



The Russification of Belarus

Policy Leads: Alicia Sigan, Kate Chu

Policy Analysts: Krithik Elango, Morgan Spillane, Chase Trentacosa, Sophie Chan,
Caroline Zhou, Paula Cuasay,

Foreign Policy, Institute for Youth in Policy

alicia@yipinstitute.org, katechu@yipinstitute.org

Abstract — This brief examines the Russification of Belarus and its implications for regional stability and international security. It analyzes the current crisis and also evaluates the broader consequences of Belarusian sovereignty and dependence on Russia, as well as the lasting effects on Eastern Europe and international affairs.

Keywords — Russia, Soviet Union, Belarus, Eastern Europe

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus has maintained distinctly close political and economic ties with Russia. Through President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, the relationship gradually developed into deeper institutional, political, and economic dependence. Following recent years with major disputes in the 2020 Belarusian Presidential Election and the full-scale Russian invasion ongoing since 2022, Moscow's influence over Belarus has grown significantly. Expanding military cooperation, political support, economic integration, and even cultural dominance, Russia's influence has expanded significantly in shaping

Belarus' domestic and foreign policy, prompting concerns over the country's national identity and degree of sovereignty.

II. HISTORY

This history of Russia's involvement with Belarus stretches all the way back to the 18th century. The world has seen Russia's influence since the Belarusian lands were collected into the Russian empire and began a long period of Russian political and cultural influence. From uprisings, to religious conversion, to language suppression. Belarus experienced increasing political control and cultural pressure during periods of authoritarian governance. Jumping two centuries, we see Belarus shift differently in the Post-Soviet world compared to its adjacent country positions. After 1991, various countries such as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania transitioned towards NATO and Euro-Atlantic integration. Another concurrent breakaway, Ukraine and Moldova counterbalance Western and Russian

effects while dealing with multi-party politics. Belarus on the other hand did not experience the same level of rapid political and institutional transformation as some neighboring states. Years of history with Russia had caused the population to be heavily Russian and the economy to be even more heavily tied back to it. This led the country to the 1995 Referendum and the Lukashenko's Administration that reversed the country's brief stint as an independent. Lukashenko adopted Soviet-Style State Symbols, cultural practices and even made Russian a co-official state language alongside Belarusian. Later on these policies were expanded resulting in geopolitical realignment, stripped checks and balances and a true Union State where economic and political coordination between the two countries has expanded through Union State institutions.

III. CURRENT CRISIS AND MECHANISMS

On August 9th 2020, the largest and most sustained protest movement in Belarus' post-Soviet history emerged as a result of Lukashenko claiming a sixth term in the presidential elections despite widespread evidence of electoral fraud (Human Rights Watch, 2021). As a result, Lukashenko's regime responded with an unprecedented crackdown involving security forces arbitrarily detaining thousands of people and subjecting many to torture and other forms of ill-treatment (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Since then, human rights monitors have

documented tens of thousands of cases of politically motivated repression since 2020, despite initial protests ending, with thousands of criminal convictions and over a thousand individuals still recognized as political prisoners (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2024). This includes the imprisonment of opposition leaders, with some driven into exile, and the forced liquidation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by court order (Human Rights Experts, 2026).

A notable action taken by the Lukashenko regime is also the suppression of the Belarusian national identity, particularly language and culture, as it became closely associated with the opposition movement (Transitions, 2024). This is shown as usage of the Belarusian language becomes increasingly marginalized: a drastic decline in Belarusian being used as the language of instruction in schools, educators who continue to teach Belarusian report growing surveillance, and publishers attempting to promote Belarusian-language literature have faced imprisonment (International Center for Journalists [ICWA], 2024; Transitions, 2024).

As the Lukashenko regime accelerates its alignment with the ideological framing of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this would result in Belarus permitting its territory to be used as a launch point for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This would include Russian forces

crossing into northern Ukraine from bases in Belarus, Belarusian airfields hosting Russian aircrafts, and missiles launching from Belarusian soil, even though Lukashenko publicly denied that Belarusian troops themselves have entered the conflict (The Insider, 2026; Time, 2026). Belarus' involvement here has been characterized by analysts as an effective reduction in Belarus' strategic autonomy, becoming what one observer called part of "the Russian military space" (Time, 2026). However, it would commonly be noted that the 2020 crackdown served as the reason for Lukashenko's regime being dependent on Russian political, financial, and security backing to withstand domestic unrest and Western sanctions, which Moscow has since leveraged for its own interests (The Insider, 2026).

This alignment would then be formalized through the Union State framework, a supranational structure through which Belarus and Russia have coordinated military doctrine, information policy, and cultural narratives (Atlantic Council, 2025; Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale [ISPI], 2026). A joint Union State media holding, backed by a budget of roughly 11 million USD, is set to fully integrate Belarusian and Russian broadcasting by 2026 with a curricula which increasingly situates Belarus within a shared "triune Russian people" narrative (a narrative emphasizing a shared Russian historical and cultural identity). (Atlantic Council, 2025; ISPI, 2026). Various implications

are created through these mechanisms as it manifests itself as daily restrictions on expression and information, where the Information Ministry has already blocked roughly 18 thousand websites and designated nearly 7 thousand as "extremist," and even subscribing to a Telegram channel can result in arrest or a prison sentence (Atlantic Council, 2025; Jamestown Foundation, 2025). Independent outlets not aligned with the enforced narrative have also been forced to close (Human Rights Experts, 2026).

IV. CONCERNS ON SOVEREIGNTY

The Russian influence in Belarus raises concerns about the extent to which Belarus can exercise its sovereignty independently, while remaining its own state under international law. Russia's justification for its close relationship with Belarus has been based on shared historical ties, security interests, and opposition to NATO expansion. As a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, Belarus not only hosts Russian military infrastructure, but its territory has also been used to support Russian objectives in Ukraine. Simultaneously, Belarus has been economically integrated with Russia through the Union State and Eurasian Economic Union. Russia remains Belarus's largest trading partner and a major source of energy, credit, and investment, creating significant economic leverage. Although this dependence does not legally eliminate Belarus's sovereignty, it does limit the range of foreign-policy and economic

decisions available to Minsk independently of Moscow.

Furthermore, Russia's influence extends beyond just security and economics, and into the lives of citizens with regard to identity and domestic life. Russian is widely used in Belarus, and Russian media is an important part of the country's information environment. But when it comes to the Belarusian language and media, their institutions and cultural organizations have been facing increased restrictions. These developments have raised concerns that continued integration with Russia could weaken the distinct political and cultural identity of Belarus over time. In this same aspect, the situation with Russia cannot be separated from the country's human rights situation. Following the disputed 2020 presidential election, Belarusian authorities carried out a broad crackdown on opposition figures, independent media, and civil society organizations, which prompted condemnation from international organizations and Western governments. Russia's continued political and economic support for the Belarusian government has reduced the external pressure on Minsk while further strengthening the country's dependence on Moscow.

V. IMPACTS ON FOREIGN POLICY

Russia's increasing political, military, and economic integration with Belarus has significantly altered the foreign-policy environment of Eastern Europe. Although

Belarus remains formally sovereign under international law, its growing dependence on Moscow has narrowed the range of foreign-policy choices available to Minsk. The post-2020 deterioration of relations with Western governments has accelerated this process: following the disputed 2020 presidential election and subsequent repression, Belarus became increasingly reliant on Russia for political and economic support, while Russia gained greater leverage over Belarusian security and foreign-policy decisions ([Leukavets, 2026](#)). The resulting relationship has been described as “subordination through integration,” in which Moscow has expanded its influence without formally annexing Belarus ([Leukavets, 2026](#)). This creates a fundamental challenge for neighboring states because decisions made in Minsk increasingly have consequences for Russian-Western relations more broadly.

The most immediate consequences concern European and NATO security. Belarus has become increasingly integrated into Russia's regional military posture on NATO's eastern border. Belarusian territory has been used to transport Russian troops and military equipment, host Russian aircraft, and launch attacks against Ukraine ([Council of the European Union, 2024](#)). The deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus has further heightened regional concerns. NATO has characterized Russia's nuclear deployment to Belarus as

dangerous and has emphasized that it is monitoring developments closely ([NATO, 2023](#)). More broadly, NATO has responded to the deteriorating security environment by strengthening its eastern flank, including through increased forward forces, air and missile defense, surveillance, and the 2025 establishment of Eastern Sentry ([NATO, 2026](#)). Consequently, Belarus's integration with Russia has contributed to a security dilemma in which neighboring NATO members including Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia must account for Russian military capabilities positioned immediately beyond their borders. Belarus's alignment with Russia also creates particular challenges for Ukraine and other neighboring states. Belarusian territory served as a launch point for Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, while Belarus has continued to provide Russia with military infrastructure and logistical support. Recently, Belarus has become an increasingly important logistical and industrial component of Russia's war effort, providing infrastructure, training grounds, and other forms of strategic support ([Glod, 2026](#)). This means that Ukraine must treat Belarus not simply as a neighboring state but as an important component of Russia's military capacity. The implications extend beyond Ukraine: Poland and the Baltic states face the possibility that a deeper Russian-Belarusian military relationship could increase pressure along NATO's northeastern frontier. The erosion of Belarusian strategic

autonomy therefore has consequences well beyond Belarus itself.

VI. POTENTIAL POLICY SOLUTIONS

Russianification in Belarus has spread throughout large facets of life. Russianification of the education system since the Soviet Era has dramatically reduced the number of Belarusian-language schools to single digits and concentrated them in Minsk. A 1995 referendum brought Russian even closer as Russian was deemed a second official language. Further, a mixed form of Russian and Belarusian, called 'trasianka,' is sometimes referred to as Belarusian despite the presence of Russian elements (Chernin, 2025). Russianification has also been visible through the destruction or modification of historical architecture, as well as the renaming of streets and landmarks in the Russian tradition or to honor Russian figures.

Solutions to Russianification are severely complicated by the political ties between Russia and Belarus. During the 2020-2021 election fraud protests, Russia provided political support to Lukashenko's government during the period of domestic unrest. Lukashenko had asked Putin for Russian support and moved troops from the Russian border to its European one. The Russian military also showed increased movement near the Belarusian border (European Union, 2020). Belarusian also has its own political connotations, with members of the Belarusian opposition (to Russia) actively using the Belarusian language,

making the language a marker of opposition for daily speakers (Chernin, 2025). Belarus has also become increasingly involved in Russia's war on Ukraine. In 2022, Lukashenko ended Belarus' nuclear-free status and Putin announced the deployment of nuclear weapons into Belarus in 2023. Hundreds of Belarusian businesses manufacture Russian weapons or defense systems and a couple thousand Russian troops are stored in Belarus. Further, Belarus has become largely responsible for providing oil to fill the gap caused by Ukrainian attacks on Russian oil refineries (Atlantic Council, 2026). Lukashenko's close political ties to Russia provide reasonable resistance against any drastic movements toward pursuing strengthening of the Belarusian identity.

Potential solutions can be found through the De-Russianfication policies of other states who experienced Russianfication. Following the collapse of the USSR, Kazakhstan began the process of De-Russianfication in 1991, a process that still continues today. During the process, it faced similar challenges Belarus does today. Russian was the first language of 62.8% of ethnic Kazakhs, compared to around 45.9% of ethnic and non-ethnic Belarusians (Pachucki-Włosek, 2024). To encourage learning Kazakh, learning of the language was encouraged in a manner that did not compete with Russian. The president at the time, Tokayev, made statements emphasizing the importance of both languages being taught in schools. Such a policy eventually developed into prioritization of Kazakh in school, with the

language being made compulsory in 2024 for kindergarten instruction (Pachucki-Włosek, 2024). Belarus too could begin with a 'both and' language policy while working through removing Russian soft power before transitioning to prioritize Belarusian. Kazakhstan also found ways to undermine emphasis on Soviet holidays by creating alternative holidays on similar dates. May 9th Victory Day celebrations were transformed into May 7th Defenders of the Fatherland Day, which also gave chance to Kazakhs to introduce more national symbols into celebrations (Pachucki-Włosek, 2024).

The Belarusian identity could further be strengthened by cultural preservation by Belarusians abroad. Due to political persecution and intensifying Russianfication, large numbers of writers and cultural figures have been either imprisoned or left the country. It is important for those living outside Belarus to leverage their position to spread the Belarusian language and culture.

Perhaps the most important pursuit of De-Russianfication is ultimately transition towards democracy. The reforms that Kazakhstan undertook were successful because of political backing received from the president and government. Without nurturing pro-democracy movements, it would be difficult for Belarusians to sustain any long term defense or solution against Russianfication.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The impact of the Russiafication of Belarus is something that policymakers globally should draw immense attention to. Not only does this continued cycle of greater political, economic, military, and cultural dependence create an increasingly limited practical autonomy within Belarus, but there is also a large sense of a human rights violation when it comes to the violent repression of protests as well as the limitation of Belarusian culture through language and media. The impacts of this crisis extend far beyond Belarus, with Belarus's integration into Russia's military strategies posing immense threats to many countries such as Ukraine within Eastern Europe, as well as NATO security.

Ultimately, these developments will have significant consequences for Belarusian youth as well, who will be raised in an environment that is increasingly hostile and have reduced access to independent information and Belarusian culture. When looking forward to future generations, it is more critical than ever that, despite Belarus's sovereignty potentially continuing to be undermined, the preservation of their independence through supporting language education and maintaining communities abroad is emphasized to shape the country's own identity and direction.

VIII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Institute for Youth in Policy wishes to acknowledge Md. Saiful Islam Shanto for editing this policy brief.

IX. REFERENCES

- [1] Atlantic Council. (2025, December 4). *Minsk in Moscow's grip: How Russia subjugated Belarus without annexation*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/russia-tomorrow/minsk-in-moscows-grip-how-russia-subjugated-belarus-without-annexation/>.
- [2] Bentzen, N. (2020, August). *Belarus on the brink*. European Parliamentary Research Service. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/652042/EPRS_ATAG\(2020\)652042_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/652042/EPRS_ATAG(2020)652042_EN.pdf).
- [3] Chernin, V. (2025, March 19). *National-democratic movement of Belarus*. Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. <https://besacenter.org/national-democratic-movement-of-belarus/>.
- [4] Council of the European Union. (2024, June 29). *Belarus' involvement in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: New EU restrictive measures target trade, services, transport and anti-circumvention*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/29/belarus-involvement-in-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-new-eu-restrictive-measures-target-trade-services-transport-and-anti-circumvention/>.
- [5] Glod, K. (2026, July 21). *From launchpad to strategic rear: How Belarus evolved into a critical enabler of Russia's war in Ukraine*. The Insider. <https://theinsider.press/en/opinion/glod/295121>.
- [6] Human Rights Experts. (2026, July 8). *Belarus human rights situation: 2025-2026 report*. <https://thehuman-rights.com/human-rights-belarus-analytical-report-2025-2026/>.
- [7] Human Rights Watch. (n.d.). *Belarus Events of 2024*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 13, 2026, from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/belarus>.
- [8] Human Rights Watch. (2026, April 7). *Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Belarus*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 13, 2026, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/07/submission-universal-periodic-review-belarus>.

- [9] Human Rights Watch. (2021, January 13). *Belarus: Unprecedented crackdown*.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/belarus-unprecedented-crackdown>.
- [10] Human Rights Watch. (n.d.). *World Report 2026: Belarus*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 13, 2026, from
<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/belarus>.
- [11] International Center for Journalists. (2024, October 29). *Belarusians in exile haunted by repression at home*.
<https://www.icjwa.org/belarusians-in-exile/>.
- [12] Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale. (2026, March 18). *Belarus-Russia relations after 2020: Subordination through integration*.
<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/belarus-russia-relations-after-2020-subordination-through-integration-232998>.
- [13] Jamestown Foundation. (2025, June 11). *YouTube restrictions on Belarus and Russia strengthen Minsk's propaganda*.
<https://jamestown.org/youtube-restrictions-on-belarus-and-russia-strengthen-minsk-propaganda/>.
- [14] Karlinsky, B. (2026). *The Russification of Belarus*. In *The Science Survey*.
<https://thesciencesurvey.com/news/2026/03/12/the-russification-of-belarus/>.
- [15] Kukharensky, Andrey. "A Red Building Surrounded by Trees." *Unsplash*, May 10, 2022.
<https://unsplash.com/photos/a-red-building-surrounded-by-trees-2sU3QHiQ3Fc>.
- [16] Liubakova, H. (2026). *Belarus is quietly preparing to play a larger role in Russia's Ukraine war*. Atlantic Council.
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/belarus-is-quietly-preparing-to-play-a-larger-role-in-russias-ukraine-war/>.
- [17] NATO. (2023, July 11). *Doorstep statement*.
<https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2023/07/11/doorstep-statement>.
- [18] NATO. (2026, June 17). *Strengthening NATO's eastern flank*.
<https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/strengthening-natos-eastern-flank>.
- [19] Pachucki-Włosek, K. (2024). *Derrusification in the Republic of Kazakhstan under Kassym Jomart Tokayev*. *Politeja*, 94, 297–324.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27414566>.
- [20] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2024, May 23). *'Lukashenka's revenge': Nearly four years after mass protests, state crackdown still reshaping Belarus*.
<https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lukashenka-crackdown-gulag-repression/32959083.html>.
- [21] *The Accidental Dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenko* | American Enterprise Institute – AEI. (2005, January 15). American Enterprise Institute – AEI.
<https://www.aei.org/commentary/the-accidental-dictatorship-of-alexander-lukashenko/>.
- [22] *The Insider*. (2026). *From launchpad to strategic rear: How Belarus evolved into a critical enabler of Russia's war in Ukraine*.
<https://theins.press/en/opinion/glod/295121>.
- [23] *The Spiral of Independence*. (2026). *Russia in Global Affairs*.
<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-spiral-of-independence/>.
- [24] Time. (2026, May 11). *Why Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to sanctions on Belarus*.
<https://time.com/6151347/belarus-russia-ukraine/>.
- [25] Transitions. (2024, July 22). *Can the Belarusian language survive?*
<https://tol.org/client/article/can-the-belarusian-language-survive.html>.