

Belarus as a hybrid threat actor: A Russian proxy with residual agency



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The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats

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Summary

This paper analyzes Belarus as a hybrid threat actor in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. With regime survival taking precedence over any foreign policy objective under Alexander Lukashenka's rule, Belarus's use of hybrid threats is conceptualized here as a tool to coup-proof his autocratic power. For decades, Russia's support was instrumental in this regard, but in return, Lukashenka had to relinquish part of Belarus's sovereignty in order to fulfil Vladimir Putin's Eurasian integration ambitions. Since 2022, this subordination has also entailed acting as a co-aggressor against Ukraine and perpetrating hybrid threats against common Western adversaries. Even though Belarus's foreign policy objectives often align with Russia's, and their hybrid threat tactics appear coordinated, their interests do not fully coincide in the longer run. This paper explains why, analyzing the extent of Belarus's agency and its capacity to leverage its own strategic interests in their ongoing confrontation with the democratic world. It highlights the unique aspects of Belarus's strategic culture as a hybrid threat actor, with all policies geared towards two complementary goals: regime consolidation (against internal enemies) and regime legitimation (in the eyes of external adversaries). Meeting these goals requires mobilizing hybrid threats in an autonomous manner, for example to conduct transnational repression against exiled dissidents, but at times also to act in coordination with Russia, as in the case of smuggling operations directed against EU and NATO neighbours. Understanding how the Belarusian regime navigates the hybrid threat battlefield provides valuable insights into its persistent nuisance capacity. The paper concludes that while Belarus currently acts as a Kremlin pawn and proxy on these issues, it does so using tactics of its own making and, at times, to pursue its own distinct strategic goals.

Introduction

Authoritarian states lacking the resources to wield soft or hard power tend to resort to sharp power instead to destabilize their adversaries from within: using hybrid threats is a way to shield their regime against democratic contagion.¹ This is the case with Belarus, whose nuisance capacity came to the fore in 2021 as it instrumentalized irregular migrants to put pressure on its European neighbours. This state-sponsored smuggling operation shocked public opinion and placed Belarus on the world map of hybrid threat actors.² Belarus has continued wielding hostile, albeit below-threshold activities, against neighbouring EU and NATO member states since then, culminating again in autumn 2025 with repeated violations of Lithuania's airspace by drones and weather balloons flying in from its territory.

Against the backdrop of escalating confrontation between Russia and Europe, analyzing operations that involve Moscow's closest military ally requires understanding the kind of hybrid threat actor Belarus actually is. Apparent contradictions in Lukashenka's foreign policy posturing led Ukrainian government officials to qualify his regime as "schizophrenic": on the one hand, Belarus claims to be a peace-

loving nation,³ offering its good offices for negotiating the return of prisoners of war, or warning Poland when Russian drones are about to penetrate its airspace. On the other hand, Alexander Lukashenka regularly makes aggressive or offensive statements against his Western counterparts, parroting Russia's propaganda, bluff, and nuclear blackmail.

These examples aptly illustrate what the EU understands as hybrid threats, which it defines as "a combination of repressive and subversive activities, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic and technological)" that are "below the threshold of officially declared war" and typically seek to exploit a target's vulnerabilities and create ambiguity to complicate decision-making.⁴

Many argue that in the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, in which Minsk continues to play an enabling role, Belarus has become a mere appendage of Russia, and should be treated as nothing more than a satellite state or buffer territory. Experts from frontline states (Poland, the Baltic states, Finland) in particular claim that most state agencies and "force" institutions (the *siloviki*) in Belarus fell under direct Kremlin control more than a decade

1 Christopher Walker, "What is 'sharp power?'" *Journal of Democracy*, 29(3) (2018): 9–23.

2 Aurel Sari, "Instrumentalized migration and the Belarus crisis: Strategies of legal coercion", *Hybrid CoE Paper #17*, April 2023, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-paper-17-instrumentalized-migration-and-the-belarus-crisis-strategies-of-legal-coercion/>.

3 On Belarus's deep-seated conflict aversion, see Anaïs Marin "Does state violence translate into a more bellicose foreign behavior? Domestic predictors of international conflict-propensity in post-Soviet Eurasia", *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, 2(2) (2016): 11–66.

4 Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council "Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats: a European Union response", JOIN/2016/018 final, 6 April 2016.



FIGURE 1. Belarus in its geopolitical environment: Hydrocarbon routes and hubs

ago.⁵ In their view, the Belarusian government should be seen as a proxy and the hybrid threat activities of Belarusian special services as part of Russia's own operations. From this perspective, Lukashenka is a puppet manipulated by the Kremlin: he may bark or seek affection, but he is on a short leash, and only does what his master allows him to do. As this paper points out, the Kremlin has indeed been using Belarus as an instrument in its hybrid threat toolbox, and has rewarded Lukashenka for his loyal contribution.

Claiming that Belarus has no agency poses a problem, however, as it risks exonerating the Lukashenka regime from liability for the crime of co-aggression that Belarus committed by letting its territory be used for attacking Ukraine in 2022, on the grounds that decision-making was subjugated by the Kremlin. Even though Belarus enjoys only limited sovereignty, claiming that it is *de facto* occupied militarily by Russia does not reflect reality. The extent to which Belarus's foreign policy goals overlap with Russia's should not be overestimated either. In fact, many independent Belarusian experts stress that, in spite of shared threat perceptions, Belarus is striving to retain some room for manoeuvre in

pursuit of strategic objectives that differ from Russia's. For lack of smoking-gun evidence, they stress, one can only assume that Belarus's hybrid threat playbook has been approved by or is being implemented in coordination with the Kremlin's. Concluding that Moscow initiates or controls each hybrid threat operation attributed to Belarus is also an unfounded extrapolation, as it ignores Belarus's efforts to resolve its alliance entrapment dilemma,⁶ notably by resorting to hybrid threats of its own design and following its own agenda.

This paper contributes to these debates by exploring what is specific about Belarus's malicious activities on the hybrid threat battlefield. It first recalls how Lukashenka surrendered part of Belarus's sovereignty to Russia in exchange for supporting his regime,⁷ particularly since 2020. It argues that Belarus is not merely a Russian proxy, however, nor is Lukashenka simply a subservient puppet. While Belarus is Russia's satellite, it pursues its own strategic interests, which Lukashenka advances through geopolitical blackmail and "dictaplomatic" bargaining,⁸ a balancing act that relies heavily on hybrid threats. The

5 Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, "Support as a means of subordination. Russia's policy on Belarus", *OSW Point of View* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies), #34, May 2013, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2013-05-06/support-a-means-subordination-russias-policy-belarus>; Ryhor Nizhnikau and Arkady Moshes, "Russia's War and Belarus's Ravaged Sovereignty", *PONARS Policy memo*, 19 September 2022, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russias-war-and-belaruss-ravaged-sovereignty/>. Belarus's neighbours tend to consider the country as a subordinate military appendage of Russia's Western military district.

6 This notion was coined in relation to Belarus by Alexander Lanoszka in "The Belarus Factor in European Security", *Parameters*, 47(4) (2018): 75–84.

7 Hanna Liubakova, "Minsk in Moscow's grip: How Russia subjugated Belarus without annexation", *Atlantic Council report*, November 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/russia-tomorrow/minsk-in-moscows-grip-how-russia-subjugated-belarus-without-annexation/>.

8 This neologism refers to the tactics authoritarian regimes use to achieve domestic, regime-survival goals by weaponizing diplomacy. Cf. Anaïs Marin, "Biélorussie : un régime autoritaire aux horizons restreints" [Belarus: an authoritarian regime with restricted horizons], *Questions internationales* (Paris), # 61–62, mai-août 2013, 128–136.

second section shows that Belarus has a specific strategic culture and foreign policy interests that define its primary objectives as a hybrid threat actor: autocratic regime consolidation on the one hand, and international regime legitimization on the other. The third section provides an overview of the actors that perpetrate hybrid threats in the interest of the Belarusian regime. Finally, the paper

examines three flagship operations that illustrate how Belarus uses hybrid threats to fight its enemies, whether internal or external, in three complementary domains, deciphering the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) mobilized to that effect: information manipulation, transnational repression, and the weaponization of smuggling (including the instrumentalization of illegal migration flows).

I. From alliance to subjugation: Belarus as a tool in Russia's hybrid threat toolbox

Analyzing Belarus's activities as a hybrid threat actor first requires questioning its agency in world politics. Over the past few decades, Alexander Lukashenka has surrendered parts of Belarus's sovereignty to Russia. This section explores how this gradual subordination has allowed Russia to exploit Belarus to perpetrate hybrid threats against their common Western adversaries.

From support to rescue: The road to vassalization

Belarus is a long-standing ally of Russia, which has rewarded Alexander Lukashenka's loyalty for years by granting his country economic and diplomatic support. When the Belarusian leader felt his power wavering after his fraudulent re-election on 9 August 2020, Moscow literally rescued his regime. Yet what Lukashenka had feared most before the vote was a palace coup orchestrated by Russia, which he presumed had bolstered most of his rivals in the campaign. In late July 2020, he ordered the arrest of some thirty Wagner mercenaries who were reportedly stranded in Minsk awaiting transfer to Africa and whom he suspected of having been sent to overthrow him. When protests erupted and spread throughout the country in August, Lukashenka was determined to suppress them himself, using maximum force to put an end to the movement without seeking Moscow's "brotherly" assistance. Having congratulated Lukashenka on his re-election, Vladimir Putin pledged support to crush the rebellion and

restore order.⁹ This emboldened the Belarusian *siloviki*, whose increased violence against peaceful protesters drew even more people onto the streets, leading to further arrests. The revolution was crushed without Russian military intervention, but from then on, an isolated Lukashenka became totally dependent on Putin for his survival.

Russian support was most visible in the secondment of state TV journalists to replace Belarusian ones who had defected. As the protests continued unabated, the Kremlin tightened its grip on key state structures: the military, vital sectors of the economy, especially dual-use industries, and the information landscape, including education and the media, thereby orienting the ideological content of the narratives produced to serve propaganda needs. This complemented prior efforts to subjugate Belarus, which had intensified since 2011, including through the indoctrination of Belarusians with "Russian World" precepts.¹⁰

Confronted with international condemnation, isolation and later on sanctions, the Belarusian regime embraced this Russian support, which brought numerous material benefits. Lukashenka quickly understood, however, the price he would have to pay for his rescue: as Putin's vassal, he had to yield to the Kremlin's demands for "deeper integration" into the Union State of Belarus and Russia, an intergovernmental alliance and Vladimir Putin's vanity project, which he has bolstered since 2019 as cover for his planned de facto annexation of Belarus.

9 He allegedly offered to deploy 1,000 elite troops from the Russian National Guard, which Lukashenka allegedly declined.

10 Cf. Mathieu Boulègue, Orysia Lutsevych and Anaïs Marin, "Civil society under Russia's threat: building resilience in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova", Chatham House research paper, 8 November 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/11/civil-society-under-russias-threat-building-resilience-ukraine-belarus-and-moldova>.

Belarus as a tool of Russia's hybrid warfare

Following the events of 2020, Belarus became embroiled in a vicious circle of violence and dependence, which accelerated its subordination to the Russian hegemon. Enabling Russia's war against Ukraine turned Belarus into a co-aggressor state and a proxy in Moscow's confrontation with the West.¹¹ Belarusian companies participate in Russia-led schemes to circumvent sanctions,¹² smuggle arms, and engage in other illicit activities in Europe, often under FSB patronage.¹³ Evidence has emerged that Belarusians are among the recruits carrying out Russia's sabotage operations in EU

countries,¹⁴ and behind the bots used by Russian intelligence to destabilize Moldova.¹⁵

Belarus's contribution to Russia's hybrid threat activities is most evident in three domains.

First and foremost, Belarus is instrumental **for disinformation purposes**, as part of Russia's wider CogOps (cognitive operations), providing propaganda outlets such as Radio Belarus that echo Kremlin narratives about the war, NATO¹⁶ (especially Poland),¹⁷ and the Baltic states, which are also targets of joint smear campaigns.

Russia has used Belarus for false-flag operations designed to scare Ukrainians and scatter their forces. For example, in early 2023,

- 11 Lucjan Kubica, "Eastern Partnership countries in flux: from identity politics to militarization of foreign relations", *Hybrid CoE Trend Report #9*, February 2023, 33; <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-trend-report-9-eastern-partnership-countries-in-flux-from-identity-politics-to-militarization-of-foreign-relations/>.
- 12 Yana Mickevich & Marina Dulneva, "Production exchange. How Belarus and Russia trade sanctioned goods with each other. The BIC has revealed the entire chain of prohibited shipments from China to Belarus via Russia", *Belarusian Investigative Center*, 7 October 2025, <https://investigatebel.org/en/investigations/belarus-russia-trade-sanctions>.
- 13 "Belarus used by Russia for arms trafficking to Europe", *Robert Lansing Institute*, 4 November 2021, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2021/11/04/belarus-used-by-russia-for-arms-trafficking-to-europe/>.
- 14 "Poland detains eight suspected of plotting sabotage on behalf of Russia", *Notes from Poland*, 21 October 2025, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/10/21/poland-detains-eight-suspected-of-plotting-sabotage-on-behalf-of-russia/>.
- 15 "Moldova's digital battleground: How propaganda networks flood feeds before the vote", *Newsletter Fact (Fighting against conspiracies and trolls) #5*, 26 September 2025, <https://fact-hub.eu/newsletter-fact-5-moldovas-digital-battleground-how-propaganda-networks-flood-feeds-before-the-vote/>. In September 2025, a Belarusian KGB network operating in Central Europe was identified, leading to the arrest of a former deputy head of the Moldovan intelligence service and the expulsion of several Belarusian diplomats; cf. Shaun Walker, "European operation identifies alleged Belarusian spy ring", *The Guardian*, 11 September 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/11/european-operation-identifies-alleged-belarusian-spy-ring>.
- 16 Anonymous, "How the Belarus-Russia axis works together on anti-EU disinformation push", *Euractiv*, 26 January 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/news/how-the-belarus-russia-axis-works-together-on-anti-eu-disinformation-push/>.
- 17 "Study links Russian, Belarusian disinformation in Poland to Telegram channel", *Polskie Radio*, 13 August 2025, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/artykul/3564407,study-links-russian-belarusian-disinformation-in-poland-to-telegram-channel>.

Belarusian forces led Ukrainian intelligence to believe that a new offensive from Belarusian soil was imminent, a hybrid threat that was echoed in Belarus's own propaganda.¹⁸ During such events, Lukashenka's statements are carefully calibrated to serve Russia's reflexive control tactics vis-à-vis the West. For instance, Lukashenka was never prevented from calling the "special military operation" a war, whereas Russians who do so risk imprisonment for "discrediting the army". The discourse discrepancy allows Russia to use Belarus as a messenger to spread false and negative news. Lukashenka's legendary outspokenness is convenient for conveying certain propaganda messages in a different tone. This is carried out either as a confidence-building measure, to divert attention away from Russian blunders, or to sow fear, as when Lukashenka claimed in July 2023 that he had restrained Wagner mercenaries hosted in Belarus from "going on an excursion to Warsaw or Rzeszów". Many regarded this mise-en-scène as a Kremlin-scripted psyop.¹⁹

Secondly, Lukashenka regularly mentions the **deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on Belarus's territory**. Although there is still no evidence of tactical nuclear warheads being

deployed to Belarus, bluffing about their presence reinforces Russia's nuclear blackmail. This effectively stalled the West: fearing a nuclear escalation, Europeans have withheld the delivery to Ukraine of military equipment that could have enabled it to achieve a decisive victory. In February 2022, Belarus renounced its formal nuclear-free status and neutrality aspirations, which had previously been enshrined in its Constitution.²⁰ In late 2024, it signed a Treaty on Security Guarantees that integrates Belarus into Russia's nuclear deterrence framework, providing for the stationing in Belarus of Russian non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons in response to any aggression (nuclear or not) that would pose a critical threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of either state.²¹ Claims that Lukashenka could press the red button are totally unfounded, but they effectively terrify public opinion. In this context, Lukashenka also asked Russia for nuclear-capable Oreshnik missiles. Used for the first time to strike Ukraine in November 2024, the announced deployment of these delivery systems to Belarus is just part of Russia's strategic signalling and bluffing. Yet if and when nuclear warheads are deployed, the risk of "spiralling out of control" will arguably

18 Illia Varzhanskyi, "Reflexive Control as a Risk Factor for Using OSINT: Insights from the Russia-Ukraine Conflict", *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 37 (2024): 419-449, 439.

19 Marta Sakavik, "What to make of the Wagner Group's threats against Poland", *Deutsche Welle*, 26 July 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-wagner-groups-westward-ambitions-poland-on-alert/a-66356603>.

20 Amendments were introduced through a referendum held on 27 February 2022. Article 18 of the Constitution was replaced with a provision stating that Belarus bans the use of its territory for aggression against another state – a commitment that was already being violated while Belarusians were casting their ballots.

21 Alexander Taranov, "New Security Arrangements Between Moscow and Minsk Cement Russia's Influence" (two parts), *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 22, issues 18 and 19, 12 and 13, February 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/new-security-arrangements-between-moscow-and-minsk-cement-russias-influence>.



FIGURE 2. Hard and hybrid warfare asset bases in Belarus

increase,²² which explains why work on the Asipovichy base, suspected of being their deployment site, is being closely monitored.²³

Thirdly, Belarus aids the Kremlin by allowing **Russian drones** to cross its airspace before penetrating that of Ukraine and even NATO member states. In 2022, Belarus enabled Russian missile attacks on Ukraine from its territory, but since 2023 its support has taken the form of refraining from shooting down Russian drones that fly into its airspace. When missiles or drones accidentally entered Polish airspace, Warsaw, for fear of escalation, refrained from making it a *casus belli*.²⁴ But the deliberate incursion of over 20 drones on 9–10 September 2025 was of another magnitude, and was treated by Poland and its NATO allies as hybrid warfare.²⁵

In that particular case, the Belarusian authorities resorted to what could be labelled “hybrid threat laundering”, recalling how promptly they had warned the Polish military that night that Russian drones were heading their way. However, the regime’s credibility was undermined by the subsequent disinformation campaign, which maliciously exacerbated the incident’s impact.²⁶ Moreover, Belarus is now establishing a new special operations forces brigade in the Homyel’ region with a legal mandate to carry out limited yet offensive cross-border operations (hybrid, diversionary or retaliatory), including small-scale drone strikes.²⁷

22 Mark S. Bell, “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose: The Old Lessons about Nuclear Weapons being Re-Observed in Ukraine” H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum, Policy Roundtable III-3: “Ukraine and Nuclear Weapons”, 21 February 2024, https://networks.h-net.org/group/discussions/20023326/h-diplorjissf-policy-roundtable-iii-3-ukraine-and-nuclear-weapons#_ftn27.

23 Alexander Taranov, “Russia Develops Infrastructure for Operational Use of Tactical Nuclear Weapons from Belarusian Territory”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17 April 2025, <https://jamestown.org/russia-develops-infrastructure-for-operational-use-of-tactical-nuclear-weapons-from-belarusian-territory/>.

24 “Drone that fell in Poland probably came from direction of Belarus, prosecutor says”, *Reuters*, 21 August 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/drone-that-fell-poland-probably-came-direction-belarusprosecutor-says-2025-08-21/>; “Possible smuggling drone falls in eastern Poland, ministry says”, *Reuters*, 6 September 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/possible-smuggling-drone-falls-eastern-poland-ministry-says-2025-09-06/>.

25 Daryna Sydorenko, “Moscow’s creeping escalation: hybrid pressure on Poland and the Alliance”, Warsaw Institute, 19 November 2025, <https://warsawinstitute.org/moscows-creeping-escalation-hybrid-pressure-on-poland-and-the-alliance/>.

26 Jakub Iwaniuk, “Poland hit by unprecedented disinformation attack following Russian drone incursion”, *Le Monde*, 8 October 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/10/08/poland-hit-by-unprecedented-disinformation-attack-following-russian-drone-incursion_6746208_4.html.

27 The Lansing Institute, “Belarus’ new defense law proposal: strategic alignment with Russia or prelude to escalation?”, 6 August 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/08/06/belarus-new-defense-law-proposal-strategic-alignment-with-russia-or-prelude-to-escalation/>.

II. Strategic objectives and culture: What drives Belarus to perpetrate hybrid threats?

Despite its alignment with Putin's foreign policy priorities, Belarus has specific strategic interests, which only partly overlap with Russia's. This is due to the distinct collective memory of the Belarusian people, notably of World War II, which bred a conflict-avoiding "peacenic" culture,²⁸ the two pillars of which have traditionally been international neutrality and a multi-vector foreign policy.

Strategic culture and threat perceptions

Like Putin, Lukashenka views Western influence as a key threat; yet his regime has never fully trusted Russia either. His population's main fear is of being "drawn into fighting someone else's war", as he puts it.²⁹ Elites quietly share this concern, aware that Vladimir Putin does not recognize Belarus's right to stand alone as a nation. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, most Belarusians realized that their country could be next on his menu. This prompted a cautious national awakening in the second half of the 2010s that even part of the nomenklatura embraced, in spite of the risks entailed by the anti-Russian undertones of this "soft Belarusianisation".³⁰

Lukashenka traditionally associates nationalism with opposition to his rule, and thus suppressed all expressions of Belarusian nationalism, notably since the 2020 protests which featured the white-red-white flag and pre-Soviet symbols that he abhors. He did not fully embrace a Grand Russian identity

instead, however. Despite his public overtures to Moscow, he upholds a distinct, what some call "Creole" national identity concept that only partly overlaps with the mythological post-Soviet heritage praised by Putin.

What both leaders fear most now, and what has become a main driver of Belarus's strategic posture, is a colour revolution. They believe that the Orange, Maidan and Euromaidan revolutions in Ukraine were not genuine popular movements, but rather Western-engineered coups intended to challenge Russia in its own backyard. This led to the branding of all pro-democracy parties and NGOs as internal enemies and fifth-column agents on the CIA's payroll. The belief that some actors abroad could still pose a threat to Lukashenka's rule is the main driver of the Belarusian regime's predominant hybrid threat activity, namely transnational repression, which it implements independently of Moscow, albeit with the occasional support of the FSB.

Lukashenka's balancing act: "Dictaploomatic" manoeuvres

Lukashenka has long-standing expertise in hybrid threats, and his successful exploitation of other countries' vulnerabilities to hybrid threats partly explains his longevity in office. On countless occasions, he has convinced Western democracies to accept his regime "as it is" and to normalize relations with it simply by invoking the threat that Russia would absorb

28 Marin, "Does state violence translate into a more bellicose foreign behavior?"

29 Opinion polls show that war aversion is a consensual and deeply rooted sentiment in Belarusian society; cf. sociological surveys conducted by the Centre for New Ideas with the support of Chatham House, notably a December 2023 analysis available at: <https://en.belaruspolls.org/narratives-1>.

30 Anaïs Marin, "Belarusian nationalism in the 2010s: A case of anti-colonialism? Origins, features and outcomes of ongoing 'soft Belarusianisation'", *The Journal of Belarusian Studies*, 9(1) (2020): 27–50.

his country.³¹ The fear that Belarus might become the next target of Russia's appetite grew in August 2008 following the Five-Day War in Georgia and prompted the EU to extend its Eastern Partnership (EaP) offer to Belarus in 2009. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, he was given the privilege of hosting the negotiations that led to the Minsk I and II Agreements. Each time, Lukashenka successfully portrayed his dictatorship as the lesser of two evils compared with the threat of an expanded Russia bordering the EU and NATO. This "dictaplomatic" blackmail has saved his regime on a number of occasions.³²

Conversely, Lukashenka leveraged his occasional petty flirtation with Western partners to unsettle Moscow. By signalling interest in the EU's Eastern Partnership, despite the democratic conditionality attached to it, he made his Russian patron very nervous. He repeated this manoeuvre a decade later by negotiating a visa-free agreement with the EU and securing US oil deliveries to bypass Russia. These manoeuvres were an easy and inexpensive way to exploit Putin's weak spot: his fear that Russia's dominion over Belarus might be challenged. The release of political prisoners was a barometer of this pressure: whenever he wanted more subsidies from Russia, Lukashenka would have emissaries inform Western capitals of his readiness to pardon them. For him, political prisoners are a commodity that can be monetized and exchanged when the price is at its highest.

For years, this balancing act, aka "dictaplomatic bargaining", enabled Lukashenka to extract concessions from both the West and Moscow. Western support remained largely symbolic, whereas Russia spared no expense, subsidizing up to 20% of Belarus's GDP at its peak.³³ In this game, Lukashenka was trading his two main assets, or at least what he knew his counterparts valued most: political prisoners on the one hand, and geopolitical loyalty on the other. The events of 2020 brought this scheme to a halt, however, forcing the regime to pledge exclusive allegiance to Moscow. Having lost its capacity to play the West against Russia, Belarus has since 2022 largely sought to avoid being dragged into Russia's war as a co-belligerent. Against this backdrop, supporting Moscow on the *hybrid* battlefield has allowed Minsk to at least avoid direct kinetic participation in the war so far.

Strategic goals and foreign policy interests

Since 2020, the regime's main goal in employing hybrid threats has been to silence and discredit dissidents who fled repression and sought refuge abroad. Whereas prior to 2020 the Belarusian diaspora, including political opponents, was under traditional surveillance by intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover, in the following years the conditions for spying on them changed dramatically after an estimated half a million Belarusians

31 Ryhor Nizhnikau & Arkady Moshes, "Belarus's relations with Russia. Is the balancing act ending?", in Aliaksei Kazharski (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Belarus* (Routledge, 2025), 24–36.

32 Marin, "Biélorussie : un régime autoritaire aux horizons restreints".

33 In 2012, according to the International Monetary Fund, cf. "Belarus: A Tale of Missed Opportunities", *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia*, Washington, D.C.: IMF, 2012.

moved abroad,³⁴ while the KGB's presence simultaneously plummeted due to the expulsion of diplomats and the closure of consulates in host countries. This has forced Belarus to develop new tools, techniques and procedures (TTPs) for transnational repression, notably by recruiting agents within the diaspora.

Yet the strategic purpose remains the same, and the way in which exiled dissidents are persecuted illustrates what the theoretical literature has recently evidenced regarding transnational repression: silencing dissent abroad is also a useful hybrid threat instrument of regime legitimization for autocrats, as it challenges the notion that host countries are safe havens for political refugees.³⁵ Another benefit for Belarus is that hybrid threat activities divert attention away from its human rights record. Lastly, one of the regime's strategic goals is to break the geopolitical deadlock that keeps it overly dependent on Russia and isolated from the West by seeking support from the "world majority". Hence Belarus's "multi-vector" diplomacy has sought to develop foreign relations with countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, China, as well as supporters of a multipolar world within the Global South. The objective is for the regime to

consolidate its positive image as an intermediary between the belligerents, a role that the Trump administration has encouraged Lukashenka to play, praising his ability to talk to Putin.

Lukashenka thus feels emboldened to act as a mediator in future peace talks, probably also in the hope of escaping liability as an accomplice in Putin's crimes – a stratagem that is unlikely to succeed, given the mounting evidence that his regime actively participated in the commission of war crimes, notably the deportation and indoctrination of Ukrainian children.³⁶ He resorts to soft power operations to try to elevate Belarus's standing as a business destination and partner for the Trump administration,³⁷ thereby exacerbating the "collective West's" divisions over how to deal with a dictatorship such as Belarus. In so doing, he achieves a strategic objective typical of hybrid threats: sowing discord in the adversary's camp and diverting attention away from domestic problems.

Operationalizing hybrid threats: The Belarusian way

While hybrid threat tools may be relevant at the strategic level, their potential impact is more visible at the operational and tactical

34 Two years ago an independent expert evaluated that repression has forced up to 600,000 Belarusians into exile since 2020, with the majority finding refuge in Poland and Lithuania; cf. Henadz Korshunau, "Belarusian Migration in 2020–2024: Scope, Trends, and Consequences", Centre for New Ideas, May 2024.

35 Marcus Michaelsen & Kris Ruijgrok, "Autocracy's long reach: explaining host country influences on transnational repression", *Democratization*, 31(2) (2024): 290–314.

36 Cf. the joint report by Freedom House, the Regional Centre for Human Rights and the ZMINA and VIASNA Human Rights Centres "Stolen Childhood: How the Belarusian Regime is Erasing Ukrainian Children's Identity through Displacement, Reeducation, and Militarization", October 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2024/stolen-childhood-how-belarusian-regime-erasing-ukrainian-childrens>.

37 Pjotr Sauer, "His drug is power": Lukashenko reaches out to the west. President of Belarus has been edging out of the diplomatic freeze, cautiously probing for space beyond Moscow", *The Guardian*, 30 September 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/30/his-drug-is-power-lukashenko-reaches-out-to-the-west>.

levels.³⁸ Hybrid threat activity combines conventional military tactics with irregular, criminal techniques borrowed from terrorist and mafia groups, simultaneously amplified by tried and tested psyops and cogops procedures, notably through cyberwarfare and information manipulation. Over the years, Belarus has developed a variety of efficient tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) in its own right, such as information manipulation and propaganda, the recruitment of assets within the diaspora for spying or sabotage purposes, and weaponizing smuggling to destabilize EU neighbours from within.

The overarching goal of hybrid threat activity for Belarus is to achieve “parity by subtraction”,³⁹ namely to increase its relative influence by downgrading that of its competitors or contenders using asymmetric warfare tools. The mission plan is to persuade public opinion in target countries that, while Belarus is not perfect, *it is not all that bad* (alternatively: it is not its fault, it is being manipulated, it has no other options, etc.), and that *democracies are not that good either* (i.e. whataboutism). When state TV in Belarus shows EU border guards refusing entry to hundreds of migrants

massed at its external borders, it sends the message that the EU is *not that open to foreigners after all*. When they are seen pushing migrants back, this can serve to argue that Poland and Lithuania are *not that democratic after all*, or that they have a *selective understanding of international refugee law and Schengen rules*.⁴⁰ If they appear to *discriminate against migrants on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion*, Belarusian propaganda will claim that they are *not true to their own values* or that they are *no better than Belarus*, which conversely appears as unjustly persecuted for perpetrating human rights violations that democracies commit too.

This downgrades the image of the EU in the eyes of Belarusians, thereby fulfilling objective one (silencing dissent), while objective two (re-legitimizing Belarus) is achieved when friendly countries, in their own media coverage of border troubles, allow themselves to be taken in by Potemkin-style make-believe, such as images of the Belarusian Red Cross distributing formula milk and blankets to migrants pushed back into the cold winter snow. The question of who took them there in the first place, and how, is obscured by such emotional imagery.

38 Ondřej Filipec, “Multilevel analysis of the 2021 Poland–Belarus Border Crisis in the Context of Hybrid Threats”, *Central European Journal of Politics* 8(1) (2022): 1–18, 7, <https://www.cejop.cz/central-european-journal-of-politics-vol-8-no-1-2022/>.

39 Maciej Filip Bukowski, “Agents of Chaos. The Shadow Campaign against the West. Cognitive Warfare and Cover Action by Russian and Belarusian Intelligence Services”, *Casimir Pulaski Foundation*, September 2025, <https://pulaski.pl/en/agents-of-chaos-the-shadow-campaign-against-the-west/>.

40 The measures adopted by targeted countries derogated from the EU migration and asylum legal framework, illustrating the EU’s chronic inability to manage incoming migratory flows due to the divergent interests of its member states; cf. Mirko Forti, “Belarus-sponsored Migration Movements and the Response by Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland: A Critical Appraisal”, *European Papers* 8(1) (2023): 227–238, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4512675.

III. Actors responsible for hybrid threat activities

Hybrid threat activities often blur the line between state and non-state actors; in the case of Lukashenka's Belarus, however, the line runs elsewhere, due to the very nature of his dictatorship, which combines neo-patrimonial and hyper-personalistic features, resulting in a nepotistic governance system in which personal loyalty to the president prevails over anything else. Lukashenka is often said to manage his country as he would a collective farm, punishing individual initiative and rewarding denunciation. Others go as far as to claim that, since his rule resembles that of a godfather running a centrally corrupt system, Belarus could well qualify as a **mafia state**.⁴¹ This paper posits that, in such a governance system, "non-state actor" is not a pertinent analytical category.

State and non-state actors involved

Given its state-controlled economy and monolithic administrative vertical, after five years of intense repression – which has pushed all dissenters to prison, self-censorship or exile – there is no room left for *any* non-state actor to operate independently of state control in Belarus. The fact that authoritarianism bans independent sources of authority virtually removes the distinction between state and

non-state actors.⁴² Hence the Lithuanian authorities hold the Belarusian government accountable for the repeated violations of Lithuanian airspace by **smugglers**. Even if the direct involvement of the Belarusian leadership cannot be established, President Gitanas Nausėda qualified the incidents in the autumn of 2025, when dozens of weather balloons carrying contraband cigarettes flew over Lithuanian airports, as "a hybrid attack by the KGB". Operations of that size could not be carried out without the protection or negligent complicity of the Belarusian security services.⁴³

The power pyramid in Belarus is structured in such a way that, below Alexander Lukashenka himself, the next echelon of actors involved in hybrid threat activities is his closest entourage, notably the **Lukashenka clan**, including his sons Viktor and Dmitry. Viktor used to supervise the **security forces (siloviki)**, and Western intelligence believes he orchestrated the 2021 migrant crisis. Dmitry heads the Presidential Sports Club and has stakes in Belarus's casino business, which is known to launder money for **organized crime**⁴⁴ under the state's very sponsorship.⁴⁵

Whereas the **Presidential Administration** sits at the top of the executive hierarchy,

41 Going beyond this journalistic statement, academics usually underline the sultanistic and clanic features of the Belarusian autocracy, cf. Uladzimir Rouda "Is Belarus a classic post-Communist mafia state?", in Bálint Magyar (ed.) *Stubborn structures: Reconceptualizing Postcommunist regimes* (CEU Press, 2019), 247–274.

42 Janne Jokinen, Magnus Normark & Michael Fredholm, "Hybrid threats from non-state actors: a taxonomy", *Hybrid CoE Research Report #6*, June 2022, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-research-report-6-hybrid-threats-from-non-state-actors-a-taxonomy/>.

43 Chris Dalby, "Inside Belarus' Cigarette Contraband Network Causing a European Security Crisis", *World of Crime Newsletter*, 27 October 2025, <https://www.seasonsofcrime.com/p/inside-belarus-cigarette-contraband>.

44 Yana Mickevich, 'Who and how: Laundering millions from illegal bets in a Minsk casino', *Belarusian Investigative Centre*, 13 February 2025, <https://investigatebel.org/en/investigations/landromat-minsk-kasino>.

45 "Global Organized Crime Index 2025: In Belarus, the state 'sponsors' criminal schemes", *Belsat TV*, 19 November 2025, <https://en.belsat.eu/90096845/global-organized-crime-index-2025-in-belarus-the-state-sponsors-criminal-schemes>.

power is increasingly distributed across the Presidential Security Service, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and **the KGB**,⁴⁶ which remains the central collective actor conducting hybrid threats attributable to Belarus. The post-2020 ideological and security alignment between Minsk and Moscow suggests that the KGB cooperates closely with its Russian counterpart, the FSB, particularly in targeting dissidents abroad – at least on one another’s territory.⁴⁷ Some operations attributed to the Belarusian KGB have reportedly targeted Russian activists who support the Belarusian opposition.⁴⁸ In the absence of proof, one can only speculate that the FSB and the KGB conduct joint operations in third countries.

Speculation that the Russian FSB controls the Belarusian KGB is not confirmed by any openly available data, however. Even if they are not seen as completely separate entities, they are still cautious about the information they share with each other. In fact, while appearing “pro-Russian”,⁴⁹ the current head of the KGB, **Ivan Tertel**, is also remembered

for orchestrating the judicial harassment of Belgazprombank director Viktor Babaryka, a Russia-friendly (probably Kremlin-supported) presidential hopeful arrested in June 2020. Moreover, should Tertel have any allegiance other than to Lukashenka, his disloyalty would surely have been sanctioned by now.

Even though Belarus has a limited **foreign intelligence** capacity,⁵⁰ it maintains an autonomous presence at least in neighbouring European countries sheltering dissidents, who are frequent targets of intimidation but also of clandestine recruitment attempts by the KGB.⁵¹ In 2025, Czech counter-intelligence, with the help of Central European counterparts and Eurojust, uncovered a Belarusian spy ring operating across several European countries to recruit informants and obtain sensitive information. Among those arrested was a former deputy head of Moldova’s intelligence service, Alexandru Bălan, accused of passing both Moldovan and Romanian classified information to the Belarusian KGB.⁵²

46 Ryhor Astapenia, “Belarusian elites after Lukashenka”, *Belarus Analytical Digest* (Zürich) #107, December 2025, <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/items/6920e117-57e9-4345-97c6-4942c65cc316>.

47 In April 2021 a joint operation led to the kidnapping in Moscow and unlawful detention in an FSB prison of Belarusian oppositionists Yury Zenkovich and Alexander Feduta, accused of plotting a coup d’état. They were later transferred to Minsk for trial outside of any formal extradition framework; cf. George Barros, “Russia’s Quiet Conquest: Belarus”, *ISW Report* (Washington: Institute for the Study of War), 15 January 2025, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russias-quiet-conquest-belarus/>.

48 RAND Corporation, *Cooperation and Dependence in Belarus–Russia Relations*, 20 June 2024, 86, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2061-3.html.

49 Tertel is regularly heard repeating Russian propaganda about alleged threats originating from the Western flank. He argues that Belarus should seek Russia’s protection against an imminent NATO invasion.

50 “The role of the KGB in the Belarusian power architecture”, *InfoSecurity24*, 29 September 2025, <https://defence24.com/geopolitics/the-role-of-the-kgb-in-the-belarusian-power-architecture>.

51 “Poland opens criminal case over attempts by Belarusian security services to recruit NAU staff”, *Reform News*, 9 November 2025, <https://reform.news/en/poland-opens-criminal-case-over-attempts-by-belarusian-security-services-to-recruit-nau-staff>.

52 “Belarusian spy ring in Europe uncovered, dismantled”, *Kyiv Post*, 10 September 2025 <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/59810>.

Other “siloviki” actors include the **State Border Committee**, which Poland and Lithuania have accused of direct involvement in hybrid attacks against their borders. When clashes erupted with migrants attempting to illegally break through border fences, border guards reported that the equipment used as weapons against them had likely been provided by their Belarusian counterparts.⁵³ These same guards also routinely allow trains, drones and balloons carrying smuggled cigarettes to cross the Belarus–EU border.

Among the governmental bodies involved in perpetrating hybrid threats, **the Interior Ministry** is worth mentioning, notably its Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption (GUBOPiK). The Ministry maintains lists of individuals, organizations and material deemed “extremist”, a designation that has fuelled the mass exodus of dissidents since 2020. Forcing them into exile may constitute the crime of deportation, but the regime continues to commit crimes beyond Belarus’s borders as well. **GUBOPiK’s** speciality as a hybrid threat actor is harassing the diaspora⁵⁴ by infiltrating social networks and using intimidation to gather material evidence of “extremist” crimes. This information is shared with the KGB for the purpose of blackmailing “fugitives”, for example

by pressuring their relatives in Belarus, or by having judges seize their property.

In fact, another feature of Belarusian authoritarianism is the now total subordination of the judiciary to the executive. **Judges** should therefore be considered enablers of transnational repression when they impose arbitrary sentences in absentia on alleged “extremists” who have been forced into exile. The **tax police** also play a supportive role by misusing bilateral tax cooperation agreements to obtain personal tax records or bank account statements by deception. These documents serve as material proof that the Belarusian NGO headed by the person concerned has received Western financial support, which is a criminal offence in Belarus.⁵⁵

Despite the numerous expulsions of Belarusian intelligence agents operating abroad under diplomatic cover, the “**agentura**” hosted in embassies is still able to conduct espionage and sabotage operations.⁵⁶ Like its Russian counterpart, the foreign intelligence branch of the Belarusian KGB is increasingly resorting to online recruitment via social networks (notably Telegram channels) to find throwaway, one-time perpetrators of minor infiltration or sabotage operations, thereby fuelling an “uberization” of the profession. For example, it hires amateur

53 Filipec, “Multilevel analysis of the 2021 Poland–Belarus Border Crisis”, 12.

54 Bukowski “Agents of Chaos”.

55 This is the scheming which led, in 2011, to the arrest of Ales Bialatski, the head of the Viasna Human Rights Centre. Since this NGO is denied registration in Belarus, it could only open a bank account abroad. The Lithuanian state agencies that shared with the Belarusian tax office details about the assets held for Viasna by Mr Bialatski in a Vilnius bank unwittingly provided material evidence that led to his first long prison sentence.

56 “Five Belarusians in Poland accused of sabotage and espionage”, *Belsat TV*, 9 August 2025, <https://en.belsat.eu/88253268/five-belarusians-in-poland-accused-of-sabotage-and-espionage>.

photographers to film anti-Lukashenka protest actions abroad.⁵⁷ Portrait photographs of participants have been used as evidence in criminal cases brought in Belarus against “extremists on the run”.

This panorama of Belarusian hybrid threat perpetrators would be incomplete without mentioning some para-state organizations, such as the private security firm **GardService**, modelled on the Wagner Group and granted a permit to use firearms in 2020. It recruits and trains former employees of the KGB and special police units (**OMON**) at the “Dynamo” training yard, managed by the Defence Ministry to protect the overseas interests of companies controlled by regime proxies, notably in Africa.⁵⁸

Lastly, regime-loyal experts, including **propagandists** working for state media and “independent” experts serving as mouthpieces for the Belarusian authorities, warrant inclusion in the list of actors conducting hybrid threats in the information domain. They stir up resentment against former internal enemies turned fugitives, and amplify official messages designed to legitimize internationally the regime’s claim to remain a non-belligerent in Russia’s war against Ukraine, as well as its hope of hosting peace negotiations in the future.

57 “Belarusian man charged in Poland over alleged arson plot for foreign intelligence services”, *Notes from Poland*, 18 August 2025, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/08/18/belarusian-man-charged-in-poland-over-alleged-arson-plot-for-foreign-intelligence-services/>.

58 Aleksey Karpeka, “Investigation: How Viktor Sheiman’s son secretly mines gold in Zimbabwe”, *Euroradio*, 7 October 2021, <https://euroradio.fm/en/investigation-how-viktor-sheimans-son-secretly-mines-gold-zimbabwe>.

IV. Belarus's flagship hybrid threat operations

In recent years, Belarus has conducted malicious operations against its NATO adversaries in several domains, notably the information domain (through cognitive manipulation operations), the legal-political domain (using transnational repression against dissenters abroad), and the economic and societal domains (sponsoring smuggling, including the trafficking of migrants).

Cognitive manipulation: Fighting dissent in the information domain

Hybrid threats exploit the vulnerabilities of open, democratic and interconnected societies where free speech is guaranteed, providing perpetrators with an ideal playing field.⁵⁹ Guided by political authorities, Belarusian propagandists and their mouthpieces in target countries produce and disseminate disinformation and misinformation via social media and other channels. The aim is to distract and confuse foreign audiences by instilling fear and heightening anxiety. The overarching objective is to pressure decision-makers in target countries to act in the interests of the Belarusian regime, for example by discrediting the opposition in exile, potentially leading host

countries to revoke their residence permits. Such hybrid threat operations can thus enhance the perceived strength of the Belarusian authorities in the eyes of the public in target countries.

Belarusian propagandists engage in cognitive manipulation by disseminating disinformation, primarily targeting neighbouring countries that advocate sanctions against Belarus due to its human rights violations. The intensity of this activity recently peaked during election campaigns in Lithuania⁶⁰ and Poland. Psyops, for their part, often use historical revisionism and defamation. For example, Litvinism, a fringe theory claiming that modern-day Belarus is the rightful heir to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, has been manipulated to create the illusion of an irredentist threat. Although radical Litvinism attracts only a handful of Belarusian nationalists,⁶¹ the claim that Wilna (Vilnius) is Belarus's historical capital has been blown out of proportion to make Lithuanians suspect the Belarusian opposition of wanting to annex Vilnius.⁶² Denying these outlandish claims, representatives of the democratic opposition in exile underlined that this psyop was likely designed by Russia to undermine Lithuanian statehood.⁶³ In Belarus proper,

59 Rainer Jungwirth et al., "Hybrid threats: a comprehensive resilience ecosystem", *Hybrid CoE Research Report*, JRC129019, April 2023, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-threats-a-comprehensive-resilience-ecosystem/>.

60 Debunk.org, "Manipulated voices: Belarus's disinformation targeting Lithuanian democracy", *EUvsDisinfo*, 31 May 2024, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/manipulated-voices-belaruss-disinformation-targeting-lithuanian-democracy/>.

61 Augustas Stankevicius, "There are no Litvinist groups among Belarusian diaspora – intelligence", *LRT* [Lithuanian Radio and Television] 20 March 2024, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2229342/there-are-no-litvinist-groups-among-belarusian-diaspora-intelligence>.

62 Edward Lucas, "Secret weapon: history. The pseudohistorical "Litvinism" is stirring discord between Lithuania and Belarus", *Europe's Edge*, 30 June 2025, <https://cepa.org/article/secret-weapon-history/>.

63 Pavel Latushka, "Is Litvinism a real threat to Lithuania or a planned Russian provocation?", *National Anti-Crisis Management*, 28 December 2023, <https://www.belarus-nau.org/en/post/is-litvinism-a-real-threat-to-lithuania-or-a-planned-russian-provocation>.

parliamentarians, state media and historians amplified the Litvinist threat to please the regime, which traditionally encourages any revisionist claim that can harm the nationalist opposition. The latter would later be blamed for the deterioration of Belarus's bilateral relations with Lithuania, cynically reinforcing the position of official Minsk in the equation.

A key trend in information manipulation is the growing use of cyber operations and hacktivists to target Western countries. Belarus's hybrid threats became known in the cyber domain because of Ghostwriter, a hacker group that has carried out information manipulation against Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian and German interests since 2016. Its TTP consists of executing spear-phishing campaigns to infiltrate the content management systems of known media outlets, planting fake stories on legitimate news websites. Mandiant analysts initially attributed these activities to a Belarusian government unit that they code-named UNC 1151.⁶⁴ However, in 2022, Insikt Group experts connected it to GRU-related

APT hackers, suggesting that Russian military intelligence used Belarus as an operational base and for training Belarusians in information and cyber warfare.⁶⁵ This high-profile case illustrates the growing coordination between the FSB and the KGB in the information domain.⁶⁶

A hybrid attack involves sowing confusion and fear among the public in target countries by using conspiracist or radical accounts on social networks to rapidly spread misinformation. While reports from Google's Threat Analysis Group have detailed the KGB's involvement in cyber operations aimed at destabilizing Poland and Lithuania, Belarusian entities have also been identified as participating in Russian hybrid cyber threat strategies.⁶⁷ The end result of any cognitive warfare operation, according to the Soviet reflexive control playbook, is to wreak havoc in people's minds in order to create social disorder, or "cognitive entropy".⁶⁸ However, creating a *real* problem remains the most widespread and efficient technique for implementing a hybrid attack.

64 Mandiant Threat Intelligence research team, "UNC 1151 Assessed with High Confidence to have Links to Belarus, Ghostwriter Campaign Aligned with Belarusian Government Interests", 16 November 2021, <https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/threat-intelligence/unc1151-linked-to-belarus-government/>.

65 Insikt Group, "Ghostwriter in the Shell: Expanding on Mandiant's Attribution of UNC1151 to Belarus", *Recorded Future* Cyber threat analysis, 18 March 2022, <https://www.recordedfuture.com/research/ghostwriter-in-the-shell>.

66 In November 2024, Belarus and Russia resolved to develop a "unified information space strategy" for the Union State and established a joint media company, signalling a further subjugation of Belarus to Russia's disinformation ecosystem; cf. Piotr Parfionienka & Paŭluk Bykoŭski, "A divided reality: Analysis of the Belarusian media in 2024", *Media IQ*, 28 May 2025, <https://mediaiq.info/a-divided-reality-analysis-of-the-belarusian-media-in-2024>.

67 Darius Štītīlis, Marius Laurinaitis, Inga Malinauskaitė-van de Castel and Matthew Warren, "Navigating the Cyber Front: Belarus' State Control and Emerging Cyber Threats", paper presented at the 23rd European Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security (ECCWS), Jyväskylä, 27–28 June 2024, <https://papers.academic-conferences.org/index.php/eccws/article/view/2518>.

68 Didier Bazalgette & Paul Janin, "Cognitive warfare: What seven years of military-civilian research reveals", *Polytechnique Insights* (Paris), 5 November 2025, <https://www.polytechnique-insights.com/en/columns/society/cognitive-warfare-what-seven-years-of-military-civilian-research-reveals/>.

Transnational repression: Punishing exiled dissidents and their host countries

In the field of transnational repression, Belarus appears to be using hybrid threats of its own design to meet its objective of intimidating, silencing or prosecuting exiled opponents. The most high-profile case was the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in Minsk on 23 May 2021, based on a false bomb alert fabricated by the Belarusian authorities.⁶⁹ On board was dissident blogger in exile Roman Protasevich, who, along with his girlfriend, was subsequently arrested and jailed.⁷⁰ All other passengers were unlawfully held for several hours, leading some to label the incident as hijacking, air piracy or state-sponsored terrorism. Belarus denied any wrongdoing but failed to cooperate with the ICAO-led investigation.⁷¹ This abduction and unlawful deportation was Belarus's most notorious act of transnational repression, but far from the only one.

Since then, the regime has refined its repressive tactics while conducting a systematic witch-hunt against exiled dissidents, whom Lukashenka colloquially calls "fugitives"

(*beglye*). The goal is to control their mobility and force them back to Belarus, using abductions, expulsions, extraditions or deportations. Once in Belarus, they face trial for alleged extremist or terrorist crimes related to the 2020 protests and other anti-government activities, which can result in prison sentences of up to 20 years. If forced return is impossible, Belarus resorts to alternative punishments, or the threat thereof, in order to silence dissenters and reduce the reputational harm they cause to the regime: digital repression; intimidation (carried out by embassy staff or the KGB); coercion by proxy (blackmailing or prosecuting relatives in Belarus); lawfare (including trials in absentia); surveillance and spyware; physical attacks or the threat thereof; enforced disappearance; and potentially murder.⁷²

The regime may also use hybrid threats to co-opt the institutions of a host country by seeking extradition through false accusations and by using judicial or tax cooperation agreements and channels. This can result in the detention abroad of a Belarusian dissident,⁷³ or

69 Mari Eccles & Zoya Sheftalovich, "Inside the control room of Belarus' hijacked Ryanair flight", *Politico*, 25 October 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/belarus-hijack-minsk-ryanair-athens-to-vilnius-control-room/>.

70 Protasevich was eventually pardoned and released after agreeing to cooperate with the KGB. He now serves as a regime apologist, sent to convince political prisoners to beg for presidential pardon as well.

71 International Civil Aviation Organization, Event involving Ryanair flight FR4978 in Belarus airspace on 23 May 2021, Fact-Finding Investigation Report, July 2022, <https://www.icao.int/ryanair-flight-fr4978>.

72 For a detailed overview, see the comprehensive reports of The International Strategic Action Network for Security, e.g. Natasza Krawczyk & Yuri Dzhibladze, "Transnational repression in Belarus: a brutal tool of the persecution of dissent by the Lukashenka regime", *iSans research report*, September 2025, <https://isans.org/human-rights/transnational-repression-in-belarus-a-brutal-tool-of-the-persecution-of-dissent-by-the-lukashenka-regime.html>.

73 As a result of such a request, and of an abusive Interpol Red notice issued by Belarus, film-maker Andrei Gnyot was detained in Serbia for months in 2024 on the basis of forged documents alleging tax evasion. Only international mobilization pushed Serbia to reject Belarus's extradition request.

a ban on re-entry to the host country.⁷⁴ Hence Belarus's transnational repression is a typical hybrid threat strategy in that it attempts to kill two birds with one stone: repressing political opponents in exile (regime consolidation) and discrediting the democratic institutions of adversaries (regime legitimization "by subtraction"), since host countries can, willingly or not, become accomplices or enablers of human rights violations if they force an exiled Belarusian back to Belarus.

In September 2023, a presidential decree discontinued some consular services, notably the issuance of passports, which until then Belarusians abroad could receive in consulates. This blanket ban, which applied to the whole Belarusian diaspora (which already amounted to well over one million people before 2020), was adopted to specifically target those who fled following the 2020 protests and whom the regime considers extremists (nationalists, dissidents, etc.), traitors (because they criticize the regime or call for sanctions against it) and fugitives (because they ran away from "justice"). Such misuse of legal tools is an indirect way to carry out transnational repression: to renew their passports, people must return to Belarus, risking arrest there. But it also "weaponizes" Belarusian passports in a hybrid attack against

host countries,⁷⁵ transferring to them the task of dealing with the consequences of Lukashenka's decree, namely working out solutions to ensure that exiled Belarusians are not treated as illegals by their public administrations for lack of a valid ID, giving them alternative travel documents to impede their deportation to Belarus, and preventing them from becoming stateless⁷⁶ – a situation that international conventions compel any country to avoid.

With these hybrid threat operations, the authoritarian regime has managed to sow fear not only in the Belarusian diaspora or exiled community, but also among the populations of their host countries, who are becoming more suspicious of or hostile towards Belarusian migrants. This is exactly the end result of some operations targeting the democratic opposition in exile, such as the disappearance in March 2025 of Angelika Melnikava, the spokesperson of the Consultative Council of the Belarusian democratic forces.⁷⁷ Thus, a frequent spillover effect is the rise of anti-Belarusian sentiment among the host countries' electorates. This serves the interests of Belarusian propaganda, which seeks to portray Poles as xenophobes and Lithuanians as nationalists in order to deter Belarusians from emigrating to their countries. Curtailing outward migration is an issue of

74 In recent years, Georgia, which had been a visa-free safe haven for Belarusians fleeing repression, has reportedly cooperated with the Belarusian KGB and refused re-entry to Belarusian citizens after they travelled to a third country, such as Turkey, to reset their right to registration-free residence in Georgia.

75 Dzmitry Hlotau, "Authoritarianism Without Borders: Belarus and Transnational Repression in Central and Eastern Europe", *Blue Europe*, 24 September 2025, <https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/full-reports/authoritarianism-without-borders-belarus-and-transnational-repression-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

76 In effect, alongside the risk of not having a valid passport, Belarus introduced, through an amendment to its criminal legislation, the possibility for a judge to strip an "extremist" living abroad of his or her citizenship.

77 While the investigation has not yet concluded whether she was abducted or ran away voluntarily, the fact that she had been dating a Belarusian KGB agent, and that more than €100,000 meant to support the democratic movement abroad disappeared with her, legitimately raises suspicion.

national economic security for Belarus, given workforce shortages, notably in the health and IT sectors, due to the post-2020 exodus. Lastly, Minsk ultimately benefits from the consequent rise of far-right, isolationist parties in European host countries, which, once in power, advocate cutting state funding for democracy promotion in Belarus, and lifting sanctions against the regime.

State-sponsored trafficking: Organized crime as hybrid threat activity

Smuggling cigarettes:

A smokescreen for airspace violations

The state-supported smuggling of cigarettes from Belarus has plagued Europe for decades, costing EU countries lost tax revenue and harming legitimate businesses. Before Covid-related border closures in 2020, Belarus produced cigarettes for which there was a significant retail price difference (1:6) between the Belarusian and EU markets. Initially, cigarettes were smuggled in small quantities by legal commuters, or sometimes “fell from the train” travelling via Lithuania to Kaliningrad. However, once sectoral sanctions and border closures hampered this scheme in 2022, smugglers developed air routes instead, using drones and weather balloons to deliver contraband cigarettes to Lithuania,⁷⁸ from where they reached Dutch, French and British black markets.

The Belarusian economy benefited from this trade, as did the regime: smuggling cannot flourish in an authoritarian setting without the protection or corruption of high-level state structures. Thus sanctions led to shortfalls for the regime as well, which is why Lithuania suspected that the latter was behind the escalation that occurred in October 2025, when dozens of weather balloons carrying contraband cigarettes disrupted traffic at Vilnius and Kaunas airports. Lithuania retaliated by closing its last border crossing with Belarus. The standoff should be seen as a deliberate exacerbation of prior tensions caused by the freezing of the transit of Belarusian potash export through Lithuanian sea terminals (initially due to 2021 US sanctions against Belaruskali). Although in 2025 Washington promised Minsk sanctions relief as part of a “Grand Bargain”, Lithuania and the EU have no reason to lift their own 2022 ban on Belarusian potash exports. The end result is that the arguments against sanctions and for returning to the status quo ante (when Lithuanian border guards were letting contraband cigarettes in) are gaining traction in Lithuania, notably among the Klaipėda harbour dockers and truck drivers stranded for weeks in Belarus.

Far more damaging as a hybrid threat is Belarus’s state-orchestrated smuggling of irregular migrants, a form of human trafficking in which the regime has specialized since 2021.

78 Daniel Tilles, “Cigarette smugglers turn to balloons amid Poland–Belarus border clampdown”, *Notes from Poland*, 24 February 2025, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/02/24/cigarette-smugglers-turn-to-balloonsamid-poland-belarus-border-clampdown/>.

Instrumentalizing migrant flows

This classic hybrid threat attack was originally designed by Belarus,⁷⁹ predating Russia's own use of migrants against Norway and Finland in 2015–2016. "Operation Sluice" was allegedly devised in the early 2010s by the heads of Belarusian intelligence and border services.⁸⁰ It consists of manufacturing migratory pressure on EU neighbours (Poland, Lithuania and Latvia) and then ceasing to prevent migrants without a valid visa from entering the no man's land, or sometimes assisting them to cross illegally.⁸¹ This hybrid tactic has disrupted targeted countries, which were overwhelmed by the number of asylum requests to process and were not prepared to accommodate migrants in transit. It achieved hybrid threat goals by fuelling fears that the migration route could be exploited by infiltrated agents, disguised

mercenaries or terrorists.⁸² This inflamed anti-Muslim sentiment and amplified political polarization in targeted countries, while aggravating disputes among EU countries over asylum quotas and migration policies more generally.

The plan was first used against Lithuania⁸³ in summer 2021, and then on a massive scale against Poland, in retaliation for sanctions those countries had adopted and promoted in Brussels. Experts believe Russian military intelligence likely became involved in later phases,⁸⁴ and that from 2022–23 Russian services, including military intelligence, were identified as facilitating migrant flows from the Middle East, leveraging their consular network, which is more developed than that of Belarus.⁸⁵

Poland introduced martial law near the border to block aid to migrants and prevent

79 Bartosz Fraszka, "The situation on the Poland–Belarus border: background, geopolitics, narratives", *Warsaw Institute* special report, 23 December 2021, <https://warsawinstitute.org/situation-poland-belarus-border-background-geopolitics-narratives/>.

80 Andrzej Wawrzuszczyński, "Kryzys migracyjny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej i jego wpływ na bezpieczeństwo Polski" [The migration crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border and its impact on Poland's security], *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia*, 2(33) (2022): 45–66, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1048492>.

81 "Мигрантов сопровождают до самой границы Литвы: Frontex зафиксировало действия белорусских пограничников" [Migrants are escorted right up to the Lithuanian border: Frontex recorded the actions of Belarusian border guards], *Delfi*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/live/migrantov-soprovozhdayut-do-samoy-granicy-litvy-frontex-zafiksirovalo-deystviya-belorusskih-pogranichnikov-87855577>; see also https://youtu.be/i2fU-n_mmlU?si=ku-Pj7OEJswy-CWQ.

82 Andrew Rettman, "Belarus 'trained Afghan and Iraqi veterans' for EU border attacks", *EUObserver*, 10 November 2021, <https://euobserver.com/eu-and-the-world/arb40d3bd5>.

83 "Кто стоит за потоком мигрантов из Беларуси в Литву" [Who is behind the flow of migrants from Belarus to Lithuania?], *Reform.by*, 26 July 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210726145331/https://reform.by/243337-kto-stoit-za-potokom-migrantov-iz-belarusi-v-litvu-rassledovanie-reform-by>.

84 "Belarus has wasted its independence and is now being used by the Kremlin for subversion", *Robert Lansing Institute*, 6 August 2021, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2021/08/06/belarus-has-wasted-its-independence-and-is-now-being-used-by-the-kremlin-for-subversion/>.

85 "Increased Libya → Belarus flights: Analysis of causes, actors, timing, and risks", *Robert Lansing Institute*, 12 August 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/08/12/increased-libya-%e2%86%92-belarus-flights-analysis-of-causes-actors-timing-and-risks/>.

journalists⁸⁶ from documenting *in flagrante delicto* how Polish border guards were pushing migrants back – in violation of international human rights conventions. Belarusian and Russian state media documented the events, however, largely spreading the footage and message that Polish border guards were violent

and racist, and that Angela Merkel was guilty of creating a “pull factor” by inciting migrants to flow to the EU in 2015. The Belarus-engineered crisis fuelled far-right narratives and likely aided their electoral gains in subsequent elections, including the 2024 elections to the European Parliament.

86 “Poland passes law to allow continued ban on journalists and NGOs at Belarus border”, *Notes from Poland*, 30 November 2021, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/11/30/poland-passes-law-to-allow-continued-ban-on-journalists-and-ngos-at-belarus-border/>.

V. Modus operandi: Tactics, techniques and procedures

As discussed above, the method used by the Belarusian regime to achieve its hybrid threat goals entailed provoking a migrant crisis at the EU's eastern borders. The authorities had provided support upstream by authorizing airlines to operate new and frequent routes between Baghdad and Minsk, while Iraqi citizens had been added to the list of foreigners eligible for visa-free travel to Belarus.⁸⁷

The build-up and weaponization of migratory waves provide many operational advantages at the tactical level, with the immediate effect of overwhelming and paralyzing the capacities of the target state, which must bear additional costs to securitize its border.⁸⁸ Poland, for example, erected a fence, including across the last primeval forest in Europe to try to stop illegal border crossing, a controversial decision that antagonized its EU partners as well.⁸⁹ Accusing Poland of not respecting international and humanitarian law, and pointing to its treatment of migrants to discredit it, undermines its trustworthiness in the eyes of democratic and non-democratic countries alike. It is a standard technique to elevate

(“by subtraction”) Belarus’s otherwise low human rights pedigree.

Turning to procedures, it appears that Belarus was initially the only hybrid threat perpetrator implicated in this human trafficking scheme. Based on interviews with smuggled migrants and “couriers”, investigative journalists in the autumn of 2021 managed to trace the source of the operation to the Belarusian regime itself, and its involvement, together with transnational organized crime, in a lucrative human trafficking operation disguised as a tour agency business.⁹⁰ They showed that a company subordinated to the President’s Office, Tsentrkurort, had brought Iraqis to Minsk, accommodated them in state hotels, and then transported some of them to the border on buses belonging to the Belarusian Ministry of National Defence.⁹¹ Belarusian consulates were also involved, delivering “hunting safari visas” to numerous applicants in Iraq and elsewhere (Istanbul, Beirut, Dubai) – although not to Afghan or Iraqi citizens.⁹² Several other travel agencies were identified (and subsequently sanctioned⁹³) that had

87 Grzegorz Tutak and Jan Gondek, “Instrumentalization of migration as an element of hybrid activities on the example of the Polish–Belarusian border”, *Transformacje* (<http://e-transformations.com/>) 4(119) (2023): 710–724.

88 Ondrej Filipec, “Multilevel analysis of the 2021 Poland–Belarus border crisis in the context of hybrid threats”, *Central European Journal of Politics* 8(1) (2022): 1–18, <https://www.cejop.cz/central-european-journal-of-politics-vol-8-no-1-2022/>.

89 “Poland starts construction of €350 million border fence with Belarus”, *Euronews*, 26 January 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/26/poland-starts-construction-of-350-million-border-fence-with-belarus>.

90 Filipec, “Multilevel analysis of the 2021 Poland–Belarus border crisis”.

91 Tutak and Gondek, “Instrumentalization of migration”, 719.

92 “Belarus border crisis: How are migrants getting there?”, *BBC report*, 26 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/59233244>.

93 “Прямо сейчас в аэропорту Минска на мигрантах нелегально наживается несколько турфирм” [Right now, several travel agencies are profiting illegally from migrants at Minsk Airport], *KUKU*, 20 October 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211021140638/https://kyky.org/money/pryamo-seychas-v-aeroportu-minska-na-migrantah-nelegalno-nazhivaetsya-neskolko-turfirm-mini-rassledovanie-kyky-rech-o-millionah>.

promised migrants they would obtain asylum once on Schengen territory.⁹⁴

Some of the TTPs involve *maskirovka*, a Soviet military tactic that spreads disinformation to disguise the origin and sponsors of such engineered crises, which Russia was later found to have supported. In November 2022, for example, the Polish Border Guard published drone footage showing the Belarusian military assisting migrants in destroying and crossing border barbed wire. Their Belarusian counterparts claimed that the footage showed migrants being pushed into Belarus by Polish border guards. Via its propaganda outlet Sputnik, Russia endorsed this ludicrous claim, and subsequently Belarus's attempt to plausibly deny that it had deliberately manipulated migrant flows.⁹⁵

This scheme was halted as early as 2021 thanks to EU pressure on countries of origin, but migrants continued to flow to the Belarus–EU border. The fact that Middle Eastern migrants now transit through Moscow airports rather

than Minsk could indicate that Russia has taken full control of this hybrid threat procedure. It is unclear who makes the decision to bus new groups of migrants to any specific section of the EU border, however. One indicator that Belarus retains some leeway is that the pressure seems calibrated to serve its own diplomatic interests: after Poland reopened its border-crossing points on 17 November 2025, it recorded no massive influx of irregular migrants, unlike on previous occasions following border closures. One possible explanation is that Warsaw, inspired by Washington's transactional approach towards Lukashenka's regime, is simultaneously conducting backstage talks with Minsk for the release of Polish political prisoners. Belarusian negotiators appear ready to reward the Polish leadership for its more conciliatory stance, irrespective of Moscow's more antagonistic posture towards its European neighbours. This again illustrates a relative decoupling between Russia and Belarus in the field of hybrid threats.

94 "Białoruska 'Operacja Śluza': starannie przygotowany plan służb" [Belarusian 'Operation Sluice': a meticulously planned operation by the security services], *InfoSecurity24.pl*, 28 August 2021, <https://infosecurity24.pl/bezpieczenstwo-wewnetrzne/bialoruska-operacja-sluza-starannie-przygotowany-plan-sluzb>.

95 "Belarus' Defense Ministry refutes claims about military's involvement in migration crisis", *Sputnik News*, 8 November 2021, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20211109/belarus-defense-ministry-refutes-claims-about-military-involvement-in-migration-crisis-1090586074.html>.

Conclusions

For a landlocked state lacking raw material riches, “sharp power” is a logical way to overcome capacity limitations. Due to a lack of soft power resources and its outsourcing of hard-power defence to Russia, Belarus became the first country in post-Soviet Eurasia to develop a hybrid threat arsenal instead. As this paper has illustrated, although Belarus’s hybrid threat activity is on a small scale, it has nonetheless proved pivotal in recent years, either by supporting Russia’s own hybrid threat activities and thereby gaining the favour of its patron, or by acting as a nuisance closer to home, targeting its neighbours when and where its autocratic regime needs it most to achieve its own survival objectives.

There is no doubt that Belarus shares Russia’s vision of NATO as a historical enemy, and regards NATO member states as potential adversaries. The fundamental difference, however, is that while Russia is constantly escalating its conflict with the West, Belarus tends to use “hit-and-run” tactics with a view to negotiating with Western partners some form of de-escalation, such as sanctions relief and a normalization of diplomatic relations.

Although Belarus is deeply integrated into the Union State, to which it has surrendered part of its sovereignty, the paper has shown that on the hybrid threat battlefield Belarus has long been playing its own part, and not always in a loyal manner to its suzerain. The paper recalled instances in which Lukashenka autonomously wielded hybrid threats for his own benefit, identified as twofold: regime consolidation (by silencing dissenting voices,

including abroad through transnational repression) and regime legitimization in the eyes of foreign interlocutors – a foreign policy that often appears schizophrenic, given the contradictions between declared peaceful goals and documented aggressive activities, notably since 2022. A supporter and enabler of Russia’s war on Ukraine, Belarus has nonetheless so far resisted committing troops on the ground: Lukashenka has admitted that his country is a co-aggressor, but he is eager for it not to be seen as a co-belligerent. Thus Belarus’s tactical “sharp power” attacks, using hybrid threats to disrupt the delivery of weapons to Ukraine and to confuse and intimidate its EU–NATO supporters, are likely to multiply.

By virtue of this dictaplomatic manoeuvring, the Lukashenka regime survives by helping Russia achieve its strategic goals: dividing the EU by inciting conflicts between its members, destabilizing NATO’s eastern border, and threatening escalation to test readiness and crisis response. Intimidating the West through nuclear blackmail allows Belarus to practise hybrid threats above its weight with relative efficiency, judging by how the fear of nuclear escalation is affecting public opinion and stalling decision-makers in the West, much to Putin’s satisfaction.

Lukashenka traditionally bets on his capacity to trade what Belarus can offer, namely its geopolitical loyalty and the use of its territory on the one hand, and political prisoners and peacenik promises on the other. In tactical terms, Belarus has preserved some room for manoeuvre, which the Trump administration

appears eager to expand by providing Minsk with “some breathing room outside of Russia’s orbit of influence”, as a US envoy put it in February 2025 after meeting Lukashenka in Minsk.⁹⁶ Europeans, for their part, are more cautious about the prospects of decoupling Belarus from Russia; even if some EU member states consider the Belarusian regime a stand-alone rogue, they know that, whatever Belarusian citizens may prefer, the current leadership will probably never be interested in the EU’s conditional offer of economic rapprochement and future cooperation, conditioned upon prior democratic progress.

⁹⁶ “A Quick, Quiet Trip to Belarus Signals a Turn in U.S. Policy”, *New York Times*, 15 February 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/15/world/europe/belarus-us-prisoners-diplomacy.html>.

Author

Anaïs Marin (PhD, Sciences Po Paris) is a political analyst specializing in post-Soviet Eurasia, border studies, and the human dimension of European security. An associate fellow with Chatham House (London) since 2019, her expertise focuses on Belarus, the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes (“dictaplo­macy”), Russian FIMI, and hybrid threats (“sharp power”). Her academic research has received support from the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (postdoctoral fellowship), the EU (Marie Curie fellowship), and the Polish National Centre for Science (NCN). She has previously collaborated with leading European think tanks, including the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS, Paris), the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA, Helsinki), and the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW, Warsaw). As a freelance consultant, she provides expert reports, OSINT analyses, and due diligence investigations, and regularly comments for the media. From 2018 to 2024, she held the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus.



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