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IN THE BEAR'S PAW: HOW EUROPEANS CAN LOOSEN RUSSIA'S GRIP ON BELARUS

Key Points

1. Growing Russian military integration in Belarus creates direct security risks along NATO's eastern flank.
2. Broad economic sanctions have failed to stop Belarus from becoming an active Russian forward platform; calibrated engagement can prevent total absorption into the Union State.
3. Effective policy requires combining border deterrence with strict, verifiable benchmarks for diplomatic engagement.

Summary

Over the past few years, Belarus has quietly developed into one of Europe's most pressing security dilemmas. The aftermath of the 2020 elections and the 2022 war in Ukraine has fundamentally altered Eastern European security dynamics, forcing the country into supporting position for Moscow's military strateg as a rear-operating base. Since 2023, Russian deployments have increasingly positioned Belarus as a potential forward-operating base. The presence of nuclear assets and missile forces on Belarusian soil has effectively brought the shadow of Russian military power much closer to the European Union's border. Consequently, European policymakers face a severe strategic crisis along their eastern frontier. Addressing this entrenchment requires going beyond blanket isolation to establish clear deconfliction channels, calibrate economic pressure, and prevent Minsk from fully consolidating into an irreversible Russian military outpost.

A satellite state

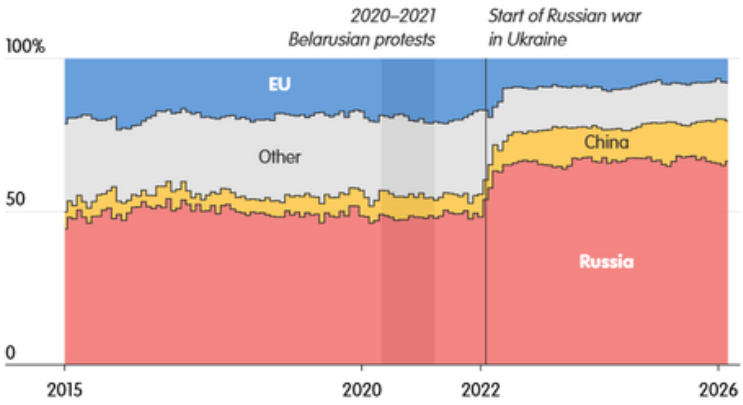
According to a map of Europe, Belarus is situated at the heart of Eastern Europe. Over the past few years, this strategic location has transformed the nation from a quiet buffer state into a critical security threat for the continent. In the aftermath of the disputed 2020 presidential elections and subsequent crackdowns, the European Union downgraded diplomatic ties and imposed economic sanctions. Russia quickly filled the economic void, drastically deepening Alexander Lukashenko's political and military dependency on the Kremlin. The consequenses of this dependency started during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, during which Belarus served as a crucial staging ground for Russian aggression. Today, the deployment of nuclear-capable hardware, hypersonic missiles and expanded military infrastructure on Belarusian soil has effectively turned the country into an active forward base for Russian power projection. This strategic shift poses an unprecedented threat to frontline NATO allies: Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. Breaking this cycle requires Europe to update its foreign policy flexibility. Rather than depending on sanctions that push Minsk further into Moscow's hands, Brussels must combine NATO defenses along the eastern border with diplomacy. Seizing moments where Lukashenko retains limited autonomy will contain military risks while maintaining long-term commitments to human rights.

Belarus as a security actor

Since Belarus declared its independence from Soviet Union in 1991, it has transformed from quiet buffer state into fully militarized actor on NATO's eastern flank. However, its strategic proximity to the Suwalki Gap made it central to Kremlin strategy. Under Lukashenko and Putin, shared anti-Western values shifted into total economic and political reliance on Moscow following the 2020 election crackdowns. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked the primary turning point, as Belarus served as a crucial staging ground for offensives against Kyiv.

Since then operational absorption within the Union State has deepened though modernized transport corridors, over 130,000 tons of transferred ammuniton, joint Zapad excercises and the deployment of advanced Oreshnik intermediate-range and nuclear-capable systems.

Crucially, this threat is compounded by aggressive hybrid tactics designed to test Western cohesion. From state-sponsored migrant exploitation along frontline borders to secret tunnel networks, Belarus continually probes NATO's readiness. Through military routinization and institutional embedding, Belarus has surrendered its sovereign autonomy, functioning as a homogeneous forward platform for Russian power projection aimed at undermining Eastern European security.

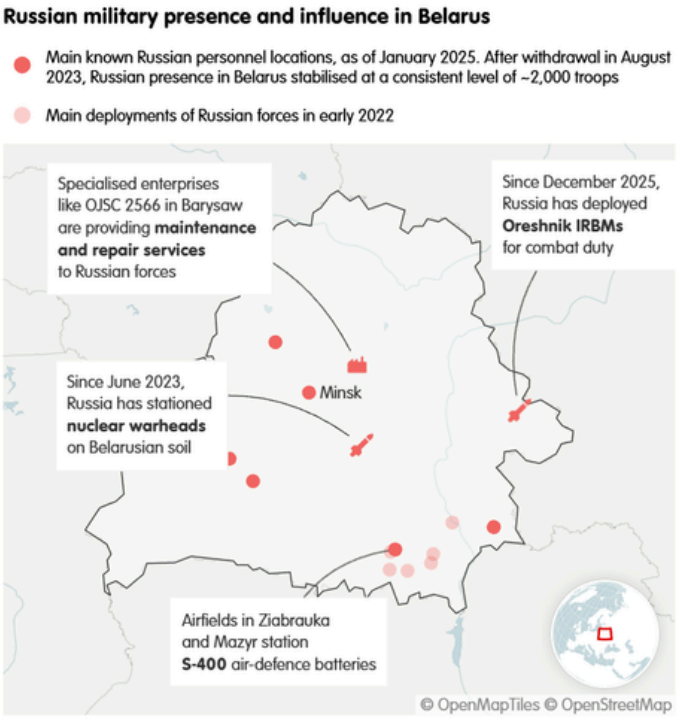


Belarus as a threat to Europe

Over the last six years, Belarus's security role has drastically changed, transitioning from strategic rear-operating logistics hub into a militarized forward-operating base for Russian aggression. Previously, Minsk provided non-combat logistical support while maintaining diplomatic maneuvering room with Western economies.

However, since 2022, Belarus has steadily surrendered its autonomy, integrating into Moscow's military machine and adopting its anti-Western ideology.

This transformation poses severe conventional and nuclear threats to European stability. Deploying nuclear-capable Iskander warheads, hypersonic Oreshnik systems, and military personnel near Minsk directly threatens NATO warning networks while expanding the war's geographic scope toward Ukraine's northern border. Additionally, drone signal relay stations on Belarusian soil actively support Russian aerial offensives. Concurrently, Minsk aggressively executes hybrid warfare—such as state-sponsored migrant exploitation, airspace incursions, and covert sabotage—forcing Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia to enforce strict border closures. With the historic buffer zone between Russia and Western Europe effectively eliminated, European leaders must immediately adapt their strategy—combining reinforced NATO frontier security with targeted diplomatic maneuvering to disrupt complete military absorption into the Union State framework.



Source: RochanConsulting; Hajun Project; RFE/RL's Belarus Service; OpenSanctions

What Europe is doing

On sanctions

The 2020 post-election crisis severed EU-Belarus diplomatic ties, re-triggering a familiar cycle of regime repression and Western sanctions. Rather than pursuing tailored foreign policy, Brussels bundled its Belarus restrictions directly into comprehensive Russian sanctions packages. This blanket approach backfires economically; isolating Belarusian industry forces Alexander Lukashenko to rely entirely on open Russian markets. Influenced heavily by strict positions in Poland and Lithuania, the European Council extended the current sanction framework until 2027, despite limited transactional contact regarding border security and political prisoners. Ultimately, this rigid trade isolation fails to deter Belarus's transformation into a militarized forward base, while simultaneously failing to alleviate the suffering of ordinary Belarusians at home or in exile.

On the diaspora

Since 2020, forced migration has become an intentional state strategy designed to neutralize domestic opposition and consolidate authoritarian rule. By driving opposition leaders, journalists, and civic organizers across European borders, the Lukashenko regime effectively externalizes domestic political contestation to project an illusion of internal stability. This forced displacement creates significant challenges for host nations, which must address social cohesion alongside rising transnational threats, such as regime surveillance and intimidation. Although the EU offers democratic forces unprecedented political recognition, funding, and legal protection, Lukashenko actively uses exile as a strategic arena.

On its foreign policy approach

A growing rift divides European and American strategies toward Minsk. Washington's pragmatism under Donald Trump prioritizes visible, transactional deals, such as lifting sanctions on the Belarusian potash industry in exchange for releasing 123 political prisoners. While this economic relief provides Alexander Lukashenko with limited leverage apart from Moscow, it completely ignores the critical security threats facing European borders. Unlike Brussels' risk-based isolation, US bargaining accepts the regime's legitimacy without demanding reductions in Russian military deployments. This strategic divergence allows Minsk to play both sides, gaining economic concessions from Washington while continuing to function as a forward-operating base for Kremlin power projection. Ultimately, without transatlantic alignment, US bargaining delivers short-term humanitarian wins without reducing Belarusian integration into Russia's aggressive posture.

What Europe can do next?

Support eastern border states

The EU must deeply integrate support for states bordering Belarus into a unified defense strategy modeled on NATO's deconfliction frameworks. Strengthening border infrastructure under programs like "Strong regions for a safer Europe" is vital, but must be paired with structured military-diplomatic channels. To reduce miscalculation risks during provocations, European leaders should establish transparency mechanisms similar to the OSCE Vienna Document. Recognizing that Lukashenko has previously sought to de-escalate maneuvers by permitting exercise observation, the EU can use targeted signaling to lower operational risks. This coordinated posture reinforces regional capabilities against covert sabotage and weaponized migration, creating a resilient defense shield that effectively neutralizes escalation risks along the bloc's vulnerable eastern boundary.

Strengthen connections inside Belarus

Europeans should maintain pragmatic, working-level diplomatic links and technical communication hotlines through member-state embassies in Minsk to track troop movements and avoid dangerous miscalculations. Beyond official contacts, Brussels must invest in Belarusian civil society to prevent complete cultural and economic integration into the Union State. Economic support should directly empower domestic small and medium-sized enterprises, building independent economic capacity that gradually decouples Belarus from Russian trade dependencies. Concurrently, non-profit cooperation, communal projects, and educational exchanges nurture a forward-looking generation that values European partnership. Engaging youth through programs like Erasmus+ builds long-term democratic leadership, establishing an essential internal foundation for future working relations with the European Union.

Engage with the Belarusian diaspora

The EU must treat the Belarusian diaspora as a strategic constituency, countering Lukashenko's policy of neutralizing dissent through forced exile. his requires moving away from volatile emergency aid toward permanent EU funding streams that support exile-based research, civic groups, and independent journalism. Crucially, transnational repression—such as digital surveillance, cross-border harassment, and regime intimidation against relatives remaining in Belarus—must be confronted as a direct threat to EU sovereignty and internal security.

Expanding formal diplomatic dialogue with figures like Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya grants Brussels unique access to alternative political channels and state insights. Formal engagement with opposition leaders like Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya offers deep analytical insights into regime operations, ensuring that exiled communities remain active catalysts for Belarus's democratic future.

Link diplomacy with action

European policy must shift toward calculated, conditional engagement that views diplomatic flexibility as an instrument of regional security. Because Europe shares immediate borders with Belarus, its long-term interests demand strategic stability, controlled migration, and firm regional deterrence. Unlike Washington's short-term transactional deals, Brussels must structure any sanctions relief around strict, verifiable conditions. Required benchmarks must include independent verification of political prisoner releases, a permanent end to new political arrests, and unhindered access for international humanitarian bodies. Linking Lukashenko's desire for economic breathing room to strict operational conditions creates real leverage. Strategic conditionality allows the EU to address root causes of regional instability while protecting its long-term frontier security against Union State pressure.

Untangle Minsk from Moscow

Belarus's quiet removal of Russian military relay stations under Ukrainian pressure proves that Lukashenko still possesses limited operational autonomy in security decisions. By coordinating closely with Washington, Europe can establish clear, joint diplomatic incentives and red lines, neutralizing Lukashenko's attempts to exploit transatlantic policy gaps. While the US focuses on transactional deals, the EU must insist on border security and sovereignty protections.

Demonstrating that further escalation carries severe economic and diplomatic costs encourages Minsk to preserve its remaining decision-making space. Strategic, calibrated pressure from neighboring states can gradually decouple Belarusian policy from Russian military control, restricting deeper Union State integration and protecting European border stability.

Shaping stabilisation on European terms

To prevent Belarus from becoming a permanent Russian forward platform, Europe must transcend the false binary of total isolation or uncritical engagement. Rejecting Lukashenko's democratic legitimacy should not preclude offering conditional incentives that influence how regional security unfolds. Short-term goals must prioritize halting the permanent stationing of Russian forces, removing deployed nuclear assets, and stopping institutional military integration. Long-term efforts should aim for a sovereign Belarus capable of making rational, independent foreign policy decisions rather than acting as a submissive military proxy. By granting calibrated agency to Minsk and reducing opportunities for Russian coercion, European nations can restore the historic buffer zone, protect NATO's eastern flank, and ensure a decisive European voice in future regional security architecture.

FOOTNOTES

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Operationalizing Conditional Economic Engagement. Utilizing market access and financial assistance as dynamic strategic tools allows the Union to incentivize behavioral compliance and deter aggressive posture among peripheral non-member states.
- Protecting Democratic Continuity and Civil Society. Strengthening legal, financial, and digital safeguards for exiled democratic networks preserves institutional memory and builds resilient human capital for future regional stabilization.
- Establishing Regional Deconfliction Frameworks. Developing localized, technical risk-reduction protocols ensures operational predictability along NATO's frontiers without granting political legitimacy to destabilizing authoritarian regimes.

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This Policy Brief has been prepared as part of the participants / students assessment in the framework of the EU Politics lecture.

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