

1. SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS

TENSIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND BELARUS. THE KREMLIN'S IMPERIALIST POLITICS TOWARDS MINSK

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I will focus on the issue of how Putin's regime and the Kremlin are trying to bind Belarus more strongly to the Russian Federation, calling this process „deeper integration“, which is basically Russia's attempt to swallow Belarus. I will give an overview of the situation in recent years concerning the „Belarusian problem“ and of which kinds of implications and issues could result in the security environment if Russia's pressure towards Belarus is successful.

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Russian neoimperialism, Putin's politics, Lukashenko, Kremlin, Belarus, Russia, political pressure, economic pressure, tensions, deeper integration.

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1. Introduction: Putin's ambitions and the concept of Russkyi Mir

The aim of this paper is to show how Kremlin is trying to pressure Belarus and involve Minsk in „deeper integration“ with the Russian Federation, which basically means that the Kremlin will try to swallow Belarus². In the past decade, Putin's aggressive revanchist regime has expressed its desire to restore its power and influence in the post-Soviet space. This is supported

by Putin's claim that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”³. As Andreas Umland points out:

*Since coming to power in 1999, Vladimir Putin has purposefully instrumentalized Russian imperial nostalgia, national pride, and ethnocentric thinking for the legitimization of his authoritarian regime*⁴.

¹ Based on some materials published in Estonian outlets: V. Sazonov. Venemaa ja Valgevene gambiit: kas Moskva suudab Valgevene alla neelata? *Diplomaatia* 187, 2019 (=Sazonov 2019a) <https://diplomaatia.ee/venemaa-ja-valgevene-gambiit-kas-moskva-suudab-valgevene-alla-neelata/> (accessed: 4.11.2019); V. Sazonov. Valgevene Putini režiimi huvifaaris ja sellest tulenevad võimalikud julgeolekuohud Balti regioonile. *Sisekaitseakadeemia*, Tallinn, 2019, [https://digiriul.sisekaitse.ee/bitstream/handle/123456789/2210/2019%2005%20valgevene%20A4_web.pdf?](https://digiriul.sisekaitse.ee/bitstream/handle/123456789/2210/2019%2005%20valgevene%20A4_web.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

[sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://digiriul.sisekaitse.ee/bitstream/handle/123456789/2210/2019%2005%20valgevene%20A4_web.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed: 4.11.2019) (=Sazonov 2019b).

² Ibid.

³ Владимир Путин: “Распад СССР – крупнейшая геополитическая катастрофа века”. *Regnum*, 25.4.2005, <https://regnum.ru/news/444083.html> (accessed: 4.10.2019).

⁴ A. Umland. Russia: Nationalism's Revenge. *Foreign Policy Journal*. 17. December 2010. <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2010/12/17/russia-nationalisms-revenge/> (accessed: 1.11.2019).

It seems that V. Putin dreams of the restoration of an empire like the Soviet Union to make Russia once again a superpower, rather than a regional power like Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Iran in Middle East. All the Kremlin's efforts in recent years have been to "make Russian state great again", but it often fails to maintain power over the areas under its authority, which Moscow has for decades considered its immediate sphere of influence, i.e., its vassals. In Europe, the Kremlin considers Ukraine and Belarus to be of paramount strategic importance. For the past 28 years, it has tried to encroach on them and turn them into vassal states. The Kremlin has wanted to make Ukraine and also Belarus into buffer zones between NATO, the European Union and the Russian Federation⁵.

As Zbigniew Brzezinski once rightly said that, for Russia, Ukraine is "an important space on the Eurasian chessboard".⁶ The same can be said about Belarus, which has become increasingly significant to the Kremlin since the events of 2014, when Ukraine moved away from Russia's sphere of influence and became more independent in own politics. Just like Ukraine, Belarus is of great importance to Russia, including in political, ideological, cultural, religious and economic respects, as its economy, culture and foreign policy are closely tied to Russia. This country is also very important from the perspective of Putin's concept of *Russskiy Mir* – 'Russian World', in which Moscow proceeds from fundamental imperial Russian ideological dogma (that probably emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries) about the regions that have been referred to since the 19th century as "the holy trinity of Russian civilisation": Russia, Ukraine

and Belarus⁷. For instance, Vladimir Putin believes that Ukrainians and Russians are one nation and that Ukrainians should be part of the *Russskiy Mir*⁸. The idea of *Russskiy Mir*⁹ was developed during the last decade by Russian ideologists, promoted by abundant PR companies and information campaigns directed toward Russian-speaking internal and external audiences in the mass media and social media, as well as in Russian popular and scientific literature (especially in historical, political, and economic fields), etc.¹⁰ In April 2007, Russian president Vladimir Putin said the following words about *Russskiy Mir*:

The Russian language not only preserves an entire layer of truly global achievements but is also the living space for the many millions of people in the Russian-speaking world, a community that goes far beyond Russia itself. As the common heritage of many peoples, the Russian language will never become the language of hatred or enmity, xenophobia or isolationism. In my view, we need to support the ini-

⁷ Б. Флория. Особенности развития этнического самосознания восточных славян в эпоху Средневековья – Раннего Нового времени. Россия-Украина: история взаимоотношений. Отв. ред. А. И. Миллер, В.Ф. Репринцев, Москва 1997, pp. 9-27, izbornyk.org.ua/vzaimo/vz02.htm (accessed: 4.11.2019).

⁸ Путин: Я считаю, что русские и украинцы – это вообще один народ, разницы мы не делаем. 112UA, 17 August 2015, <https://112.ua/politika/putin-ya-schitayu-chto-russkie-i-ukraincy-eto-voobshhe-odin-narod-raznicy-my-ne-delaem-252644.html> (accessed: 1.11.2019); Путин назвал русских и украинцев единым народом. Interfax, 17 August 2015, www.interfax.ru/russia/460776 (accessed: 1.11.2019).

⁹ In June 2007 Putin founded the *Russskiy Mir* Foundation; Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of the Establishment of the *Russskiy Mir* Foundation, June 21, 2007, Moscow, Kremlin, <http://russskiymir.ru/en/fund/decree.php> (accessed: 10.3.2019).

¹⁰ For example, see the philosophical, propagandistic book, "Project Russia" (Проект Россия), published in 2014. This book was recommended by the Administrative Department of the President of the Russian Federation to be read by statesmen and politicians of the Russian Federation.

⁵ J. Carik, A. Sivinckij, Беларусь в контексте противостояния Россия–НАТО. Minsk: Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studie, 2016.

⁶ Z. Brzezinski. The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives. New York: Basic Books, 1997, p. 46.

*tiative put forward by Russian linguists to create a National Russian Language Foundation, the main aim of which will be to develop the Russian language at home, support Russian language study programmes abroad and generally promote Russian language and literature around the world*¹¹.

V. Putin and his close circle believe the same about Belarusians and want to integrate Belarus into Russia even more and on a deeper level, which would essentially mean the loss of Belarus' fragile sovereignty. Many have recently spoken about the Kremlin's attempts to "swallow" Belarus¹².

Russia's chief ideologist, Vladislav Surkov, has been trying to outline the Russian state's "new" ideological direction or program, recently claiming that "the state of Russia will continue to exist and will be a new type of country the likes of which we have never seen before"¹³. There is indeed some novelty to this, but it lies in the fact that Russia is a hybrid country that produces and disseminates hybrid threats¹⁴. W. Neneth rightly remarked that "Russia can be considered an epitome of a hybrid state. The common denominator of various theories on what constitutes a hybrid state is that it is a political regime that has autocratic as well as democratic characteristics. Furthermore, it is not a regime in transition but, rather, a type of regime of its own"¹⁵.

Historically, this has indeed not happened before. Vladislav Surkov also stresses that there are four main state models in Russia's history, which he thinks can be named after their creators or founders: the

state of Ivan III (the 15th-17th century Grand Duchy of Moscow and period of the first Russian Czars – e.g., Ivan IV etc.), the state of Peter the Great, i.e. the Russian Empire (18th-19th century and early 20th century), the state of Vladimir Lenin, i.e. the Soviet Union (20th century, 1917-1991) and the state of Vladimir Putin (21st century)¹⁶.

Vladislav Surkov points out the following about Putin's regime:

*Putin's huge political machine is only gaining momentum and configuring itself for a long, difficult and interesting task" and compares Putin's Russia to Atatürk's Turkey and de Gaulle's France*¹⁷.

It is clear that Vladislav Surkov is trying to justify aggressive imperialist politics of Putin's regime, emphasising that, for Russian state, this is a long-term sustained opportunity and a major new development – in a way, a "new state". Notable is that Vladislav Surkov believes that Putin's state will last a long time¹⁸.

Russia's manipulations in Ukraine following the Orange Revolution, the constant pressure on Kyiv and Ukrainians, the incompetent rule of the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and several other factors gave rise to the Maidan events at the end of 2013, as a result of which, Moscow lost control over Ukraine¹⁹. Kremlin subsequently annexed the Crimea

¹⁶ В. Сурков. Долгое государство Путина. Незвисмая газета, 11 February 2019.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. Similar appeals to ancient heads and leaders of state and their founders can also be found in earlier periods of history – e.g. the Soviet Union, Mussolini's fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, where Adolf Hitler was likened to Frederick the Great of Prussia (ruled 1740-1786) or some powerful leader (emperor) of the Holy Roman Empire, and people talked about a thousand-year *Reich* (see also Sazonov 2019a; Sazonov 2019b).

¹⁹ С. Кошкина, Майдан. Нерасказанная история. Киев: Брайт Стар Паблшинг, 2015; Дневник Евромайдана. Революция глазами журналиста «Репортера». Саммит-Книга, Киев 2014.

¹¹ Russkyi Mir Foundation, <http://rusскиymir.ru/en/fund/index.php> (accessed: 14.10.2019).

¹² В. Сурков. Долгое государство Путина. Незвисмая газета, 11 February 2019, www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/57503_surkov.html (accessed: 14.10.2019).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ W. Neneth. Russia's State-centric Hybrid Warfare. *Diplomaatia* 140, 17 April 2015, icds.ee/russias-state-centric-hybrid-warfare/ (accessed: 14.10.2019).

¹⁵ Ibid.

from Ukraine in March 2014²⁰ and tried to create the so-called *Novorossiya* – a body of terrorist-separatist states directly subject to the Kremlin – in eastern Ukraine, but this plan was largely unsuccessful for Kremlin²¹. However, Moscow managed to establish only two smaller, state-like separatist/terrorist formations: the so-called “people’s republics” of Luhansk and Donetsk. With Ukraine having slipped from the Kremlin’s geopolitical grasp during the events of 2013–2014, the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus – onto which Putin’s regime has latched like a leech – remain the Kremlin’s only access points to Polish territory and to Central Europe more generally.

2. Russia’s Fears and Expectations?

Having learned from experience in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict – in which the Kremlin is waging a hybrid war against Ukrainian state,²² one dimension of which is an extensive information war and cyber-attacks,²³ and maintaining the frozen con-

flict in Eastern Ukraine – Vladimir Putin has decided to integrate Belarus increasingly into his country and regime. Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus’ long-standing leader, dubbed “Europe’s last dictator”, objects to Belarus being “swallowed up”. Russia’s pressure on Belarus has increased in recent years along with information campaigns, trolling and economic and political pressure targeting Minsk. The situation worsened considerably in 2018. Recently, a lot has been said and written about Russia’s actions towards Belarus. It was feared that Russia would fail to withdraw its troops from Belarus following the countries’ joint military exercise, Zapad-2017, but fortunately this did not happen²⁴.

As Andreas Ventsel et al. point out about Zapad-2017:

‘Zapad 2017’ took place in the context of long-running Russia – NATO tensions (Diesen, 2016; Sakwa, 2017). Because of their borderland status, the Baltic states – occupied by the Soviet Union from 1940 to 1991, and members of NATO since 2004 – have often been in the centre of information conflicts between Russia and NATO. Therefore, the empirical material for our study was collected from news media in Estonia as a NATO member state located in the immediate vicinity of the Zapad exercises²⁵.

Moscow fears that if something happened to A. Lukashenko (who is already 65 years old), or if he is forced to stand down, a “colour revolution” might take place in

²⁰ H. Mölder, V. Sazonov, R. Värk. Krimmi liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad. I osa”. Akadeemia 12/2014, pp. 2148-61; H. Mölder, V. Sazonov, R. Värk. Krimmi liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad II osa. Akadeemia 1/2015, pp. 1-28.

²¹ Д. Тымчук, Ю. Карин, К. Машовец, В. Гусаров. Вторжение в Украину: Хроника российской агрессии. Киев: Брайт Стар Паблицинг 2016; Sayarin, S.; Tsybulenko, E. (eds.). The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law. Jus Ad Bellum, Jus In Bello, Jus Post Bellum, Springer, The Hague 2018.

²² To read more about Russian hybrid warfare in Ukraine, see U. Franke, “War by non-military means: Understanding Russian information warfare”. Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, 2015; J. Bērziņš. Russian New Generation Warfare is not Hybrid Warfare”, in Artis Pabriks & Andis Kudors (eds.) The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe. Riga: Centre for East European Policy Studies, University of Latvia Press 2015.

²³ See e.g. K. Müür, H. Mölder, V. Sazonov and P. Prulmann-Vengerfeldt, Russian Information Operations against the Ukrainian State and Defence Forces: April–December 2014. Journal of Baltic Security, 2(1), pp. 28-71; H. Mölder and V. Sazonov. Information Warfare as the Hobbesian concept of Modern Times: Principles, Techniques and Tools of Russian Information Operations in Donbass. Journal of Slavic Military Studies 31(3), pp. 308-28.

²⁴ To read more about the Zapad exercise see A. Ventsel, V. Sazonov, A. Saumets (eds.). Zapad 2017 infosõja kontekstis. Sõjateadlane 8 (2018).

²⁵ A. Ventsel, S. Hansson, M.-L. Madisson, V. Sazonov. Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia’s Zapad war games. Media, War & Conflict, 2019, p. 3.

Belarus,²⁶ and the country could follow Ukraine's lead by turning towards Europe. In that case, the Kremlin would not only suffer in economic terms (Russia imports goods from Europe and exports its goods to Europe via Belarus as if they originated from that country). The political aspect here is perhaps even more significant: this would mean a reduction in Moscow's influence in Europe and in the Baltic region. It would also reduce Russia's chances of pressuring Ukraine, and Minsk could no longer be used as a shock absorber – for instance, for conducting negotiations like those of the Minsk summit, if such a need should recur. In the military-political and strategic sense, Russia would lose Belarus as a military partner, and military exercises 'Zapad'²⁷ could no longer be held on Belarusian territory, causing military cooperation to decline or end altogether.

After all, Belarus could end up in NATO's sphere of interest, or at least this has not been ruled out, as this is what happened to Ukraine. In addition, this would mean that the Russian Federation would lose access to the gap of the Suwałki Corridor²⁸. As is well-known, there is currently a possibility that Russia could use the Suwałki Corridor against Poland and the Baltic states when necessary by threatening to close this existing gap.

We should not forget that Vladimir Putin's regime also needs Belarus to ensure its sustainability for at least five to ten years;

it needs to keep Belarus under its influence and closely integrated with Russia, so as to present it to the people later as a great geopolitical success and achievement because the era of hysterical propaganda slogan "Крым наш" („the Crimea is ours“) after the annexation of Crimea in early 2014 by Russian troops,²⁹ which used to thrill the Russian population, is long gone. The Kremlin's efforts in the Syrian civil and Middle East war were not as successful as hoped (in Kremlin), either. The popularity of Putin's regime is currently in decline, along with Russians' income and the economy. The general mood in the country is increasingly depressing.

3. The "Union State" Agreement between Russia and Belarus

The Agreement on the Creation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus was signed in 1999 in Moscow by Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko and the then Russian president, Boris Yeltsin. The treaty, which consists of 71 articles, begins as follows:

The Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, based on the will of the nations of Russia and Belarus to unite and relying on the historical commonality of their fates, having their citizens' vital interests in mind; convinced that the establishment of a Union State allows efforts to be united in the interests of the socio-economic progress of both countries; based on the effort to continue the integration processes established with the Treaty on the Formation of the Community of Belarus and Russia of 2 April 1996, the Treaty on the

²⁶ A. Cordesman, 'Russia and the 'Color Revolution'', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 28 May 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-%E2%80%9Ccolor-revolution%E2%80%9D> (accessed: 1.11.2019).

²⁷ See more on history of military exercises 'Zapad' D. A. R. Palmer. The NATO-Warsaw Pact competition in the 1970s and 1980s: A revolution in military affairs in the making or the end of a strategic age? *Cold War History* 14(4), 2014, pp. 533-573.

²⁸ S. Roblin. The Suwalki Gap: The 40-Mile Line NATO is Ready to Go to War with Russia Over. *The National Interest*, 13 April 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/suwalki-gap-40-mile-line-nato-ready-go-war-russia-over-52172> (accessed: 7.11.2019).

²⁹ H. Mölder; V. Sazonov, R. Värk. Krimmi Venemaaga liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad. I. *Akadeemia* 12 (2014), pp. 2148-2161; H. Mölder; V. Sazonov, R. Värk. Krimmi Venemaaga liitmise ajaloolised, poliitilised ja õiguslikud tagamaad. II. *Akadeemia*, 1 (2015), pp. 77-104.

Formation of the Union of Belarus and Russia of 2 April 1997 and the Statutes of the Union of Belarus and Russia of 23 May 1997, and by implementing the provisions of the Declaration on the Further Integration of Russia and Belarus of 25 December 1998; confirming their attachment to the principles of the Charter of the UN and wishing to live in peace and good neighbourly relations with other countries; acting in accordance with the generally recognised principles and standards of international law, have agreed on the following³⁰.

The Article 2 of this treaty explains the union's objectives, some of the most important of which are:

... ensuring the peaceful and democratic development of the member nations of the sister states; strengthening of friendship, ensuring an increase in well-being and living standards; creating a shared economic space to ensure socio-economic development on the basis of the member states' material and intellectual potential and market mechanisms required for the functioning of the economy³¹.

Some of these objectives have already been fulfilled (at least partially) – for instance, the creation of a shared economic space – but there are also unachieved goals and points of difference between Minsk and Moscow, such as the former not having recognised the Crimea as part of Russian Federation³².

This, of course, shows that Belarus and its president are still more or less an inde-

pendent country and resisting the pressure applied by Moscow. But how strong will it be in the event of a possible hybrid conflict between Russia and Belarus? One can only guess.

4. The Military Dimension

Belarus and Russia have engaged in military cooperation for years, even more. One facet of this cooperation is the military exercises called 'Zapad'. Since 2009, Russian Fedartiom and Belarus have organised these once every four years (to date, these have taken place in 2009, 2013 and autumn 2017)³³. In the introduction to a special issue of the Estonian Journal of Military Studies (Sõjateadlase) dedicated to 'Zapad 2017', Andreas Ventsel and I pointed out following:

Zapad, the name of Russia and Belarus' joint military exercise, is not chosen randomly and it has its own historical tradition: this was also the name of a military strategic operational exercise organised by the Soviet Union and member states of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War period in 1973, 1977, 1981, 1984 and 1985, which was in many ways similar to Zapad. Thus, Zapad was first held in 1973. In the 1970s and 1980s, Zapad also had a propaganda objective in addition to military-technical goals: Moscow wanted to demonstrate the military might of the Soviet Union as well as to use extensive and powerful exercises

³⁰ "Договор о создании союзного государства", www.soyuz.by/about/docs/dogovor5/ (accessed: 16.6.2019).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Е. Толкачева, *Единая Конституция, валюта, суд». Что из Договора о Союзном государстве так и осталось на бумаге*". TUT.BY, 15 December 2018, news.tut.by/economics/619244.html?crnd=6850 (accessed: 1.11.2019).

³³ R. McDermott. Zapad 2009 Rehearses Countering a NATO Attack on Belarus. – Eurasia Daily Monitor, Nr. 6 (179) (2009), <https://jamestown.org/program/zapad-2009-rehearses-countering-a-nato-attack-on-belarus/> (accessed: 1.11.2019); S. Sukhankin. Zapad-2017: What Did These Military Exercises Reveal? Diplomaatia 170, 24 October 2017, <https://icds.ee/zapad-2017-what-did-these-military-exercises-reveal/> (accessed: 1.11.2019). A. Wilk, "The Zapad-2017 Exercises: The Information War (for Now)". Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 4 September 2017, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2017-09-04/zapad-2017-exercises-information-war-now (accessed: 1.11.2019).

to intimidate Western and Central European countries who had not joined the Warsaw Pact. In this sense, Zapad-814, which was held from 4 to 12 September 1981 on the territory of the military districts of Belarus, the Baltic states and Kyiv, was particularly noteworthy. It was one of the largest military exercises in history, involving approximately 100,000 Soviet servicemen and a variety of military equipment. The collapse of the system in the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries and the poor economic situation, however, forced the Kremlin to abandon several grandiose plans and ambitious projects in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Among other things, Moscow had to cut down considerably on its ambitions in relation to Zapad³⁴.

These kind joint military exercises (between Russia and Belarus) and other forms of military cooperation are also reflected in the planned military doctrine of the Union State, which V. Putin approved in late 2018³⁵. To date, we have published one joint volume on the military exercises, in which we focused mostly on Russian information warfare in the context of 'Zapad-2017'³⁶. For this reason, I have chosen not to have a deeper discussion in this article about issues related to 'Zapad-2017' or to Russia and Belarus in the context of these military exercises.

5. Intimidation and political pressure from the Kremlin

For many years, Russia has put pressure on Belarus and its leader, A. Lukashenko.

To this end, the Kremlin has used both political and economic measures as well as information operations – for example, the “milk wars” initiated by Russian Federation at the beginning of 2009, which created a lot of tension between Minsk and Moscow³⁷. As already mentioned, the latest 'Zapad' exercise ('Zapad-2017') in particular prompted fears about Russia refusing to withdraw its troops and annexing Belarus (this was also feared in Ukraine and elsewhere). Lukashenko probably had the same worry. The end of 2018 saw increased pressure applied by Moscow to make Belarus integrate further with Russia.

The Russian side started with revising the Agreement on the Creation of the Union State³⁸. The former Russian ambassador in Belarus (August 2018 – April 2019), Mikhail Babich, spoke about this revision:

At present, the inventory of all the provisions of the Union State Agreement is being broken down by blocks: economic, social, government, security and military-technical cooperation. All aspects of the Agreement, which were established in 1999, will be examined by the appropriate governmental agencies³⁹.

According to M. Babich, this is connected with the issue that Russia, Belarus and some other countries signed onto the 2014 Eurasian Economic Union. Babich points out: „some of the clauses of the Agreement have been taken out and translated at the Eurasian level, therefore it is important here not to duplicate the powers delegated to the Eurasian authorities, but to preserve

³⁴ V. Sazonov, A. Ventsel. Sõna saateks. Sõjaväeõppus Zapad 2017 Venemaa infosõja kontekstis. Sõjateadlane 8, pp. 7-8.

³⁵ Распоряжение президента Российской Федерации о военной доктрине Союзного государства, 19.12.2018, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201812190032> (accessed: 12.9.2019).

³⁶ V. Sazonov, A. Ventsel, A. Saumets (eds.). Zapad 2017 infosõja vaatepunktist. Sõjateadlane 8 (2018).

³⁷ Wikipedia 2009. Russian ban on Belarusian dairy products https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_Russian_ban_on_Belarusian_dairy_products (accessed: 5.11.2019).

³⁸ Сейчас идет инвентаризация всех положений союзного договора – посол Бабич, Белрынок, 23.01.2019, <https://www.belrynok.by/2019/01/23/sejchas-idet-inventarizatsiya-vseh-polozhenij-soyuznogo-dogovora-posol-babich/> (accessed: 1.11.2019).

³⁹ Ibid.

in the framework of the union treaty those legal relations that should be in a bilateral format"⁴⁰. The Parliament of Belarus ratified the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union in October 2014⁴¹.

Babich stressed the long-term cooperation and partnership between Minsk and Moscow, but obviously, Moscow's desire to exert pressure. Evidently, in Moscow's review of *The Agreement on the Creation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus*, we may see certain political pressure on Minsk. Notable is that Mikhail Babich, who has no diplomatic experience abroad, has been given wide discretion as a special representative to advance Russian interests and to influence the Belarusian leadership to meet Russian demands⁴². Let us not forget that as a Russian "diplomat", Mikhail Babich had a background in the special service, which is not diplomatic at all⁴³.

In addition to the political pressure on Minsk, Moscow has been increasing its economic pressure for years (in which the roles of M. Babich and of other men with similar backgrounds are not insignificant). Among other things, Moscow is threatening to raise the price of oil sold to Belarus to the world market price rather than continuing to sell it at a 20% discount⁴⁴. This tactical step by Russia of levying oil taxes on Belarus causes great financial damage. Finally, according to Belarus's own economic analysts, the country may lose as much as 10.8 billion USD by 2025. One can only guess

how this dispute will end⁴⁵.

At the same time, the Belarusian president claimed in a meeting on 10 January 2019 that "*it is not worth aggravating the problems related to Belarus' budget losses that may be caused by Russia's tax manoeuvre; however, there is a need to seek other resources that could compensate for them*". Lukashenko also stressed that this must not be viewed as a disaster. "*If the Russian leadership chooses such a path – the loss of their only ally to the west – that is their choice. We cannot force them*"⁴⁶. Thus, A. Lukashenko has taken into account the possibility of the further deterioration of the relationship with Russia, with Belarus ceasing to be its partner and ally. Of course, Moscow may not wish to make Belarus a Russian oblast (even though there are those in Russia who do want that), but there is no doubt that Moscow wants to gain full control over the country – to control its armed forces, its economy, its resources, its finances (so there would be a shared currency – the Russian rouble), and so on. This would probably mean the end of Lukashenko's rule and the loss of Belarus' sovereignty. As Anne Applebaum rightly points out:

But in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Lukashenko has sought to protect his independence and project a different image, occasionally defying Russian requests, pursuing a somewhat independent foreign policy and even, as a gesture toward the West,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Парламент Белоруссии ратифицировал договор о Евразийском экономическом союз. Тасс, 9.10.2014, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1496150> (accessed: 1.11.2019).

⁴² Väisluureameti aastaraamat 2019, p. 24.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ А. Шрайбман, Шрайбман назвал самый вероятный сценарий конфликта Минска и Москвы. Gazeta.by, 21.1.2019, <https://gazetaby.com/post/shrajbman-nazval-samyj-veroyatnyj-scenarij-konflik/149744/> (accessed: 12.9.2019).

⁴⁵ Väisluureameti aastaraamat 2019: 245; Д. Заяц, Чем закончится нефтяной спор с Россией" Naviny.by, 20 August 2018, <https://naviny.by/article/20180820/1534739667-chem-zakonchitsya-neftyanoi-spor-s-rossiye> (accessed: 7.7.2019).

⁴⁶ Если Россия не заплатит компенсацию – это путь к потере единственного союзника в западном направлении. Лукашенко. Белрынок, 10 January 2019, <https://www.belrynok.by/2019/01/10/esli-rossiya-ne-zaplatit-kompensatsiyu-eto-put-k-potere-edinstvennogo-soyuznika-v-zapadnom-napravlenii-lukashenko/> (accessed: 29.10.2019).

*releasing his political opponents from jail ...*⁴⁷

At the same time, Lukashenko has openly shown that he will not give in to Moscow's extortion⁴⁸. In mid-December 2018, Lukashenko stated that:

It is no use blackmailing us, trying to make us toe the line or seizing us by the throat. We must pursue integration for the sake of the unity of our peoples. I cannot resort to plotting behind the scenes – the process should be open and transparent.

Alexander Lukashenko also stressed that Belarus would not become part of Russia, and Moscow's "deeper integration" would mean Belarus acceding to Russia. "I understand these hints: take our oil, but let's destroy the country and join Russia," said A. Lukashenko, stressing that the idea of "deeper integration" originated in Moscow and would essentially mean the end of Belarus. Lukashenko added also: "some people are already saying we are ready for you to become a part of the Russian Federation in the form of six oblasts"⁴⁹.

It is not known whether President of Belarus A. Lukashenko actually believes this and is sincere about it. Perhaps the Belarusian leader wants to save face in front of his voters and supporters, but this could also be his real position⁵⁰.

No doubt, Alexander Lukashenko understands pretty well that if this "deeper integration" with Russian Federation comes

into being, it would essentially mean the end of his rule⁵¹ and of the sovereignty of Belarus, which is probably why he wants to withstand the Kremlin's pressure and refuses, for example, to become vice president of the Union State. It seems that the Belarusian authoritarian leader does not want to play second fiddle in his own country.

6. Summary

Vladimir Putin's revanchist regime is doing everything in its power to get control over Belarus and to further integrate Belarus with the Russian Federation, attempting to bring about the final collapse of Belarusian sovereignty. There are several reasons while Putin is interested in swallowing of Belarus. Firstly, the popularity of Putin in Russia itself is going down, economic and social problems in Russia are deepening and people are more and more unsatisfied with Putin's regime. Secondly, war with Ukraine was not successful for the Kremlin. Thirdly, Vladimir Putin needs a new "victory" to increase his popularity among Russians in Russia.

However, President Lukashenko opposes such developments and, despite Moscow's increasing political blackmail, economic pressure and information and cyber campaigns, has shown perseverance in standing up to Russia's aggressive and pushy intimidation, which has, in a sense, acquired the characteristics of hybrid warfare. But it is very difficult to predict how this resistance is going to end. It could happen that the Kremlin could easily overstretch itself in its efforts to swallow its 'vassal' state, Belarus, and may lose it from its sphere of influence, just like Ukraine in 2013-2014.

However, things could go differently, because it seems that Moscow is now acting

⁴⁷ A. Applebaum. Why the world should be paying attention to Putin's plans for Belarus. *Washington Post*, 4 January 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/why-the-world-should-be-paying-attention-to-putins-plans-for-belarus/2019/01/04/40c8d7cc-1043-11e9-831f-3aa2c2be4cbd_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.5bc515a44316 (accessed: 9.9.2019).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Президент – о словах Медведова об «углубленной интеграции»: Шантажировать нас бесполезно. TUT.BY, 14 December 2018, news.tut.by/economics/619170.html (accessed: 9.9.2019).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ А. Класковский, Класковский: Интеграция – конец для Лукашенко. Он будет упираться рогом... Белорусский партизан, 11 January 2019 belaruspartisan.by/politic/451245/ (accessed: 9.9.2019).

more carefully than it did in Ukraine before 2014 and is doing everything it can to not let Minsk slip out of its grip.

What can this mean for the security environment in the Baltic region? In the case of the end of Belarusian sovereignty, the three Baltic states and Poland will be faced with a more complicated and dangerous geopolitical situation in the region of Baltic see. This will open new possibilities for the Kremlin's *modus operandi*, enabling Russian Federation and V. Putin to expand its imperialist aggression and influence and destabilize the security environment in the Baltic region.

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