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BELARUS

BELARUS AS A HYBRID ACTOR:

key findings and recommendations

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

iSANS (International Strategic Action Network for Security) is a Warsaw-based think tank that detects, analyses and counters hybrid threats. It focuses on the Kremlin's influence in Central and Eastern Europe, with particular attention to Belarus, and provides analysis to national and international decision-makers.

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This paper was written as part of the EU-funded project "Strengthening Independent Belarusian Social, Political and Economic Research".

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or the EU.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The most acute kinetic threat from Belarus at present is the use of its airspace by Russian long-range unmanned aerial vehicles. As Russian drone strikes on Ukraine continue and intensify, the likelihood of such incidents will increase.

- The main economic threat results from the widening divergence between US and EU sanctions on Belarus. Since September 2025, the US has eased some of its sanctions, while the EU has not, and this has opened up room for legal arbitrage and given Minsk the possibility of driving a wedge between Washington and Brussels. It also feeds Belarus's information campaigns against EU policies.

- Belarus has seized foreign capital (there has been a ban on withdrawing capital from 1,849 companies, as well as dividend controls) and physical assets (the authorities held over 1,000 Lithuanian trucks in Belarus for more than five months) and disrupted EU aviation and logistics (contraband balloons closing airports in Vilnius and Kaunas). The goal is to raise the domestic cost of frontline states' countermeasures and strain EU unity from within.

- The recruitment of disposable operatives via Telegram continues to be a source of threat, but in this case, the direct involvement of the Belarusian intelligence services in acts of sabotage has not been proven. At the same time, there remains a high probability that this method is being used for espionage and to exert pressure on diasporas.

- Migration remains the best-documented instrument of hybrid attacks, and Minsk now regulates it by country: pressure on Poland, with whom Belarusian authorities are discussing the re-establishment of official contacts, has fallen sharply, while Lithuania and especially Latvia face aggressive pressure from irregular crossings, tunnels and attacks on border infrastructure. The goal is to divide the allies by exploiting the difference in pressure levels on different neighbouring countries.

- Belarusian pro-government Telegram channels use border disputes, sanctions and security incidents to make European policy look ineffective, costly or unnecessary. The focus often moves away from reasons why a measure was introduced.

- Border disputes are used by Belarusian regime-backed Telegram channels to argue that European countries should restore contacts with Minsk. Restrictions and the lack of dialogue are linked to transport problems and financial losses for West. Restored contact with Minsk, reopened transit and sanctions relief are offered as the practical way out.

- Belarus's deep dependence on Russia enables sanctions circumvention and supports Russia's war effort, while its asymmetric relationship with China and loss of access to EU markets have narrowed its economic options. Minsk increasingly relies on residual supply channels to Russia and hybrid economic pressure against the EU.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report provides a brief overview of the methods and tools employed by the authorities in Minsk to achieve their geopolitical objectives. In their case, this involves contending with the international and economic isolation that results from western sanctions, imposed in response to the brutal suppression of the 2020 protests in Belarus and complicity in Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The methods employed by Minsk include intimidation, pressure, information operations, and the infliction of economic, reputational and other forms of damage; these constitute an additional track running alongside diplomatic and political efforts to escape the pressure of sanctions.

Minsk is an ally of the Kremlin, which is waging a full-scale hybrid war on EU territory. Many of the Belarusian state's actions certainly coincide with Moscow's strategic interests, such as the long-term destabilisation of the European Union and target countries (e.g. the migration crisis, nuclear/missile deterrence, letting drones fly through its airspace). At a tactical level, a number of Belarus's hybrid attacks serve Minsk's own interests rather than a shared agenda with Russia (e.g. the weaponisation of smuggling, the detention of lorries, transnational repression). That said, complicity in acts of sabotage against NATO member states could have very serious consequences and are not in the interests of Minsk, which is currently seeking to establish a dialogue with the US. How far Minsk and Moscow coordinate their positions in the negotiations remains an open question. So does the degree of cooperation between Russian and Belarusian security services in hybrid operations: whether the Belarusian services are fully subordinate to the Kremlin or retain some autonomy in decision-making and running their own operations is a debatable point.

Data on the frequency of hybrid incidents and the arrests of individuals involved are fragmented due to their heterogeneity and are often not made public because of the sensitive nature of the subject. Given this, this study does not aim to conduct a quantitative analysis of what is happening in the EU. Furthermore, there is a problem with reliably attributing certain types of attacks even when the consequences are known or the perpetrators and organisers have been detained, because the ultimate sponsor often remains in the shadows. Consequently, several conclusions regarding Minsk's involvement or non-involvement are drawn based on assessments of its geopolitical interests and circumstantial evidence.

Types of hybrid attacks are divided into three categories: kinetic and security threats, economic threats, and media coverage targeting both domestic and international audiences. Illustrative case studies are provided for each type of attack. Some of the policy recommendations advanced by the authors are specific to countering Minsk, while others are universal and applicable to the general counteraction of a specific type of threat, regardless of its source.

2. KINETIC AND SECURITY THREATS

Belarus is perceived as a direct conduit of the Russian state's agenda, but there are a number of discrepancies between the strategic goals and operational methods of the Belarusian and Russian intelligence services. At this time, there is no public confirmation that the Belarusian intelligence services have been directly involved in acts of sabotage in the EU (although Belarusian citizens did participate in them). At the same time, they employ a similar arsenal of methods and tools, which have not yet escalated into harsher actions but are aimed at espionage, intimidating the Belarusian diaspora, and exerting pressure along the state borders to achieve political and diplomatic goals. Consequently, certain types of operations (for example, recruitment via Telegram) are examined alongside Russian operations where Belarusian citizens were involved, since the methods for countering them will be the same.

2.1 Long-Range Drone Provocations

A significant threat concerns long-range drone strikes against infrastructure on the territory of EU and NATO states, employing drones of the Shahed, Geran and Gerbera types. Repeated violations of Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian and Romanian airspace have been recorded during Russian war on Ukraine. There are good grounds to treat a portion of these penetrations as deliberate, intended to test warning systems and air-defence reaction times.

In this context, particular attention should be paid to a potential false-flag scenario involving the use of Ukrainian UAVs (or their redirection via electronic warfare assets) to carry out strikes within EU territory with the aim of undermining Polish-Ukrainian relations.

The potential for using Belarusian mobile communications infrastructure to coordinate and better manage strike assets needs further assessments. According to Ukrainian experts,[1] the use of radio beacons for navigation and mesh networks can create coverage zones extending up to 150 kilometres from communication towers. This completely covers the Suwałki Gap, extends to the outskirts of Warsaw and covers key checkpoints on the Ukrainian-Polish border.

Another dimension of such provocations has been notifications from authorities in Minsk to neighbouring states about approaching drones. It cannot be definitively stated whether this is an attempt by Minsk to distance itself from the ongoing attacks or a manipulation of its "peacemaker" status to gauge the reactions of the targeted countries. In either case, Belarus plays the role of a buffer, introducing an additional variable into other parties' decision-making process regarding retaliatory measures.

Cases: Since 2024, Russian Geran-2/Shahed-136 attack UAVs have repeatedly used Belarusian airspace to strike targets in Ukraine. The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry noted the use of Belarus as an air corridor for Russian drones.[2] An incident on 10 September 2025 was particularly significant. During Russia's massive attack on Ukraine, a large number of drones were operating in Belarusian

1. Calibre Defence, "Mesh networks: How Russia is increasing the range of its drones", 3 September 2026. https://www.calibredefence.co.uk/mesh-networks-how-russia-is-increasing-the-range-of-its-drones/
2. LRT, "Lithuania hands in protest note to Belarus over Gerbera drone airspace violation", 17 July 2025. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2612108/lithuania-hands-in-protest-note-to-belarus-over-gerbera-drone-airspace-violation

airspace, after which some crossed into Poland. Poland scrambled its air force and, together with its allies, destroyed several of the drones. The Belarusian side claimed that some drones deviated from their course due to electronic warfare and stated that it had warned Poland and Lithuania of their approach.[3]

A year later, in September 2026, there were a number of drone incursions into Lithuanian territory from Belarus. In the early hours of 13 September, military radars detected an object near Varėna that crossed 60–70km of Lithuanian airspace before exiting into Russia's Kaliningrad region, all in the space of about 20 minutes.[4] On 14 September, a Russian Gerbera-2 drone carrying a high-explosive fragmentation warhead was found on the Polish Baltic coast near Rusinowo, roughly 250km west of Kaliningrad.[5] On the night of 14–15 September, a drone that had entered from Belarus was shot down by Italian Eurofighters on NATO air-policing duty near Pratkūnai in the Kaišiadorys district, close to the Kruonis pumped-storage power plant.[6]

These incidents occurred against the backdrop of strikes by Russian drones in the vicinity of the Yahodyn crossing point on the Polish-Ukrainian border, which is located a few dozen kilometres from the Belarusian border. The Ukrainian Border Guard Service claims that repeaters located in Belarus were used to carry out the strikes.[7] In this instance, it cannot be ruled out that such flights are a test of Lithuania's air defence systems, as well as a check on the operational capabilities of drone communication and control systems in the Baltic theatre.

2.2 Recruitment of Disposable Executors through Telegram

The most widely used model across Europe, particularly in Germany, Poland and Lithuania, involves the mass recruitment of one-off proxy agents through Telegram. As a rule, these operatives have no prior ties to intelligence services, which direct the recruits through anonymous accounts. Advertisements offering easy money are usually targeted at marginalised groups: unemployed young people, migrants and individuals with criminal records. Tasks range from photographing infrastructure facilities or individuals to, in some cases, putting up stickers and posters. Cases of sabotage have also come to light, however, including arson, direct damage to infrastructure, and the transfer or placement of explosive devices.

The defining characteristic of this model, a form of "outsourcing", is the expendability of the operative. Recruiters primarily operate through networks of disposable accounts registered to virtual phone/mobile numbers in third countries and have no interest in protecting or evacuating those they recruit. Contact ends once the task is completed or fails, and the organiser knows

3. NV, "Belarus says it 'warned' Poland of drone activity during Russian strike, blames jamming for stray aircraft", 10 September 2025. https://english.nv.ua/nation/belarus-claims-it-warned-poland-about-drones-during-russian-overnight-strike-50543884.html
4. LRT, "Lithuania investigates unidentified object that crossed airspace from Belarus", 14 September 2026. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/3052101/lithuania-investigates-unidentified-object-that-crossed-airspace-from-belarus
5. Militarnyi, "Russian drone found in Poland was equipped with warhead", 17 September 2026. https://militarnyi.com/en/news/russian-drone-poland-equipped-with-warhead/
6. LRT, "NATO jets shoot down drone that entered Lithuanian airspace", 15 September 2026. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/3053032/nato-jets-shoot-down-drone-that-entered-lithuanian-airspace
7. Nasha Niva, "Ukraine linked Russian attacks on its western regions with repeaters on Belarusian territory", 16 September 2026. https://nashaniva.com/en/404777

that an untrained operative is highly likely to come to the attention of law enforcement officers. Individual acts of sabotage can be carried out at low cost, while distance between the organiser and the operative is maintained at every stage. Payment in cryptocurrency makes financial tracking even more difficult.

Recruitment under a "false flag" also falls into this category: Belarusian intelligence services hire people for activities presented as freelance work - filming events or recording footage at the site of a mass rally, or under the pretext of cooperating with the authorities of EU member states and their allies, while the participants may have no idea who is actually directing them.

Cases: Anna B., a second-year Ukrainian student majoring in Media and Communications at the European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius. According to an investigation by Euroradio and Malanka Media, Belarusian state propagandists manipulated her fellow Ukrainian student, Mykola B., into filming a Freedom Day (Dzień Voli) protest in Vilnius under the guise of an assignment for the independent outlet Novaya Gazeta Europe. He subsequently brought his friends, including Anna, into the initiative. She was contacted via an anonymous Telegram account using friendly, informal communication. Investigators found that she filmed the event without verifying the client's identity due to a lack of experience. She and her peers were allegedly offered less than €100 in cryptocurrency for carrying out the assignment.[8]

Maryia M., a 20-year-old Belarusian citizen, was recruited by Russian intelligence services as part of a 16-member foreign espionage network operating in Poland to track military transport to Ukraine and prepare acts of sabotage. Following her arrest, she was tried in Lublin and convicted of providing her bank account to fund espionage operations and helping post flyers aimed at inciting hostility toward Ukrainians. She was sentenced to one year and one month in prison along with a fine.[9]

On 27 August 2026, funeral wreaths and a mourning portrait of the company's head were left outside the Vilnius office of RSI Europe, a manufacturer of unmanned systems that supplies FPV drones to Ukraine. The task was advertised in a Telegram chat for casual jobs, with a payment of €400. It was allegedly taken by Nikita S., a 23-year-old former Belarusian political prisoner granted asylum in Lithuania, who passed it on as a side job to a Ukrainian acquaintance. The acquaintance delivered the wreaths and was detained by Lithuanian authorities, while Nikita S. was charged with assisting another state in activities against Lithuania (Article 118 of the Criminal Code).[10]

2.3 Belarusian Territory as a Platform for Russian Force Projection

The alleged stationing of the Oreshnik intermediate-range missile system on Belarusian territory, as well as of elements of the Russian nuclear arsenal, has been deliberately kept ambiguous since late 2024. Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced that the system had entered combat duty in

8. Euroradio, "Promised payment in crypto: an EHU student on filming protests for propaganda" (in Belarusian), 27 March 2026. https://euroradio.fm/abyacali-zaplacic-kryptay-studentka-egu-pra-zdymki-pratestau-dlya-prapagandy
9. Fakt.pl, "An unpleasant surprise in the Lublin court for Maria, convicted of espionage", 19 July 2026. https://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/przykra-niespodzianka-w-sadzie-w-lublinie-dla-skazanej-za-szpiegostwo-marii/v24g4xr
10. Nasha Niva, "A former political prisoner found a side job in a Vilnius chat and became the subject of a criminal case over provocations against Ukraine", 12 October 2026. https://nashaniva.com/ru/406604

December 2025, and the Russian Ministry of Defence published footage of Oreshnik's elements on 30 December without identifying a location.[11] Open-source analysts have converged on the former Krichev-6 airfield in the Mahiliou region as the probable site,[12] with air-defence and electronic-warfare positions appearing around its perimeter through early 2026. There is no consensus among experts on whether the site is a permanent base or a forward/temporary deployment point.

Deploying Oreshnik in Belarus makes little difference militarily. The system can reach any European capital from Russian territory, and Kaliningrad is closer to most Western European capitals than Krichev in any case. The same applies to tactical nuclear weapons; their deployment matters mainly for political reasons. Establishing an unverifiable nuclear presence near EU borders serves as a tool of psychological pressure, compelling neighbouring states to factor this element into their defence planning. It also mirrors Western models of nuclear cooperation, as part of a Russian strategic-deterrence effort to discourage the hypothetical placement of nuclear weapons in new EU countries near the Russian border. For example, Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, commented on Lithuania's recent plans to lift its ban on the deployment of nuclear weapons:

> "These steps are in line with the extremely provocative and destabilising anti-Russian policy of NATO countries, which take no account whatsoever of what the people of Lithuania want, but simply view Lithuania as a springboard, as yet another platform for potential provocations [...] The deployment of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory was a direct response to such a policy, and we now regard this as an integral part of ensuring the security and strengthening the defence capabilities of the Union State [of Russia and Belarus]".[13]

2.4 Balloons

This hybrid instrument involves violations of Polish and Lithuanian airspace by meteorological balloons launched from Belarusian territory, nominally used for cigarette smuggling. The numbers have increased since autumn 2025, with dozens of balloons crossing in a single night, operations at Vilnius airport repeatedly suspended and civil aviation over the Podlaskie voivodeship temporarily restricted. Lithuania declared a state of emergency in December 2025 and in February 2026 submitted evidence to the International Civil Aviation Organization — at least sixteen airspace violations since October 2025, affecting more than 370 flights and some 53,000 passengers, with damages exceeding €2.3 million.[14]

11. Euronews, "Russia shows nuclear-capable Oreshnik missile system deployed in Belarus", 30 December 2025. https://www.euronews.com/2025/12/30/russia-nuclear-oreshnik-missile-belarus
12. Radio Svaboda, "A new satellite image has likely captured vehicles of the Oreshnik complex near Krychau" [in Belarusian], 10 February 2026. https://www.svaboda.org/a/33674462.html
13. BelTA, "«Безответственное действие». Захарова о планах Литвы отказаться от запрета на размещение ядерного оружия" ["Irresponsible action": Zakharova on Lithuania's plans to lift the ban on deploying nuclear weapons; in Russian], 15 September 2026. https://belta.by/world/view/bezotvetstvennoe-dejstvie-zaharova-o-planah-litvy-otkazatsja-ot-zapreta-na-razmeschenie-jadernogo-801173-2026/
14. LRT, "Lithuania submits evidence to UN aviation body over Belarus balloons", 18 February 2026. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2843285/lithuania-submits-evidence-to-un-aviation-body-over-belarus-balloons

There is no doubt that these balloons are used for smuggling, as customs authorities consistently record the seizure of hundreds of thousands of cigarette packs. However, the military commands of Poland and Lithuania view these incidents within a broader context: they classify a significant number of them as hybrid operations designed to probe air defence systems by testing reaction times to low-altitude, low-visibility objects. The primary advantage of this tactic lies in its plausible deniability. Minsk denies involvement in the illicit activity, claiming only an inability to prevent it. Yet the outcome is a de facto gain for the Belarusian authorities: air traffic is disrupted, border operations are thrown into disarray, and significant economic losses are incurred - all without any resulting legal liability.

2.5 Cyber Operations against Officials and Institutions

This method targets the professional and personal accounts of government officials, primarily in Poland. It does so through the hijacking of messaging app accounts (WhatsApp, Signal) and phishing campaigns, as well as the compromise of email inboxes and social media accounts belonging to officials involved in national security, migration and Eastern policy. Government registries and information systems (medical, land and civil registry databases) are likewise subjected to systematic attacks.

These operations serve a dual purpose: intelligence gathering (gaining access to correspondence and contact networks) and discrediting targets (using compromised accounts to disseminate disinformation ostensibly from the official in question).

The main actor in this sphere is the hacking group UNC1151 (Ghostwriter, FrostyNeighbor), which cybersecurity researchers link it to the Belarusian government.[15] Its activities have been known since 2016, with operations primarily targeting the neighbouring countries of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine. The group's activities align with the Kremlin's interests: it participated in cyberattacks on Ukrainian infrastructure in the run-up to the invasion;[16] once the war began, it carried out a phishing campaign against the Ukrainian military;[17] and it also facilitated disinformation campaigns.

Cases: In 2021, the email account of Michał Dworczyk, Head of the Prime Minister's Office in Poland, was hacked. He had been actively involved in Belarusian issues, including aid programmes to resettle ethnic Poles living in Belarus to Poland. Some of his documents were published on Telegram channels. An investigation revealed that UNC1151 was behind the attack.[18]

Since March 2026, the group has been conducting a hacking campaign against Ukrainian

15. RFE/RL, "U.S. cybersecurity researchers link Belarusian government to hacking, disinformation campaign", 16 November 2021. https://www.rferl.org/a/ghostwriter-hacking-mandiant-belarus/31564853.html
16. Reuters, "Exclusive: Ukraine suspects group linked to Belarus intelligence over cyberattack", 15 January 2022. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-ukraine-suspects-group-linked-belarus-intelligence-over-cyberattack-2022-01-15/
17. Council on Foreign Relations, Cyber Operations Tracker, "Targeting of Ukrainian and Polish military personnel", February 2022. https://www.cfr.org/cyber-operations/targeting-of-ukrainian-and-polish-military-personnel
18. Minister-Coordinator of Special Services (Poland), "Findings regarding hacker attacks", 22 June 2021. https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/findings-regarding-hacker-attacks

government agencies and has also been targeting Polish Gmail users. The group is searching these accounts for contacts, documents and information about linked accounts, which could be used for further cyber operations and intelligence-gathering activities.[19]

2.6 Transnational Repression and the Discreditation of the Belarusian Diaspora

The Belarusian diaspora in EU countries is under constant pressure from Belarusian security services. This has been ongoing for years, though the frequency has increased recently. In a number of criminal cases, and in proceedings that declared organisations abroad extremist, officers have visited the relatives of diaspora members and pressured them to contact the security services under threat of prosecution. Diaspora figures and activists also receive threats and intimidation on a regular basis. A separate tactic involves the threat of trials in absentia, confiscation of property, and other forms of pressure.

At the same time, Belarusian state actors run disinformation campaigns to undermine trust between the diaspora and host societies, framing Belarusians in exile as a security threat to EU countries in order to complicate their legal status and stay.

Cases: Since 2023, the Minsk government has run an information campaign on "Litvinism" aimed at creating interethnic tensions in Lithuania. Litvinism is a fringe view that presents the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a historical state that included most of present-day Lithuania and Belarus, as essentially Belarusian, and Vilnius as a Belarusian city. Many Lithuanians nevertheless see it as a challenge to their national identity and even to the country's territorial integrity. Following a spontaneous incident in August 2023, where a Lithuanian and a Belarusian had an argument in a bar that was captured on video, a Minsk-controlled TikTok influencer deliberately provoked Lithuanian users. Then videos containing threats to Lithuanians from alleged Belarusian volunteer fighters were published,[20] threats were sent to Lithuanian politicians and historians, and acts of vandalism took place in Vilnius featuring graffiti claiming the city is Belarusian.[21] At the same time, parents of Belarusian schoolchildren received threatening letters from alleged Lithuanian nationalists, Belarusians received phone calls from people claiming to be from the immigration service, and threatening graffiti appeared on Belarusian establishments.[22]

19. CERT Polska, "Kampania phishingowa grupy UNC1151/Ghostwriter na pocztę Gmail" [UNC1151/Ghostwriter phishing campaign targeting Gmail; in Polish], 12 June 2026. https://cert.pl/posts/2026/06/UNC1151-kampania-gmail/
20. Delfi, "A strange video mentioning members of the Seimas is circulating: The State Security Department has managed to get to the root of the matter", 11 october 2023, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/plinta-keistas-vaizdo-irasas-kuriame-minimi-seimo-nariai-vsd-pavyko-uzciuopti-siulo-gala-94755521
21. Nasha Niva, 'Vilnia is ours' with the white-red-white flag painted at the entrance to Vilnius: how such graffiti is commissioned; 21 March 2024. https://nashaniva.com/ru/338935
22. Joanna Hyndle-Hussein, Kamil Kłysiński, "A difficult legacy. Tensions over how to interpret the shared past of Lithuanian and Belarusian peoples", OSW Commentary, 7 August 2024. https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-08-07/a-difficult-legacy-tensions-over-how-to-interpret-shared-past; LRT, "Russian, Belarusian intelligence plotted attacks on Belarusians in Lithuania – VSD", 23 April 2025. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2543993/russian-belarusian-intelligence-plotted-attacks-on-belarusians-in-lithuania-vsd

Then there is the case of the European Humanities University (EHU). On 14 April 2026, Belarus's Supreme Court designated the Vilnius-based EHU an "extremist organisation" at the request of the Prosecutor General, acting on a KGB recommendation. A criminal case under Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code ("assisting extremist activity") covers the period from spring 2016, so current and former students, graduates, lecturers and parents who paid tuition fees can all be prosecuted: up to five years for paying tuition fees or donating money, and up to six for studying or teaching at the university.[23] From early June 2026, the KGB carried out dozens of property searches and interrogations across Belarus. Officers questioned relatives of current students who had paid for tuition, demanded diplomas from graduates of the 2019–2025 period, and summoned former staff. In at least 20 cases, parents were pressed to make their children drop out and asked to bring proof of their withdrawal. One graduate whose family had been visited was expelled and lost his Lithuanian residence permit. Others were made to sign statements of repentance, record video apologies or invited to become informants in exchange for safety.[24] By mid-August, Viasna had recorded at least 175 people affected.[25]

Yauhen Karaulau, a Belarusian activist and politician and member of the Coordination Council, reported that Belarusian security service agents are harassing his family. KGB agents initially called from his grandmother's phone; they then detained her and called him using her device. They demanded that he agree to cooperate. Under threat, he initially agreed, after which he informed human rights activists of the situation and issued a public statement.[26]

On 25 June 2026, the Polish Internal Security Agency detained 19-year-old Belarusian Alexei B. and 44-year-old Pole Rafal G. in Warsaw. In exchange for cryptocurrency payment, they attended events organised by the Belarusian diaspora in Warsaw, recorded and photographed the participants. The collected materials were used by the Belarusian security services and the propaganda apparatus of the Lukashenka regime.[27]

2.7 Instrumentalisation of Defectors

European defectors from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia are publicly exploited for Belarusian propaganda purposes. The clearest case is Polish judge Tomasz Szmydt, who crossed into Belarus in May 2024 and played an active role in propaganda activities, including supporting hybrid operations.[28] In another example, former Latvian MP Aleksejs Rosļikovs fled to Belarus in 2026

23. Human Rights Watch, "Belarus: Crackdown on an Independent University", 12 June 2026. https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/06/12/belarus-crackdown-on-an-independent-university
24. Euroradio, "How Belarusian security forces persecute people linked to Vilnius-based EHU", 2 October 2026. https://euroradio.fm/en/how-belarusian-security-forces-persecute-people-linked-vilnius-based-ehu
25. Amnesty International, "Belarus: Authorities targeting European Humanities University students abroad and their families in intensifying crackdown", 1 September 2026. https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/belarus-authorities-targeting-european-humanities-university-students-abroad-and-their-families-in-intensifying-crackdown/
26. Jauhien Karaŭlaŭ, Facebook post, 16 September 2026. https://www.facebook.com/JauhienKaraulau/posts/pfbid0zzk9wcbhwCobCaWNhLpM4A5SiFLopU7Fp6CGtPabYrHNscb3VSZctRNkJJi2TfFWl
27. Jacek Dobrzyński, spokesperson for the Minister-Coordinator of Special Services (Poland), post on X, 2 July 2026. https://x.com/JacekDobrzynski/status/2072582238139449648
28. Notes from Poland, "Polish judge flees to Belarus seeking asylum", 6 May 2024. https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/05/06/polish-judge-flees-to-belarus-seeking-asylum/

while under prosecution for incitement of ethnic hatred and remains there evading an arrest warrant.[29]

The main gain from defectors is the sensitive information they bring, although its value depends on their prior access and is usually a one-time benefit. Their propaganda use is secondary and aimed mainly at the domestic audience, as evidence that there are people familiar with European institutions who prefer to live in Belarus. Such figures are used repeatedly in low-level information operations — fake human-rights awards to controversial political actors from the EU, involvement in state media broadcasts. In an escalation scenario, this group would serve as the recruitment pool for governments-in-exile and collaborationist administrations.

2.8 Instrumentalisation of Migration

This is the best-documented hybrid instrument: channels of irregular migration organised through Belarusian territory with the direct assistance of Belarusian state agencies. After large-scale border breaches by groups of irregular migrants in autumn 2021, hostile actors shifted to infiltration in small groups and tunnelling under the border. The first tunnel was discovered on the Polish border in September 2025. Lithuania has recorded twelve tunnelling attempts since the start of 2026 and has identified dozens of further suspected sites; Latvia found its first tunnel in August 2026.[30]

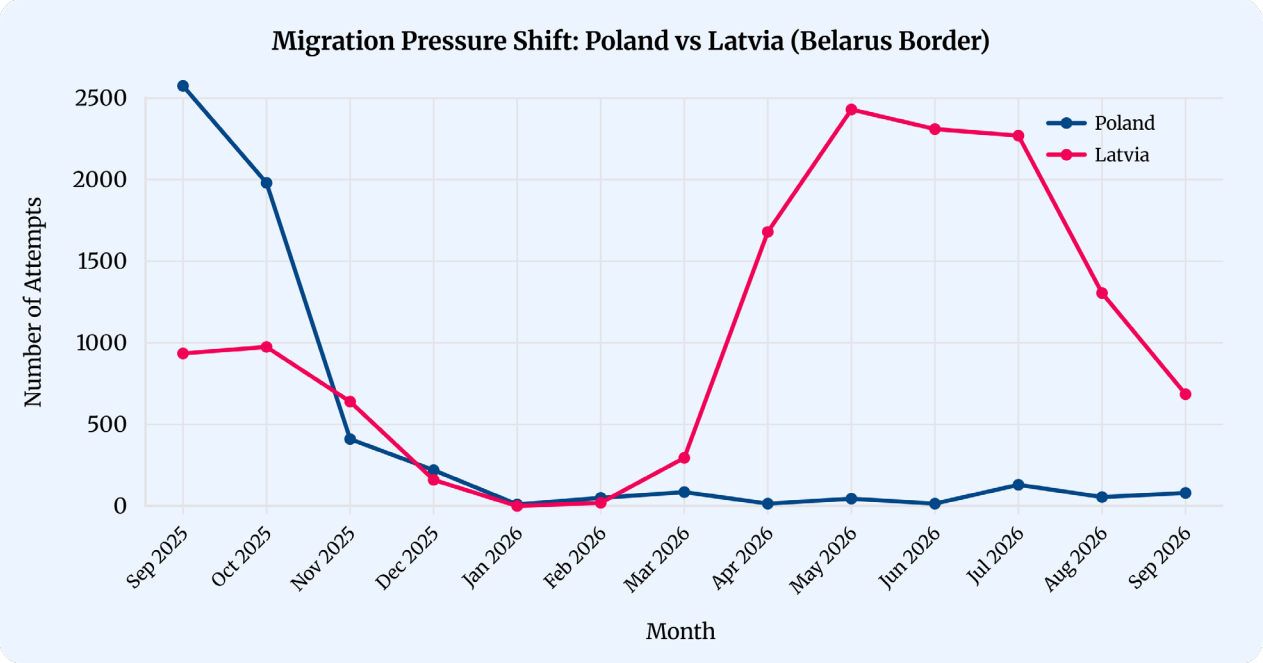

Figure 1. Monthly attempts to cross the border illegally from Belarus into Poland and Latvia, September 2025 – September 2026. Source: Polish Border Guard; State Border Guard of Latvia.

Looking at the crisis over time, the number of attempts to cross the border with Poland has fallen

29. LSM, "Warrant out for former MP Rosļikovs' arrest", 9 April 2026. https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/crime/09.04.2026-warrant-out-for-former-mp-roslikovs-arrest.a642290/
30. Amos Chapple, "The migrant tunnels burrowing from Belarus into the EU", RFE/RL, 14 August 2026. https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-migrant-tunnels-eu-poland-lithauania-latvia-hybrid-war/33830304.html

sharply – as of September 2026, 472 attempts had been thwarted since the start of the year, compared with 25,000 during the same period the preceding year.[31] The flow has been partially redirected from Poland to Latvia – 10,816 attempts[32] since the start of the year, compared with 12,046 cases for the whole of last year. The number of attempts via Lithuania is also low – 1,472 incidents since the start of the year as of September.[33] In addition to infiltration attempts, there have also been incidents of damage to border infrastructure on the Belarusian-Latvian border. In early October, armed and masked men accompanying a group of migrants threatened Latvian military personnel. A few hours after the incident, masked individuals crossed the border into Latvia, damaged an electrical distribution panel, and stole CCTV cameras.[34]

This case clearly demonstrates Minsk's objectives: on the border with Poland, with which there are currently discussions regarding a possible easing of sanctions and the normalisation of relations, the situation has stabilised. On the borders with the Baltic states the situation is tense. By easing pressure on Poland and keeping it on Latvia and Lithuania, the regime is trying to split the three countries and push each of them to change its policy towards Minsk.

Such incidents also help hostile actors to understand what is permissible and the parameters of a possible response. This information could be critically important for planning further provocations, or even for escalation scenarios carried out as part of Moscow's hybrid aggression.

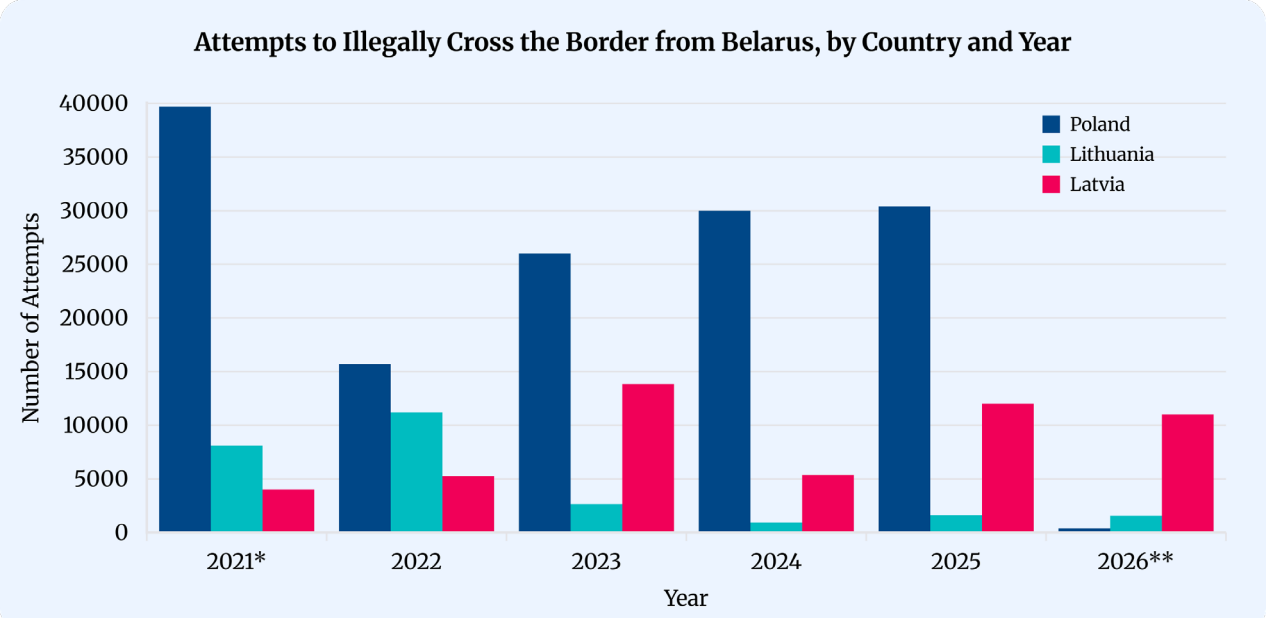

Figure 2. Attempts to cross the border illegally from Belarus, by country, 2021–2026. Source: border guard services of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Note: 2021 covers August–December only (start of the crisis); 2026 is partial (through mid-September).

31. Strefa Obrony, "MSWiA: Prawie 500 prób nielegalnego przekroczenia granicy z Białorusią" [Interior Ministry: almost 500 attempts to cross the border from Belarus illegally; in Polish], 16 September 2026. https://strefaobrony.pl/mswia-prawie-500-prob-nielegalnego-przekroczenia-granicy-z-bialorusia/ar/c1p2-29358555
32. State Border Guard of Latvia, "2026. gada 10. septembris uz valsts robežas un valsts iekšienē" [10 September 2026 at the state border and inside the country; in Latvian], 11 September 2026. https://www.rs.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/2026-gada-10-septembris-uz-valsts-robezas-un-valsts-iekseine
33. LRT, "VSAT: Baltarusijos pasienyje apgręžti 9 neteisėti migrantai" [State Border Guard Service: 9 irregular migrants turned back at the Belarusian border; in Lithuanian], 13 September 2026. https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/3051006/vsat-baltarusijos-pasienyje-apgrezti-9-neteiseti-migrantai
34. LSM, "NBS: Migrant group pushed aggressively across Latvian border this week", 7 October 2026. https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defence/07.10.2026-nbs-migrant-group-pushed-aggressively-across-latvian-border-this-week.a666481/

In 2026, the Belarusian route accounted for some 12,000–13,000 attempted crossings into Poland, Lithuania and Latvia by mid-September, which is far below the nearly 60,000 detections of illegal border crossing attempts on the three Mediterranean routes in January–August.[35] In terms of migration volume, the route is marginal for the EU. Minsk, however, exploits its political sensitivity, selectively easing or increasing pressure depending on developments in foreign policy, as the difference between the Polish and Latvian sections shows.

2.9 Trajectory and Escalation Risks

Possible directions of escalation:

- The main threat is more drone incursions from Belarus into Poland and the Baltic states, and towards the Ukrainian-Polish border. Belarusian communications infrastructure could help to guide drones to specific targets.

- Future targets for Russian drone provocations could include energy and port infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, such as LNG terminals and offshore wind substations.

- Ukrainian-made drones could be used directly by Moscow, or Ukrainian drones intentionally redirected by Russian electronic warfare, to strike EU territory.

- Minsk could exploit divisions among allies that stem from the lack of a common EU policy on engagement with Belarus in order to break out of diplomatic isolation and force economic cooperation.

- Countries that take a tougher stance on Minsk are likely to face more hybrid pressure, as is already happening to Latvia.

- More powerful electronic-warfare systems could be deployed in Belarus, similar to the jammer in the Kaliningrad region, which is already affecting the Baltic region.

- Radical and pro-Russian European politicians could be used to stage provocations against the diaspora and to obtain information on supported Belarusian initiatives through parliamentary questions.

35. Frontex, “Irregular border crossings into the EU down 1/3 in first 8 months of 2026“, 11 September 2026. https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-irregular-border-crossings-into-the-eu-down-1-3-in-first-8-months-of-2026-WWxc7M

3. ECONOMIC INSTRUMENTS OF HYBRID PRESSURE

Belarus's economic behaviour towards the EU is shaped by three relationships: deep, multi-sided dependence on Russia; a narrower, more transactional relationship with China; and the loss of the EU market after sanctions. Section 3.1 introduces the main actors and the state of their relationships with Belarus, Section 3.2 then turns attention to the specific types of economic hybrid activity Belarus runs against the EU, Section 3.3 continues with consolidated impact and Section 3.4 hypothesises emerging threats.

3.1 The Actors: Russia, China and the EU

3.1.1 Russia

Russia is by far Belarus's largest economic partner, accounting for 66% of its foreign trade turnover, with another 15% reaching world markets through Russia via Russian ports, railways and intermediaries.[36] Most of what Belarus sells to Russia satisfies ordinary civilian demand: food, machinery, vehicles and other consumer goods. This does not mean, however, that its economic relationship with Russia is irrelevant to the war effort. Belarus serves both as a residual channel for sanctioned imports and as a supplier of components and services. Because this is the most consequential and most concealed part of the relationship, it is treated separately below (see Section 3.2.1 "Aid to Russia's War Economy").

The relationship also works in the opposite direction as Belarus relies on Russia to soften the impact of sanctions. By the time the first three Belarusian banks were cut from the SWIFT messaging network in March 2022, Belarusian banks had already integrated with Russia's own System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) and moved onto it.[37] Access to the Russian market and Russian physical and financial logistics is a major part of what allows Belarus to keep functioning under sanctions.

3.1.2 China

China is now Belarus's second-largest trading partner, with bilateral goods trade reaching US $8.9 billion in 2025.[38] Lukashenka has tried to make the relationship with Beijing resemble the one with Moscow in order to counterbalance both economic and political dependence on Russia. Politically, he has largely succeeded. Since September 2022, the two states have described their ties as an "all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership", China's highest category of friendship, sustained

36. International Monetary Fund, "International Trade in Goods (by partner country) (IMTS)" dataset. https://data.imf.org/Datasets/IMTS; European Commission, DG Trade, "European Union, Trade in goods with Belarus", 20 May 2026. https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_belarus_en.pdf

37. Council of the EU, "Russia's military aggression against Ukraine: EU agrees new sectoral measures targeting Belarus and Russia", 9 March 2022. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/09/russia-s-military-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-agrees-new-sectoral-measures-targeting-belarus-and-russia/; Interfax, "Belarus banks cut off from SWIFT to switch to other systems, including Russia's – minister", 14 March 2022. https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/76707/

38. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Embassy in China, China–Belarus trade statistics page [in Russian], based on data of the General Administration of Customs of China. https://china.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral/trade/

by frequent Xi–Lukashenka meetings and warm language about their "iron friendship".[39]

Economically, however, the relationship is narrower and more transactional. China mainly buys raw or lightly processed commodities from Belarus, including potash, timber and certain food products, while selling a broad range of manufactured goods in return. The previously mentioned US $8.9 billion in bilateral trade underscores the imbalance: Belarusian exports amounted to just US $1.7 billion, compared with US $7.2 billion in imports. At the same time, China largely refused to provide politically driven investment or new lending that the Belarusian regime had counted on. Analysts describe the partnership as asymmetric and largely symbolic.[40] Beijing's other main interest is transit across Belarusian territory under the Belt and Road Initiative, discussed in Section 3.2.3 Border and Transit Weaponisation.

3.1.3 The EU

The EU was for years one of Belarus's most valuable trade partners, but trade collapsed after sanctions following the Belarusian authorities' 2020 crackdown on the pro-democratic movement and measures linked to Belarus's role in Russia's war against Ukraine after 2022. EU imports from Belarus fell from €5.6 billion in 2021 to €0.4 billion in 2025. Belarus is now negligible in EU trade, accounting for less than 0.1% of EU imports and 0.2% of exports.[41]

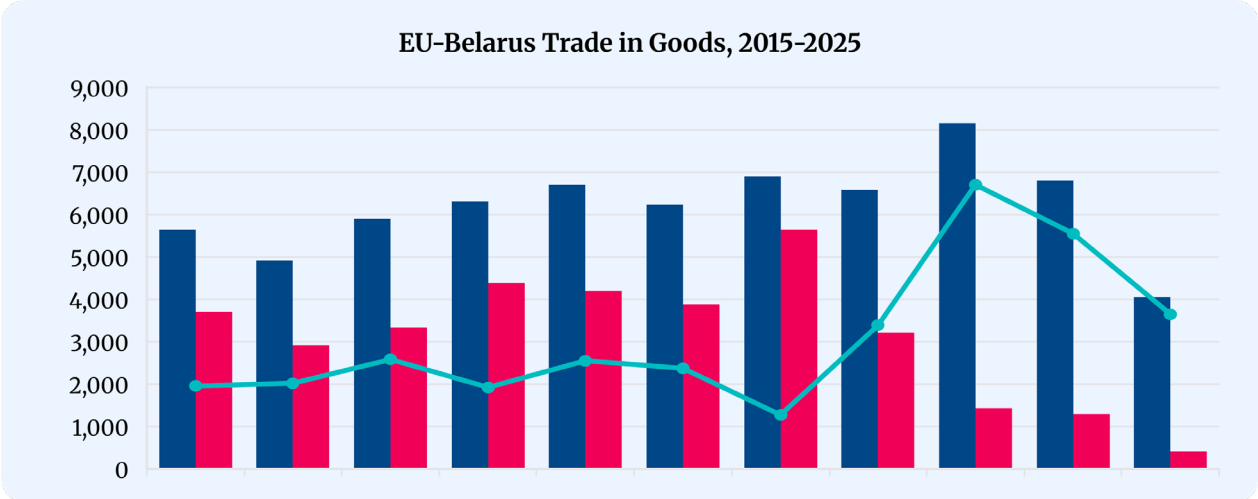

Figure 3. EU–Belarus trade in goods, 2015–2025 (€ millions). Source: Eurostat Comext.

Belarus's losses come in two main forms. The first is the loss of high-margin Western markets and the logistics that served them, such as potash fertiliser, processed timber and the short, cheap route through the port of Klaipeda that carried Belarusian potash to third countries.[42] The second is the loss of EU imports of intermediate goods, including microelectronics, engines and specialty chemicals that are hard or sometimes impossible to replace with substitutes from Russia or China.

39. Pavel Hruban, "A gateway or a dead end? Belarus and China's Belt and Road Initiative", CEIAS, 23 September 2025. https://ceias.eu/a-gateway-or-a-dead-end-belarus-and-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/
40. Sebestyén Hompot, "Chinese Media Watch: Premier Li Qiang visits Moscow and Minsk; state media praises progress in building a pro-Beijing club on the EU's eastern borders", CEIAS, 5 September 2024. https://ceias.eu/chinese-media-watch-premier-li-qiang-visits-moscow-and-minsk-state-media-praises-progress-in-building-a-pro-beijing-club-on-the-eus-eastern-borders/
41. European Commission, DG Trade, "European Union, Trade in goods with Belarus", 20 May 2026. https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_belarus_en.pdf
42. Kamil Kłysiński, "Tough business in tough times: Belarusian exports of potash fertilisers", OSW Commentary No. 631, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 20 November 2024. https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW_Commentary_631.pdf

The EU still runs a large surplus with Belarus and exports about ten times what it imports, so Brussels could disrupt the remaining trade more easily than Minsk. With little positive economic leverage left, the regime instead uses what it still controls: its territory, its role in Russia's war economy, and the foreign assets and traffic that sit inside or pass through the country.

3.2 Types of Economic Hybrid Activity

Belarus uses a broad range of economic instruments against the "West" in general and the EU in particular. Most importantly, Belarus is involved in enabling Russia's war economy; it also exercises direct economic coercion against EU actors, disrupts EU infrastructure and logistics, and engages in economic (mis)information warfare.

3.2.1 Aid to Russia's War Economy: Circumvention and Military Procurement

In earlier years, Belarus was a significant actor in Russian sanctions evasion. That role has narrowed as the EU progressively aligned its Belarus and Russia sanctions regimes. A substantial harmonisation of export bans on sensitive and dual-use goods came on 3 August 2023, followed by fuller alignment. Today the conduit is concentrated in specific categories, mainly grey-market car imports, including luxury models, and some consumer goods. Russia now runs most of its evasion through Central Asia and China.

The earlier wave is still visible in EU-Belarus bilateral trade data (Figure 4). While the two sanctions regimes were not yet aligned, EU exports to Belarus of goods that Russia could no longer buy directly rose sharply. Machinery and transport equipment went from €2.6 billion in 2022 to €3.8 billion in 2023, while automotive products increased from €1.6 billion to €2.6 billion, far beyond the usual levels of Belarusian domestic demand.[43]

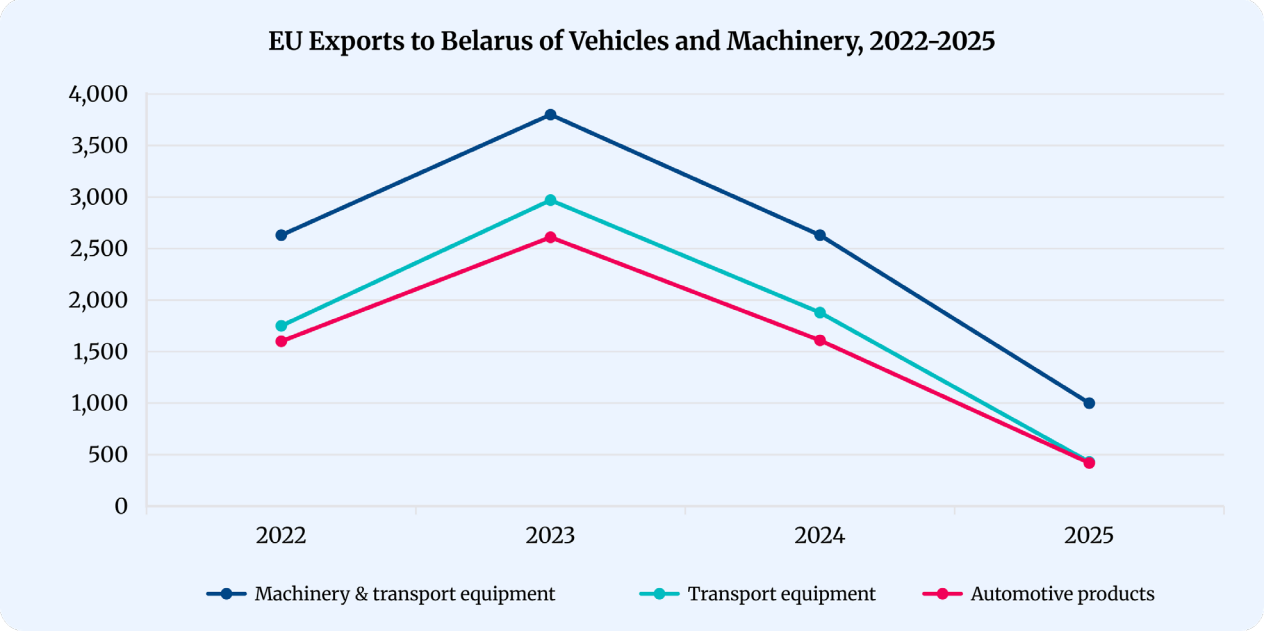

Figure 4. EU exports to Belarus of vehicles and machinery, 2022–2025 (EUR million). Source: Eurostat Comext.

43. European Commission, DG Trade, "European Union, Trade in goods with Belarus", 20 May 2026. https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_belarus_en.pdf

The flow then fell back as the two regimes converged and enforcement tightened. Exports of vehicles and machinery peaked in 2023 and dropped in 2024 and, most sharply, in 2025, following the mid-2024 no-re-export clause and later packages. Machinery and transport equipment fell to €982 million in 2025, about a quarter of the 2023 peak, while automotive products fell to €412 million, roughly a sixth of their own peak. This closed the widest circumvention channel, although smaller-scale import and re-export operations through Belarus remain an important route for sanctions evasion.[44]

Belarus also helps supply Russia's military, although it does not appear to manufacture complete weapons systems. Investigations by the Belarusian Investigative Center, working with Cyberpartisans, traced Belarusian firms selling Russian defence producers microchips worth more than US $125 million between September 2022 and June 2024. These included Western-made chips banned for export to Russia. The investigation also found components from the state chipmaker Integral in Russian missiles and aircraft, mapped supplies from 58 Belarusian firms to 41 Russian military-industrial plants, and documented chips that had been relabelled to disguise their origin.[45]

There are several reasons why estimating the precise share of the Belarusian economy involved in Russia's military effort is complicated. First, much of the relevant data is classified. Second, some goods are genuinely dual-use, such as fuel for Russian tanks, uniforms and food rations for the Russian army. In the statistics, these would be indistinguishable from fuel, clothing, and food supplied to the Russian civilian market. Investigators estimated the value of purely military shipments from Belarus to Russia between February 2022 and August 2025 at US $1.2 billion, equivalent to roughly US $0.5 billion per year. These figures suggest that documented Belarusian military exports account for around 2% of overall exports to Russia. Estimates that include dual-use goods and services put the figure at up to 4% of exports. Their military value may be far larger than their economic weight.

3.2.2 Asset Capture: EU Capital and Hauliers Held Hostage

A distinct and less examined instrument is the seizure, legal or physical, of foreign assets that happen to be inside Belarus. The regime takes value that is already within reach and puts it to three uses: forced financing of its own economy, a bargaining chip against EU governments, and

44. Council Regulation (EU) 2023/1594 of 3 August 2023. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/1594/oj/eng; Council of the EU, "Belarus' involvement in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: new EU restrictive measures target trade, services, transport and anti-circumvention", 29 June 2024. 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/

45. Meduza, "Short-circuiting sanctions. How Belarusian companies funnel Western-made microchips to Russia for missiles and fighter jets", 27 November 2024. https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/11/27/short-circuiting-sanctions; Belarusian Investigative Center, "Belarusian companies doubled supplies to Russia's military industry in two years", 8 May 2026. https://investigatebel.org/en/investigations/belarus-supplies-russian-defense-industry; OCCRP, "Belarus Ramps Up Arms Pipeline to Russia Amid Sanctions Gaps", 8 May 2026. https://www.occrp.org/en/news/belarus-ramps-up-arms-pipeline-to-russia-amid-sanctions-gaps

pressure that runs through the affected companies back onto their own states.

Since July 2022, investors from "unfriendly" states have not been able to freely sell their Belarusian shares or leave the market. The list of affected companies rose from about 190 to 1,849 within months. Since September 2023, investors' dividends have had to pass through special accounts controlled by the regulator and in April 2024 a government resolution (No. 299) capped dividend payments above a set threshold, such that official permission was thereafter required to exceed it. The tax on dividends for these owners rose from 15% to 25%. These measures are accompanied by various arbitrary fines levied on foreign businesses operating in Belarus.[46]

Each company is left with three poor options: write off the asset, keep the profits frozen, or reinvest it inside Belarus. The regime then reports the resulting forced reinvestment as incoming FDI and as evidence of investor confidence. Much of the net FDI of about US $1.6 billion recorded in 2025 was reinvested profits.

The same approach appeared at the border in late 2025. After Lithuania closed its two crossings with Belarus on 29 October in response to the airspace incidents (see Section 3.2.3 "Border and Transit Weaponisation"), Belarus refused to let Lithuanian-registered trucks leave its territory. The drivers were released, but Belarus held the vehicles and declined to open an evacuation corridor unless Lithuania fully reopened the border. Linava, the Lithuanian carriers' association, estimated that up to 4,000 Lithuanian vehicles were stuck in Belarus, with stranded assets worth up to €60 million. In a formal complaint to the European Commission on 2 March 2026, it documented at least 1,071 of them from 149 companies, with a confirmed value of about €16 million, rising to about €22 million when a further 400 were included.[47]

Minsk moved the trucks to paid car parks, charged €120 per vehicle per day, and threatened to confiscate them all. The standoff lasted more than five months before the situation was normalised in late March 2026, when the charges were reduced and most of the vehicles were returned to Lithuania. However, according to reports, around 100 trucks were still being held in Belarus as of August 2026,[48] as the cost of recovering them appeared too high for their owners. The losses turned the hauliers into a domestic lobby pressing both Vilnius and Brussels for help and compensation, with some firms facing bankruptcy.

46. U.S. Department of State, "2023 Investment Climate Statements: Belarus". https://2021-2025.state.gov/reports/2023-investment-climate-statements/belarus/; Schneider Group, "Restrictions on the rights of foreign businesses to manage companies in Belarus", 8 February 2023. https://schneider-group.com/en/news/countries/restrictions-on-the-rights-of-foreign-businesses-to-manage-companies-in-Belarus/

47. Council of the EU, "Truck blockages in the Republic of Belarus", WK 2943/2026, 20 February 2026. https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/WK-2943-2026-INIT/en/pdf; LRT, "Lithuanian carriers appeal to European Commission over trucks stranded in Belarus", 4 March 2026. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2857117/lithuanian-carriers-appeal-to-european-commission-over-trucks-stranded-in-belarus

48. Reform.news, "Around 100 Lithuanian trucks still remain in Belarus", 14 August 2026. https://reform.news/en/around-100-lithuanian-trucks-still-remain-in-belarus/

3.2.3 Border and Transit Weaponisation

Belarus sits on road and rail links between the EU, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China, including the Belt and Road land route, which is Beijing's main stake in Belarusian transit. Before sanctions and disruptions, the Belarusian corridor accounted for roughly 5% of China-EU trade. Since the onset of sanctions, Belarus has lost around 40% of the freight volume passing through its territory, and repeated disruptions at border crossings have forced the EU and China to reroute more freight through the Trans-Caspian "Middle Corridor".

In practice, only EU countries have used this transit as leverage. However, the remaining volumes may still provide some leverage to the Belarusian regime itself because it can still disrupt key logistical channels. The fact that there has been no such behaviour by the Belarusian side is likely explained by a fear that disruptions would create frictions in China-Belarus relations, increasing China's dissatisfaction with the Belarusian authorities. At the same time, if the Chinese position or the nature of Belarus-China relations change, the authorities in Minsk may look to use this instrument.

A new form of cross-border economic disruption emerged in the fourth year of the full-scale aggression. Since October 2025, cheap high-altitude balloons carrying contraband cigarettes have repeatedly forced Vilnius and Kaunas airports to close (see Section 2.4 "Balloons"). By December, the Vilnius airport had experienced more than 60 hours of forced closure, affecting around 350 flights and 51,000 passengers, and Lithuania declared a state of emergency.[49] Irrespective of whether smugglers or Belarusian security services launch the balloons, as Vilnius alleges, they provide a cheap and deniable way of imposing high costs on neighbouring states. The contraband itself also funds networks linked to the regime.

3.2.4 Economic Narratives in Propaganda: The Potash Case

Economics also gives Minsk and Moscow a recurring disinformation theme: the claim that Western sanctions are causing global hunger. Belarus produces roughly a fifth of the world's potash, a fertiliser with few substitutes, and used to ship it through Lithuania's Klaipeda port. Sanctions and the loss of that port in early 2022 cut Belarus's global market share from about 20% to 9%. The propaganda campaign originating from the Belarusian regime was effective enough that, in March 2023, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for the EU to ease Belarus potash sanctions to avoid world hunger and an approaching disaster for the Global South.[50]

The feared global shortage did not materialise. After an early price spike, the market adjusted and settled, with other producers, particularly Canada and new African capacity, filling part of the gap. Belarus also rebuilt its export volumes by shipping through Russia's logistical infrastructure and selling into China and other markets at discounts of up to 50% below market value. By 2025 it was on track to export more than 12 million tonnes, above pre-sanction levels, recovering its world

49. Lithuanian Airports, Annual Report 2025. https://ltou.lt/app/uploads/2026/05/LTOU_metine-ataskaita_2025_EN.pdf
50. POLITICO Europe, "UN's Guterres wants EU to ease Belarus sanctions. The EU isn't so sure", 23 March 2023. https://www.politico.eu/article/united-nations-antonio-guterres-ease-belarus-sanctions-eu-fertilizers-world-hunger/

market share.[51]

But volume recovery does not mean a recovery in profitability. Sanctions, rerouting costs and the discounts required to reach alternative markets have left profits well below pre-sanctions levels.

The theme grew stronger in late 2025, when the United States started easing Belarus sanctions, including on potash and the Belarusian national airline, in return for the release of political prisoners; the EU did not follow the same path.[52] The diverging policies of Washington and Brussels in itself provides opportunities for hybrid economic influence (see Section 3.4 "Emerging Economic Hybrid Threats").

3.3 Consolidated Impact

The instruments discussed above impose real but uneven costs. The circumvention channel kept Russia supplied with controlled goods until the EU closed it, and Belarusian components still reach the Russian military. Asset seizures and border disruption concentrate losses on frontline states through frozen capital, stranded haulage and disrupted air travel, while giving Minsk deniable leverage. The potash narrative creates some erosion of sanctions consensus and some goodwill in the Global South at a relatively low cost.

What links these instruments is that they are the tools of an economy that has lost its Western markets and leaned hard on Russia. They are used as much on Russia's behalf as on Belarus's own.

3.4 Emerging Economic-Hybrid Threats

The following developments appear to be plausible in the current EU-Belarus standoff:

> - Since September 2025, Washington has eased some sanctions on Belarus, while Brussels has kept its own sanctions regime in place. Minsk can use this divergence in three ways: for legal arbitrage, since a transaction cleared by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) may still breach EU law; to drive a wedge between Washington and Brussels; and in propaganda claiming that the US has admitted its sanctions failed.
>
> - EU tariffs on Belarusian and Russian farm goods and fertilisers, in force since 1 July 2025, give Minsk a reason to push the food-security narrative and to time pressure on transit or supplies to EU sanctions reviews.
>
> - As the direct EU–Belarus trade route closes, more trade will move through EAEU origin rules and third countries, a shift already visible in Belarusian data. The United Arab Emirates,

51. Kamil Kłysiński, "Tough business in tough times: Belarusian exports of potash fertilisers", OSW Commentary No. 631, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 20 November 2024. https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW_Commentary_631.pdf
52. OFAC, "Counter Terrorism Designations; Issuance of Belarus General License" (General License 11, Belavia), 11 September 2025. https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20250911; OFAC, "Publication of a Belarus Sanctions Regulations Web General License" (General License 13 of 15 December 2025), Federal Register, 2 March 2026. https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/935056/download?inline=; OFAC, "Belarus Designations Removals; Issuance of Belarus General License; Rescission of Belarus Directive 1", 26 March 2026. https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20260326

Belarus's third-largest export market in 2025, is the main example; others are Central Asia, the Caucasus and Chinese rail and payment systems.

- Crypto, alternative payment-messaging systems and Chinese fintech give Belarus ways of evading sanctions that are much harder to track in trade statistics than car imports were.

- Asset seizures will probably widen along the 2022–2025 pattern: from frozen dividends to external management and nationalisation, and from impounded trucks to confiscation. Any EU business or asset in Belarus can become a hostage, and its owner may end up lobbying for Minsk inside the EU.

- As freight routes adjust to bypass Belarus, the regime will have less commercial reason to keep transit open and more reason to disrupt it for leverage, including on specific critical goods.

4. HOW BELARUSIAN PROPAGANDA SUPPORTS HYBRID PRESSURE

Belarusian state-backed propagandists use security and economic incidents to cast doubt on European countermeasures, questioning whether they work, who bears the cost and what should happen next. Once the issue is framed in those terms, responses such as reopening borders, easing sanctions or restoring political contact with Minsk can be presented as reasonable steps. This section examines how selected security and economic disputes are used to make those arguments and to influence the range of responses considered by European governments.

One of the main channels for distributing and recirculating pro-government messaging in Belarus is the Telegram messaging app. Much of the material published there reproduces statements from official institutions and state media, but the platform also brings together a wider set of actors, including government and institutional channels, regional outlets and personal channels run by prominent propagandists.

The analysis in this section uses the Telegram network as its primary empirical source. Between 1 January 2025 and 31 May 2026, a set of monitored pro-government channels published 383,296 posts. To examine broad patterns systematically without relying on hand-picked examples, the content analysis that follows uses a random sample of 170,140 posts published over the described period. The sample covers 34 Telegram channels and preserves the composition of the monitored corpus, allowing comparisons across topics, targets and types of messaging. A separate coded set of 1,480 posts is used for a narrower analysis of how security incidents were framed. It extends to 5 June 2026 and assigns one main frame to each post.

4.1 Minsk Presents Itself as the Partner the EU Needs

Lithuania closed the Šalčininkai and Medininkai border crossings on 29 October 2025 in response to repeated balloon incidents linked to airborne smuggling from Belarus. The crossings reopened on 20 November after the government reported a decline in such incidents, but the dispute did not end there.

Coverage of the balloon incidents in pro-government Telegram channels took two different approaches. Some posts treated the problem mainly as cross-border smuggling involving recipients, intermediaries and financial incentives inside Lithuania. This appeared in 90 of 368 posts across 18 channels, while others focused on how the disruption should be handled. *Glavny Tur* formulated the argument this way: *"If they really want to deal with smuggling and protect themselves from balloons, they should not close the border. They should find and jail the bandits inside their own borders".*[53] Twenty-eight posts across nine channels presented cooperation with Minsk as part of the solution, linking continued transport and aviation problems to restrictions and the lack of working contacts. A later post presented cooperation as the alternative: *"Let us work together and make money from freight transport... Let us open the border and make it predictable and safe for citizens of all countries".*[54]

53. Glavny Tur (@glav_tur), Telegram, 5 November 2025. https://t.me/glav_tur/15847
54. Zapadnye Zaichiki (@zaikiusd), Telegram, 17 March 2026. https://t.me/zaikiusd/2691

Once the focus shifted to the stranded trucks, the proposed remedy became more political. Of 304 posts across 27 channels, 83 posts blamed European restrictions or government decisions for the carriers' losses, 60 presented contact with Minsk as a way to resolve the problem and 16 posts made both points at once. *Zapadnye Zaichiki* stated: *"The authorities refuse direct negotiations with Minsk for political reasons, but this is leading to growing pressure from their own businesses, which are suffering real financial losses".* [55]

Some messages went beyond general calls for dialogue and argue for contact at the political level. On 15 November, *Pul Pervogo*, a presidential press-pool channel centred on Lukashenka's statements and activities, relayed the Belarusian Foreign Ministry's call for political-diplomatic negotiations and described a meeting between border guards as insufficient. *AzarenokCTV*, the personal channel of a political commentator and presenter on the state-owned STV television channel, made the same distinction in November and December.[56]

4.2 Sanctions are Presented as Harmful and Unable to Change Policy

Potash coverage makes a related case for economic concessions. Across 217 posts in 28 channels, the coverage linked restrictions to higher economic costs, threats to global food security and, in some cases, hunger, while presenting sanctions relief as evidence that Western policy had failed. After the US eased restrictions on Belarusian potash in December 2025, pro-government commentators described the decision either as a strategic gain for Minsk or as a Western capitulation, even while claiming that Belarus had learned to operate without sanctions relief.[57]

Twenty-five posts across 15 channels questioned the usefulness or justification of sanctions, while 27 posts in 13 channels linked European restrictions to economic costs. They state, for example, that *"Sanctions never would have been permanent, especially those that do not work. Potash fertilisers are needed not only by Belarus... many countries need them simply to grow food"*.[58] Across this coverage, channels called for sanctions to be lifted, transit restored and cooperation resumed. Several also amplified foreign political voices making similar arguments, extending the case beyond Belarusian official messaging without showing coordination with Minsk or influence over European policy.[59]

Pro-government channels also use Belarus's economic ties with Russia to explain how the country can supposedly absorb Western pressure. Some posts point to access to the Russian market, preferential inputs, credit and technological cooperation as evidence that Belarus can withstand

55. Zapadnye Zaichiki (@zaikiusd), Telegram, 10 December 2025. https://t.me/zaikiusd/2530
56. Pul Pervogo (@pul_1), Telegram, 15 November 2025. https://t.me/pul_1/19097; AzarenokCTV (@AzarenokCTV), Telegram, 12 November 2025. https://t.me/AzarenokCTV/61718; AzarenokCTV (@AzarenokCTV), Telegram, 9 December 2025. https://t.me/AzarenokCTV/63349
57. Shpakouski (@shpakouski), Telegram, 13 December 2025. https://t.me/shpakouski/7378; AzarenokCTV (@AzarenokCTV), Telegram, 13 December 2025. https://t.me/AzarenokCTV/63594; House of Representatives of Belarus (@housegovby), Telegram, 29 March 2025. https://t.me/housegovby/27918; AzarenokCTV (@AzarenokCTV), Telegram, 30 October 2025. https://t.me/AzarenokCTV/60900
58. Glavny Tur (@glav_tur), Telegram, 16 February 2025. https://t.me/glav_tur/13800
59. Shpakouski (@shpakouski), Telegram, 13 December 2025. https://t.me/shpakouski/7378; House of Representatives of Belarus (@housegovby), Telegram, 3 April 2025. https://t.me/housegovby/28042; Shpakouski (@shpakouski), Telegram, 30 January 2025. https://t.me/shpakouski/5861

sanctions. In this framing, ties with Russia support the broader claim that sanctions impose costs without changing policy.

4.3 European Security Measures are Portrayed as Expensive and Ineffective

The coverage of the migration crisis is aimed at discrediting the response measures and portraying them as unjustified. *Nevolfovich* linked migration to Western involvement in destabilising migrants' countries of origin, *Nasha Zemla* accused Polish authorities of concealing deaths at the border.[60]

Coverage of the tunnels has focused more directly on whether Poland's border defences are worth the cost. Seven of the 13 retained posts described the existing measures as ineffective. For example: *"A structure costing half a billion euros turned out to be, mildly speaking, not the most insurmountable obstacle"*, or *"Every such tunnel is an ideal pretext for Warsaw to scare Brussels and keep extracting enormous sums for strengthening the EU's eastern borders"*.[61] Three posts from one channel went further, presenting the incidents as a reason for Warsaw to seek more EU funding or expand political control. R.L.S., a political commentary channel, tied a reported September tunnel to the cost of the border barrier and requests for additional EU money, while *Nevolfovich* later mocked claims about who built the tunnels.[62]

Belarusian channels have also changed how they framed drone incidents involving Lithuania over time. In July 2025, 23 of 37 posts questioned the incident itself, its significance or the evidence about the drone's route, while ten focused on whether Lithuanian protection measures were effective. They state: *"The exiles have no problem discussing Lithuania's leaky air defence... There are also quite reasonable suggestions that the Lithuanian government simply invented the story and staged the drone crash at one of its training grounds"*.[63] By March and May 2026, the incident itself was less central to the dispute. Criticism focused instead on air-defence failures and alleged double standards. In May, 16 of 34 posts questioned the effectiveness of protection, while 10 posts across 8 channels portrayed Belarus as helpful or protective. Some March posts also repeated statements attributed to Lithuanian officials identifying a drone as Ukrainian.

4.4 Military Cooperation with Russia is Described as Defensive, while Belarus Presents Itself as Restrained

In the wider security coverage, pro-government channels hand Russia a different role. Cooperation with Moscow is presented as defensive or as a normal activity between allies. Joint migration control is described as improving security, while Zapad-2025 was framed as protecting Belarusian

60. Nevolfovich (@nevolf), Telegram, 8 April 2025. https://t.me/nevolf/42461; Nasha Zemla (@Nashazemla), Telegram, 30 March 2026. https://t.me/Nashazemla/69844
61. R.L.S. (@r_l_s_by), Telegram, 23 September 2025. https://t.me/r_l_s_by/29072
62. R.L.S. (@r_l_s_by), Telegram, 23 September 2025. https://t.me/r_l_s_by/29072; Nevolfovich (@nevolf), Telegram, 27 February 2026. https://t.me/nevolf/49909
63. Glavny Tur (@glav_tur), Telegram, 8 August 2025. https://t.me/glav_tur/15010

and Russian borders rather than threatening neighbouring states. Responsibility for escalation is instead placed on NATO activity near Belarus.

In several cases, Minsk was shown warning neighbouring states, offering dialogue or saying it would use force only in response to interference. In such cases, Russia is cast as the security partner while Belarus appears as the more restrained or constructive actor.

When European security incidents are linked to Russia, pro-government channels routinely question the evidence, ridicule European threat assessments, criticise the response and, in some cases, point to Ukrainian responsibility instead. After the September 2025 drone incursion into Poland, Nevolfovich acknowledged that Poland had received allied assistance but portrayed it as inadequate, while giving more prominence to Minsk's warning to Warsaw.

A frequent reaction is that state-run channels do not deny the incident itself. They can accept that something happened while arguing that European authorities reacted badly, failed to provide protection or used the incident for political purposes.

4.5 Threats are Used to Raise the Cost of Supporting Independent Organisations

For independent organisations and their supporters, the pressure is linked to the risks associated with their involvement. One example is Belaruski Hajun, a Telegram project that collected citizens' reports on Russian and Belarusian military movements in Belarus until February 2025, when the security services gained access to its bot chat and began arresting informants. Of 102 posts about the project across 18 channels, 67 claimed that users' data had been exposed and 37 linked participation to punishment. Seven posts in three channels claimed access to messages sent to the Belarusian Investigative Center. On 30 March 2026, *AzarenokCTV* urged contributors to surrender to the authorities: *"All correspondence, all user data — everything was read, logged and added to criminal case files... Everyone who wrote to this bot: run to GUBOPiK with a confession. Only hours remain; there will be no other chance".*[64] The posts present withdrawal or surrender as safer than continued participation, but neither the claimed breaches nor changes in behaviour are established by this analysis.

Pressure also targets funding and representation. On 7 May 2025, *Nevolfovich* urged readers not to donate to the Belarusian House in Warsaw. The next day, Oleg Gaidukevich's personal channel called for the organisation to be disbanded and replaced: *"The extremists' House should be broken up — or let my bulldog Aksi run it; she'll chase them all out herself. A real Belarusian House of Friendship will be created by patriots of the Republic of Poland".*[65] *Nevolfovich* also used an Alternative für Deutschland parliamentary inquiry about funding for Belarusian initiatives to support allegations against BYSOL.

64. AzarenokCTV (@AzarenokCTV), Telegram, 30 March 2026. https://t.me/AzarenokCTV/70243
65. Nevolfovich (@nevolf), Telegram, 7 May 2025. https://t.me/nevolf/43129; Oleg Gaidukevich (@gajdukevichh), Telegram, 8 May 2025. https://t.me/gajdukevichh/9144

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Collective Response and Attribution

- Treat pressure on one frontline state as pressure on all. Hybrid actions by Minsk against Poland, Lithuania or Latvia should trigger a pre-agreed collective EU response, so that selective pressure on the states with the toughest stance carries the same cost as pressure on the Union as a whole.

- Keep a common position on any easing policy towards Minsk. No member state should agree bilateral relief on border crossings, transit or the release of assets without coordination at EU level, since Minsk varies pressure country by country in an effort to split the common position.

- At an analytical level, Belarus and Russia should be treated as separate hybrid actors. This will require dedicated research and a regularly updated database of cases. Studying their methods and level of cooperation will make attribution and response measures more accurate.

5.2 Countering Recruitment through Telegram

- Establish a mechanism for monitoring Telegram channels and job-advertisement chats, using automated analysis.

- Develop a legal framework for a proactive presence in the environments where recruitment takes place, including monitoring job postings and responses, using controlled counterparties, and deploying other practices designed to identify candidates for sabotage.

- Set up controlled groups and accounts to identify individuals interested in criminal activity and use undercover personas to trace the source of hostile advertisements and collect additional information. The aim is to create a lasting perception in target communities that such advertisements may be sting operations, which over time would narrow the adversary's recruitment pool.

- Launch targeted information campaigns addressed to the most vulnerable groups distributed through the communication channels these groups actually use.

- Create a working channel with Telegram for the rapid removal of recruitment channels and the de-anonymisation of administrators, based on the model applied to terrorist content. In the absence of voluntary cooperation from the platform, employ EU-level legal instruments to compel it.

5.3 Countering the Drone Threat

- Deploy a layered counter-drone system at priority sites and along the border, combining radar detection of low-altitude, low-signature targets, electronic-warfare assets and physical barriers, alongside general-purpose air-defence systems optimised for other classes of target.

- Support the development of domestic commercial counter-drone solutions as a supplement to state programmes.

- Maintain regular consultations with Ukraine on adapting critical infrastructure to withstand drone attacks.

- Research the infrastructure that extends drone range. Repeaters and mobile networks on Belarusian territory used to guide Russian drones should be mapped together with Ukraine, the operators involved should be listed under EU sanctions, and electronic-warfare coverage along the border should be planned to neutralise these signals.

5.4 Countering the Intimidation and Discreditation of the Belarusian diaspora

- Maintain a consistent public distinction in official state rhetoric between the Lukashenka regime and Belarusian civil society.

- Provide legal and institutional protection for Belarusian activists, journalists and diaspora representatives against targeted discreditation campaigns. Legal protection is particularly important, as it reduces the vulnerability of Belarusian activists and, consequently, makes them more resilient to pressure and recruitment tactics.

- Establish an accessible, low-threshold reporting channel for diaspora members to inform host-country authorities about threats, recruitment attempts or blackmail.

- Facilitate formal complaints to international organisations and pursue international legal action against transnational repression, with sustained legal backing for such cases in court.

- Shield supported initiatives from hostile information requests. Parliamentary questions and freedom-of-information requests about EU funding for Belarusian civil society should be answered in aggregated form that does not expose individual recipients.

5.5 Countering Belarusian Information Pressure

- Report incidents and responses with evidence. Communicate quickly what happened, what remains uncertain and what evidence supports attribution. For recurring border, transport and security disputes, provide short public briefings on why a measure was introduced, what

results it has delivered and under what conditions it could be lifted, backed by non-sensitive performance data and an honest account of known failures.

- Belarusian state-linked information activity should be made one of the priorities within the European Democracy Shield and related EU mechanisms. Monitoring and the Rapid Alert System can be used to track recurring narratives around sanctions, border disputes and security incidents and to share warnings across member states. Independent Belarusian experts should also be included in the European Centre for Democratic Resilience, alongside stable support for research and independent media that can monitor these narratives over time.

5.6 Economic Instruments and Sanctions Policy

- Set up continuous circumvention monitoring. Treat independent Belarusian research and investigators as part of the resilience effort.

- Intentionally address the gap between US and EU sanctions. The EU must provide clear guidance to companies on remaining EU exposure despite OFAC relief, while coordinating with Washington to prevent US policy shifts from opening loopholes in the EU framework

- Pre-empt economic disinformation. The EU should commission independent economic analysis of the potash and food-security cases and put it in front of Global South audiences early, as economic counter-FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) under the Democracy Shield's external work, so the true premise cannot be turned into a false conclusion.

- Build a response to asset seizures by the Belarusian state. EU compensation mechanisms or an insurance backstop and legal support for trapped capital and hauliers; a common position on payments to release assets; exposure mapping based on the roughly 1,849-company list; and treating asset seizure and logistics ransom as sanctionable hybrid coercion under the framework the EU widened in December 2025.

- Design sanctions to avoid the boomerang. Where rerouting through Russia turns a Belarus measure into Russian revenue, as with potash, the EU should target the Russian ports and logistics handling the trade rather than leave the flow in place.

6. CONCLUSION

Belarus is the junior partner in Russia's hybrid campaign against the West, and its dependence on Moscow limits how far it can act on its own. Even so, official Minsk has a wide range of hybrid tools at its disposal – and experience in using them. Some operations are carried out openly, with little effort to hide Minsk's involvement; others are covert, and its role can be inferred only from indirect evidence.

The scale of the threat and the intensity of operations will depend on a combination of Moscow's priorities and Minsk's strategic interests. Minsk is trying to leverage the rift among Western allies, already visible in the divergence between US and EU sanctions. The next step could be an exit from diplomatic isolation on Minsk's terms, with the aim of forcing the West to accept the political status quo inside Belarus in order to avoid further costs and keep its eastern border relatively stable. Certain activities will continue regardless of diplomatic efforts, such as the persecution of the diaspora and pressure on Belarusian political structures in exile. These serve another key interest of Minsk: the stability and political survival of the regime.

The Kremlin, for its part, seeks to weaken support for Ukraine in the EU and in individual member states, and may use Belarus's territory and its state resources for new destabilising actions and further escalation. The two regimes may claim different intentions while playing the same game. Lukashenka presents himself as Moscow's loyal ally while trying to win room for manoeuvre with the West. The Kremlin may tolerate these manoeuvres while they serve its interests, but when necessary, it can bring Minsk back into line and make full use of Belarus to pursue its own goals.

Lukashenka's agency, and his readiness to defy Moscow when their interests diverge, remain questionable. The degree of coordination between Russian and Belarusian services requires further study. In any case, the effectiveness of European policy towards Belarus will depend on close cooperation among member states, EU institutions and their partners.