeze and visa ban extended to additional individuals and entities.
2012	Suspension of Sanctions	EU suspended most of the sanctions in response to the release of political prisoners.
2015	Suspension of Asset Freeze and Visa Ban	Asset freeze and visa ban suspended for most individuals and entities.
2016	Extension of Suspension	Extension of suspension of asset freeze and visa ban.
2020	Re-Imposition of Sanctions	Re-imposition of asset freeze and visa ban in response to the presidential elections and crackdown on opposition. Sanctions extended in 2021.

Table no. 2 Russia's Economic Cooperation with Belarus

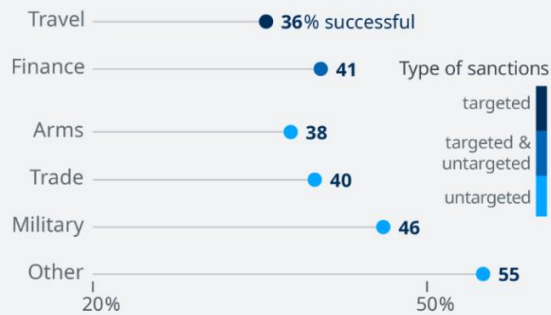
Year	Total Russian aid to Belarus (in USD)	Russian Oil Subsidies to Belarus (in USD)
1995	150 million	N/A
2000	500 million	N/A
2005	1.5 billion	1.0 billion
2010	3.5 billion	3.0 billion
2015	760 million	1.5 billion
2020	1.5 billion	1.0 billion

Table no. 3 Russia's Defense Cooperation with Belarus

Year	Number of Russian troops in Belarus	Number of joint military exercises
1995	1,700	0
2000	3,000	8
2005	6,000	10
2010	7,200	15
2015	1,000-1,500	15
2020	1,500-3,000	8

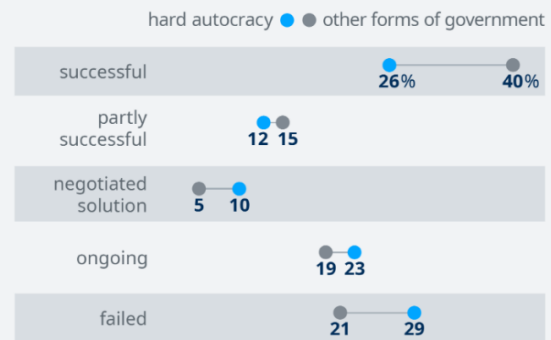
“Targeted” sanctions' chances of success

Sanctions on ...



 Source: Global Sanctions Database, 1995–2019
 Methodology: github.com/dw-data/sanctions_belarus

How successful were sanctions on “hard” autocracies like Belarus?



 Source: Global Sanctions Database, Democracy Matrix, 1949–2019
 Methodology: github.com/dw-data/sanctions_belarus