

POLICY BRIEF

**CHINA, BELARUS AND RUSSIA:
A GEOPOLITICAL TRIANGLE?**

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OXFORD BELARUS OBSERVATORY: The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policymaking, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

OST RESEARCH CENTRE: OST Research Centre is a department of the **OFFICE OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA (OST)**. The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

IGSD, UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK: Institute for Global Sustainable Development (IGSD) is a world-leading research institute with a focus on resilience and sustainable governance. IGSD supports the work of OBO by providing expertise, networks and advocacy for this initiative. It also complements the OBO expertise through its own projects which focus on **Resilience in Ukraine** from a comparative perspective (2022-23); the **GCRF COMPASS+** project on Central Eurasia (2022-23), the EU Horizon project **SHAPEDEM** focusing on the eastern neighbourhood and Belarus in particular (2022-25), and DFF **AGMOW** project (SDU, 2023-26) focusing on Russia. IGSD has expertise from life science, humanities and social sciences and champions transdisciplinary research for transformative change.

CHINA, BELARUS AND RUSSIA: A GEOPOLITICAL TRIANGLE?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief focuses on Belarus' relations with Russia and China, in times of the growing geopolitical turmoil in the immediate neighbourhood of Belarus. While Russia remains a strong anchor for Belarus' development, China is now the second largest economy in the world and largest trade partner of dozens of countries, contesting the US and the EU as the dominant trade actors. To this end, Belarus-China trade relations has changed significantly over years. For the Lukashenka regime, China is an actor to diversify its foreign relations and reduce economic and political dependence on Russia. However, the asymmetry between two countries and Lukashenka's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine place these bilateral ties into a more delicate situation. This policy brief assesses current trends in bilateral ties and explores its significance in terms of regional geopolitical dynamics.

BACKGROUND

Following a shift in Belarus' foreign policy away from the Western sphere, the Lukashenka regime has been re-orienting itself towards non-democratic alliances, including China. While Russia has traditionally been the main supporter of the Belarusian regime, Belarus has also actively engaged with autocratic powers in Asia, such as China and the countries of Central Asia. Belarus has been utilising China's financial assistance tools, primarily loans, while also exploring closer trade and economic relations with China as a means of bypassing Western sanctions and possibly reducing its economic dependence on Russia. Meanwhile, integration projects between Belarus and Russia and the latter's continuous financial support is guided more by political than economic motives.

How does Belarus position itself within the geopolitical triangle of Russia-Belarus-China, and what factors contribute to its role within this dynamic? What are the key economic partnerships, political engagements, and calculations that shape the relations between Belarus, China, and Russia? What strategic considerations drive the interactions between Belarus, China, and Russia, and how do they impact regional stability and international cooperation? These and other questions will be discussed in a panel discussion organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory, in partnership with the Research Center of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office, and the IGSD, University of Warwick. These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office (OST Research Centre), the Oxford Belarus Observatory and IGSD University of Warwick (Institute for Global Sustainable Development). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Tatsiana Chulitskaya, Research Associate Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO), Researcher Vilnius University/Manchester Metropolitan University and the speakers of the event included Valery Kavaleuski, Deputy Head at

the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus; Representative on Foreign Affairs, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; Roza Turarbekava, Doctor, Associate Professor, Member of the Free Trade Union of Belarusian State University Employees, Repressed, Independent Belarusian Expert; Viktor Shadurski, Former Dean of Belarusian State University, Researcher at the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Germany), Visiting Professor at the Institute of International Studies at the University of Wrocław; Maryia Danilovich, Postdoctoral Researcher, Centre for Modern East Asian Studies, University of Göttingen.

INTRODUCTION

The political turmoil in Belarus in 2020 has had far-reaching consequences, forcing the Lukashenka regime to recalibrate its foreign policy stance. With Western countries imposing sanctions and distancing themselves from Belarus, the regime found itself trapped in dependence on Russia, which has provided political and economic support, enabling Lukashenka's regime to remain in power despite the majority of Belarusian people being against it. However, the relationship between Belarus and Russia has not always been plain sailing, with occasional disputes over energy prices and political influence¹. In response, Belarus has sought to diversify its alliances and look eastward, with China emerging as a crucial player in this strategic shift. This policy brief aims to analyse the dynamics of Belarus-China-Russia relations in this context and provide recommendations in response to these broader geopolitical developments.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Marples, David. 2008. 'Is the Russia-Belarus Union Obsolete?' *Problems of Post-Communism*. vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 25-35.

ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

I. BELARUS-CHINA RELATIONS: BACKGROUND

Belarus and China established diplomatic relations shortly after Belarus gained independence in 1992. However, it was not until the mid-2000s that Belarus started to pay more attention to its relations with China, seeking new cooperation opportunities and partners amidst tensions with Russia, the European Union, and the United States.

In the 2000s, the Belarusian regime made a significant shift towards strengthening its ties with China. This shift became more evident with Lukashenka's recognition of China as a strategic partner in 2005. Subsequently, in 2013, a comprehensive strategic partnership was announced, followed by a 10-year treaty of friendship and cooperation signed in 2015 during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Minsk¹. This marked a deepening of cooperation between Belarus and China across various sectors.

However, the political crisis and subsequent crackdown on civil society in Belarus following the 2020 presidential elections had a detrimental impact on the regime's international standing. The EU and the US imposed sanc-

tions on the Belarusian regime, raising concerns about its stability and predictability as a partner. This strained the country's image as a reliable and secure ally for China. Subsequently, China started to limit its economic cooperation with Belarus and even suspended several bilateral projects².

Simultaneously, facing a domestic crisis, it became increasingly crucial for the Lukashenka regime to seek alternative partners. Within this intricate triangular dynamic, the Belarusian regime found itself in a delicate position, seeking to maintain its grip on power while exploring avenues for cooperation with China and other potential partners to offset the impact of Western sanctions and reduce its dependence on Russia.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Danilovich, Maryia. 2022. Belarus, The People's Map of Global China: [READ HERE](#)
2. Aleszko-Lessels, Olga and Andrei Yeliseyeu. 2023. Belarus and China: Together through thick and thin? IPS. : [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

II. BELARUS-CHINA-RUSSIA TRIANGLE IN THE CONTEXT OF WAR

Belarus has long held a strategic position as a vital transit and logistical hub, facilitating trade and transportation between Europe and Asia. This positioning has made Belarus an important component of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, the geopolitical dynamics shifted in 2022 when Lukashenka's regime became involved as a co-aggressor, offering logistical and medical support to Russia and enabling the passage of Russian troops through Belarusian territory into Ukraine. This change in Belarus's positioning, along with the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions, has presented significant challenges for the realisation of China's investment and infrastructure plans that include Belarus.

Nevertheless, it has not impeded the development of Belarus-China relations at both the economic and political levels. This is evident in the recent developments between the two countries. According to the official statement of the representative of the Ministry of Economy of China, at the end of 2022, China became Belarus' second trade partner. When it comes to political dimension, on July 15, 2022, the Secretary General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation announced that Minsk had applied to join the organisation, indicating its intention to deepen its engagement with China and other SCO member states. Furthermore, at the SCO summit in Samarkand on September 15-16, 2022, Lukashenka was invited, and the official procedure for considering Belarus' application to join the SCP began. In addition to the summit, Lukashenka had a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Samarkand, where they announced adoption of the declaration on establishing all-round and all-weather strategic partnership. This declaration signifies China's official support for Belarus and indicates a willingness to further strengthen their bilateral relations.

In March 2023, Lukashenka paid an official visit to China, where he

expressed his support for China's 'peace plan' for Ukraine¹. The main significance of this visit for the Belarusian side is the attempted demonstration that Lukashenka's regime, despite facing Western sanctions and supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is not completely isolated on the international stage. According to the Belarusian official sources, 27 intergovernmental, interdepartmental, interregional agreements and 8 large commercial contracts were signed, and the cumulative economic effect of the signed agreements would amount to approximately \$3.5 billion². However, it is worth noting that many of the signed documents are in the form of memorandums, and the track record of cooperation between the two countries suggests that a substantial portion of these agreements have not been implemented in practice³.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Dyner, Anna Maria. 2023. Lukashenka visits China, PISM., [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. Aliaksandr Lukashenka's state visit to the People's Republic of China is over, Pravo.by, 2023: [READ HERE](#)
3. Dyner, Anna Maria. 2023. Lukashenka visits China, PISM., [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

CONCLUSIONS

Belarus-China relations have undergone notable developments in recent years. The political crisis in Belarus and the imposition of Western sanctions have presented challenges to the realisation of China's investment and infrastructure plans in the country. However, despite these obstacles, Lukashenka's regime has managed to maintain economic cooperation with China and strengthen the ties at the political level, as demonstrated by its application to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the establishment of an all-round and all-weather strategic partnership.

Belarus' current position of not being militarily involved in the war creates some space for its engagement and manoeuvring with China. The Belarusian regime seeks to diversify its economic and political partnerships to reduce its reliance on Russian influence and assert its foreign policy presence beyond Russia's sphere of influence. As a result, the regime will likely continue its efforts to strengthen economic cooperation and political engagement with China in the near future.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Given the potential security implications for NATO's Eastern borders, it is crucial for the West to closely monitor and respond to the strengthening of Belarus's defence potential through Chinese investments, including considering targeted sanctions on relevant Belarusian and Chinese entities.
- 2** Closely follow Belarus-China cooperation in the media sphere and address the potential amplification of Belarusian propaganda by Chinese media, while focusing efforts on countering disinformation in countries of the "Global South."
- 3** The West and Belarusian pro-democracy forces should enhance their monitoring and analysis of China's broader engagement with Belarus, particularly in areas of investment, infrastructure projects, and economic cooperation. This includes tracking the implementation of agreements, assessing the impact on local communities, and identifying any potential risks or dependencies that emerge from Chinese investments.

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