

7th Semester Project

Investigating the reasons behind the close cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation

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Chapter I

Introduction

The Republic of Belarus is a landlocked country situated in Eastern Europe which shares borders with the Russian Federation to its east, Ukraine to its south, and Poland, Lithuania and Latvia – or the European Union – to its west and north. Belarus has an annual nominal GDP of around \$65,8 billion and a population of around 9.4 million people, 600,000 of which currently reside in Russia.¹ The Russian Federation, on the other hand, neighbours the total of 14 countries, stretching from Finland to its west, Mongolia, Kazakhstan and China to its south, North Korea to its east and the Arctic Ocean to its north. The annual nominal GDP of Russia is around \$1.5 trillion and it has the population of 145 million.² With such neighbours, the position of Belarus makes it very unique. On one hand, its eastern partner, the possessor of the world's largest nuclear arsenal, represents an oppressive ideology with which it was able to attain superiority over smaller states throughout its history. On the other hand, its western neighbours are the world's leading examples of equalitarianism, democracy and freedom. For ordinary Belarusian citizens, the location of their country is both a blessing and a curse.

The beginning of the international relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus began in December 1991, when the two – together with Ukraine – signed the *Belovezh Accords*, establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).³ The main goal of this intergovernmental regional organisation is to establish military, economic and cultural cooperation between member states. On December 8, 1999, the *Treaty on the Creation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia* was signed between Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Russian President Boris Yeltsin.⁴ Its signing was preceded by the formation of the Community of Russia and Belarus in 1996, and the Union of Belarus and Russia in 1997. The main purpose of this agreement was to create closer economic, military and political ties which in-time would lead to a fully-fledged union and ultimately a single unified state. The agreement to form a union between the two states was part of Kremlin's⁵ effort to re-establish regional hegemony in the former Soviet Union, primarily because Yeltsin's Russia (1991 – 1999) was immensely weak and on the verge of collapse in the nineties. Since 1999, no president in the CIS has been as eager as Alexander Lukashenko to preserve and strengthen ties with the Russian Federation, especially within the framework of the Union State.⁶

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus (2017): *General Information about the Republic of Belarus*, pp. 2 – 4

² Federal State Statistics Service (2017): *Russia in Figures*, Official Publication, pg. 79

³ Voitovich S. (1993): *The Commonwealth of Independent States: An Emerging Institutional Model*, pg. 404

⁴ Marin, A. (2020): *The Union of Belarus and Russia: Myth and Realities of Political-Military Integration*, pp. 2 – 4

⁵ The term *Kremlin* is used to describe the seat of the Russian executive government.

⁶ Hedenskog J. (2021): *Endgame Belarus? Union State Integration under Pressure*, The Swedish Defence Research Agency, pg.

It must be noted that there has not been a lot of work done by academics on the Russo-Belarusian relations in recent years, primarily because the main focus in the last decade was based on US-Russia rivalry and crises in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). This project is therefore a great opportunity to establish new perspectives and examine other important actors on the international arena, especially the role of Belarus in the current unipolar world order. The focus of this project is going to be situated on the following research question:

“Why do Russia and Belarus cooperate so closely?”

Chapter II

Methodological Framework

This project seeks to understand the reasons behind the closeness of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation. The unique connection between the two countries is going to be investigated through Realism and Liberalism as both offer potential to explain the relationship best. In particular, this project is going to be divided into two hypotheses based on the two theories above. The author of the paper will also investigate other relevant theorists in order to provide a good examination of the research question. The first hypothesis will be based on the notion of balance of power, hegemony and security, which Russia has had to employ – especially through its actions Georgia, Ukraine and Belarus – to counter the Euro-Atlantic⁷ “*expansionist tendencies*”⁸ led by the West. For this part, the project will investigate and apply John Mearsheimer’s *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), which provides an outstanding explanation for the structure of the international system that has pushed Russia to counterbalance Western dominance on its eastern frontier. The purpose of the second hypothesis is to examine the Liberalist school of thought through the internal dynamics of Russia and Belarus. A particular emphasis is going to be based on the respective political systems and ideologies, style of rule, attitudes to public dissent and the allergy Belarus and Russia share for democratic reform. It must be noted that Realism will be the main theory of this project, while Liberalism will be used to back up certain arguments made by the author of this essay.

In order to establish a sophisticated examination of the research question and to verify the hypotheses that are going to be produced, the focus of this project will be based on secondary qualitative and quantitative research methods provided by various English and Russian sources such as: academic articles, journals, speeches and interviews of senior government officials, online newspapers and magazines. It is particularly important to apply a variety of Russian and English sources in order to produce a balanced and neutral examination of problem formulation, especially because the majority of academic work produced today holds a certain amount of bias, leaving out important information from other parties. In addition, to evaluate the

⁷ The term *Euro-Atlantic* in this project refers to the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)

⁸ Putin, V. (2021): *President Putin’s Dialogue at Valdai Discussion Club on 21st of October 2021*, Russia 24

regimes of Belarus and Russia, this project will apply quantitative data provided by Freedom House and the Democracy Index in order to establish the internal similarities between the two states. Quantitative methods will also be used throughout the project to provide statistical data to back up different arguments as well.

Chapter III

Empirical Overview

In 1922, Belarus became one of the founding republics of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) alongside Russia, Ukraine and Transcaucasia.⁹ As part of the USSR, the Belarusian SSR¹⁰ (BSSR) was very closely linked with the Russian SSR economically, socially and culturally. The cultural connection between the two countries was caused by rapid russification¹¹ of Belarus, a period of cultural assimilation process – conducted first by the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union – under which non-Russian communities gave up their language and culture (either voluntarily or involuntarily) in favour of Russian language and culture.

It must also be noted that throughout the existence of the BSSR, there were no noticeable dissident movements against Russian dominance, unlike in neighbouring Ukraine or the Baltics. Even prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, there was no country less ready for independence than Belarus. This was because Belarusians were among the staunchest supporters of the USSR, as 83.72% of the population in 1991 voted to remain part of it in the *Referendum on the Future of the Soviet Union*.¹² This clearly demonstrates that independence and democracy fell upon the Belarusian people, which is very important because Alexander Lukashenko's presidential campaign focused on bringing back certain aspects of the past, including Soviet-era symbolism, state ownership of Belarusian industries, creation of a union between Belarus and Russia and giving the same status to the Russian language as Belarusian. Shortly after the accession of Alexander Lukashenko to the presidency in 1994, the russification policy was relaunched.¹³

Since 1999, the Presidents of Belarus and Russia have developed a somewhat of a special relationship, which is similar to the traditional definition of the *special relationship* between the leaders of the United Kingdom and the United States.¹⁴ Different factors contribute to the special relationship, but most importantly, the number of times the two leaders have met in official settings since Vladimir Putin's election as President of Russia in 2000. According to recent information provided by TASS¹⁵, from 2000 to 2020, Lukashenko visited Russia 106 times to hold talks with Vladimir Putin – both as President (1999 – 2008/2012 –) and Prime

⁹ Big Russian Encyclopaedia (2004): *Treaty on the Formation of the Union of the SSR*, Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, pp. 178 – 179

¹⁰ SSR – Soviet Socialist Republic

¹¹ Bendin, A. (2013): *Return of White Russia*, Archive of Publications, Moskva Journal, pg. 1

¹² USSR Central Referendum Commission (1991): *On the Results of the USSR Referendum held on March 17, 1991*, pg. 3

¹³ Smok, V. (2013): *Belarusian Identity – the Impact of Lukashenko's Rule*, Belarus Digest, pg. 1

¹⁴ U.S. Embassy in the United Kingdom (2021): *Policy and History – the Special Relationship*, pg. 6

¹⁵ Metcel, M. (2021): *Chronology of Alexander Lukashenko's Visits to Russia*, TASS News Agency, Moscow, pg. 1

Minister (2008 – 2012). President Putin visited Belarus 24 times, which is the second biggest number of foreign visits after Kazakhstan.¹⁶ Such factors are significant as they help to understand why Russia and Belarus have been close historically. Most importantly, public perceptions of Russian and Belarusian citizens also show the close link between the two states. In a survey produced by Levada Russia from 2006 to 2020 on the question of “*Who are the closest friends/allies of Russia?*”¹⁷, 58% of those asked responded with Belarus as Russia’s closest ally, and traditionally, the US as its most hostile, with 60% of respondents.

Chapter IV

Theoretical Framework – Realism

Realism is one of the most prominent political philosophies which seeks to explain the competitive and conflictual side of international relations. This theory of international relations dates all the way back to the historical accounts of Thucydides, who wrote about the role of power politics in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (400BC). It was not until the end of the Second World War, however, that Realism developed its modern outlook from the work of Hans Morgenthau (1948), who wrote about the experience of world politics that led to the World War II, and established a number of theses which are going to be developed further in this essay.

Based on the writings of Morgenthau (1948), the sphere of international relations is associated with struggle for power supremacy. Power is the single most important resource of any state which acts as a guarantor of security and survival, as well as an opportunity to disseminate the ideological values of that state elsewhere. As argued by Mearsheimer (2001), great powers “*must be forever vigilant*” and “*never subordinate survival to any other goal, including prosperity*”.¹⁸ Therefore, power is not only the goal of the state participating in international politics, but also one of the most important means. In this regard, states that accumulate power must do whatever it takes in order to preserve it and therefore achieve survival.

One significant proposition of Realism is state-centrism. In this sense, the most important actors on the international arena are sovereign states that have the necessary amount of power.¹⁹ Only states have legitimate foundations and the necessary resources to conclude treaties, conduct foreign policies and declare wars. Therefore, albeit organisations and individuals exist within this framework, i.e., the United Nations, their roles are limited. To add to that, Morgenthau (1948) points out that the state of international relations depends very much on interactions between great powers. Mearsheimer (2001) notes that fortunes of states – either great powers or smaller powers – are “*determined by the decisions and actions of those with the greatest*

¹⁶ Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia (2021): *List of Trips Made by President Putin*, pg. 1

¹⁷ Levada Centre (2020): *From Opinions to Understanding “Friends” and “Enemies” of Russia*, pg. 1

¹⁸ Mearsheimer, J. (2001): *Great Power Politics in the Twenty First Century*, University of Chicago, p. 371

¹⁹ Mearsheimer J. (2009): *International Relations: Reckless States and Realism*, Sage Journals, pg. 242

capability".²⁰ As history has shown, the course of international relations was often influenced by states with great military and economic capability. For instance, following the end of the Second World War, as argued by Mearsheimer (2001), "*politics in almost every region of the world were deeply influenced by the competition of the USSR and the United States*".²¹ To add to that, the majority of conflicts and wars throughout history were often led by great powers, especially Great Britain, France, Germany, the United States and Russia.

Another important principle of Realism is the constant state of anarchy. The term *Anarchy* is used to explain the absence of a higher authority, i.e., a superstate actor, capable of enforcing international law in order to prevent international conflicts.²² The lack of such institution is the primary determinant of outcomes in international relations. Hobbes (1651), who is considered to be one of forefathers of political realism, argued that the absence of government between individuals would lead to a *state of nature*. This is characterised by constant and violent condition of competition, fear and conflict, or as Hobbes himself put it "... *war of every man against every man*".²³ Such analysis is very much applicable to the state. The absence of a higher authority to adjudicate conflicts and disputes means that states will take any measures necessary – usually through competition or conflict – to ensure security and survival. In order to achieve the latter, states must attain military and economic power, through which great powers can dominate the positions and interests of smaller states as well as other great powers.

According to Realists, there are ways in which states secure survival. Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001) distinguish between *Defensive* and *Offensive* Realism as means to attain security and ultimately, survival. While both argue that states are primarily concerned with the maximisation of security, they disagree about the means in which states achieve it. Defensive Realism is best explained by Waltz (1979), who argues that the anarchic structure of the international system encourages states to maintain reserved if not neutral policies in order to achieve security.²⁴ States must be careful not to seek excessive power because this could trigger a domino effect. What is meant by this is that out of fear and uncertainty, other states will retaliate by building and strengthening their militaries, as well as create opposing alliances. This is known as the *Balance of Power* theory, which seeks to explain the behaviour of states in the anarchic international system. States preserve an equilibrium of power by preventing the domination of other states either by increasing their own power or forming alliances to combine efforts in order to secure survival.²⁵ A good historical example of formation of alliances is the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) between countries of the West and

²⁰ Mearsheimer, J. (2001): *Great Power Politics in the Twenty First Century*, University of Chicago, p. 361

²¹ *Ibid*, pg. 3

²² Mearsheimer, J. (2001): *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, University of Chicago, pg. 6

²³ Hobbes, T. (1651): *The Leviathan: Selections on the State of Nature, War and formation of the State*, pg. 2

²⁴ Waltz, K. (1979): *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity, Structural Realism*, pg. 88

²⁵ Schweller, R. (2016): *The Balance of Power in World Politics*, Oxford University Press, pp. 2 – 5

the Warsaw Pact of Eastern Bloc socialist republics during the Cold War (1947 – 1991).²⁶ On the other hand, Offensive Realism is a structural theory put forward by Mearsheimer (2001) in response to Defensive Realism. According to this theory, the anarchic nature of the international system pushes states to maximise their power. Mearsheimer pointed out “... states employ a variety of means – economic, diplomatic and military – to shift the balance of power in their favour, even if doing so makes states suspicious or even hostile”.²⁷ States cannot be sure about the intentions of other countries; therefore, they will use their resources to build up their military forces. As a result of this, states will maximise their power and attain security through domination and hegemony by weakening of competitors as much as possible.²⁸

A further assumption of Realism is based on self-interest of states. It is important to point out human nature is deeply rooted within this theory of international relations because Realists perceive human beings as inherently egoistic, selfish and self-interested.²⁹ Moreover, Realism is sceptical about the relevance of morality in international relations, especially because morality and ethics are barriers to dominance, and most importantly, survival. Keohane (1995) argues that states are rational actors who calculate different types of courses of action in order to maximise their expected utility.³⁰ In other words, by making cost-benefit analysis, states are more likely to attain greater results. It must be noted that a state which acts in an anarchic environment on the basis of its own interests inevitably faces the fact that its interests are in conflict with those of other states. This is because the principal interest and goal of every state is accumulation of power. Waltz (1979), who is a prominent Neorealist agreed on the basic provisions of Realism such as the state of anarchy, the notion of power, rationality and security. However, he established a new theory of Neorealism to challenge and develop the theory of Realism further. Waltz believes that the nature of humans, i.e., selfishness and/or egoism is of reductionist nature and cannot explain the reason behind the behaviour of states.³¹ What does explain their behaviour, as argued by Neorealists, is the structure of the global system, and because the structure of IR is based on anarchy and absence of a higher authority, states must act in the self-help manner in order to survive.

The rivalry of the two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – in the era of bipolarity cast doubt on a number of provisions of the Liberalist paradigm. However, it is evident that Realism possesses several limitations which must be highlighted. First and foremost, Realism does not take into account domestic factors which influence the behaviour of states. Second, following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, Realism began to lose significance due to its lack of predictability. For example, the end of the Cold

²⁶ NATO (1982): *NATO and the Warsaw Pact Force Comparisons*, NATO Archives Online, pp. 6 – 12

²⁷ Mearsheimer, J. (2001): *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, University of Chicago, pg. 34

²⁸ Ibid, pg. 3

²⁹ McGinley S, Walters, R, Scheinflug C. (2017): *International Relations Theory*, pg. 16

³⁰ Keohane, R. and Martin, L. (1995): *The Promise of Institutional Theory*, *International Security* pp. 39 – 51

³¹ McGinley S, Walters, R, Scheinflug C. (2017): *International Relations Theory*, E-International Relations Publishing, pg. 17

War did not result in a return of power politics, nor did it lead to a physical war between the great powers of that time. Third of all, Realism did not offer an explanation for the establishment and purpose of international institutions – such as the EU – under which states cooperate together peacefully.³² Thus, the end of the Cold War paved way to the revival of a theory of international relations known as *Liberalism*.

Theoretical Framework – Liberalism

Political idealism, which is better known as Liberalism, is one of the oldest and most known theories of international relations. The origins of the Liberalist paradigm can be traced back to the works of key liberalist philosophers such as John Locke (1690) and Immanuel Kant (1795). This particular paradigm is based on the idea of universal values and ideals, as well as the idea of the possibility and necessity of changing the nature of international relations in the spirit of freedom, human rights and democracy. In political practice, Liberalism manifested itself in a well-known thesis developed by US President Woodrow Wilson to promote peace in Europe after the First World War. This was done through the introduction of the *Fourteen Points*, which was heavily influenced by Kant's theory of international relations, as well as the creation of international organisations such as the League of Nations (1918) in order to preserve peace among the international community. Such principles are the foundations of today's liberal world order.³³

Liberalists do not deny that international relations are inherently anarchic.³⁴ However, as opposed to Realism, the absence of a supreme authority to enforce international law and adjudicate conflicts between states does not necessarily mean that states are going to equip themselves with arms and maximise their security. Liberalists argue that the creation and expansion of powers of international organisations, the democratisation of international relations and improvement of international law will lead to equal participation in international politics not only of great powers, but also of other states and non-state actors. Additionally, the world community of democratic states with the support and pressure of public opinion is capable of settling disputes between its members peacefully by increasing the number and role of international organisations that promote mutually beneficial cooperation. The creation of collective security systems based on voluntary disarmament and mutual renunciation of war is a priority that makes it possible to end armed conflicts between states also.

In contrast from their ideological predecessors, Liberalists argue that the state is not the only and at times not the main actor in world politics. Participants in international relations represent a wide range of different actors, including governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public associations and groups, transnational corporations and even individuals.³⁵ Such actors can influence the positions of states,

³² Schouenborg, L. (2010): *Why War Has Become Obsolete in Europe*, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Relations, pg. 1

³³ Kortunov, A. et al. (2018): *Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points 100 Years On*, Center for Strategic Research, pp. 4 – 7

³⁴ Buchan, B. (2018): Brills Companion to Anarchism and Philosophy - *Anarchism and Liberalism*, pp. 51 – 52

³⁵ McGinley S, Walters, R, Scheinflug C. (2017): *International Relations Theory*, E-International Relations Publishing, pg. 25

provoke their respective governments and encourage political change. This is important because unlike Realism, Liberalism emphasises internal dynamics of states. Raymond Aron, a prominent Liberal philosopher, distinguished between *homogeneous* and *heterogeneous* systems in international relations.³⁶ A homogenous system, as argued by Aron (2009) is one in which states “*belong to the same type and obey the same conception of politics*”.³⁷ The principal states that fall under this category belong to the Western liberal world order, in-particular the Euro-Atlantic alliance consisting of the United States and the European Union. These states represent almost identical ideologies, governments and most importantly, shared values. Aron (2009) argued that homogeneous societies are part of *transnational* systems, which are a collection of societies that share values related to freedom, democracy, the rule of law and fundamental religious beliefs.³⁸ A heterogeneous system, on the other hand, is composed of states “*that differ significantly in type and adhere to different conceptions of policy*”.³⁹ Such countries represent opposing ideologies to those of the West, in particular states such as Russia and Belarus, as well as most countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Aron (2009) further claims that the first type of system tends to be more stable and permanent because it is “*foreseeable and frowns upon violence*”.⁴⁰ The other type of system is unstable because of “*inherent contradictions in the nature of [those] states*” which lead to violence and conflict. Russia, which has attained superiority through domination of other states throughout history, is a good example of such a system.

One of the greatest limitations of Liberalism is that the widespread dissemination of ideas of human rights and the practice of international (humanitarian) intervention in the affairs of nominally sovereign states has not necessarily transformed them into full, freedom-supporting and democracy-loving countries. For example, in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya today, the Western model of ‘democracy’ has created more chaos rather than promoted prosperity. According to Amnesty International (2021), the three countries mentioned above share the same fate. In Iraq, for example, “*dissent is repressed through excessive force against protesters, unlawful killings and enforced disappearances*”.⁴¹ In Libya, “*armed groups commit violations of international humanitarian law, including possible war crimes*”.⁴² In Afghanistan, “*the current conflict entered its twentieth year and continued to claim largest civilian casualties*”.⁴³ In all of these countries, the US-led liberal world order promised a prosperous future for the citizens of these countries. Yet, the Euro-Atlantic alliance used shared liberal values as a justification to completely destroy the internal

³⁶ Adair-Toteff, C. (2019): *Raymond Aron’s Philosophy of Political Responsibility: Freedom, Democracy and National Identity*, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 106 - 108

³⁷ Schmitt, O. (2018): *Raymond Aron and International Relations*, Chapter VIII, Routledge, pp. 140 – 145

³⁸ Adair-Toteff, C. (2019): *Raymond Aron’s Philosophy of Political Responsibility: Freedom, Democracy and National Identity*, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 106

³⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 106

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 106

⁴¹ Amnesty International (2021): *Middle East and North Africa – Overview of Iraq*, pg. 1

⁴² Amnesty International (2021): *Middle East and North Africa – Overview of Libya*, pg. 1

⁴³ Amnesty International (2021): *Asia and the Pacific – Overview of Afghanistan*, pg. 1

dynamics of these states, which today are in a worse position than they were under individuals such as Muammar al-Gaddafi or Saddam Hussein.

Chapter V

Analysis – Realism

The purpose of this section is to analyse the closeness of the Russo-Belarusian relations through the Realist paradigm. In particular, the following paragraphs are going to investigate Russia's vulnerability in the unipolar world order established after the end of the Cold War, the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic organisations on Russia's traditional spheres of influence and Russia's balancing behaviour since the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 in order to preserve its status as a great power. As mentioned in the theoretical framework section, power supremacy is the goal of every great power in the anarchic global system. For Kremlin, power supremacy and hegemony must be achieved in Russia's traditional sphere of influence in order to ensure the preservation of equilibrium of power and ultimately survival of the Russian government. Historically, Russia's neighbours have played a significant role in the survival of the Russian regime, either in the imperial or the communist years. Mearsheimer (2014), argued that a huge expanse of flat land that Napoleonic France, imperial Germany and Nazi Germany "*all crossed to strike at Russia*" is situated Ukraine, which was also historically part of modern-day Belarus.⁴⁴

When asked about his greatest regret, Vladimir Putin described the fall of the Soviet Union as the "*greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century*".⁴⁵ A Levada Center (2019) poll showed that 66% of Russians also "*regretted*" the fall of the USSR also.⁴⁶ This was because Russia was in the highest ranks as the world's second super power, which extended its influence over eastern Europe, East Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East. Following the collapse of the Soviet state in 1991, the United States came out victorious and not only did it retain its position over Europe, it also expanded its influence in the post-Soviet sphere, which in-turn diminished Russia's influence over its "*near abroad*"⁴⁷. The establishment of a unipolar world order led by the United States allowed it to exercise its power over any territory in the world without the intervention of any opposing state, while the newly establish Russian Federation provided hope that it would become part of the Western democratic world. However, within a few years of its existence, the newly established state was on the verge of collapse, primarily because of its frail leadership. President Boris Yeltsin, who was considered to be the leading supporter of democratic liberal values at that time, privatised the entirety of Russia's state-owned assets, including energy, natural gas, oil and industrial sectors. As a result of this, the

⁴⁴ Mearsheimer, J. (2014): *Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin*, Council on Foreign Relations, pg. 82

⁴⁵ Putin V. (2018): *Press Conference of the President of the Russian Federation on 2nd of March 2018*

⁴⁶ Levada Center (2019): *The Collapse of the USSR*, Yuri Levada Analytical Centre's Polling, pg. 1

⁴⁷ In the political language of Russia, *near abroad* refers to the independent republics which emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union

majority of such sectors fell into the hands of a small group of *oligarchs*⁴⁸ who, after the rapid accumulation of Russian capital, were able to directly influence the Russian government.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the Russian Armed Forces sustained embarrassing losses during the devastating war in Chechnya (1994 – 1996) which led to the withdrawal of Russia’s troops from a country that is smaller than Israel.⁵⁰ The cost of the war took a significant toll on the Russian economy, which gradually led to the Economic Crisis of 1998, resulting in devaluation of the Ruble and an inflation of 84%.⁵¹

By the time Vladimir Putin became Prime Minister and later acting President of Russia in 1999, Russia was practically “*on its knees*”.⁵² In order to re-establish itself as a great power again, one of the first things Russia did was to sign the *Treaty on the Creation of the Union State* with the Republic of Belarus and establish the Union State of Russia and Belarus in 1999. The Union State is a supranational entity of the two countries with a unified political, military, economic and legal space that is gradually integrated. Not even a year ago, however, further integration between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus appeared to be an unlikely prospect, primarily because Lukashenko looked towards expanding relations with the West. On numerous occasions, Lukashenko even stated that in-case Russia would try to incorporate Belarus into its sphere, Lukashenko would defend “*every inch of Belarus*”⁵³. However, the fraudulent presidential elections in August 2020 – in which Lukashenko supposedly won the election with 80% of the popular vote⁵⁴ – and their aftermath have been a critical turning point in the relations between Belarus, Russia and the European Union. Today, Lukashenko is isolated, meaning that the support of his eastern ally is of utmost importance. In recent months, President Lukashenko stated that “*the two of us [Russia and Belarus] could unite tomorrow, no problem*”.⁵⁵ Russia’s support during the acute phase of the political crisis in Belarus has become a key factor in the retention of power of Lukashenko.

The creation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus caused many analysts, as argued by Janeliunas (2007), to consider Belarus a ‘*vassal state*’ of Russia.⁵⁶ This is because Belarus joined the Union to fulfil its economic needs and to receive Russian subsidies of cheap oil and gas in exchange of political support. In a recent press conference of the Belarusian and Russian leaders, Vladimir Putin even stated that “*The cost of gas for Belarus will remain at \$130 per 1000 cubic metres. The fixed price on the European market is \$650*

⁴⁸ An *oligarch* is a business magnate of the former Soviet republics who rapidly accumulated wealth during the era of privatisation

⁴⁹ Stratfor Global Intelligence (2009): *The Rise and Fall of the Russian Oligarchs*, pp. 3 – 8

⁵⁰ Calzini, P. (2005): *Vladimir Putin and the Chechen War*, The International Spectator, pp. 2 – 5

⁵¹ Congressional Research Service (1999): *The Russian Financial Crisis of 1998: Analysis of Trends, Causes and Implications*, Library of Congress pg. 2

⁵² Putin, V. (1999): *Putin’s Address at the Meeting of the Government of Russia Dedicated to Counter-Terrorist Operations in North Caucasus*

⁵³ Lukashenko, A. (2020): *Interview of President Lukashenko with Ukrainian journalist Dmytro Gordon on 6th of August 2020*

⁵⁴ Walker, N. & Robinson, T. (2020): *Belarus: 2020 Presidential Election*, House of Commons Library, pg. 10

⁵⁵ Shraibman, A. (2019): *Belarus Ready to ‘Unite’ With Russia, Lukashenko Says*, The Moscow Times, pg. 1

⁵⁶ Janeliunas, T. (2007): *Between Russia and the EU: Transformational Opportunities for Belarus*, Vilnius University, pg. 144

per 1000 cubic metres".⁵⁷ It must be noted, that Belarus is heavily dependent on Russia's resources in order to ensure its economy functions well. From the perspective of the Russian government, on the other hand, the desire for further integration through the Union State was and is primarily driven by political and military interests, and for as long as the two countries continue integrating, NATO's desires to expand further eastward are going to be diminished. Therefore, the relationship between Russia and Belarus is particularly close primarily because the interests of the two states are fulfilled. On one hand, by funding the Lukashenko regime, Kremlin secures loyalty and security on its eastern frontier, and on the other hand, by providing loyalty to Putin, Lukashenko receives generous subsidies of natural resources with which he can build up strong repressive and ideological state apparatuses – which are going to be explained further in the project.

For Kremlin, Belarus occupies a very critical geographical position alongside the Suwalki Gap. The gap is the narrow strip which forms the Lithuania-Poland border providing the only corridor connecting Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia with Poland and other NATO allies, as well as linking the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad to Belarus.⁵⁸ This would be the most likely area for conflict between Russia and the West. Hence, this is the reason why the joint strategic military exercises of the armed forces of Russia and Belarus are held in Kaliningrad Oblast. The two countries have intensified their military activities near the borders of Lithuania and Poland, in-particular through the Zapad⁵⁹ activities. The Zapad military activities have taken place since 1981 every four years, centered on what the Russian General Staff terms "*the Western strategic direction*". The main purpose of such activities is to imitate military training for regional or large-scale war against NATO, primarily because there is not larger existential threat to Russia than the Euro-Atlantic alliance. In the most recent talk of the Russian President at the Valdai Discussion Club 2021, Vladimir Putin noted that "*It is not us [Russia] who are placing rockets everywhere. It is they [NATO] who are placing missiles under our noses [Romania and Poland], and this is a severe threat to us.*"⁶⁰ Therefore, following NATO expansion to Russia's eastern frontier, Russia has no choice but to carry out offensive military Zapad activities in order to present itself as a country which will not tolerate expansion on its traditional sphere of influence and will attempt to become a regional hegemon on its border with the European Union.

One of the principal reasons behind Russia's maintenance of good relations with Belarus is the guarantee of non-deployment of enemy missile weapons on the territory of Belarus, which enhances the security of Russia. This is very important because the scenario is not the same in Georgia and Ukraine. When Russia supported and funded separatist movements in Georgia, i.e., Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Kremlin lost one of its historical partners, and since the invasion of Georgia in 2008, Russia and Georgia have had no

⁵⁷ Putin, V. (2021): *Press Conference of the President of the Russian Federation and the President of the Republic of Belarus on 9 September 2021*.

⁵⁸ Challis, B. (2020): *Belarus beyond 2020: Implications for Russia and the West*, Euro-Atlantic Security Policy Brief, pg. 2

⁵⁹ The term *Zapad (Zanad)* in Russian means the *West*.

⁶⁰ Putin, V. (2021): *President Putin's Speech at Valdai Discussion Club on 21st of October 2021*, Russia 24

formal diplomatic relations. Furthermore, although Russia gained direct influence over the affairs of Crimea and Donbass (Luhansk and Donetsk regions), its influence over Ukraine, which it held since its independence years, has diminished greatly.⁶¹ Hence, Lukashenko argued that “... [I], together with Putin, gifted Ukraine to the West, and the West should be thankful for that.”⁶² In other words, the West is able to place its military assets on Ukrainian territory without Russia’s approval. As a result of this, Belarus is of utmost security to the Kremlin, and it is evident that Russia will do anything in its power to preserve the status quo, because otherwise, without a buffer zone to its eastern border, Russia’s borders will be left vulnerable for NATO encroachment. According to prominent Russian political scientist Melyantsov (2021)⁶³, the reason behind why it is unprofitable to destabilise Belarus for Russia is because Belarus acts as a “*balcony hanging over the NATO countries and their allies*” which determines the strategic importance of the Belarusian territory. In an event of military conflict between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic alliance, the territory of Belarus is of key importance for the unblocking of Kaliningrad exclave and the encirclement of the Baltic states, using the Suwalki corridor. It must be noted that two important Russian military installations, including a nuclear reactor are situated on Belarusian territory. The largest bilateral investment between the two states was the construction of the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant in 2021, which is on the outskirts of the border between Belarus and the European Union. This was completely funded by the Russian Federation at a cost of around \$10 billion.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the Hantsavichy Radar Station (70M6 Volga), situated in southern Belarus is a station used by the Russian Space Forces for detection of ballistic missile launches from Europe. Such military installations are very important, primarily because they act as sources of information and security against NATO threat.⁶⁵

One of Russia’s main existential threats has been Belarus’ interestedness to re-open dialogue with the European Union and the United States. In-particular, Belarus has shown willingness to join the organisation since the late 1990s. For example, in 2006, Belarus and NATO approved the first package of 21 partnership documents. By 2014, 16 additional partnership documents were approved.⁶⁶ Ever since 1991, NATO continued to expand greatly, first through the Visegrad Group (Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic) in 1999, the Vilnius Group (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia) in 2004, Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020.⁶⁷ It is therefore evident that Russia cannot guarantee that such enlargement of a military alliance would not be used against it, particularly because the purpose of NATO was largely to contain the spread of communism during the Cold War. It must

⁶¹ Mankoff, J. (2014): “*Russia’s Latest Land Grab: How Putin Won Crimea and Lost Ukraine*, Foreign Affairs 93, pp. 60 – 68.

⁶² Lukashenko, A. (2020): *Interview of President Lukashenko with Ukrainian journalist Dmytro Gordon on 6th of August 2020*

⁶³ Melyantsov, D. (2021): *Why Does Russia Support Lukashenko?* Deutsche Welle, pg. 1

⁶⁴ Janeliunas, T. (2021): *The Long Shadow of a Nuclear Monster*, International Centre for Defence and Security, pp. 22 – 23

⁶⁵ Alesin, A. (2020): *Missile Attack Warning System “Volga” Turned Out TO be More Important Than “Dnepr” and “Daryal”*, Belrynok News Agency, pg. 1

⁶⁶ Ministry of Defence of Belarus (2021): *Belarus and NATO*, pg. 1 (translated)

⁶⁷ Faris, D. (2021): *The Madness of Expanding NATO*, The Week Magazine, pg. 1

be pointed out that the Soviet Union has not existed for over 30 years, therefore there cannot be any other threat to NATO but Russia. Mearsheimer (2014) argues that Washington would not tolerate Russia's military deployment "anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, much less on its borders",⁶⁸ which demonstrates that Russia will not allow the deployment of the Euro-Atlantic militaries near its spheres of influence as it will pose a great security threat to its state apparatus. Following the Euro-Atlantic eastward expansion, in-particular the expansion of the European Union and NATO in Russia's near abroad, Russia turned to serious measures in order to balance the power. This was seen through its action in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

Analysis – Liberalism

The purpose of this section is to analyse the close diplomatic relations between Belarus and the Russian Federation through the Liberalist paradigm. In-particular, it is important to examine the internal dynamics of both Russian and Belarusian regimes in order to establish reasons why the two countries share a very close diplomatic relationship.

One of the principal reasons behind the closeness of the two states is the fact that in the early 1990s, both Russia under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin (1991 – 1999) and Belarus under Stanislav Shushkevich (1991 – 1994), initiated various democratic reforms, and at the same time, reversed their policies immediately. For example, with the election of Alexander Lukashenko as President of Belarus in 1994, as well as the nomination of Vladimir Putin as acting President in 1999, the leaders diverged from the democratic path of the two states to a centralised and more oppressive political systems. According to Democracy Index (2020), Russia and Belarus both share an allergy for democratic processes and reforms primarily because they are both considered to be *Authoritarian* and *Moderate Autocracies* with a total score of 3 out of 10.⁶⁹ In addition, according to the most recent data provided by Freedom House (2021), Russia represents an autocratic political system with "loyalist security forces", "subservient judiciary" and "controlled media environment" with which the Kremlin is able to manipulate elections and suppress dissent.⁷⁰ On the other hand, Belarus is an authoritarian state in which elections are "openly rigged" and civil liberties are "severely restricted".⁷¹ To add to that, the two countries share a very similar trait when it comes to change in government. Since 1999, the Russian Federation showed very little progress in change of government. Although Putin was succeeded by Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, Putin held the post of Prime Minister, which at that time, was very powerful. Lukashenko became president in 1994, which makes him the longest-serving head of state in Europe. Both

⁶⁸ Mearsheimer, J. (2014): *Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault, The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin*, Council on Foreign Relations, pg. 82

⁶⁹ The Economist Intelligence Unit (2020): *Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health?* The Economist, pg. 1

⁷⁰ Freedom House (2021): *Countries and Territories: The Russian Federation*, Freedom House Index, pg. 1

⁷¹ Freedom House (2021): *Countries and Territories: Republic of Belarus*, Freedom House Index, pg. 1

leaders went to great lengths to stay in power, in-particular, through the use of fraudulent elections, corruption, murder of the opposition and the use of force against their own citizens.

As mentioned previously, Liberalism advocates for the creation and expansion of powers of international organisations, the democratisation of international relations and improvement of international law. Ikenberry (1999) adds that Liberal international order is based on international norms.⁷² Especially international laws such as respect for human rights, the rule of law, democracy and freedom. Unfortunately, Russia is a prime example of a country which does not support liberal ideas. This is because in the entire history Russia, there has not been a single period of time which could have been classified as democratic, either under the imperial rule of the tsars, the communists or the presidencies of both Yeltsin and Putin in modern Russia.⁷³ According to research conducted by both Russian and Western researchers, a fascinating fact was found with regard to Russia's position on democracy. According to research by Friedrich-Nauman Foundation (2018), the majority of the Russian population are not keen on democracy, it is not something as desired as it would be in the West.⁷⁴ Terms such as *democracy* and *liberty* are not valued by many, because the survey shows that the majority of Russians (57% that is) state that they want to live in a state while supporting government actions that "*undermine any chance of Russia becoming a liberal democracy*". Furthermore, out of 1653 Russian citizens asked, 70% stated that there is "*no need for freedom of speech or independent media outlets*".⁷⁵ In a recent study conducted by Levada Center, 49% of Russians would prefer a Soviet political system, with 16% believing that the best political system is a "*democracy based on western countries*".⁷⁶ With regard to Belarus, the entire period of its existence, apart from 1918 and 1990 – 1994 is very much the same as Russia. Belarus experienced very little periods of democratic/liberal rule throughout its history. It must be noted that because the fall of the Soviet Union was so instant on Belarus and democratic values were not as prominent as in the West at that time, Lukashenko was able to consolidate power throughout his presidential terms without much public dissent. Today, however, the civil society is far too weak to overthrow the Lukashenko regime primarily because of the Russo-Belarusian links. In a survey produced by Chatham House (2021), 73% of respondents state that Russia is the sole support of Lukashenko, while 79% feel very positive about the Russian Federation.⁷⁷

Liberal norms are incompatible with the Russian and Belarusian governments, therefore making them closer. It is important to point out that the majority of Russia's partners, i.e., China, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Syria are non-democratic societies. Moreover, such international liberal norms pose a threat to both Russian

⁷² McGinley S, Walters, R, Scheinplflug C. (2017): *International Relations Theory*, E-International Relations Publishing, pg. 24

⁷³ Wills, M. (2020): *Was Russia Destined to Be an Autocracy?* JSTOR Daily, Politics and History, pg. 1

⁷⁴ Friedrich-Nauman Foundation (2017): *The Perception of Freedom by Inhabitants of Russia*, F-NF, (pp. 2 – 19)

⁷⁵ Friedrich-Nauman Foundation (2017): *The Perception of Freedom by Inhabitants of Russia*, F-NF, (pp. 2 – 19)

⁷⁶ Kudryavtsev, K. (2021): *Poll: The Number of Supports of Russia – a "Great Power" Has Reached a Minimum*, Svoboda, pg. 1

⁷⁷ Astapenia, R. (2021): *Belarusians' Views on the Political Crisis*, Chatham House, pg. 1

and Belarusian governments. For instance, a prime similarity between the two states is their respective reactions to public dissent. Both Kremlin and Minsk have used repressive measures to deal with dissent, usually through the assassination of prominent opposition leaders, placing peaceful protesters to prison and taking freedoms away from their people. Lukashenko's regime, for example, employed brutality, coercion and violence as means to end anti-government protests. As a result of this, the European Union imposed a series of economic sanctions against the Belarusian regime, while the Belarusian government suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership.⁷⁸ President Lukashenko cut off ties with the European Union, which left him isolated and with no choice but to cooperate with Kremlin in order to continue the generous provision of subsidies of oil and gas. Most importantly, by keeping close relations and making concessions with Vladimir Putin through the expansion of the Union State for the sake of the Russian Federation, Lukashenko will be able to stay in power for longer.

Because this part of the project examines internal dynamics of states, it is also important to include definitions of important thinkers from other paradigms which help to examine the problem formulation better. Althusser, who is a Marxist philosopher, distinguished between the ideological and repressive state apparatuses. Although these definitions are not part of the Liberalist paradigm, they are very much applicable to the internal dynamics of Russia and Belarus. Thus, these definitions must be examined and applied. According to Althusser (1970), the *ideological* state apparatus consists of institutions such as media, education and the law, which are directly influenced by states in order to transmit the values of the state on their population.⁷⁹ Both Russia and Belarus share very similar attitudes to institutions such as education, law and especially the media. For instance, the most popular TV channels in Russia, such as Channel One Russia, Russia 24 and Russia Today are either owned by the state or heavily state-funded.⁸⁰ In Belarus, media channels such as Belarus 1, ONT and STV are owned by the Government of Belarus. Interestingly enough, STV, which is the third most popular TV channel in Belarus, is owned by Alexander Lukashenko. State-controlled media is used as the ideological state apparatus to distort the realities and misinform the general population for the gain of their current governments. Bodrunova (2021), argues that as a result of this, freedom of expression in Russia and Belarus are almost non-existent because not only do state-controlled media gain the majority of viewings, most of independent and anti-government news agencies are banned as a result of dissent.⁸¹

As mentioned previously, Belarus enjoys a very generous provision of cheap gas and oil resources from the Russian government in exchange for loyalty. With this, the Belarusian state is able to fund the *Repressive* state apparatus⁸², which consists of the law enforcement and the military. By investing into these

⁷⁸ Brzozowski, A. (2021) *EU Reproves Belarus' Walkout from the Eastern Partnership*, EUROACTIV, pg. 1

⁷⁹ Althusser, L. (1970): *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*, New York, pg. 14

⁸⁰ Maida, Adam (2017): *Online and On All Fronts – Russia's Assault on Freedom of Expression*, Human Rights Watch, pg. 1

⁸¹ Bodrunova, S. (2021): *Social Media and Political Dissent in Russia and Belarus*, SAGE Journals, pp. 1 – 3

⁸² Althusser, L. (1970): *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*, New York, pg. 15

institutions, Lukashenko has been able to suppress any public dissent and protest since 1994. For instance, the most recent 2020 – 2021 Belarusian protests which were caused by Lukashenko's authoritarian repression of Belarusian citizens, the Belarusian government was able to suppress them and imprison main opposition leaders. Recently, Sergei Tsikhanovsky, a prominent pro-democracy activist and dissident and husband of Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya – the leader of the Belarusian revolution – was sentenced for 18 years in prison. In Russia, the scenario is very much the same, but the enforcement apparatuses are far more sophisticated and are constantly used against the civil society in case of protest or dissent.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project has examined the various explanations for closeness behind Russian and Belarusian governments, in-particular through Liberal and Realist paradigms. The author of this paper also examined other explanations to help answer the problem formulation through Althusser's (1970) explanation of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, which is significant to this day. It is evident from the evidence provided that the US-led global order has created a difficult if not confrontational situation for Russia, primarily because of NATO expansion in Russia's traditional sphere of influence, which throughout the imperial and communist years was directly influenced by the Kremlin. Russia, which was on the verge of collapse in the 1990s had to reinforce its image through establishing closer ties with Belarus within the framework of the Union State. Today, as part of the agreement between the two countries, Russia is able to place its military assets on Belarusian territory and counterbalance the NATO presence in Eastern Europe as mentioned by Kremlin, also. In recent years, especially since 2008 and 2014, Georgia and Ukraine both demonstrated willingness to join the Euro-Atlantic club and shift away from Russian control. Unfortunately, the vulnerability created by the unipolar world order pushed Russia to invade the two countries, which as a result, had to pay a heavy price. To this day, for example, Ukraine has not recovered from the Russian occupation and involvement in eastern Ukraine. This project also provided information with regard to domestic factors of the two states. It is evident from the evidence produced that from internal dynamics, Russia and Belarus are identical in the style, length and means of rule of their presidents. Additionally, the two countries have turned to repressive measures against their civil societies in order to deal with public dissent and protest. It is evident that the Realist paradigm helps to understand the current state of Russo-Belarusian relations best, primarily because of the factors provided above. It is clear that for as long as Alexander Lukashenko is in power, Belarus and Russia will continue to develop strategic plans to integrate their countries further, which in-turn will diminish NATO's plans to expand further into the east. The two countries have recently signed 28 Union State programs in order to deepen the economic and military process. Although there has been no mention of political integration so far, one must remember that Rome was not built in one day and that political integration of two states is still a possible prospect.

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