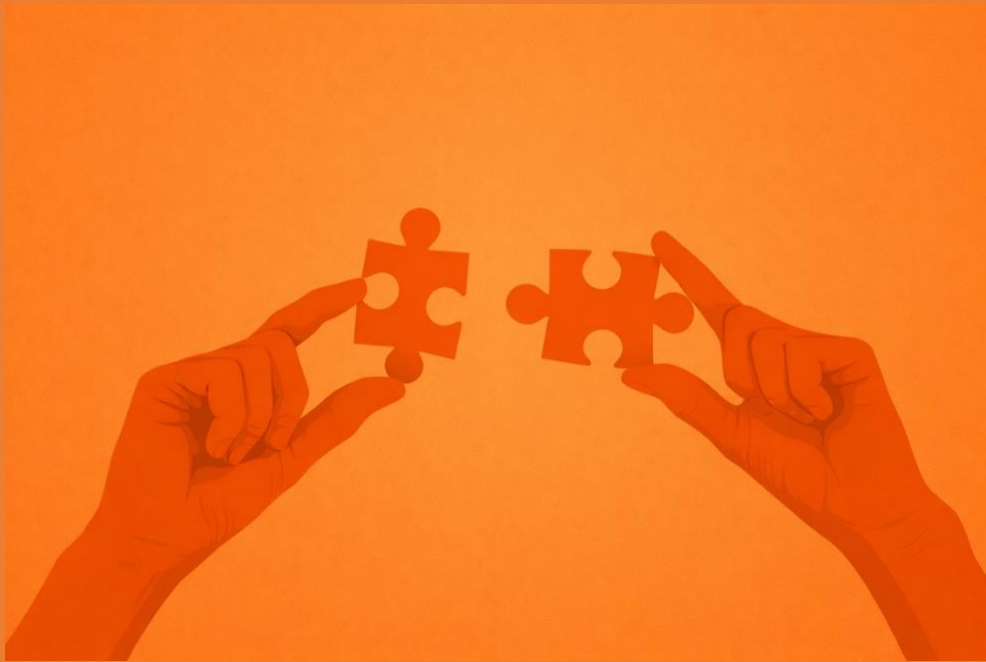




Institute for Development and Social Market in
Belarus and Eastern Europe



POLICY BRIEF

THE UNION STATE OF BELARUS AND RUSSIA: A LABORATORY FOR THE CONSOLIDATION OF AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

IDSMBEE
Vilnius, Lithuania
2026

Imprint



This policy brief has been prepared with the support of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Belarus Country Office

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Acknowledgement

This policy brief is based on the results of a webinar held in March 25th, 2026 within the project “*Belarus–Russia Relations in the Context of War, Authoritarianism, and Cultural Hegemony*”, with the participation of representatives of the Belarusian and Russian expert communities.

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Date

April 2026

Using the content and citation

Should you wish to reproduce or cite any part of this written content, please provide proper reference to the policy paper “**The Union State of Belarus and Russia: a laboratory for the consolidation of authoritarian regimes**” (2026).

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Executive summary

The Union State of Belarus and Russia (the Union State) should be viewed less as a failed supranational project and more as an institutional environment. It entrenches Minsk's asymmetric dependence on Moscow. The US facilitates the consolidation of the authoritarian regimes in Russia and Belarus in the context of the war against Ukraine and the imposition of international sanctions. The inadequacy and dysfunction of the Union State as a supranational project do not negate its operational functionality. On the contrary, the absence of a fully-fledged union centre, a common currency and other attributes of a supranational state make the Union State model appear benign to external observers and convenient for both sides. In practice, decisions are implemented through bilateral intergovernmental agreements, inter-agency coordination and technical regulations. The authorities of both states effectively use the Union State institutional framework and Belarus as an "offshore" jurisdiction to circumvent sanctions. At the same time, the Union State infrastructure keeps the cost for the Kremlin of controlling decision-making in Belarus comparatively low. For Minsk, this format also yields substantial benefits in the form of financial assistance (loans), economic preferences (low energy prices, facilitated access to the large Russian market for goods and services, etc.) and political and diplomatic support.

The primary security threat to Ukraine, and the region as a whole, stems from the operational dimension of the Union State, within which military coordination, the militarisation of the population and the development of sanctions-evasion schemes take place. Sanctions pressure would be more effective if it took into account this dual nature of the Union State and focused on its operational dimension, while not increasing the isolation of civil society. Otherwise, the response of European partners will inevitably lag, and sanctions themselves will deepen Belarus's dependence on Russia and contribute to the growth of anti-European sentiment within civil society.

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Introduction

This document is based on the outcomes of a discussion among Belarusian and Russian experts conducted under the Chatham House Rule. The focus is on the institutional nature of the Union State, the dynamics of its development against the backdrop of the war, sanctions, and intensified interaction between the two authoritarian regimes, as well as the implications of the consolidation of the authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Russia for the security of Belarus, Ukraine, and the wider region (with a particular focus on EU Member States sharing a border with Belarus and Russia).

Experts were unanimous in noting that, over thirty years, the Union State has not evolved into a fully-fledged supranational entity. However, this does not imply political failure or dysfunction. On the contrary, for the ruling elites in both countries, the current decorative and declarative model of the Union State is acceptable and convenient, albeit for different reasons. For the Kremlin, it is advantageous in that it combines the formal-legal and symbolic preservation of Belarus's sovereignty with the capacity to expand and institutionally entrench Minsk's dependence. This increases control over Belarus's foreign policy, defence, economic and information behaviour. Moscow uses Belarus as an "offshore" jurisdiction to circumvent sanctions. For the Belarusian elites, in turn, the Union State continues to function as a decorative and declarative construct that appeases the imperial expansionist ambitions of Russia and channels them into more manageable forms of coexistence. Minsk is able to secure economic preferences (lower energy prices, loans, access to the market for goods and services, among others).

Thus, despite its failure to develop into a fully-fledged supranational entity, the Union State constitutes a successful (from the perspective of the current ruling elites), convenient and effective—above all for the Kremlin—conglomerate of institutions.

1. The Union State as an iceberg: decorative on the surface, functional within, and dangerous for neighbouring countries

First, attention should be drawn to the dual nature of the Union State, which resembles an iceberg: a small, decorative, non-functional and seemingly harmless visible part, and a vast, functional and risk-laden submerged part. At the surface level, the Union State appears as an unfinished quasi-state with dormant and/or over-bureaucratized institutions that have for thirty years simulated "vigorous activity". Public opinion surveys in both countries are indicative in this regard. A majority of citizens in Belarus and Russia remain unaware of the Union State's existence and do not take it seriously. However, at the concealed operational level, the Union State functions differently: as an institutional environment enabling the intensification of key intergovernmental arrangements between presidents, governments and agencies. For this reason, the thesis of the Union State's failure is valid only with regard to the original design of the 1990s and/or in comparison with existing successful supranational entities (for example, the European Union). As an instrument for deepening Belarus's dependency on Russia and for controlling the behaviour of Belarusian political elites, this construct has proven effective.

Second, the operational functionality of the Union State has become most evident since the start of the Kremlin's war against Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions by the European Union and the United States on Russia and Belarus. Over the past five years, the extent and depth of bilateral interaction have become clear. This applies primarily to security and defence, the development of military and dual-use infrastructure (transport networks and logistics flows, enterprises servicing the defence-industrial complex, medical facilities and personnel mobilised to treat Russian military personnel, among others), as well as foreign policy, information policy, and even domestic socio-political activity (including indoctrination through aligned ideological patterns in education and culture). It follows that the Union State's activities are not limited to symbolic events or the adoption of non-binding decisions and legal acts. A far more significant share of activity takes place without public visibility: through technical bureaucratic documents, the adoption of compatibility standards, and inter-agency coordination procedures governing concrete actions, which rarely attract public scrutiny. These inconspicuous yet effective and long-term institutionalisations of Russia–Belarus cooperation substantially constrain Belarus's sovereignty. Should a window of opportunity emerge, they will increase the cost of Belarus's exit from the Union State.

Third, at present the operational dimension of the Union State is increasingly characterised by the transformation of Belarus into an offshore jurisdiction for Russia. In this context, trade channels and logistical corridors have gained importance for both countries. For Moscow, Belarus has become a resource for sensitive sanctions-evading operations. At the same time, Minsk seeks to commercialise this asset. It is used as leverage in negotiations with Moscow for lower energy prices, access to loans, and expanded market access for Belarusian goods and services. As a result, by 2025 bilateral trade exceeded USD 50 billion, reaching a historic high. However, what provides short-term benefits to Belarus simultaneously deepens its institutional and structural dependence on Russia. For example, the integration of tax databases and coordination on indirect taxation grant Moscow access to sensitive information on Belarus's economic policy decision-making and business environment. Likewise, enforced alignment with Russian standards facilitates integration into sanctions-evasion chains at the cost of technological autonomy in the medium and long term.

Fourth, institutional dependence coincides with the strengthening of the authoritarian tandem of Russia and Belarus, which poses a threat not only to Ukraine but also to EU Member States. In this context, a "wait-and-see" approach—seeking to outlast the current crisis under the cover of the Union State's imitation forms of integration—appears naive, short-sighted and risky. Dormant institutions and declarative integration formats should not obscure the effectiveness of operational integration. Integration of the defence-industrial complexes of Russia and Belarus continues to deepen; civilian and military infrastructures are being harmonised; and instruments of indoctrination and militarisation are being aligned through media, education and cultural institutions. Maintaining the status quo is not a neutral scenario; it reinforces and institutionalises Belarus's dependence on Russia. These processes pose a threat not only to Belarus's sovereignty and to Ukraine, but also to the region as a whole, particularly to EU Member States bordering Belarus and Russia, including Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland.

2. Significance for European policy

First, representatives of Belarusian democratic forces and European policymakers should not underestimate the role and significance of the Union State. Behind its visible dysfunctionality, intensive institutional work is under way. This means that even if Putin and Lukashenka leave power, the inertia of the authoritarian tandem will continue. It will be sustained by the institutions being created and by the bureaucracies servicing them. Consequently, the departure of both autocrats, whether sequential or simultaneous, as well as a possible democratic transition of power, will not remove from the agenda the security threat posed by the Union State. At present, this concerns primarily the threat to Belarus's own sovereignty and to Ukraine's security. In the short and medium term, however, it also concerns the security of EU Member States bordering Russia and Belarus: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland.

Second, the security threat to the region and to EU Member States should not be understood only in a narrow and direct sense, namely as military aggression against the Baltic States and Poland. In a broader, indirect and delayed form, an escalation of tensions is quite likely as a result of the Union State's success as a project for consolidating authoritarian regimes and accumulating their resources. In this context, the Union State should be regarded as a paradigmatic model for the consolidation of authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe. Its success will be attractive primarily to post-Soviet states, most of which, with varying configurations, have authoritarian political regimes.

It is possible to forecast, with a fairly high degree of probability, the expansion of the Union State as an instrument of "soft colonisation". Two factors reinforce this scenario: Russia's continuing expansionist tendencies and the high costs of military occupation of neighbouring states, as demonstrated by Ukraine. It is clear that Moscow has a strong interest in preserving a grey "offshore" zone of neighbouring states. These states would not fall under sanctions, but would remain loyal and friendly to Moscow in economic, migration, defence and information policy. In turn, neighbouring states, if faced with a choice between military occupation and peaceful coexistence in the Union State format, would most likely choose the Belarusian option. Such "Belarusisation" of relations with Moscow implies the voluntary limitation of sovereignty. At the formal and international level, however, both the relative room for manoeuvre of the political elites of Russia's satellite states and the sovereign subjectivity of these states may be preserved, for example through the representation of post-Soviet states at the United Nations.

3. Recommendations and policy proposals

At the level of EU institutions

- Shift the focus from the symbolic (decorative and declarative) dimension of the Union State to its operational institutional dimension and the network of "offshore" schemes it generates. Priority should be given to measures targeting grey logistics, intermediary companies, certification and standardisation mechanisms, digital registries and other control infrastructures. This form of

Belarus–Russia interaction enables the circumvention of restrictions while simultaneously deepening Belarus’s dependence on Russia, strengthening control over citizens and contributing to the militarisation of the population.

- Support and encourage monitoring and expert analysis of the Union State’s activities, particularly in areas sensitive to the security of Ukraine and EU Member States bordering Belarus and Russia, including defence, security agencies, standards and regulatory frameworks. Such cooperation between Minsk and Moscow facilitates the consolidation of authoritarian regimes and the accumulation of their militarised capacity.

At the level of EU Member States

- Combine sanctions pressure with the preservation of legal channels for movement and communication for citizens.
- Expand opportunities for visa and educational mobility, scholarship and humanitarian programmes, as well as support for independent research initiatives.
- If pressure on the regimes is accompanied by the closure of channels of communication between citizens and restrictions on their mobility, this will only deepen isolation, narrow the space for autonomous civic activity, and contribute to the growth of anti-European sentiment within the civil societies of Belarus and Russia.

At the level of programmes supporting civil society and democratic actors

- Provide support to areas that make the hidden aspects of integration within the Union State visible:
 - monitoring of treaties, regulations and inter-agency agreements;
 - mapping of supply chains and sanctions-evasion routes;
 - support for research on the Union State in its operational dimension;
 - translating complex technical issues into language understandable to citizens and businesses in terms of their practical implications.
- Facilitate the development of a roadmap for the possible dismantling of the Union State, addressing the following key questions:
 - which elements of the Union State pose a threat to Belarus, Ukraine and regional security as a whole, and should therefore be abolished immediately?
 - which elements of the Union State allow for a transitional period?
 - which elements of the Union State could be retained, subject to public oversight and guarantees of Belarus’s sovereignty?



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