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GEORGE BARROS

RUSSIA'S QUIET CONQUEST: BELARUS



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Russia's President Vladimir Putin (R) and his Belarus counterpart Alexander Lukashenko (L) attend a press conference following their talks at the Kremlin in Moscow on February 18, 2022. - Vladimir Putin said on February 18, 2022 that the situation in conflict-hit eastern Ukraine was worsening, as the West accuses him of planning an imminent attack on the country. (Photo by Sergei GUNEYEV / Sputnik / AFP) (Photo by SERGEI GUNEYEV/Sputnik/AFP via Getty Images)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Glossary of Terminology

This report uses the following specific terminology to discuss the Kremlin's integration effort in Belarus.

Military Terms

- **Military integration:** A Kremlin line of effort to establish a “unified defense space” with Belarus. In the Kremlin's maximalist conception, this effort includes establishing permanent Russian military basing in Belarus; establishing Russian administrative control over the Belarusian military; gaining the ability and sufficient political influence to assume operational control over Belarusian forces when desired by the Kremlin; establishing interoperability between Russian and Belarusian tactical units under Russian command; potentially enabling Russia to recruit Belarusian citizens into the Russian military; and integrating Russian and Belarusian law enforcement and other paramilitary security services.
- **Regional Grouping of Forces (RGV):** A permanent Russian headquarters intended to control a large and flexible combined arms and joint formation (объединение). In the context of this report, this refers to a headquarters that the Kremlin seeks to leverage to operationalize the entire Belarusian Armed Forces and any necessary Russian forces under a unified Russian command structure.
- **Operational control:** One of the Kremlin's primary military integration objectives. The ability not only of the Kremlin to involve Belarusian forces in Russian wars and other military operations (a largely political question), but also to enable Russian military officers to directly command Belarusian units in active combat.
- **Administrative control:** One of the Kremlin's primary military integration objectives. Russian authority over the peacetime organization and management of the Belarusian Armed Forces, including the organization of forces; personnel

management; logistics, individual and unit training; readiness; and other peacetime control functions.

- **Interoperability:** The ability of military forces from different state actors to coordinate and conduct effective operations. In the context of this report, this term refers to the Kremlin's objective to increase Russian-Belarusian interoperability by aligning the Belarusian military with Russian doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures so that Russian commanders can effectively command Belarusian forces during combat operations.
- **Unit (Часть):** The Russian term for a unit at the regiment level or below.
- **Formation (Соединение):** The Russian term for brigades, divisions.
- **Large formation or “association” (Объединение):** The Russian term for corps, armies, and larger military formations, including the Russian Regional Grouping of Forces (RGV) in Belarus.¹

Political Terms

- **Political integration:** A Kremlin line of effort to leverage the existing Union State institutions to secure significant control over most aspects of Belarusian foreign policy and subnational governance.
- **Union State:** The Union State is a supranational organization founded in 1999 which stipulates Russia's and Belarus' integration under a federated supranational state, complete with a constitution, combined legislative, combined executive, combined judiciary, a currency union, and other state accoutrements. The Kremlin's strategic effort to de facto annex Belarus is centered on a campaign to leverage and expand Union State institutions to dominate Belarus.

¹ Russian military sources do not always use these three terms strictly, and units of the same size may at times be variously referred to as units or formations in Russian or Belarusian official sources and independent writing. This report uses these terms using the exact echelons defined above.

- **Union State Roadmap/Union State Program:** A policy action plan intended to advance the integration of an aspect of Belarusian and Russian governance. The Kremlin leverages these roadmaps to actualize its desired conception of the Union State in phases, often against Belarusian resistance.

Economic Terms

- **Economic integration:** A Kremlin line of effort leveraging Union State structures and processes to create a Russia-dominated “single economic space” between Russia and Belarus and irrevocably intertwine Belarus’ economy with Russia’s enabling the Kremlin to secure Belarus within its economic orbit, greatly reduce Belarus’ ability to exercise independent fiscal and monetary policies, and exploit aspects of the Belarusian economy.
- **Technological sovereignty:** The Kremlin’s term for its desired objective of eliminating Russia’s dependence on Western-sourced components and technology through Russian domestic production and import substitution, including import substitution and sanctions evasion through Russia’s numerous trade partners—including but not limited to Belarus.

Note on Open-source

This report leverages extensive open-source research to analyze the Kremlin’s integration campaign. The author analyzed dozens of official Union State, Russian, and Belarusian policy documents, roadmaps, and laws, with a particular focus on studying recent integration progress since between 2020 and 2023. The author assessed the evolving nature of joint Russian-Belarusian exercises and Russian efforts to expand Russian military basing access in Belarus since 2020 by studying Russian and Belarusian military exercise readouts and collecting open-source information—including satellite electro-optical imagery and mobile device signals data—about Russian military activities in Belarus. The author analyzed scores of interviews and speeches by senior Russian and Belarusian officials responsible for advancing Union State integration. This report builds upon the insights of ISW’s previous coverage of the Belarus protests in 2020 and the Kremlin’s exploitation of that movement to accelerate integration processes since 2020.¹¹ This paper is also informed by ISW’s extensive analysis of Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine, which the Kremlin has leveraged to accelerate the effort to de facto annex Belarus. All information underpinning the analysis in this report is included in full in the endnotes, and this report does not leverage any classified, privileged, or undisclosed information. The author considered data collected up to May 2024.

¹¹ This report is not a detailed history of Lukashenko’s foreign policy vis-à-vis the West and Russia, Belarus’ 2020 protest movement, or the Kremlin’s integration campaign against Belarus. Those interested in a day-by-day history of Belarus’ August 2020 protest movement, and the Russian intervention and exploitation of that movement, should read ISW’s daily Belarus protest coverage from late 2020. “Belarus Warning Updates,” *Institute for the Study of War*, Accessed May 7, 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/belarus-warning-updates>.

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RUSSIA'S QUIET CONQUEST: BELARUS

Executive Summary

Russia's effort to de facto annex Belarus poses strategic risks to the United States, NATO, and Ukraine.

The Kremlin is in the endgame of a decades' long strategic effort to de facto annex Belarus—an effort which will permanently augment Russia's military and economic capabilities to pursue its revanchist geopolitical objectives against the United States and NATO. Moscow's effort to de facto annex Belarus through the Union State framework, while incomplete, has already achieved significant gains, requiring NATO to reevaluate the implications of Russia's growing control over Belarus and the capabilities and resources Russia can leverage against the United States, NATO, and Ukraine as a result. Belarus is not merely a Russian-aligned ally; the Kremlin is transforming Belarus into a strategic enabler for Russia's ability to project power globally. The Kremlin will leverage its recent but deep-rooted gains in Belarus to offset costs from Russia's protracted war against Ukraine, accelerate Russia's recovery following the war in Ukraine, and help Russia prepare for future wars more rapidly than Russia could by itself. Policymakers must start planning for a future in which Belarus is not only a captive nation but also effectively an extension of the Russian Federation.

The Kremlin seeks to de facto annex Belarus by formalizing the Union State as a Russian-dominated federated government that grants Moscow dominant power over most if not all aspects of Belarusian governance. This includes establishing full operational and administrative control over Belarus' armed forces during peacetime and permanent Russian military basing in Belarus; a political union with a Kremlin-dominated federated government with a common set of federal laws and institutions for Belarusians and Russians to be governed as a single polity; and a fully integrated economy complete with common markets, free labor flows, unified laws, and a currency union. The Kremlin very likely plans to leverage Belarus' population of 9.155 million people, Belarus' geostrategic territory on NATO's eastern flank, and Belarus' economic resources in service of Russian state power.

Russia's effort to de facto annex Belarus is a whole-of-government effort. This paper studies three key Russian lines of effort: The Kremlin's

efforts to integrate Russia and Belarus militarily, politically, and economically. The Kremlin's desired suite of integration measures with Belarus is so broad and comprehensive in many respects that it is harder to determine what Moscow will *not* control in Belarus if Moscow succeeds than to list what Moscow will control.

Russia's effort to de facto annex Belarus, while incomplete, is in an advanced stage and already has achieved milestones that pose security threats to the United States, NATO, and Ukraine, and an existential threat to Belarus' continued existence as a sovereign state.

Russia does not need to make any additional integration gains in Belarus to threaten the West. Russia's existing suite of military, political, and economic integration gains in Belarus since 2020 already pose threats to the West that policymakers must consider.

Russia's existing military gains are transforming Belarus into a lodgment in which Moscow can base Russian military forces postured against NATO and Ukraine. Russia has achieved permanent aircraft and air defense system deployments to Belarus since 2021 that increased Russia's military threat to NATO's eastern flank and Ukraine. Russia notably did not need to open any new official bases in Belarus for Russian forces to exercise an unprecedented level of freedom of movement in Belarus since 2021 and invade Ukraine from Belarusian territory in 2022. Russia likely could surge Russian troops to Belarus again if it so chooses. Russia almost certainly has the capability to operationalize Belarusian forces in any future large-scale war with NATO and is likely making progress toward securing the ability to operationalize Belarusian forces in operations below this threshold. Russia has established control over Belarus' airspace and air defense assets within an integrated air defense system subordinate to the Russian General Staff. Russia has established a permanent Russian combat forces presence in Belarus that did not exist prior to 2020. Moscow deployed Russian-controlled tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus in 2023 after coercing Belarus to pass constitutional amendments renouncing Belarus' official status as a non-nuclear state. The Kremlin began using Belarusian training capacity to augment Russia's own force generation capabilities in 2022. Training capacity (including qualified trainers; training equipment; and space at purpose-built training grounds) is a strategic Russian resource and a key factor limiting the Russian military's effort to replace its military losses from combat in Ukraine. The Kremlin may permanently deploy one or more of the planned new maneuver divisions that Russia is forming to Belarus once the division(s) finish forming, or permanently redeploy existing Russian units to Belarus. The Kremlin also seeks to use Belarusian forces in Russian military operations and to directly recruit Belarusians into the Russian military to partially mitigate Russia's force generation issues.

The Kremlin is steadily advancing Russian-Belarusian economic integration and is setting conditions for Russia to subsume Belarus' economy.

The Kremlin is using Belarus (which Western sanctions do not target as strictly as they do Russia) as a key sanctions evasion partner and seeks to subsume the Belarusian defense industrial base and labor pool to support Russian operations in Ukraine, Russian force reconstitution, and buttress Russia's flailing economy. Russia is already leveraging Belarus to evade Western sanctions and procure sanctioned dual-use goods critical to Russia's war effort, such as microchips and precision machine tools. Russia is coercing Belarus into adopting new streamlined laws that bring Belarusian economic regulations, including foreign trade policy and domestic tax laws, in line with Russian laws so that Moscow can merge the economies of Russia and Belarus into a single economy complete with a currency union and a common market. The Kremlin seeks to economically entrap Belarus by irrevocably interlocking the Belarusian and Russian economies and depriving Belarus of control over its own monetary, fiscal, and trade policies.

Russia's political integration is slowly but steadily normalizing the systematic erosion of Belarus' sovereignty and sets conditions for further Russian integration gains in Belarus and elsewhere in the former Soviet space. The Kremlin seeks control over Belarusian national and local governance beyond the purview of foreign and defense policy. The Kremlin has largely eliminated Minsk's previous multi-vector foreign policy and has increasingly aligned Belarus' foreign policy with Russia's since late 2020, including reorienting Belarus' foreign policy to have Belarus explicitly define NATO as Belarus' strategic adversary. This is a significant achievement. Belarus was not always the Kremlin's stooge; Belarus previously sought to expand its cooperation with NATO and the European union as recently as 2020, and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko notably refused to recognize Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea up until 2021. Russia is also attempting to advance a long-term effort to establish combined political institutions—such as supranational combined executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government—that Moscow seeks to use to govern Belarus.

Russia's current integration successes are on track to turn Belarus into a military, political, and economic vassal of the Russian Federation that Russia can leverage to augment Russia's ability to sustain its war in Ukraine, partially offset effects of the war in Ukraine on Russia, rebuild the Russian military and economy following the war in Ukraine, restore Russian dominant geopolitical influence in the former Soviet space, and project power against NATO and the United States globally.

The West must reevaluate the requirements for defending NATO's eastern flank and sustaining the defense of Ukraine given Russia's creeping annexation of Belarus' population and resources.

Russia is winning in Belarus. The Kremlin is close to de facto annexing Belarus and likely will do so within a decade provided current trends continue. NATO must plan for the likely future in which Belarus is mostly if not entirely Russian-controlled, regardless of the outcome of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin stands to advance the de facto annexation of Belarus even in a best-case scenario in which the West helps Ukraine defeat Russia and bolsters NATO's eastern flank. Russia's increasingly likely victory in Belarus will have major implications for NATO's security and Russian capabilities even in that case.

NATO planners must reevaluate Russian gains in Belarus as part of the growing requirements to defend NATO's eastern flank. Russia is undertaking large-scale force restructuring for conventional warfare against NATO. Strategic basing in Belarus will likely play a major role in Russia's future force posture beyond 2025. A permanent Russian presence in Belarus would increase the Russian military threat directly on NATO's border, especially in the long run as the Russian military reconstitutes, potentially bases new maneuver divisions in Belarus, and continues posturing the combined Russian-Belarusian Regional Grouping of Forces against NATO. A permanent Russian ground forces presence in Belarus would enhance Russian forces' ability to threaten the Suwalki Corridor to geographically isolate NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia from the rest of the alliance. Russia's military advance in Belarus dramatically

increases the resourcing requirements for NATO to deter and if necessary, defeat Russian attacks against NATO's eastern flank. Additionally, any permanent Russian military presence in Belarus—even if primarily postured against NATO—will increase Ukraine's defense requirements to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian threats on the Ukraine-Belarus border. Russian basing in Belarus would fix Ukrainian forces in northern and northwestern Ukraine at scale, pulling Ukrainian forces away from the frontline in eastern and southern Ukraine.

The West must include Belarus' training capacity in its assessment of Russian force generation capabilities. The Russian military has leveraged and likely will continue to leverage Belarusian military as trainers for new Russian forces. Russia's training capacity is limited and likely degraded since February 2022 and is a key limiting factor for the volume and rate at which the Russian military can regenerate its losses in Ukraine and generate planned new forces part of Russia's long-term force restructuring postured against NATO. The auxiliary training capacity that Belarusian forces can provide the Russian military is likely a strategic accelerant for Russian force generation and will help the Kremlin achieve its desired force reconstitution and growth faster than Russia could by itself. Belarus' population could also provide a small but steady supply of recruits if Russia manages to recruit from Belarusian prisons or society at large. Even the relatively small population of Belarus could offer an important if limited mitigation for Russia's own demographic decline and combat losses.

Successful Russian political integration with Belarus will embolden and empower the Kremlin's global ambitions to establish a multipolar world order. At stake is Belarus' future as an independent sovereign state. Russia's de facto annexation of Belarus, if achieved and *gone unchecked*, would be the first effective annexation of *an entire country* since the Second World War and accelerate the Kremlin's strategic effort to erode the international rules-based order in which all states are sovereign. Russian victory in Belarus would normalize Russia's strategy of undermining a target state's sovereignty using coercion and subversion under the rubric of "political integration,"

as opposed to overt force (as the Kremlin opted in Ukraine 2022).

Policymakers cannot count on the end of Russian President Vladimir Putin's tenure to save Belarus. The Kremlin is playing for keeps in Belarus. Moscow's effort to annex Belarus is a major all-of-government undertaking that—over the past two decades—has established its roots in a sustainable manner and has only recently accumulated momentum. Putin has successfully institutionalized in Russian geopolitical thinking the falsehood that Belarusians—like Ukrainians—are just temporarily lost segments of the Russian nation that the Russian Federation must reunite. Any of the strongmen at the highest echelons of the Russian government who stand to lead a post-Putin Russia will doubtlessly ideologically support Belarus' "reunification" with Russia and thus continue advancing this effort until its completion. The Kremlin's effort to cement Belarus as a permanent fixture within Russia's orbit—particularly through full economic integration—once achieved will likely be irreversible. It will be exceedingly difficult for Belarus—under current Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko or any future Belarusian government—to reassert its independence from Moscow once independence is lost.

The United States and NATO must study Russia's successes in Belarus as a cautionary tale so the West can prevent Russia from replicating effective subversion against other target states in the former Soviet space.

Geostrategic analysis of Russian foreign policy since 2022 has rightly focused on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the Kremlin's geopolitical objectives in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union transcend the conquest of Ukraine. The Kremlin seeks to restore Russian dominance over all former Soviet states, with Ukraine and Belarus as Moscow's current top priorities (in that order). Putin has opted to destroy Belarus as a sovereign state using military, political, and economic coercion, as opposed to overt military force, unlike in Ukraine. The Kremlin's approach of subversion in Belarus has been significantly more effective than its war of

conquest against Ukraine, and Russia's alarmingly effective subversion of Belarus has met little resistance from the West, in part because the Kremlin's unassuming and gradual approach in Belarus flew under the radar.

Russia's effort to annex Belarus has been the Kremlin's most successful subversion and integration effort to date. Russia's results in Belarus through Union State integration have far surpassed what the Kremlin has attempted to achieve with other post-Soviet states through its better-known international integration organizations, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The United States and NATO must study the Kremlin's Union State integration effort to prevent Russia from replicating similar (and likely more successful) efforts against other target states. The Kremlin will pivot and target other vulnerable states following success in Belarus. Russian officials and academics already openly discuss Russia's Union State integration with Belarus as the ideal model for how Moscow should go about restoring Russian geopolitical influence over post-Soviet states. Russia's protracted strategic effort against Belarus must serve as a cautionary example for the West.

Russia's gains in Belarus did not occur overnight but were secured as part of a carefully planned strategic effort. Western inattention to the Union State's slow but steady progress over decades enabled Russia to leverage the crises of the 2020 protests and 2022 invasion of Ukraine to accelerate its efforts. This case study demonstrates that Russia's "bilateral cooperation" with post-Soviet states is not a series of one-off cooperation deals; it is a means within long-term predatory campaigns aimed at systematically eroding and ultimately destroying the sovereignty of target states. The West must not ignore small Kremlin integration gains elsewhere, as they build over time into severe threats.

Introduction

Russia's campaign to integrate Belarus into Russian-dominated institutions under the Union State framework has already achieved significant gains, requiring NATO to reevaluate the implications of Russia's control of Belarus and the capabilities and resources Russia can leverage as a result. The Kremlin is further pursuing a suite of maximalist integration objectives in Belarus that would—if achieved—constitute the de facto Russian annexation of Belarus regardless of the Kremlin's framing. Russia's de facto annexation of Belarus would greatly advance the Kremlin's strategic effort to reestablish its control over the former Soviet space, including the key lands that the Kremlin regards as the core "historic Russian lands" (Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus), and would strengthen Moscow's military and to a lesser extent economic capabilities. The Kremlin seeks to integrate Belarus into Russian-dominated institutions under the auspices of the Union State in practically all policy areas falling primarily into three categories: military integration, political integration, and economic integration. The Kremlin's desired military integration efforts enhance Russia's ability to threaten NATO and Ukraine; expedite Russia's ability to reconstitute and transform its military following losses in Ukraine; and increase the Russian military's combat power. The Kremlin's desired political integration efforts aim to secure Kremlin control over substantial aspects of sub-national Belarusian governance and advance the creation of the Kremlin's desired multipolar world order by normalizing the use of political integration measures to undermine the sovereignty of another state. The Kremlin's desired economic integration aims to permanently bind the Belarusian economy to Russia. Moscow's victory in Belarus would make it exceedingly difficult for Belarus—under current Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko or any future Belarusian government—to reassert its independence from Moscow.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's geopolitical worldview fundamentally rejects the notion that an independent Belarusian nation can exist outside of the Russian nation and without direct political

control by Moscow. Putin's views about the non-existence of the Belarusian nation and Belarusian sovereignty parallel his views on the non-existence of the Ukrainian nation and Ukrainian sovereignty. The means by which Putin has worked towards restoring control over Belarus and Ukraine are very different but are rooted in the same ideological conception. Putin has repeatedly stated that Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians comprise one "triune nation" that was artificially and violently divided via policy miscalculations during and after the fall of the Soviet Union and Putin argues that the Russian Federation should unify this "Russian nation."¹ Putin's infamous July 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," while primarily concerning his demands of Ukraine, noted that both Belarusians and Ukrainians have always belonged to the Russian nation.² This essay openly questioned Ukrainian territorial integrity and underpinned Putin's justification for his full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Putin reiterated his belief that Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians constitute the "great Russian nation" at his speech at the plenary session of the World Russian People's Council in November 2023.³ Putin's claim that the Russian Federation as a state should control all "historic Russian land," which Putin uses to justify Russia's war against Ukraine, geographically encompasses Belarus.⁴ The Russian Orthodox Church's Moscow Patriarchate—a Kremlin-controlled organization and a known tool within the Kremlin hybrid war toolkit—adopted an ideological and policy document in March 2024 calling for Russian foreign policy to prioritize the "reunification" of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, under the greater Russian nation.⁵ This Russian imperialist expansionist worldview is the driving force behind the Kremlin's strategic effort to reestablish Moscow's rule over both Belarus and Ukraine.

Russian victory will turn Belarus into a military, political, and economic extension of the Russian Federation. ISW has assessed since 2019 that the Kremlin seeks suzerainty (control of a target state's foreign and defense policy) over all former Soviet

states, including, but not limited to Belarus.⁶ The Kremlin's objectives in Belarus go far beyond suzerainty, however. The Kremlin seeks to base Russian military forces in Belarus permanently; to develop the technical ability and the political influence to bypass Minsk and directly integrate Belarusian forces into the Russian military and leverage them in Russian military operations; and to secure the ability to recruit Belarusians into the Russian military. The Kremlin seeks control over elements of Belarusian national and local governance beyond the purview of foreign and defense policy—a step beyond traditional suzerainty, and much closer to de facto annexation.⁷ The Kremlin seeks to economically entrap Belarus by irrevocably interlocking the Belarusian and Russian economies and depriving Belarus of control over its own monetary, fiscal, and trade policies. The Union State's framework nominally preserves Belarus' independent statehood. However, in practice the Kremlin—if it achieves all of its maximalist objectives—will effectively dominate all meaningful levers of state power in Belarus and eliminate any real manifestation of a sovereign Belarusian state. The Kremlin's desired suite of integration measures with Belarus is so broad and comprehensive in many respects that it is harder to determine what Moscow will not control in Belarus if Moscow succeeds than to list what Moscow will control.

Russia's integration campaign poses an existential threat to Belarus as a sovereign state, even if Russia never officially de jure annexes Belarus. The Kremlin's effort in Belarus is in an advanced stage, as the Kremlin has already achieved many of its objectives short of de facto annexation. These existing achievements threaten both Belarusian sovereignty and NATO's security. Russia does not need to implement the Union State institutions exactly as outlined in the Union State's 1999 founding treaty or other documents to advance its control over Belarus and threaten NATO. The Kremlin has demonstrated flexibility and adaptability in its approach to integrating Belarus and has managed to advance its objectives without strictly following prescriptive structural approaches in leveraging the Union State concept. The Kremlin's current gains in Belarus, while still short of de facto annexation,

are already systematically eroding the sovereignty of Belarus, potentially in near-irreversible ways.

The Tumultuous History of Russia's and Belarus' Integration Efforts

Complete Russian victory in Belarus is not inevitable, and Russia's progress to date was not inevitable either. Russia's longstanding strategic objective towards Belarus is to secure Moscow's total control over Belarus via the Union State—a supranational organization that stipulates Russia's and Belarus' eventual integration under a federated supranational state complete with a constitution, combined legislative, executive, and judiciary branches of power, a completely integrated economy including a currency union (a single currency), a single external international border, and other attributes common to a singular state.⁸ Then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko signed the Union State Treaty in December 1999, when Russia and Belarus aspired to deepen their military, political, and economic ties following the turmoil of the post-Soviet 1990s. The Union State was conceived at the time of its founding as a relatively equal union between Russia and Belarus, despite the vast power disparity between the two, and was explicitly framed as open to the possible membership of other states.⁹ Vladimir Putin subsequently flipped the script following his election in 2000 by seeking to weaponize the Union State to restore dominant Russian control over Belarus under the rubric of agreements nominally intended to advance cooperation and integration but in truth dominated by Moscow. The Union State has not been fully established with its envisioned institutions and powers as prescribed and defined in the 1999 Union State Treaty, and the Kremlin's overall strategic effort to control Belarus is centered on expanding and transforming aspects of the Union State into Russian-dominated mechanisms to control Belarus.

Between 2000 and 2020 Lukashenko conducted a delicate balancing act between Russia and the West. Lukashenko sought to preserve both his own autocratic rule in the face of Western pressure and Belarus' sovereignty writ large against Russia's

increasingly expansionist foreign policy while securing any possible economic and political benefits for Belarus from both Russia and the West.¹⁰ Lukashenko successfully conducted this balancing act for two decades and almost certainly intended to continue to do so as long as possible, stating in March 2019 that “ideally, the Western and Eastern directions of Belarusian foreign policy should balance each other.”¹¹

Lukashenko increased his outreach to the West in the 2010s to balance against Russia’s increasingly threatening foreign policy towards the post-Soviet states, including increased Russian pressure against Belarus to accept integration under the Union State.¹² Minsk began a new diplomatic effort to normalize ties with the European Union (EU) in 2012, culminating at the Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2013 when then-Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei announced Minsk’s interest in starting to negotiate visa liberalization with the EU.¹³ Belarus began negotiations with the EU on a Visa Facilitation Agreement in 2014.¹⁴ Beyond reaching out to the EU, Lukashenko flatly refused to make several key integration concessions to Russia in the late 2010s. Lukashenko did not support Russia’s initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and called Russia’s annexation of Crimea a “bad precedent.”¹⁵ Lukashenko denied Russia permission to open a Russian military airbase in Belarus in 2015.¹⁶ Lukashenko blocked the signing of a new Union State military doctrine in 2018.¹⁷ Lukashenko sought to slow several other Russian-desired political and economic integration processes despite Russian economic pressure in 2019.¹⁸ The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced in December 2019 that it was discussing formats for joint peacekeeping exercises with NATO, though these discussions never came to fruition.¹⁹

Lukashenko balanced against Moscow well into mid-2020. Lukashenko accused the Kremlin of using predatory oil pricing to advance integration processes

and claimed in January 2020 that Belarusians would “eat him” if he threatened Belarusian sovereignty by capitulating to the Kremlin’s integration pressure.²⁰ Lukashenko rejected the deployment of Russian S-400 air defense systems in Belarus in February 2020.²¹ Then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Lukashenko met in Minsk in February 2020 (the first time a US Secretary of State had visited Minsk since 1994) and agreed to exchange US and Belarusian ambassadors for the first time since 2008.²² The United Kingdom’s Royal Marines and Belarusian Airborne Forces conducted the joint exercise “Operation Winter Partisan” at the Losvido Training Ground in Vitebsk Oblast, less than 60km from the Russian border, in March 2020.²³ The United States joined Norway and Azerbaijan in exporting oil to Belarus in May 2020 after Russia blocked Kazakh oil shipments to Belarus in January 2020.²⁴ Within two years of these economic and diplomatic ties, and the now seemingly unthinkable event of NATO forces conducting a military exercise in Belarus within 60km of the Russian border, Russian forces invaded Ukraine from Belarusian territory.

The Kremlin exploited the mass Belarusian protest movement beginning in August 2020 to achieve a strategic breakthrough in the Kremlin’s effort to de facto annex Belarus. Lukashenko initially accused Russia of fomenting the 2020 protests (which were rooted in opposition to Lukashenko’s flagrant falsification of his reelection as president) but changed tack to accusing the West of using the protests to conduct a coup against himself after the protests escalated.²⁵ The protest movement shook Lukashenko’s regime to its core, and Moscow became Lukashenko’s only remaining lifeline.²⁶ The Kremlin directly intervened in Belarus’ 2020 protests with crisis management and regime stabilization support, likely with a quid-pro-quo that Lukashenko would make concessions toward Russia’s Union State integration campaign in exchange for

Within two years of these economic and diplomatic ties, and the now seemingly unthinkable event of NATO forces conducting a military exercise in Belarus within 60km of the Russian border, Russian forces invaded Ukraine from Belarusian territory.

Russian support enabling Lukashenko to remain in power. Lukashenko and the Kremlin reached an agreement for a potential Russian intervention to crush the demonstrations early in the protest movement and the Kremlin deepened its intervention as the protest movement evolved.²⁷ The Kremlin very likely sent senior Federal Security Service (FSB) officials to Minsk to facilitate Lukashenko's crisis management and crackdown against protesters.²⁸ The Kremlin deployed Russian state media professionals—including from Russian state television outlet *RT* and newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*—to Belarus in August 2020 to run Belarusian media and conduct information operations to regain control over the Belarusian information space and promote the Kremlin's desired framings of the protests and Russian-Belarusian relations.²⁹ The Russian Orthodox Church's Moscow Patriarchate dismissed the former head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus for expressing sympathy with protesters and appointed a Kremlin loyalist bishop.³⁰ The Kremlin may additionally have deployed plainclothes Russian security forces to Belarus to suppress protests, though reports of those deployments remain unconfirmed.³¹

The Kremlin's successful exploitation of the 2020 protests dramatically

The Kremlin's successful exploitation of the 2020 protests dramatically accelerated Russian-Belarusian military integration and the Kremlin's wider de facto annexation effort.

accelerated Russian-Belarusian military integration and the Kremlin's wider de facto annexation effort.³² Russia leveraged the August 2020 crisis to launch a suite of previously unplanned near-monthly military exercises between August 2020 and March 2021, which enabled a steady stream of Russian forces to deploy to Belarus—a key breakthrough in Russia's effort to establish permanent military basing in Belarus.³³ By November 2021 Putin managed to coerce Lukashenko into finally agreeing to permanently host Russian air and air defense forces in Belarus; adopting a package of 28 integration roadmaps and a new joint military doctrine; and formally recognizing Russia's annexation of Crimea, among a litany of other concessions discussed in depth in this report.³⁴ These rapid Russian gains set the conditions for Russia's expanded permanent military presence in Belarus and the establishment of Russian military logistics in Belarus necessary for Russia to leverage Belarus as a staging area for its invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Russian military likely could not have achieved the basing access and freedom of maneuver in Belarus that it needed for its 2022 invasion of Ukraine without the prerequisite concessions that Moscow extracted from Lukashenko when he was under duress during the 2020 protests.

Methodology

This report evaluates the Kremlin's campaign to leverage existing Union State institutions and empower new ones to create the supranational structure necessary to de facto annex Belarus under three distinct but mutually supporting lines of effort: military integration, political integration, and economic integration. It presents the subordinate objectives and assessments of the varying levels of progress toward achieving those objectives for each line of effort. This report does not examine

in depth parallel Kremlin integration lines of effort focused on soft power (such as Russian-Belarusian educational, scientific, and cultural integration), although these undertakings are surely efforts supporting Russia's strategic objective of de facto annexing Belarus. This report instead focuses on those integration efforts that more directly impact Russia's ability to leverage Belarus as a threat to Europe and the United States.

The Kremlin's Integration Objectives in Belarus

The Kremlin seeks near-total control over Belarus' military, national governance, and economic policy—a level of control tantamount to the de facto annexation of Belarus. Belarus will effectively cease to exist as a sovereign state if Russia achieves its maximalist objectives, though even partial Kremlin successes will significantly erode Belarusian sovereignty and amplify Russian capabilities. This section of the report assesses the Kremlin's objectives and desired end state for each of its military, political, and economic integration efforts to forecast the overall strategic direction of the Kremlin's desired end state for Belarus.

The Kremlin reportedly seeks to complete integration by 2030, but it remains unclear if it can. An investigation into a reportedly leaked Kremlin strategy document conducted by a team of international journalists, including the *Kyiv Independent*, the *Dossier Center*, and *Yahoo News*, outlines a concerted strategic effort by the Kremlin to effectively annex Belarus under the rubric of Union State integration by 2030.³⁵ The reported strategy document outlines lines of effort for Belarus' phased military, political, economic, and cultural integration with Russia through the Union State in a manner consistent with ISW's long-term research on Russia's effort to de facto annex Belarus. Though ISW cannot verify the document's authenticity,^{III} Lukashenko commented on the reported document in February 2023 and insinuated that it could be genuine and prepared by the Russian Presidential Administration in 2020.³⁶ In July 2021 Lukashenko publicly "proposed" that Russia and Belarus develop a strategy for completing Union State integration by 2030, indicating that work on a 2030 Union State strategy document was already underway at the time.³⁷

Russia seeks full peacetime administrative control over the Belarusian military and the option to secure wartime operational control without input from Minsk.

Military Integration Objectives

Putin and senior Russian officials refer to Russia's aspirational military integration with Belarus as creating a broadly defined "unified defense space."³⁸ The depth of this desired integration transcends the military cooperation of international mutual defense frameworks, such as the Collect Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Russia seeks to permanently base combat forces in Belarus to support Russian military operations against NATO's eastern flank and Ukraine. Russia seeks full peacetime administrative control over the Belarusian military and the option to secure wartime operational control without input from Minsk. Finally, Russia likely seeks the option to expand Russia's military recruitment base to include Belarus' population.

Russia's and Belarus' Regional Grouping of Forces and Russia's Desired Operational Control of the Belarusian Military

Russia uses a military structure called the Regional Grouping of Forces (RGV) as a Russian-led headquarters that can be activated to command Belarusian forces in wartime. The RGV is intended to use its headquarters to command a large and flexible combined formation (объединение) made up of the entire Belarusian Armed Forces and any necessary Russian forces.³⁹ The RGV is not a permanent formation with a rigidly defined composition or end strength, but rather a flexible headquarters that can integrate and command Russian units from all parts of the Russian military and the entire Belarusian military. The 2021 Union State Doctrine variously states that the RGV can be used independently or jointly with unspecified formations from other

III The investigators from the above-named journalistic outlets did not release the document itself to protect sources and methods. While ISW has no reason to doubt the veracity of the reporting by these journalists, but it cannot itself verify the existence or text of the document.

“national armed forces,” “other forces” and “other military formations.”⁴⁰ The RGV was originally stipulated in a 1997 Russian-Belarusian bilateral agreement on supporting regional military security and the 1999 Union State Treaty.⁴¹ The Kremlin seeks to have Belarus cede its operational control over its own forces to the Russian RGV commander in wartime, allowing the Russian commander to operationalize Belarusian forces in a combined formation with Russian units in support of Russian military operations. The Kremlin’s envisioned chain of command for controlling Belarusian forces likely runs downward from the Russian General Staff to the Russian Moscow Joint Strategic Command^{IV} (previously the Western Joint Strategic Command), then to the Russian-commanded RGV headquarters, and finally to the Belarusian General Staff, or to separate Belarusian brigades directly subordinated to the RGV.

The RGV is not a novel concept for the Russian military, which has a long history of fielding task-organized “groups of forces” abroad. The Soviet Union and early Russian Federation used a similar flexible “group of forces” to occupy East Germany from 1945–1994. (This formation was called the “Group of Soviet Occupation Forces in Germany” between 1945–1954, the “Group of Soviet Forces in Germany” between 1954–1989, and the “Western Group of Forces” from 1989–1994). Russia also formerly maintained a similar “Northern Group of Forces” in Poland from 1945 to 1993, a “Central Group of Forces” in Czechoslovakia from 1968 to 1991, and a “Group of Russian Troops in the Transcaucasus” in Georgia from 1993 and 2007.⁴² Russia currently maintains a “United Group of Forces” including the Russian 102nd Military Base and the Armenian 5th Army Corps in Gyumri, Armenia.⁴³

The Kremlin seeks to align Belarusian military doctrine, operating concepts and tactics, techniques,

and procedures, unit structures, and standardized battle orders with those of Russian forces so that Belarusian soldiers can seamlessly operate in combined battalions or companies under a Russian command.⁴⁴ Russian and Belarusian joint tactical exercises since September 2020 have increasingly focused on deepening Russian-Belarusian interoperability.⁴⁵ Russian and Belarusian forces formed a combined battalion in exercises for the first time in September 2020, a combined company in an exercise for the first time in June 2021, and exercised as a combined battalion tactical group for the first time in November 2021.⁴⁶ Russian Eastern Military District and Belarusian artillery elements formed a combined artillery battalion for the first time during Union Resolve 2022 exercises in February 2022 immediately before Russian forces invaded Ukraine.⁴⁷

The Kremlin seeks the ability to assume operational control of Belarusian forces through the RGV for undeclared wars or other minor actions—a change from previous Union State doctrine that previously outlined Russian operational control over Belarusian forces in the RGV as an exclusively wartime function. The 2001 Union State doctrine stated that the RGV would operationalize and deploy during wartime, subordinating all Belarusian land and special forces to the RGV headquarters headed by a Russian commander (it is unclear at this time which Russian officer would assume this role, and the role of RGV commander could be dual hatted with the commander of a Russian Joint Strategic Command).⁴⁸ In contrast, the updated 2021 Union State military doctrine explicitly removes the wartime requirement for operationalizing the RGV and specifies that Russia and Belarus should form a joint command of the RGV during the period of “direct threat of aggression”—a heightened readiness period in Russian military doctrine below wartime.⁴⁹ The Russian military operationalized the

^{IV} Russian President Vladimir Putin officially dissolved the Russian Western Military District (WMD) and re-established the Moscow and Leningrad military districts (which previously merged to form the WMD in 2010) in February 2024. Previous Russian and Belarusian discussions about Russian military units and headquarters based in western Russia between 2010 and 2023 previously referred to the WMD, but the WMD no longer exists. The reformed Moscow Military District (MMD) will almost certainly reassume the majority of the functions that the WMD did regarding Belarus, though the Leningrad Military District (LMD) may assume some responsibilities regarding Russia and Belarus’ joint air defense system. It remains unclear how command and control for the RGV and the joint Russian-Belarusian air defense system will function given the dissolution of the WMD into the MMD and LMD. This report uses the military district designation that existed at the time when the relevant data points discussed were introduced. This report uses the Moscow and Leningrad military districts for all forecasts and assessments discussed after the WMD’s dissolution in February 2024.

RGV for the first time in such a manner without *officially* being at war in October 2022, likely to support an information operation targeting the West to erode Western support for Ukraine following the Kharkiv 2022 counteroffensive.⁵⁰

This is a notable change from the preceding Union State doctrine that previously saw Russian control over Belarusian forces in the RGV as an exclusively *wartime* function.^V The Kremlin could in the future define all times as a period of “direct threat of aggression” to justify operationalizing the RGV and thus subordinating Belarusian forces to the Russian RGV command indefinitely. The Kremlin has falsely framed Belarus and Russia as the target of a Western hybrid war since August 2020 and could easily leverage this false narrative to claim Russia and Belarus are in such a period of “direct threat of aggression.”⁵¹ Additionally, it is important to remember that the Kremlin has still yet to define its full-scale conventional invasion of Ukraine as a war in the legal terms that previously would have been necessary to operationalize the RGV. The Kremlin could theoretically (if it mitigated the many barriers to operationalizing the Belarusian military in Russian operations opposed by Minsk discussed below) use this new doctrine to leverage the Belarusian military in operations against Ukraine or NATO (such as a limited border incursion) below the level of declared war.

The Kremlin additionally seeks to use the RGV’s broad military integration provisions to erode the Belarusian civilian government’s sovereign control over the Belarusian military. The Kremlin has gradually shifted the RGV away from the being a combined formation in which Russia and Belarus are theoretically equal towards the RGV becoming an explicitly Russian-dominated command that provides Russia *de facto* control over Belarusian forces. The likely deliberate erosion of Belarus’ sovereign control over Belarusian forces in the RGV is not simply a natural byproduct of the fact that

Belarusian forces would play a supporting role in any major combined operation since the Russian military is substantially larger and more capable than the Belarusian military. A new Union State doctrine document adopted in 2021 removed the previous document’s language acknowledging Belarusian sovereignty by stating that the RGV’s joint command and control bodies should be developed while “maintaining national leadership” of both states’ forces to ensure Belarus’ and Russia’s respective “constitutional order,” “law and order,” “internal military security,” and “other tasks in accordance with national legislation” (i.e. Russia’s and Belarus’ respective laws).⁵² The omission of the previous document’s language about protecting Belarus’ sovereignty over Belarusian forces in the RGV indicates a Kremlin effort seeking to erode Belarus’ control over its own forces.

Russia likely desires to increase its influence over the Belarusian military to provide the Kremlin with a lever of influence within the Belarusian state. The Belarusian military is a key pillar of Lukashenko’s regime security. Multiple Belarusian maneuver brigades deployed elements to Belarusian city centers to suppress protests in August 2020.⁵³ The Kremlin likely seeks to shift the loyalties of Belarusian officers and military personnel towards their Russian counterparts rather than their authorities in Minsk, just as the Kremlin managed to co-opt significant elements of Ukraine’s military and security services prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁵⁴ A major defection among any of Belarus’ six maneuver brigades during a crisis would have significant ramifications for Lukashenko’s regime stability.

The Kremlin likely intends to secure *de facto* near-total peacetime administrative control and wartime operational control over the Belarusian military while allowing the Belarusian military to continue to exist as a separate entity on paper. Official Union State documents and senior Russian

V Note that Russian military doctrine separates periods of threat and active war into a six-part typology: two stages leading up to conflict and four types of conflict, progressing through Military Danger, Military Threat, Armed Conflict, Local War, Regional War, and Large-Scale War. The first two periods of “Military Danger” and “Military Threat” are heightened readiness periods that could lead to wartime but are below the threshold of kinetic warfare. For further details, see Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Dmitry Gorenburg, Mary Chesnut, Jeffrey Edmonds, and Julian Walle with Kasey Stricklin and Samuel Bendett, “Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts,” *The Center for Naval Analyses*, August 2021, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/russian-military-strategy-core-tenets-and-operational-concepts.pdf.

officials' statements indicate that the Belarusian military will continue to exist on paper as opposed to being formally disbanded and reorganized under the Russian military or the RGV, presenting Russia with several benefits.⁵⁵ Keeping a Russian-controlled Belarusian Armed Forces officially separate from the Russian Armed Forces allows the Kremlin to leverage Belarusian combat power without becoming responsible for financing the bulk of the Belarusian military. The continued existence of a Belarusian Armed Forces on paper also helps Moscow obfuscate the extent to which it seeks to or has secured control over the Belarusian military as a straightforward extension of the Russian military. This obfuscation helps conceal Russia's intent for Belarus internationally and among Belarusians. Declining to attempt to formally dissolve the Belarusian military also allows the Kremlin to avoid potential institutional resistance from Belarusian military personnel who may accept Russian control under the RGV but would resist direct integration into the Russian military.⁵⁶ The Kremlin likely seeks to leverage Belarusian units in Russian military operations to shape perceptions of Russia's military operations and deployments as "multinational" undertakings or "peacekeeping operations" to conceal Russian intent, obfuscate interventions, and imbue Russian activities with a veneer of legitimacy.⁵⁷

Russia's Military Basing Aspirations in Belarus

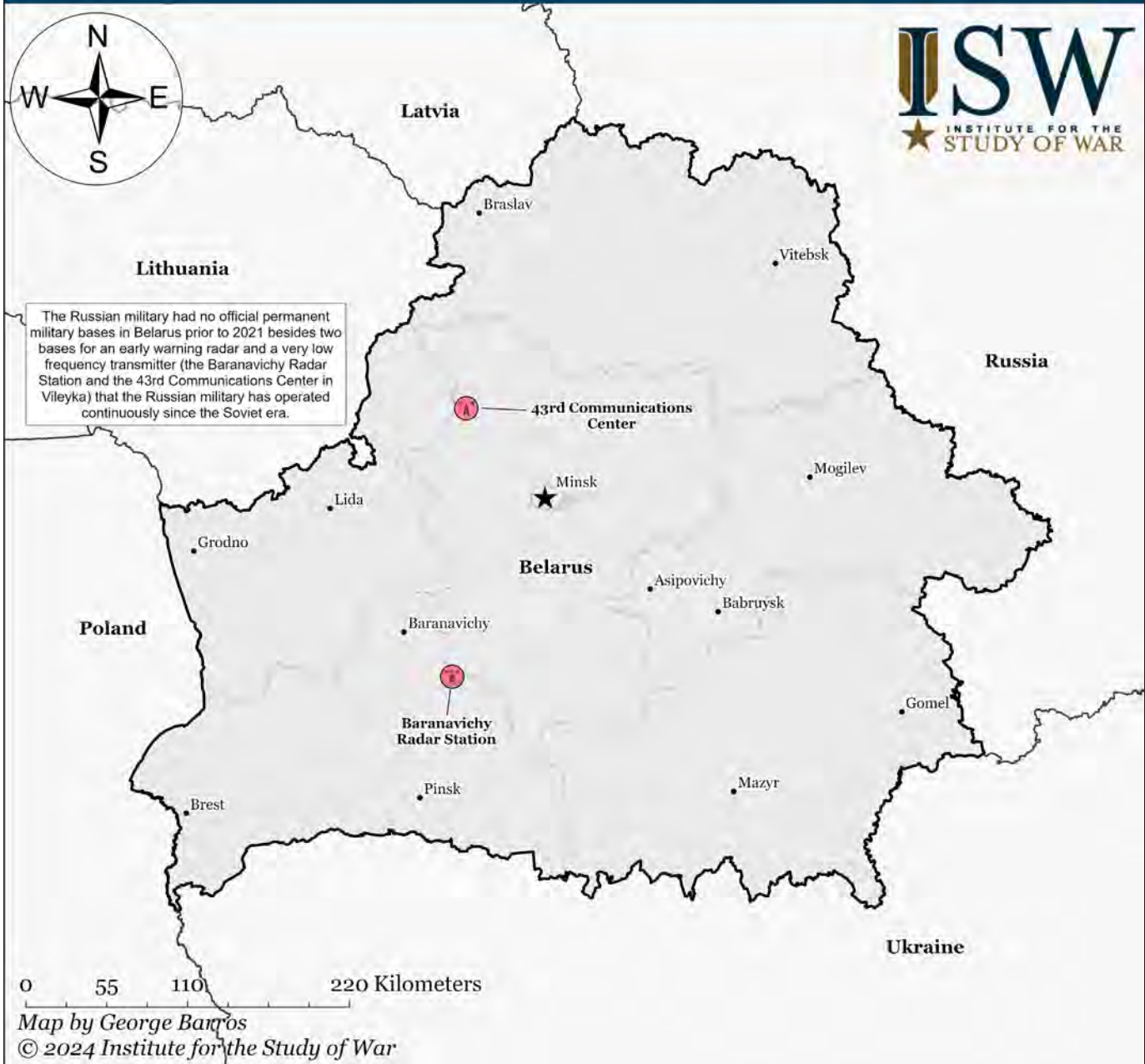
Russia seeks to formalize the unprecedented basing access that the Russian military obtained in Belarus between 2021 and 2023 into de facto permanent Russian bases in Belarus.⁵⁸ Before 2021 the Russian military had no *official* permanent military bases in Belarus apart from two radar bases that the Russian military has operated continuously since the Soviet era: an early warning radar base and a very low frequency transmitter (the Baranavichy Radar Station and the 43rd Communications Center in Vileyka).⁵⁹

The Kremlin has sought to establish an official Russian air base in Belarus, possibly in Bobruisk, since at least 2014. Then-Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Air Force Colonel-General Viktor Bondarev announced in 2014 that Russia's

Aerospace Forces (VKS) would permanently deploy Russian Su-27 fighters at the Belarusian air base in Bobruisk by 2016.⁶⁰ Putin unsuccessfully pressured Lukashenko to agree to open a Russian air base in Belarus in 2015.⁶¹ Lukashenko reversed course and suggested that he was prepared to drop his long-standing opposition to the base in Bobruisk in March 2021.⁶² Russia separately established a de facto permanent air defense base in Grodno, Belarus, in 2021 under the rubric of establishing a "joint training center."⁶³

The Kremlin seeks to expand Russian ground forces basing access in Belarus, likely under the rubric of creating "joint training centers." Russia's and Belarus' 2021 Union State doctrine calls for the creation and development of unspecified military and transport infrastructure facilities for Russia's and Belarus' joint use.⁶⁴ Lukashenko stated in 2022 that he would support the creation of more joint training centers in Belarus.⁶⁵ Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced in May 2023 that Russian forces will deploy additional military contingents to Belarus to develop military infrastructure, expand joint combat training, and conduct reconnaissance activities near the Union State's borders.⁶⁶ Putin signed a law on December 12, 2023, ratifying a Russian-Belarusian agreement on the creation and operation of joint combat training centers.⁶⁷ Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced in February 2024 that Russia and Belarus had established a legislative framework for creating and operating joint combat training centers.⁶⁸ Russian and Belarusian officials plan to implement two new Union State programs on improving Union State infrastructure facilities and modernizing logistics facilities for joint use by the RGV in 2024.⁶⁹ These provisions likely will support the creation of more "joint training centers" that will de facto function as Russian quasi-military bases in Belarus.⁷⁰ Russia's military logistics modernization in and near Belarus will also support Russia's ability to rapidly deploy Russian forces to and from Belarus regardless of what forces it may permanently base in Belarus. Putin and Lukashenko signed a resolution on modernizing and developing railroads connecting Belarus and Russia's "northwest region" in January 2024.⁷¹

The Russian Military's Footprint in Belarus Before 2021



The Russian military will use Russian basing in Belarus and Russian operational control over Belarusian forces to threaten NATO's eastern flank and increase military pressure against Ukraine. Senior Russian officials have consistently framed its

expanding military footprint in Belarus since 2020 as a defensive effort against nonexistent NATO threats to Russia and Belarus.⁷² The Russian military likely intends to use the Belarusian military, under the control of the RGV, as additional forces

postured against NATO. The Russian military likely subordinated the RGV to the reformed Moscow Military District (MMD) after Russia officially dissolved the Western Military District (WMD) and reformed the MMD in February 2024.⁷³ Russia and Belarus additionally approved changes to the way in which Moscow and Minsk plan to use the RGV in 2020, likely shifting the RGV's intended area of responsibility to Poland and Lithuania, as opposed to Ukraine.⁷⁴ Russian planners have increasingly integrated Belarusian forces as part of the RGV into Russia's largest strategic and high operational-level military exercises postured against NATO since 2013.⁷⁵ Russia's largest recurring exercises with Belarus—such as biannual “Union Shield” and quadrennial “Zapad” exercises—increasingly have explicitly integrated Belarusian forces and the RGV into Russian planning for conventional combat operations against NATO, though it is worth noting that the Russian military largely halted these exercises after the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁷⁶

Russian Efforts to Develop Other Institutional Security Integration with Belarus

The Kremlin additionally likely seeks to integrate Russian and Belarusian law enforcement and other paramilitary forces. Russian and Belarusian domestic law enforcement bodies have steadily deepened their institutional cooperation and conducted joint exercises for over a decade.⁷⁷ The Kremlin likely seeks to expand Russian law enforcement agencies' powers so that they can operate in Belarus to police Belarusians under future Union State law and detain wanted persons in Belarus without interference from Minsk, a line of effort that supports both Kremlin security objectives and the political integration objectives discussed in the following section of this report. Belarus' Investigative Committee and the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs signed a cooperation agreement in 2018 on investigation training and cooperation against organized crime within the Union State.⁷⁸ The Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) implemented a cooperation agreement in November 2020.⁷⁹ Russian and Belarusian law enforcement seek to collaborate on

combatting cybercrime in addition to traditional law enforcement.⁸⁰ Discussions of cybercrime must be viewed through the lens of Russia's extensive efforts to criminalize domestic dissent.⁸¹

The Kremlin likely seeks to secure the option to recruit Belarusian citizens into the Russian military. Belarusians and Russians have a single citizenship status under the Union State Treaty and in theory have equal rights under Union State law.⁸² The Kremlin could assert that Belarusians therefore also have the same civic duties and responsibilities under Union State law. Russian officials may one day require Belarusian subjects of a de facto annexed Belarus to serve within the Russian military or within Russian-controlled Union State military formations under a uniform Union State law. While the Kremlin has not yet publicly conducted a campaign to recruit Belarusian citizens at scale, the Kremlin has already targeted Belarusians and other foreign nationals for individual recruitment. Belarus has a population of 9.155 million and a prison population of about 32,000 prisoners that the Russian military may seek to tap for recruits following the pattern the Kremlin has established for Russia's own prisons.⁸³ Russian force generation efforts have aggressively targeted migrants in Russia with and without Russian citizenship for military recruitment and have recruited foreigners from several foreign countries, including Belarusians.⁸⁴ For instance, a Belarusian citizen living in Russia received a mobilization notice following Russia's September 2022 mobilization.⁸⁵ The Kremlin could attempt to use Belarus' population as a recruitment base to offset systemic manpower shortages that the Russian military has been facing since May 2022.⁸⁶ Russia will need to substantially grow the size of its military to staff the various new formations that the Russian Ministry of Defense intends to stand up over the next several years.⁸⁷ Even the relatively small population of Belarus could offer an important if limited mitigation for Russia's own demographic decline and combat losses.

Political Integration Objectives

The Kremlin seeks to formalize the Union State as a Russian-dominated federated government that

grants Moscow dominant power over most aspects of Belarusian governance, either as a single administrative unit or over Belarus' component oblasts. The Kremlin's intent to control Belarus through Union State institutions is an alteration of the original intent of the 1999 Union State Treaty. The Union State Treaty in theory stipulates a de facto political union (the joining of two or more states under one government) between Russia and Belarus in which Russia and Belarus hold equal powers through combined supranational executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government.⁸⁸ In practice, Moscow seeks to be the dominant power within the Union State, forcing Minsk to sacrifice much of Belarus' sovereignty to Russian-dominated Union State institutions, including supranational executive, legislative, judiciary, fiscal, and monetary institutions. The Kremlin seeks to leverage a Union State Council of Ministers to establish a Russian-dominated combined executive power that would assume executive powers currently held by the Government of Belarus.⁸⁹ The Kremlin seeks to leverage a Union State Parliament to establish a Russian-dominated joint legislature that would subsume legislative powers currently held by Belarus' bicameral parliament.⁹⁰ The Kremlin seeks to establish a Russian-dominated "Court of the Union State"—a supreme court equivalent—for interpreting the Union State's laws.⁹¹ The Court of the Union State would effectively become the higher court of review in Belarus, likely superseding the jurisdiction and responsibilities of Belarus' Supreme Court. The Kremlin seeks to adopt a Union State constitution that the Kremlin would likely engineer to effectively supersede the Belarusian constitution.⁹²

Russia was always going to dominate any Union State, to be sure, given the massive power imbalance between the two states. But the prospects for continued Belarusian autonomy under the increasingly autocratic and militarized Russian Federation of 2024 are far more limited than those Minsk could have hoped for under the demilitarized Russia still fighting for and trending towards democratization of 1999.

The Kremlin intends to secure control over much of Belarus' mundane domestic and administrative controls, going beyond traditional suzerainty.⁹³ The

Kremlin's desired end state for the Union State would not allow Belarus to control significant aspects of its internal affairs. Moscow explicitly seeks to create a "legal space" within the Union State that grants Russian entities control over legal processes and court proceedings in Belarus, among other things.⁹⁴ Russian and Belarusian officials have discussed their desire for Russia and Belarus to form a "united cultural space" and a "united education space" under the rubric of Union State integration.⁹⁵ Russian Ambassador to Belarus Boris Gryzlov announced in February 2024 that Russia and Belarus agreed to create a Russian-Belarusian Commission on History and that Russia and Belarus will use a unified history textbook for schools and universities, which he claimed will eliminate "discrepancies in the understanding of a number of important historical events"—in practice, teaching the Kremlin's desired revisionist history in Belarus.⁹⁶ The Union State Treaty calls for the creation of a unified scientific and technological space between Russia and Belarus.⁹⁷ The Kremlin seeks to control Belarusian domestic governance minutiae such as regulating Belarusian drivers' insurance, tourism development strategy, post office regulations, regulations for how Belarusian law enforcement conducts property foreclosures, and how Belarusian bureaucrats calculate official statistics.⁹⁸ All these minutiae offer ways for Russian officials to obtain enormous information about, leverage on, and ultimately control over Belarusian citizens that the government in Minsk could not resist other than by attempting to break free from the Union State apparatus. They are ways of ensuring Russia's control, in other words, short of Belarusian resistance that would take the appearance of an uprising.

The Kremlin particularly seeks to dominate Belarus' information space.⁹⁹ The Kremlin is advancing an effort to deepen its control over Belarus' information space through the creation of a "Union State media holding," which Russian and Belarusian officials have described as a single media company that will unify Belarus' and Russia's media resources under one consolidated "powerful editorial office" to "promote the Union State agenda" domestically.¹⁰⁰ Russian officials have also described the media holding as a "non-profit organization" registered

in Moscow that will interface with leading Russian and Belarusian media outlets.¹⁰¹ Russia and Belarus passed a decree in January 2024 on creating a Union State “Media Company” to help create the Union State’s “common information space.”¹⁰² It is unclear if this “Media Company” is the previously discussed “Union State media holding” under a different name or a separate structure. This “Media Company” will include a television channel, print media, and a “media resource center” for creating, adapting, and distributing digital content.¹⁰³ The Kremlin will likely frame its intensified control over Belarus’ information space as part of the process of creating the “unified information space” stipulated in the Union State Treaty.¹⁰⁴ The Kremlin is likely prioritizing establishing control over Belarus’ information space because the Kremlin and senior Russian military personnel regard the information domain as a critical battleground in geopolitics, strategy, and military operations.¹⁰⁵ The Kremlin likely saw the information domain as a key battleground for defusing the 2020 protests in Belarus. The Kremlin conducted a direct action campaign in August 2020 by deploying Russian media professionals from Russian state outlet *RT* and pro-Kremlin tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* to run Belarusian mainstream media to regain control over the information space during the height of the 2020 protests.¹⁰⁶ These Kremlin initiatives must be seen in the context of the dramatic increase in the Kremlin’s control over Russia’s own information space over the past two years. There is every reason to assume that Moscow will use these instruments to impose a similar control over Belarus’ information space.

The Kremlin has seized the initiative in developing Union State institutions, forcing Belarus to respond to Kremlin-driven efforts and ensuring that any formalized Union State institutions will be dominated by Moscow. Russia’s integration roadmaps with Belarus—discussed in depth in this report’s section on Russia’s economic integration achievements—notably seek to amend Belarusian laws and policies in such a manner that the Belarusian law, regulations, and policies will mirror Russian ones,

as opposed to amending Russian laws to bring them to a middle ground with Belarus.¹⁰⁷ The Kremlin explicitly seeks to establish a currency union in which the Russian ruble is the only legal tender in Belarus and the Russian Central Bank is the Union State’s unified issuing bank (“Единый эмиссионный центр Союзного государства”).¹⁰⁸ Putin stated in November 2000 that the Russian ruble should become the currency of the Union State starting in 2005 and that the Union State should have its own unified currency (implied to be the Russian ruble) starting in 2008, and while the Kremlin did not achieve either of these deadlines and faces severe challenges creating its desired currency union, this likely remains a key Russian objective.¹⁰⁹ Putin and Lukashenko determined in 2000 that the Standing Committee of the Union State would be permanently based in Moscow.¹¹⁰ The Office of the Secretariat of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union State—the institution that fills in as the Union State’s joint parliament until a full joint parliament is formed—is based in Moscow.¹¹¹ The Union State’s official television channel is based in Moscow.¹¹² The Union State’s capital city—once finalized—will likely be Moscow, though senior Russian officials have discussed the possibility of the capital being in Smolensk (also in Russia).¹¹³ It is exceedingly unlikely that Lukashenko, given his deep dependence on Moscow, would be able to exert much influence in Kremlin-designed and largely Moscow-dominated Union State institutions. Lukashenko explicitly accused the Kremlin in 2018 of trying to “destroy” Belarus by absorbing Belarus either as Belarus’ six constituent oblasts or as a single entity into the Russian Federation.¹¹⁴ He is very likely correct.

Economic Integration Objectives

The Kremlin explicitly seeks complete economic integration^{VI} with Belarus under the rubric of forming a “single economic space.” This effort, if successful, would effectively make the Russian and

VI Complete economic integration is the deepest form of economic integration most common within modern nation states where sub-national polities cede significant authorities to a unitary state or federal government via a political union in order to facilitate the free movement of goods, services, labor, and capital.

Belarusian economies function as a single economy, allow the Kremlin to exploit Belarusian goods and production, and make it nearly impossible for a future Belarusian government to decouple the Belarusian economy from Russia.

The Kremlin seeks to eliminate Belarus' sovereign fiscal and monetary policies by establishing uniform taxation laws, a combined budget authority, uniform trade policies, and a currency union. The Union State's founding treaty stipulates the creation of a combined Union State Accounts Chamber (Счетная палата) to control Union State finances, and Union State policy documents confirm ongoing Kremlin efforts to establish an "integrated system for administering indirect taxes" in Russia and Belarus.¹¹⁵ Russia seeks to create a common market in which Russia and Belarus will have total free movement of capital and people without regard to national boundaries.¹¹⁶ The Kremlin seeks to unify Belarus' and Russia's public procurement systems to enable Belarusian companies to participate in Russian public procurement without permits and vice versa.¹¹⁷ Belarus will have no meaningful influence on joint economic policy if the Kremlin succeeds.

The Kremlin's economic integration efforts are intended to reduce Minsk's economic policy jurisdiction to localized domestic affairs. Economists have developed a framework to analyze various levels of economic integration depth within seven stages. The seven stages (first articulated in part by Hungarian economist Bela Balassa in 1961) in order of depth, are: preferential trade area, free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union, economic and currency union, and complete economic integration.¹¹⁸ The first stage of the economic integration—the preferential trade area—is a simply an area with an increased scope of tariff reductions (e.g. Trans-Pacific Partnership),

whereas the final stage—complete economic integration—is the form of integration most common within individual states in which sub-national polities cede significant authorities to a unitary state or federal government via a political union in order to facilitate the free movement of goods, services, labor, and capital.¹¹⁹

The Kremlin has advanced and explicitly advocated for institutions which—if successful—would achieve the seven states of economic integration and enable the merging of Belarus' and Russia's economies over three decades.

1. Russia and Belarus signed a free trade agreement in 1992 and a free trade protocol in 1995.¹²⁰
2. Russia established a customs union with Belarus Eurasian Customs Union in 2010.¹²¹
3. Russia supposedly achieved a free trade area with Belarus through the Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Area in 2011.¹²²
4. Russia and Belarus agreed to a common market with the formation of the Eurasian Economic Space in 2012.¹²³ Article 17 of the 1999 Union State Treaty explicitly stipulates the creation of a common market to ensure free movement of goods, services, labor, and capital within Belarus and Russia.¹²⁴
5. Russia claims it achieved an economic union^{VII} through the Eurasian Economic Space in 2014, though it has not done so in practice.¹²⁵
6. Russia has not yet established an economic and currency union with Belarus, though Article 13 of the 1999 Union State Treaty explicitly stipulates a currency union with a unified monetary policy and exchange rate.¹²⁶ Union State policy planning documents calls for Russia's and

VII The Eurasian Economic Union is not a true economic union or common market and may never be. The Eurasian Economic Union is a political project lacking the institutional robustness of a true common market. In practice the Eurasian Economic Union's "common market" is plagued by the absence of strong common institutions capable of devising and enforcing a corpus of common rules. Russia's and Belarus' bilateral effort to form common markets especially suffer from unresolved issues regarding energy tariffs, subsidy mechanisms, and lack of harmonization in public procurement. Moscow and Minsk are continuing efforts to optimize and further develop their common market that the Eurasian Economic Union theoretically should have achieved, though it remains to be seen whether they can successfully establish a true common market. Katarzyna Wolczuk, Et al. "Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia," *Chatham House*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-10-eurasian-economic-union-genuine-and>; "Union State: Economic Integration - New Challenges," *Roscongress*, June 16, 2022, <https://roscongress.org/news/sojuznoe-gosudarstvo-ekonomicheskaja-integratsija-novye-zadachi/>.

Belarus' governments and central banks to conduct a "unified structural macroeconomic policy" and create a "common financial market" by harmonizing monetary policy, foreign exchange regulation and foreign exchange control, and regulatory standards for credit and non-credit financial organizations.¹²⁷

7. Russia has not achieved complete economic integration with Belarus, though it remains an explicit objective. Article 17 of the 1999 Union State Treaty explicitly stipulates the creation of a "single economic space," unified tax and pricing policies, and uniform rules of competition and consumer protection. Senior Russian officials have described Russian-Belarusian economic integration strategy as following a "principle of 'two states—one economy.'"¹²⁸ Union State policy documents seek to establish unified industrial, agrarian, and public procurement policies, indicating that the Kremlin seeks significant influence over domestic Belarusian economic activity.¹²⁹

Russia will not be able to achieve complete economic integration without first achieving the prerequisite common market, economic union, and currency union—all of which remain incomplete as of this publication.

Economic integration—if successful—will entrap Belarus, potentially permanently. The Kremlin seeks to use economic integration to make Belarus irreversibly economically dependent on Russia by eliminating Belarus' sovereign trade policy and establishing a unified Union State trade and customs policy with respect to third countries, international organizations and associations.¹³⁰ The Kremlin likely seeks to deprive Belarus of the ability to conduct its own independent trade with third parties or customs unions (like the European Union—a bloc Belarus traditionally used to economically balance against Moscow) without Moscow's permission.

The Kremlin may seek to deepen Belarus' economic and political reliance on Moscow by enticing Belarus' best and brightest workers to move to Russia. Free movement of labor between Russia

and Belarus would incentivize skilled Belarusian workers to move to large Russian cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg where such workers could likely earn more than if they remained in Belarus. This free movement of labor would increase the number of Belarusians—and particularly those Belarusians with high economic mobility most likely to look to the West—to see their economic and political futures as linked with Russia, not the West. Many of the best-educated and most economically mobile workers in Belarus' information technology sector participated in the 2020 protests and fled Belarus to the West after the protests failed, for example.¹³¹ The incentives for Belarusians to flee Belarus will likely intensify as Western sanctions against Belarus and Belarusian restrictions on its own population tighten, degrading Belarus' labor force and overall making Belarus more economically dependent on Russia. Belarusian worker migration from Belarus to Russia could additionally help alleviate Russia's current labor shortage.¹³² While free labor and capital flows may increase efficiencies for a subset of Russian and Belarusian workers, those benefits would likely be a secondary effect, with the Kremlin's primary objective being furthering and cementing its control over Belarus rather than producing economic benefits for firms or individual citizens.

Belarusian authorities are trying to combat this brain drain to Russia. The Belarusian Council of Ministers passed a resolution in November 2023 restricting Belarusian citizens from freely traveling abroad for permanent residence, effectively requiring Belarusian citizens to acquire an "exit visa," as the Soviet government required of its citizens seeking to leave the Soviet Union.¹³³ It is unclear how this law will impact labor movement within the Union State—if at all—given a 2006 bilateral agreement that grants Russian and Belarusian citizens equal rights for freedom of movement and choice of permanent residency within the Union State.¹³⁴ Lukashenko may attempt to implement Belarusian laws that contradict Union State provisions to slow integration.

The Kremlin likely seeks to subsume elements of Belarus' defense industrial base to support Moscow's larger effort to reequip and enlarge the Russian military following its heavy losses in Ukraine. The Kremlin explicitly seeks to create a "single industrial

space” in the Union State.¹³⁵ Russia and Belarus are actively working on multiple import substitution projects to provide Russia with resources and materials to offset the effects of Western sanctions against Russia.¹³⁶ Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced in February 2024 that Russia and Belarus recently proposed to develop a plan for a joint weapons program.¹³⁷ Lukashenko told Putin in February 2023 that Belarus’ aerospace industry is ready to produce Su-25 ground attack aircraft for the Russian military with the support of Russian technology transfers.¹³⁸ Lukashenko also stated that the Belarusian state-run Minsk Automobile Plant began producing components to support Russian KAMAZ (a Russian heavy-duty truck producer) products and expressed willingness to help Russia produce electronic components to substitute for lost Western imports.¹³⁹ Lukashenko additionally stated that Belarus is implementing a suite of unspecified defense and security cooperation agreements that Belarus and Russia agreed to in late 2022.¹⁴⁰ Ukrainian military intelligence has alleged that Belarusian authorities have assessed Belarus’ ability to establish production lines to support 122mm and 152mm artillery ammunition production,

presumably to support Russian reequipment efforts.¹⁴¹ While Belarus is of course unable to singlehandedly sustain Russia in the long term with badly needed munitions and higher-end systems, Belarusian provision of spare parts, ammunition, and limited vehicle production could form an important contribution to Russian sustainment and rearmament efforts.

The Kremlin’s economic integration effort with Belarus is first and foremost a geopolitical influence project intended to use fiscal, monetary, trade, and regulatory policy instruments to establish control over Belarus’ foreign and domestic policies. The Kremlin’s economic integration efforts will likely generate some shared economic benefits, especially in the long run, but any benefits that the Russian economy or some select economic winners may enjoy are secondary to the Kremlin’s geopolitical ambition to de facto annex Belarus. Economic integration could expand the Kremlin’s global economic influence in some niche markets by granting Russia control over Belarus’ share of commodities that Belarus trades on global markets. This would enhance Russia’s capability to leverage trade commodities (such as potash fertilizers) as political levers.¹⁴²

Current Progress of the Kremlin’s Integration Lines of Effort

Some of the Kremlin’s integration efforts have been more successful than others. This section assesses the Kremlin’s progress to date in military, political, and economic integration. The Kremlin has already achieved most of the objectives of its military integration line of effort. Moscow has accelerated its economic integration line of effort since 2020 and has made steady progress, though the Kremlin is still several key milestones short of full economic dominance over Belarus. The Kremlin has made relatively little progress on political integration, although the progress it has made endangers Belarus’s sovereignty, and has likely temporarily deprioritized this line of effort to reinforcing successes in military and economic integration.

Military Integration Achievements

Russia has achieved far more military integration successes with Belarus to date than with any other post-Soviet state. Military integration is also the Kremlin’s most successful integration line of effort in Belarus and is the one in which the Kremlin is closest to achieving its maximalist objectives. The Kremlin’s military integration effort has secured partial Russian administrative and operational control over Belarusian forces, deepened Russian and Belarusian forces’ interoperability, and expanded Russian basing access in Belarus.

Russian Wartime Operational Control over the Belarusian Military

The Kremlin has very likely achieved its objective of securing the ability to assume operational control over Belarusian forces during a declared war and will almost certainly use the Belarusian military in any future large-scale conflict with NATO. Moscow is extremely unlikely to tolerate the limits Lukashenko has imposed on support for the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in any major NATO war scenario. The newly reformed Russian MMD (building on the ties established by the previous WMD) has likely successfully created Belarusian dependency on the Russian military to coordinate effective command and control involving multiple Belarusian brigades or combined operations at scale. The Belarusian military's dissolution of its unified ground command in 2011 effectively subordinated Belarus' ground forces to the WMD, and these ground command ties likely directly transferred to the present MMD.¹⁴³ Belarus has extremely limited experience in conducting large-scale operations or organizing exercises above the brigade level since 2011.¹⁴⁴ Belarus' main source of knowledge and experience for higher operational activity involving multiple brigades is from Russia-organized exercises, such as the recurring (prior to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine) Zapad, Union Shield, and Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises.¹⁴⁵ Belarus has not undertaken any effort to reconstitute its strategic command and control capabilities and has likely acquiesced to Russian control above the brigade level in any future declared war. The implications of the gap between the powers Moscow has likely secured in the case of a war with NATO and those it has apparently not secured in the undeclared and ostensibly more limited invasion of Ukraine are discussed later in this report.

The Russian military has increasingly prioritized subordinating Belarusian forces to a Russian command during large-scale combat operations in joint exercises since 2015. During joint Union Shield 2015 exercises then-Western Military District Commander Anatoly Sidorov noted that one of Union Shield's central features was the subordination of a Belarusian command to Russian forces.¹⁴⁶ A Russian colonel gave commands to Belarusian generals during the Zapad-2017 exercises, and Zapad-2021 also involved the

RGV commanding subordinate Belarusian troops in a simulated meeting engagement with NATO forces.¹⁴⁷ The Russian military almost certainly has the capability of directly integrating the Belarusian ground forces into Russian command structures in the event of a declared large-scale war with NATO via the RGV mechanism.

The Russian General Staff has effectively established control over Belarus' airspace and air defense assets within an integrated air defense system. Russia and Belarus created in 2009 the legal and statutory basis for a regional air defense system, which became operational in 2016.¹⁴⁸ This air defense system operates under Belarusian control during peacetime. The founding 2009 agreement that created the system effectively subordinates Belarus' Air and Air Defense command to the former Russian Western Joint Strategic Command during wartime, however. The agreement stipulates that during a period of military threat (an officially declared period of heightened tension and partial mobilization below the level of full-scale war—a legal condition that currently exists in Russia), Russian and Belarusian air defense forces and systems should be subordinated to a joint command.¹⁴⁹ During wartime, Belarus' Air and Air Defense commander is placed on the same level as the commander of Russia's 6th Air and Air Defense Army (the former WMD's principal frontal aviation formation), indicating a chain of command under which a Russian commander—likely the Western Joint Strategic Command commander—would ultimately exercise operational control over Belarus' Air and Air Defense Forces.¹⁵⁰

The re-establishment of the Leningrad Military District (LMD) in February 2024 has complicated this previously developed command relationship. The 6th Air and Air Defense Army is headquartered in St. Petersburg and is subordinate to the LMD (and in wartime to the Leningrad Joint Strategic Command), not the MMD. It is unclear how the Russian military has decided to deconflict command and control for the RGV and the joint Russian-Belarusian air defense system since the principal Russian air defense army in the joint Russian-Belarusian air defense system is likely subordinated to the LMD, and the RGV headquarters is likely subordinated to the MMD.

It remains unclear which Russian formation or headquarters will be responsible for reconciling this apparent split. The Russian military reportedly intends to create a new air defense army and subordinate it to either the LMD or the MMD.¹⁵¹ The Russian military may, therefore, transfer the 6th Air and Air Defense Army to the MMD and stand up this new air and air defense army in the LMD to cover Finland and the northern Baltics, and the existing 45th Air and Air Defense Army (formerly of the now-disbanded Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command) may undergo some reorganization to support the formation of a new air and air defense army of the LMD. The Russian military could create a new air and air defense army of the MMD and have it replace the command and control connections with the 6th Air and Air Defense Army for the joint air defense system, though this scenario seems less likely. Alternatively, the Russian command may intend to give the RGV commander or Moscow Joint Strategic Commander operational control over elements of the 6th Air and Air Defense Army during operations that use joint Russian-Belarusian air defense system or the RGV. Russia will very likely increase its military presence in Belarus in any event even though the post-WMD command seams remain in flux. The Russian MoD is not likely prioritizing working out all the implications of the LMD-MMD seam while engaged in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Kremlin is using the RGV to improve Belarusian forces' interoperability with all elements of the Russian military, not only forces in western Russia bordering NATO and Ukraine. Moscow most frequently deployed elements previously under the former Western Military District to operate with Belarusian forces under the RGV, such as elements of the Russian Baltic Sea Fleet in Kaliningrad, the 1st Guards Tank Army, the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army, and the 6th Air Forces and Air Defense Forces Army.¹⁵² These formations—and the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV)—likely had the best established interoperability with Belarusian forces, although it is not clear what the devastating losses those formations have suffered in Ukraine have done to that interoperability. The RGV is nevertheless intended to be a flexible headquarters that can accept Russian forces from any military district. Elements

of the Russian Eastern Military District (EMD), likely including elements of the 35th Combined Arms Army and 36th Combined Arms Army, were subordinated to the RGV in “Union Resolve 2022” exercises in Belarus in February 2022 immediately before invading Ukraine.¹⁵³ Russian Airborne Forces—which are not subordinate to any Russian military district—have also been subordinated to the RGV in joint exercises with Belarusian forces, including elements of the 106th Guards Airborne Division and the 76th Guards Air Assault Division.¹⁵⁴

Russian Airborne Forces lead Russian-Belarusian tactical unit integration and had established close special training relationships with Belarus' two Airborne Forces brigades before the invasion of Ukraine. Russia has rotated elements of almost all of its VDV divisions through Belarus, except the 104th VDV Division, which was newly reformed in 2023 to fight in Ukraine, and the Krasnodar-based 7th VDV Division.¹⁵⁵ (Belarusian airborne forces deployed to exercises in Krasnodar with elements of the 7th VDV Division in June 2021, however).¹⁵⁶ The Belarusian 38th Air Assault Brigade most often exercises with elements of the Russian 76th Air Assault Division but also exercises with elements of the 106th Airborne Division and the 31st Air Assault Brigade.¹⁵⁷ The Belarusian 103rd Guards Air Assault Brigade mainly partners with the Russian 7th Air Assault Division, but also exercises with elements of the Russian 98th Airborne Division as part of the CSTO Collective Operational Reaction Forces.¹⁵⁸ Paratroopers of Russia's 234th Guards Airborne Assault Regiment (76th Guards Air Assault Division) formed the first observed combined Russian-Belarusian airborne battalion with unknown Belarusian Airborne elements (likely of Belarus' 38th Air Assault Brigade) in September 2020.¹⁵⁹ The extremely high losses all these Russian units and formations have taken in Ukraine have, again, likely severely eroded the effects of much of this joint training beyond the working-out on paper of the principles and procedures of such interoperability. The combat development of Russian units and formations, while Belarusian units have not been fighting, has likely created a significant gap in experience, making combined operations difficult until joint exercises are extensively renewed.

Russia's Growing Peacetime Administrative Control over the Belarusian Military

Russia has established sufficient administrative influence over the Belarusian Ministry of Defense to effectively procure ammunition and vehicles to support Russia's invasion of Ukraine since 2022. Belarus provided Russia tanks, unspecified spare parts, and over 10,000 tons of ammunition throughout 2022 and 2023.¹⁶⁰ Belarusian officials acknowledged that Belarusian military equipment transfers to Russia intensified in 2023, and the *Wall Street Journal* reported that in 2023 Russia purchased back at least six Mi-26 heavy transport helicopters that it previously had given Belarus.¹⁶¹ Ukrainian media reported that Belarus transferred at least 100 tanks to Russia between April 2022 and April 2023, but these deliveries remain unconfirmed.¹⁶² Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported in October 2022 that a train with 492 tons of ammunition from the Belarusian 43rd Missile and Ammunition Storage Arsenal in Gomel arrived at the Kirovskaya Railway Station in Russian-occupied Crimea.¹⁶³ Independent Belarusian monitoring group The Hajun Project reported that Belarus had transferred over 200 pieces of equipment, including T-72A tanks, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, and Ural vehicles, to Russia as of October 2022.¹⁶⁴ Belarusian railway workers reported that the Russian military transferred over 130,000 tons of ammunition from Belarusian military warehouses to staging areas in Crimea and near eastern Ukraine between January 2022 and January 2023.¹⁶⁵ It remains unclear whether Russia has sufficient influence over Belarus' military that it can effectively commandeer and consume Belarusian vehicles and ammunition that should in principle be reserved for Belarus' own national defense needs, or if Russia has otherwise compensated Belarus for these stocks.

The Kremlin began using Belarusian training capacity to augment Russia's own force generation capabilities

in 2022 but heavily reduced this line of effort by late 2023, though Russia likely can leverage Belarusian capacity in the future. Training capacity (including qualified trainers; training equipment; and space at purpose-built training grounds) is a strategic Russian resource and a key factor limiting the Russian military's effort to replace its military losses from combat in Ukraine and generate a new forces through 2026.¹⁶⁶ The Russian military regularly deployed Russian soldiers to Belarus to undergo training throughout 2022 and early 2023, likely to augment Russia's training capacity.¹⁶⁷ Russia deployed thousands of newly mobilized and largely untrained Russian troops to Belarus in October and November 2022 following Russia's mobilization of 300,000 reservists in September 2022.¹⁶⁸ Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate reported in September 2022 that Belarusian officials prepared to accommodate up to 20,000 Russian mobilized personnel in Belarus.¹⁶⁹ Numerous Belarusian sources reported a large influx of Russian trainees appearing in Belarus around November 2022.¹⁷⁰ Satellite imagery collected in November 2022 detected an increase of Russian equipment, particularly main battle tanks, at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, (Belarus' principal combined arms training ground) including at least one brigade's worth of equipment observed at the training ground on November 20, 2022.¹⁷¹ Mobile device GPS location signal data analyzed by commercial data provider Anomaly Six observed an increase in mobile device activity at the Belarusian Obuz Lesnovsky Training Ground, Lepel Training Ground, and Repischcha Training Ground between August 2022 and December 2022.^{VIII} (See appendix for more information.) The Ukrainian General Staff reported in November 2022 that it assessed that Russian forces would redeploy unspecified units from Belarus to Ukraine after the units "acquire combat capabilities," indicating that Russian personnel were in Belarus to undergo training.¹⁷²

VIII Anomaly Six collects mobile device data from cell phones, tablets, and other smart mobile devices whose users opted in to share GPS and mobile ad identification (MAID) data with commercial data vendors. Several of the mobile devices observed at Belarusian training grounds in late 2022 were previously observed in Russia and were later tracked to have moved towards Russian border crossings and military staging areas around Ukraine in April 2023. The observation of an increase in mobile device activity at training grounds where Russian trainees were reportedly training, and during the time frame in which Russian trainees were reportedly training, prior to deployment to border crossings with Ukraine is significant. The observed signals data is a supporting indicator that increases the confidence of ISW's assessment that Belarusian forces assisted Russia's major training surge in late 2022 following Russia's September 2022 partial mobilization. Readers should note that since 2022 Russian authorities have become more aware of the risks that the use of insecure mobilize devices pose, so the absence of such devices in the future should not be taken as a perfect indicator that Russian forces have stopped using Belarusian training grounds. See appendix for more information.

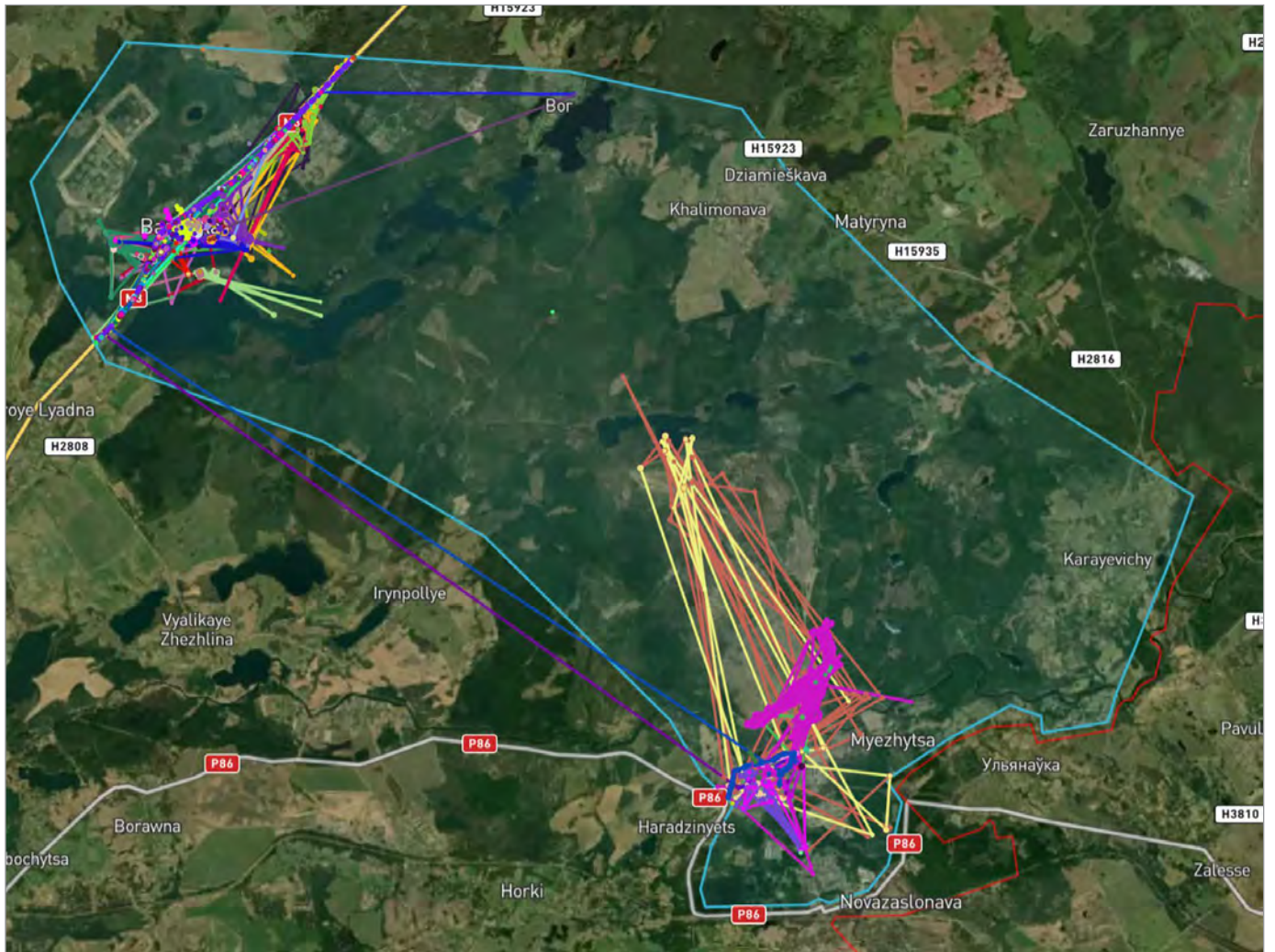
Maps of Mobile Devices at Belarusian Training Grounds Around Late 2022



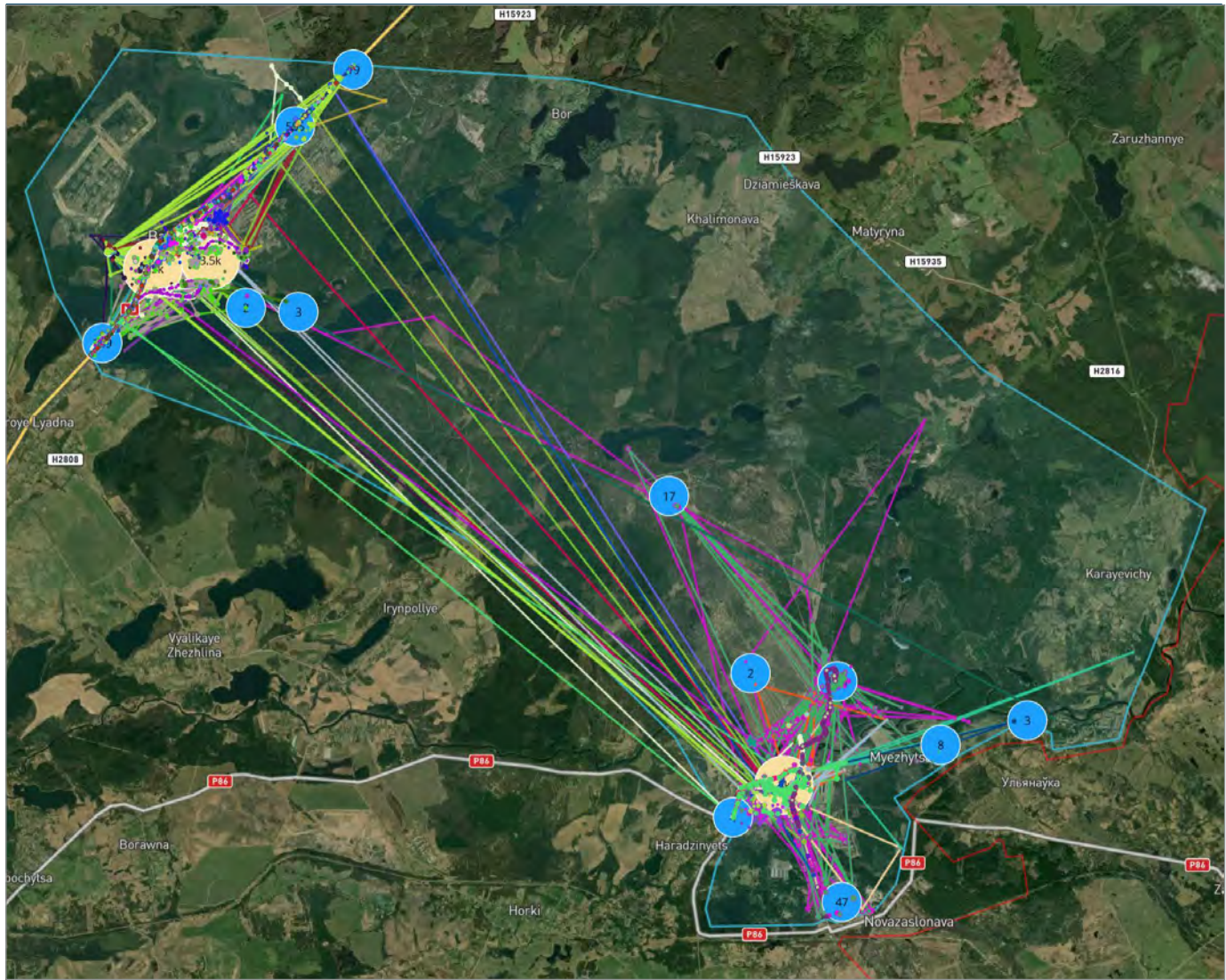
Repischcha Training Ground in October 2022



Obuz Lesnovsky Training Ground in November 2022



Lepel Training Ground in November 2022



Lepel Training Ground in December 2022

The Russian military sent mobilized personnel to train in Belarus in Fall 2022 likely because it lacked the organic training capacity necessary to train them all in Russia. Russia’s large training deployments to Belarus in late 2022 and early 2023 coincided with regular large-scale Russian conscription call-ups that likely consumed much of Russia’s organic training capacity. Putin ended his Fall 2022 mobilization campaign at the same time the postponed Fall 2022 Russian conscription cycle was set to begin, indicating that Putin likely needed to pause or end his partial mobilization to free up training capacity for the fall conscription cycle.¹⁷³ This bottleneck likely reoccurred around Russia’s April 2023 conscript call-up. Satellite imagery collected in March 2023 indicates that Russian trainees at

the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Belarus returned to Russia in March 2023 ahead of Russia’s spring conscription call-up on April 1, 2023—likely to free up capacity at the Belarusian training ground for new trainees ahead of the April 2023 conscription call-up.¹⁷⁴ Anomaly Six observed a steady increase in mobile device GPS signal data at the aforementioned three Belarusian training grounds between January 2023 and May 2023.¹⁷⁵

Russia’s use of Belarusian training capacity in 2022 indicates that the Russian military was able to use Belarus’ training capacity largely at will. Russia’s temporary use of Belarusian training capacity, however, does not dispositively mean Russia has established full administrative control over Belarusian training grounds and resources, and Lukashenko may

have allowed Russian forces to use Belarusian training capacity as a bargaining chip to avoid or delay making other concessions.

The Kremlin has long held administrative control over significant parts of Belarusian higher military education. Belarus has a domestic training pipeline up to a faculty intended to train officers to perform General Staff functions, but the Belarusian military education system is closely integrated with and dependent upon Russian military institutions of higher learning.¹⁷⁶ This integration and dependency grants the Kremlin tremendous opportunities to influence all levels of Belarus' military establishment, especially Belarusian military leadership. Most Belarusian officers undergo partial training at Russian military institutions, providing the Russian Ministry of Defense control over Belarusian students' military curricula, and operational concepts.¹⁷⁷ Nearly 90 percent of Belarus' senior command staff have studied or increased their qualifications at Russian educational institutions.¹⁷⁸ This level of influence is the result of decades of persistent Russian efforts. Russia established a program in 1998 to train Belarusian personnel in Russian military education institutions under unified curricula and syllabi to enhance the effectiveness of combined forces within the RGV.¹⁷⁹ Beyond strict military training, the Kremlin likely seeks to use this accumulated influence to co-opt Belarusian military personnel and leadership through close ties with their Russian counterparts, ideological education, and corruption, as it managed to coopt elements of Ukraine's military and security services prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014.¹⁸⁰ The Russians surely also keep track of the reliability—from their perspective—of Belarusian officers who train in Russia and will very likely use that information to gain more influence and control over the Belarusian military in the future.

...Nuclear weapons deployment does not significantly change the Russian threat to NATO's security.

Russian Nuclear Weapons in Belarus

Moscow deployed Russian-controlled tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus in 2023 after coercing Belarus to pass constitutional amendments renouncing Belarus' official status as a non-nuclear

state.¹⁸¹ Lukashenko passed constitutional amendments eliminating Belarus' constitutional status as a non-nuclear state in a controlled referendum in February 2022, legally allowing Russia to deploy nuclear weapons within Belarus.¹⁸² Russian nuclear weapons likely arrived in Belarus (possibly near Asipovichy or Lida) in mid-2023.¹⁸³ Putin and Lukashenko announced that Russia began transferring tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus in June 2023.¹⁸⁴ An unnamed senior US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) official told *CNN* that the DIA has “no reason to doubt” that Russia has deployed tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus as of July 2023.¹⁸⁵ Lukashenko announced in December 2023 that Belarus had received and stored all Russian tactical nuclear weapons destined for deployment in Belarus following further Russian deliveries to Belarus in September and October 2023.¹⁸⁶ Belarus' Ministry of Defense announced plans in January 2024 to formalize an updated Belarusian military

doctrine that would address Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus.¹⁸⁷

The Kremlin's coerced reshaping of Belarus' constitution is a noteworthy achievement of

Moscow's effort to undermine Belarus' sovereignty. Lukashenko firmly and vocally opposed expanding Russia's military footprint in Belarus before the 2020 protests forced him to give in to Russian integration demands under duress.¹⁸⁸ Putin began pressuring Lukashenko to adopt constitutional amendments no later than October 2020 and intensified this pressure in late 2021.¹⁸⁹ Lukashenko first implied that Belarus was ready to resume hosting Russian nuclear infrastructure in November 2021 as tens of thousands of Russian soldiers deployed to staging areas across Belarus.¹⁹⁰ Belarus' constitutional amendment regarding nuclear weapons, therefore, was very likely not Minsk's own decision but rather the culmination of at least three years' worth of Kremlin pressure on Lukashenko.

Russia's tactical nuclear weapons deployments in Belarus does not significantly change the Russian threat to NATO security. The Russian military has long fielded nuclear weapons in mainland Russia

Confirmed Russian Force Deployments to Belarus as of January 25, 2022



Map by George Barros with Thomas Bergeron
 Institute for the Study of War © 2022

Spatial Reference: WGS 1984 Web Mercator (auxiliary sphere)

and the exclave of Kaliningrad capable of striking anything that tactical weapons now deployed in Belarus can strike. Russian forces would likely have a large presence in Belarus and have the capability to deploy additional tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus in any major period of escalation that would prelude their possible combat use. The practical benefit to Russia of these deployments is therefore minor, and they largely support Kremlin information operations that leverage longstanding nuclear saber rattling. However, Lukashenko may attempt to exploit these deployments to rhetorically argue that additional Russian basing access in Belarus is now unnecessary since the Russian nuclear umbrella now covers Belarus and deters any threats to Belarus.¹⁹¹ Belarusian officials are already framing Russia's tactical nuclear weapons deployments to Belarus as a key element of Belarusian strategic deterrence.¹⁹² Lukashenko began soft-launching elements of an information operation that could support such an argument in Summer 2023.¹⁹³ Lukashenko's effort to stave off additional Russian basing in Belarus is unlikely to succeed given the Kremlin's accelerated progress securing permanent basing access in Belarus, however.

Russia Leverages Belarus as a de facto Cobelligerent in Russia's War Against Ukraine and Has Permanently Expanded Russian Military Basing in Belarus

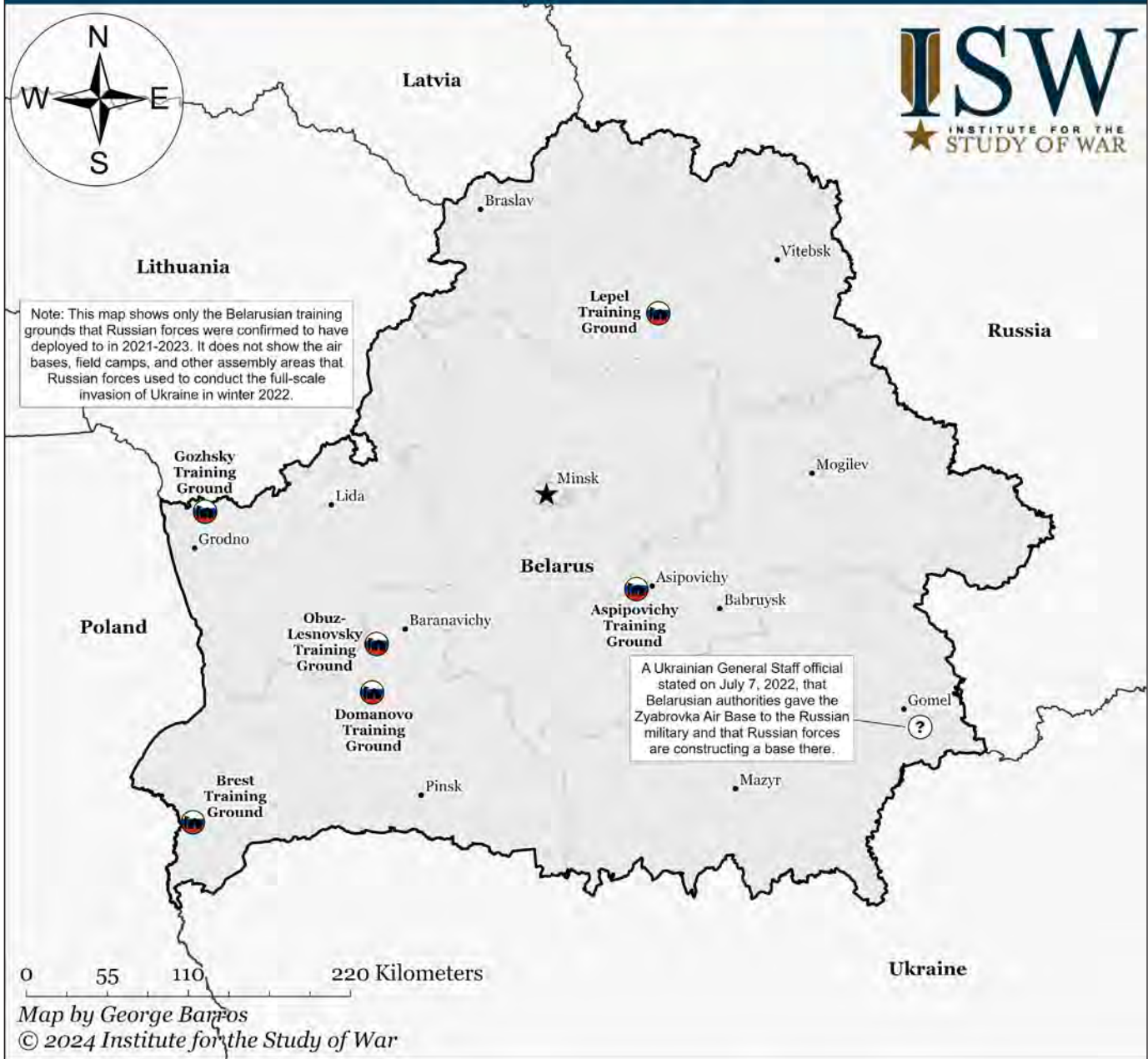
The Russian military invaded Ukraine from Belarus in February 2022 and has leveraged Belarus as a rear staging area for Russian combat operations, a training ground for Russian soldiers, and an air base for the Russian Air Force since. Belarus is de facto co-belligerent in Russia's war against Ukraine, even though Belarusian forces have not been committed to combat operations in Ukraine and Lukashenko falsely feigns neutrality. Russian forces have also leveraged Belarusian territory as a sanctuary from which to strike Ukraine without fear of major reprisal. US and Ukrainian officials confirmed that Russian forces fired missiles at Ukraine from Belarus from at least February 2022 to July 2022.¹⁹⁴ The Hajun Project assessed that Russian forces fired no fewer than 633 rockets at Ukraine between February 24, 2022, and May 8, 2022,

from Belarusian territory.¹⁹⁵ The Ukrainian military has not engaged in major retaliatory strikes against Russian forces deployed in Belarusian territory.

Russia likely would not have been able to leverage Belarus as a staging area for its invasion of Ukraine if it was not for all the prerequisite logistical work that the Kremlin undertook since 2020 to expand Russian forces' military basing and freedom of movement in Belarus. Russia did not maintain any permanent or near-permanent combat units in Belarus prior to August 2020. Russia began conducting near-monthly exercises in and near Belarus in August 2020, including deployments to Belarus.¹⁹⁶ Russian and Belarusian forces conducted abnormally intense logistics exercises in late 2020 and 2021 that set conditions for Russia's large scale military buildup in Belarus in preparation for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, further advancing the Kremlin's longtime parallel objective to establish a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus.¹⁹⁷

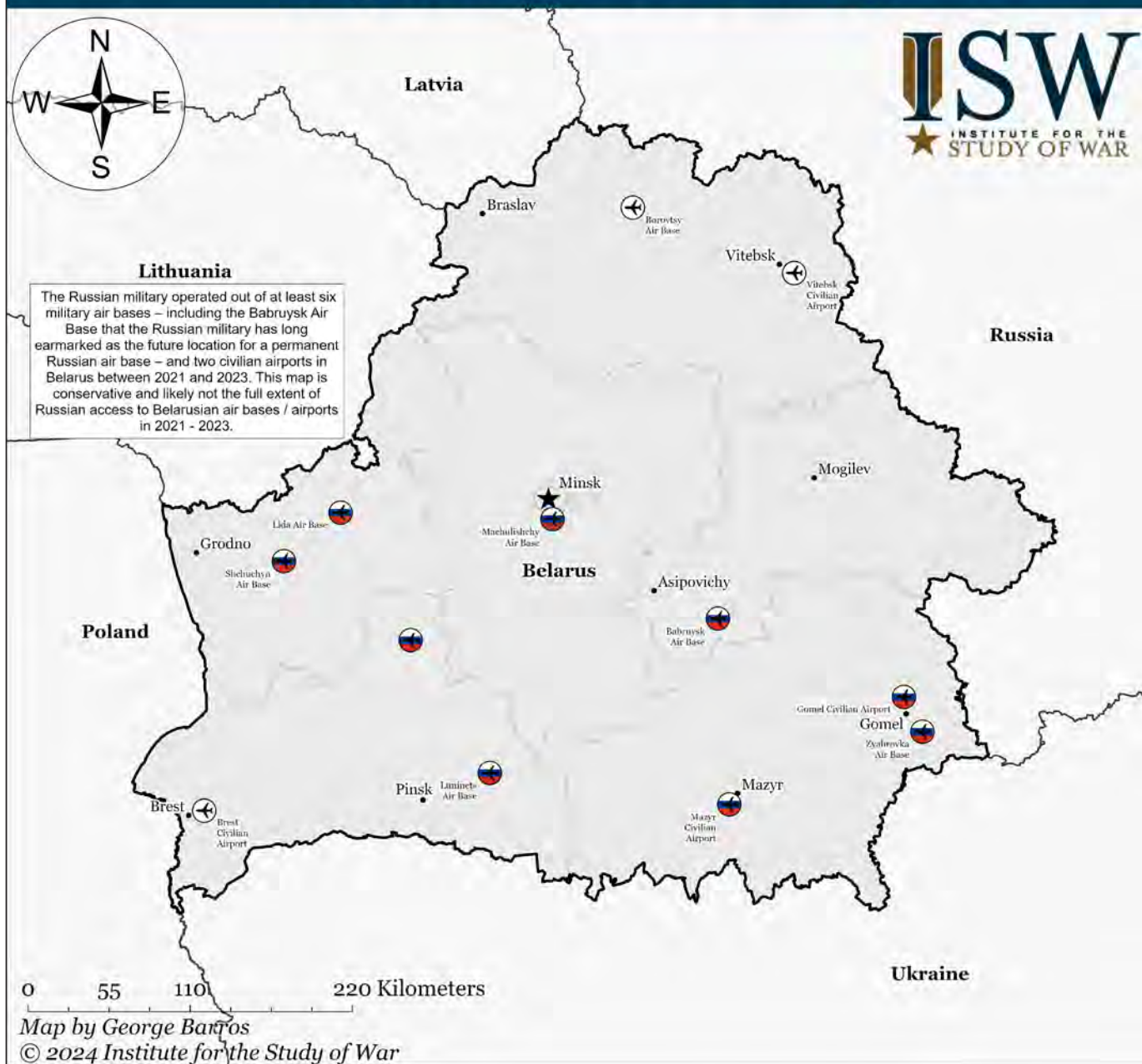
Russia's military deployments to Belarus between late 2021 and 2023—the period when Russia began arraying forces in Belarus to invade Ukraine to when the Russian military largely withdrew from Belarus, respectively—were unprecedented in scope and scale. Russia deployed substantial elements from the Eastern Military District—approximately 30,000 troops—to Belarus in the weeks immediately ahead of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹⁹⁸ This deployment dwarfed the size of previous major Russian deployments to Belarus since the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia's previous largest military deployments to Belarus, for the major exercises Zapad 2017 and Zapad 2021, reportedly sent approximately 3,000–3,500 Russian troops to Belarus, for example.¹⁹⁹ The Russian military operated out of at least six military air bases—including the Babruysk Air Base that the Russian military has long earmarked as the future location for a permanent Russian air base—and two civilian airports in Belarus between 2021 and 2023.²⁰⁰ Russia demonstrated regular use of Belarusian training grounds between late 2021 and mid-2023, including the Brest, Obuz-Lesnovsky, Asipovichy, Gozhsky, Domanovo, and Lepel training grounds as noted above.²⁰¹



The Russian Military's Unprecedented Access to Belarusian Training Grounds in 2021 - 2023



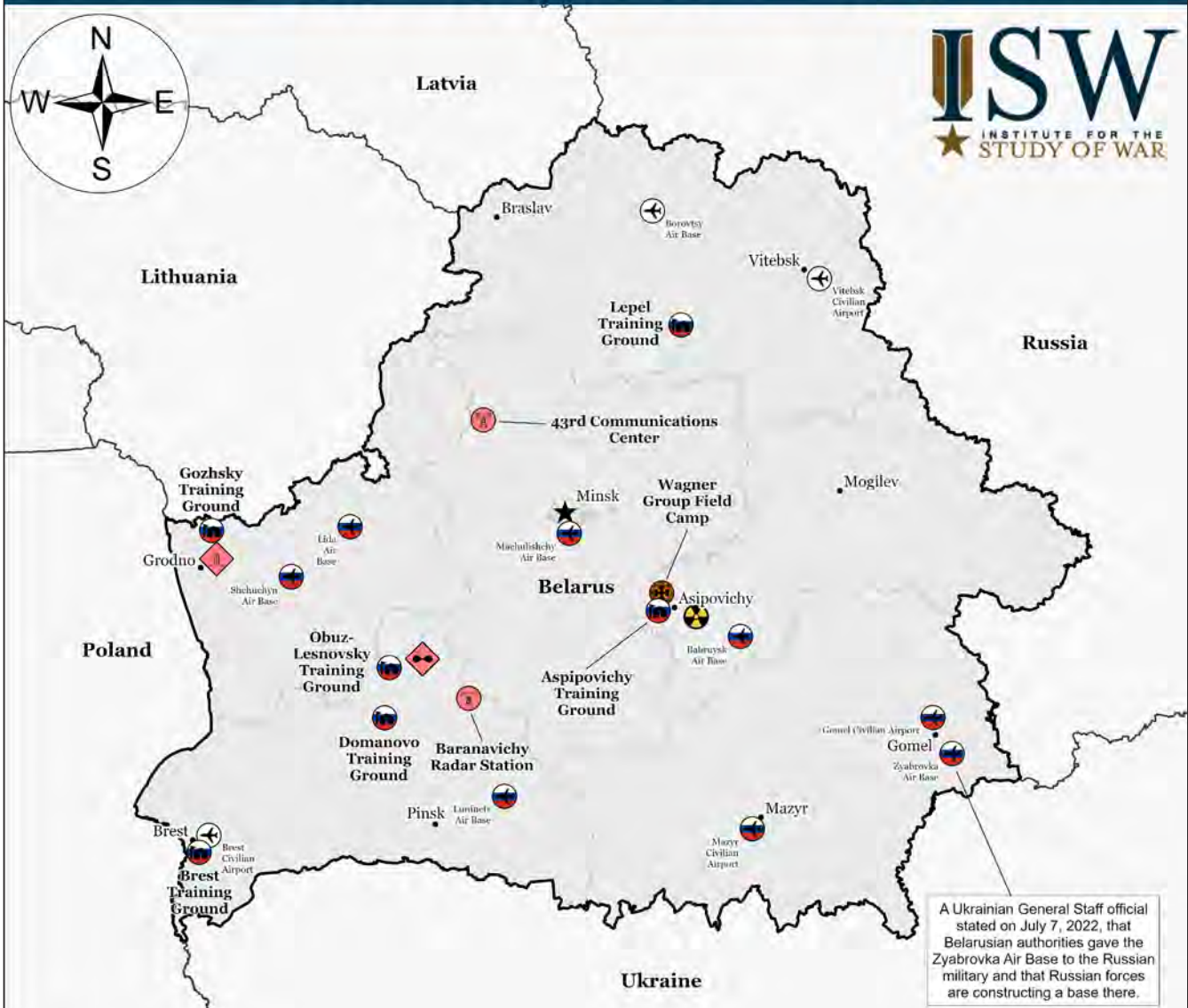
- 🇷🇺 Confirmed Russian Deployment to Belarusian Training Ground
- ❓ Unconfirmed Permanent Russian Base at Zyabrovka Air Base

Russian Forces' Unprecedented Access to Belarusian Air Bases and Airports in 2021 - 2023



-  Confirmed Russian Deployments to Belarusian Air Bases
-  Reported Russian Deployments to Belarusian Air Bases

The Russian Military's Unprecedented Basing Access and Freedom of Movement in Belarus in 2021 - 2023



A Ukrainian General Staff official stated on July 7, 2022, that Belarusian authorities gave the Zyabrovka Air Base to the Russian military and that Russian forces are constructing a base there.

Map by George Barrios
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- Soviet-Era Radar and Communication Stations
- Permanent Russian Su-30 Deployment at Baranavichy Air Base
- S-300 Elements of the Russian 210th Air Defense Regiment
- Wagner Group Field Camp in Tsel
- Confirmed Russian Deployment to Belarusian Training Ground
- Confirmed Russian Deployments to Belarusian Air Bases
- Possible Russian Tactical Nuclear Weapons Storage at Asipovichy
- Reported Russian Deployments to Belarusian Air Bases

The Russian military additionally regularly operated beyond Belarusian military infrastructure during this period. The Russian military established informal field camps throughout Belarus and temporarily kept Russian helicopters on civilian roads immediately prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.²⁰² Russian forces are confirmed to have used civilian airports in Gomel and Mozyr to support combat operations in Ukraine in February and March 2023.²⁰³ Russian forces additionally allegedly used civilian airports in Brest Oblast in March 2022 and possibly in Vitebsk Oblast in March 2023 to support combat operations in Ukraine.²⁰⁴

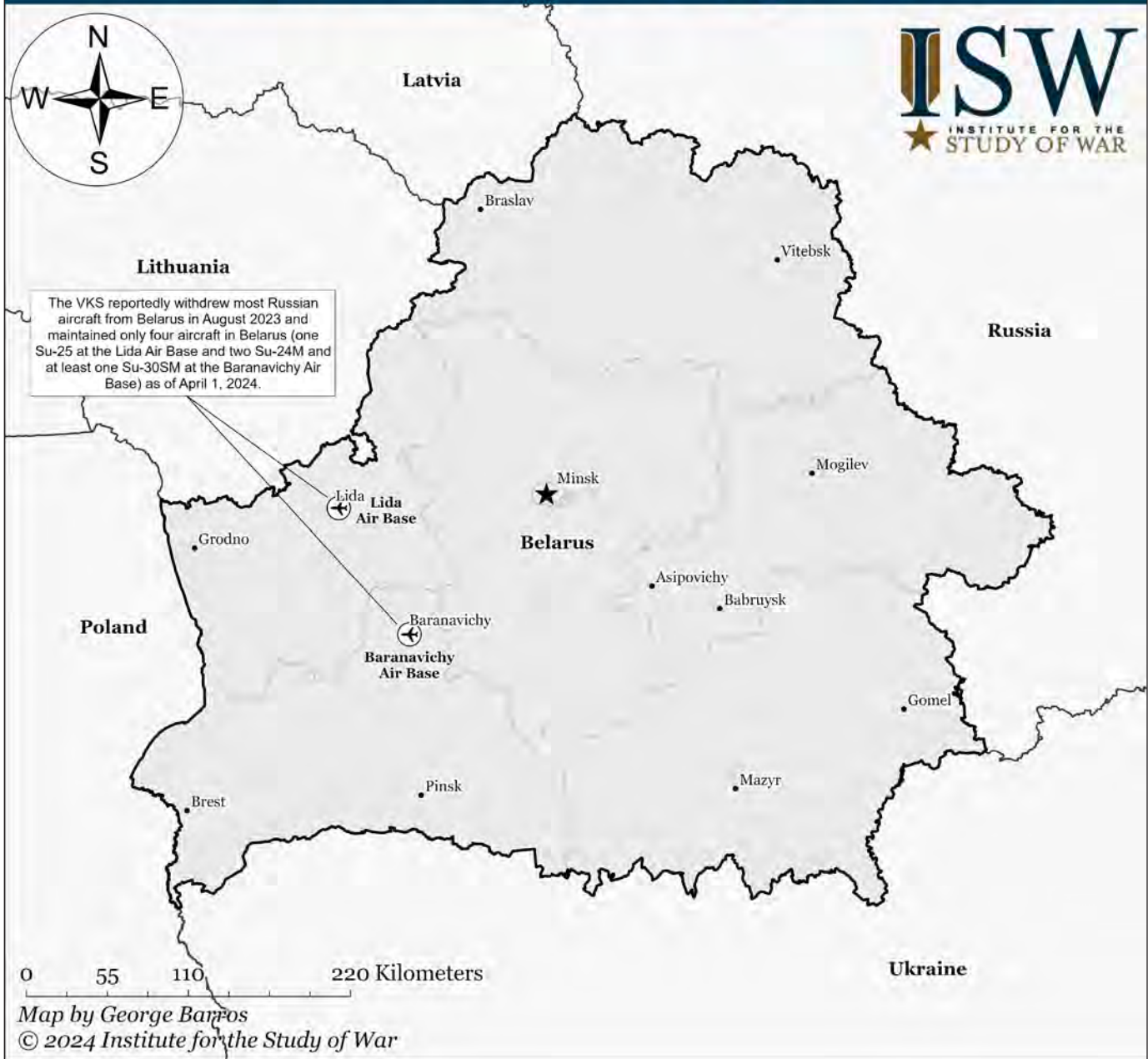
Russia greatly expanded its permanent air force and air defense footprint in Belarus in the period 2021-2023. Russia permanently deployed S-300 air defense elements of the Russian 210th Air Defense Regiment (4th Air Defense Division, 1st Air Defense Army) to Grodno, Belarus, in August 2021 as part of the formation of the permanent joint “training center” in Grodno that Moscow and Minsk had agreed to create in March 2021.²⁰⁵ This “joint training center,” while not officially framed as an official military base, in practice serves as a small Russian military base that creates a legal basis for a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus, as well as a practical logistical base to help deploy forces to Belarus in a crisis, similar to the way in which Russia’s military bases in Crimea enabled the Kremlin to rush additional forces to seize Crimea in February 2014.²⁰⁶ Russia permanently deployed an unspecified number of Su-30 fighters to the 61st Fighter Air Base in Baranavichy in September 2021 and has continuously operated aircraft in Belarusian airspace from this base since this date despite not officially having a formalized air base in Belarus.²⁰⁷ Russia and Belarus began their first joint air patrols in Belarusian airspace on January 5, 2022.²⁰⁸ Russia “gave” Belarus at least four batches (likely four batteries) of S-400s to Belarus between December 2022 and November 2023 that the Russian military can likely use if it chooses.²⁰⁹ These Belarusian S-400 systems are integrated into the combined Russian-Belarusian air defense system.²¹⁰ Russia maintains two S-400 battalions, as well as several Pantsir-S1 systems, at the Prybytki and Velikii Bokov air bases near Belarus’ southern border with Ukraine.²¹¹

The Russian military may also have unofficially acquired a new air base in Gomel Oblast, Belarus. Ukrainian Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff General Oleksii Hromov stated in July 2022 that Belarusian authorities gave the Zyabrovka Air Base to the Russian military and that Russian forces were constructing a base there.²¹² Commercially available satellite imagery collected throughout 2023 detected persistent construction work at the Zyabrovka Air Base. The Russian military has maintained an S-400 battalion and likely Pantsir air defense systems and Iskander ballistic missiles at the Zyabrovka Air Base since April 2022.²¹³ Recently collected satellite imagery confirms that Russian air defense systems remain at the base as of May 1, 2024.²¹⁴ It remains unclear whether the Russian military has officially or unofficially assumed full operational control over the Zyabrovka Air Base as Hromov stated, but there is no reason to question his report.

Current Russian Military Presence in Belarus and Future Prospects

Few regular Russian forces remain in Belarus as of May 2024. Almost all Russian forces withdrew from Belarus by August 2023, the Wagner Group contingent that deployed to Belarus in late summer 2023 notwithstanding.²¹⁵ Satellite imagery collected in June and July 2023 indicates that Belarusian authorities dismantled tent camps used to accommodate Russian servicemen at the Obuz-Lesnovsky, Lepel, and Rechitsa training grounds in Belarus.²¹⁶ The VKS reportedly withdrew most of its aircraft from Belarus in August 2023 and maintained only four aircraft in Belarus (one Su-25 at the Lida Air Base and two Su-24M and at least one Su-30SM at the Baranavichy Air Base) as of April 1, 2024.²¹⁷ The Hajun Project has reported that roughly 2,000 Russian troops have remained in Belarus between December 2023 and April 2024: about 1,450 personnel at Russia’s two longstanding radar stations in Belarus and approximately 500-600 personnel at the Baranavichy, Mazyr, and Zyabrovka air bases.²¹⁸ A Ukrainian military spokesman reported that only a “small contingent” of Russian soldiers numbering in the hundreds remained in Belarus as of November 23, 2023—likely referring to the contingent of

Belarusian Air Bases where Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) Reportedly Still Maintain Aircraft as of April 1, 2024



⊕ Belarusian Air Bases where VKS Reportedly Still Maintain Aircraft as of April 1, 2024

personnel at the Baranavichy, Mazyr, and Zhabrovka air bases, which has remained unchanged through May 2024.²¹⁹ Reportedly fewer than 1,000 Wagner Group personnel remained in Belarus as of January 2024.²²⁰ Anomaly Six's collection and analysis of mobile device location data also are consistent with open-source reporting that the Russian military presence in Belarus dropped off sharply by November 2023, although the Russians have also become steadily more alert to the risks of allowing their personnel to use mobile phones, which may also contribute to decreased observations.

Russia demonstrated the capability to surge forces to Belarus and sustain them in Belarus for a protracted period and the Kremlin likely could do so again if it desired, and separately is building towards true permanent basing. It remains unclear, however, if Russia has secured the ability to freely deploy Russian forces to Belarus on the scale it did in 2021-2023 at any desired point in the future, or whether the mounting costs from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a possible growing dependence on Belarusian import substitution and training capacity has enabled Lukashenko to reduce or slow down wide-scale Russian basing access in Belarus.

Russia has likely decided not to deploy Russian forces to Belarus at scale at this time because it has no active front in northwestern Ukraine, so deploying ground forces to Belarus would detract from Russia's ongoing offensive operations to complete the seizure of eastern and southern Ukraine. Russia likely does not have sufficient reserves to deploy a significant force group in Belarus without substantially changing its current campaign design, since Russia has opted to sustain an intense tempo of operations since 2022 that has stressed the Russian military's ability to replace combat losses to retain the initiative. Moreover, the Kremlin likely understands that NATO would rightly interpret any repeated large Russian force deployment to Belarus as a threat to NATO as well as to Ukraine. Russia is waging a major supporting information effort to convince the West to abandon Ukraine.²²¹ New large-scale Russian deployments to Belarus deployment would thus undermine Russian information operations that seek to degrade Western support for Ukraine by misleading the West into thinking that

Russia does not pose a threat to NATO, that Russia does not want to conquer all of Ukraine, or that Russia is open to negotiating a settlement to the war with the West.²²² NATO states, especially NATO's Eastern European members, would likely perceive a renewed large-scale Russian deployment to Belarus differently than NATO did in early 2022, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Russian saber-rattling have increased tensions with NATO states bordering Russia and Ukraine.

Russia does not necessarily have to officially formalize an official new base or a special military presence in Belarus to maintain the de facto basing access and freedom of movement that Russian forces demonstrated in 2021-2023. The Kremlin may, after major military operations in Ukraine are over, permanently deploy one or more of the planned new divisions that Russia is forming to Belarus once the division(s) finish forming, or permanently redeploy existing Russian units to Belarus.²²³

The alarming suite of Russian military gains in Belarus is the culmination of years of painstaking Russian planning. These efforts long predated active Russian preparations to launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. These gains are another example of Putin's ability to conceive and pursue coherent strategies over a long period of time and pursue them using flexible means, not just to seize opportunities. Russia notably advanced much concrete military integration before invading Ukraine in 2022 and without fully establishing all the Union State military structures it previously defined as necessary in official Union State documents. Russia and Belarus never formed the Supreme Military Council—a body stipulated in the 2001 Union State military doctrine that was supposed to be responsible for coordinating joint plans for the development and use of Russia and Belarus' armed forces and military infrastructure—and Russia has been able to advance integration and secure basing access without it.²²⁴ The updated 2021 Union State doctrine dropped mention of the Supreme Military Council, and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that there are currently no discussions to create the Supreme Military Council of the Union State as of June 2023.²²⁵ The Union State's Supreme State Council—an existing Union



State institution—has instead fulfilled the functions initially envisioned for the Supreme Military Council.²²⁶ These innovations over time, including Russia’s unprecedented basing access and freedom of movement in Belarus without opening official bases in Belarus, suggest that the Kremlin’s military integration approach is flexible. The Kremlin likely will leverage a myriad of approaches and structures so long as they advance Moscow’s ultimate goal of securing control over Belarus.

Political Integration Achievements

Russia’s political integration effort in Belarus has been the least successful of the three integration efforts examined in this report, in large part because the Kremlin’s desired political union will require formal institutions that will take longer to develop than the mechanisms the Kremlin has used for military and economic integration. The Kremlin has nonetheless expanded its influence in Belarus and can functionally influence some aspects of Belarusian foreign policy and domestic governance.

The Kremlin is actively aligning Belarusian policies and regulations with its own to lay the unified foundation necessary to impose Russian-controlled Union State governing bodies on Belarus—the same approach that Moscow used in the Luhansk People’s Republic and Donetsk People’s Republic before officially annexing them in September 2022. These aspirational Union State governing bodies are still critical for the Kremlin despite Russia’s significant political integration progress to date, and the Kremlin will not be able to achieve its full suite of desired integration objectives without them. The Kremlin is thus accelerating efforts to formalize previously toothless Union State bodies, and these bodies will not remain impotent if Russia maintains its current momentum and continues to make integration progress as it has since 2020.

Reshaping Belarusian Foreign Policy

The Kremlin has largely eliminated Minsk’s previous multi-vector foreign policy (a foreign policy that strives for predictable and friendly relations with all countries) and has increasingly aligned Belarus’ foreign policy with Russia’s since late

Reported Number of Russian Troops in Belarus

Date	Reported number of Russian Troops in Belarus (Excluding Wagner Group fighters)	Associated Event
9/17/2021	2,500	Reported Russian presence in Belarus for Zapad 2021 exercises
1/19/2022	15,000	Russian military buildup in Belarus underway
2/3/2022	30,000	Height of Russian pre-invasion buildup
6/25/2022	1,500	Drawdown in June 2022 following Russian retreat from Kyiv and Russian redeployment to eastern Ukraine
8/27/2022	1,000	
9/21/2022	Unknown	Putin declares partial mobilization
10/17/2022	9,000	Mobilized troops surge to Belarus for training
11/25/2022	12,000	Highest number of Russian forces observed in Belarus after the initial Russian invasion of Ukraine
12/28/2022	10,200	
1/16/2023	11,000	
1/25/2023	5,800	
2/6/2023	9,000	
3/4/2023	10,000	
4/5/2023	4,000	Russian spring conscription begins
5/15/2023	2,500	
6/23/2023	1,500	
7/4/2023	Unknown	Satellite imagery shows tents on training grounds being dismantled
7/14/2023	Unknown	Reported Russian military withdrawal from Belarus
9/8/2023	2,100	
10/16/2023	2,000	Russian fall conscription begins
11/23/2023	2,000	
1/1/2024	2,000	
2/1/2024	2,000	
3/1/2024	2,000	
4/1/2024	2,000	

2020.²²⁷ Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova declared in February 2024 that foreign policy coordination between Russia and Belarus reached an unprecedented level in 2023 and will continue to deepen further.²²⁸ Lukashenko officially recognized Crimea as Russian territory in November 2021, something he notably refused to do following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.²²⁹ Lukashenko began parroting Kremlin information operations about a nonexistent Polish-Lithuanian-NATO hybrid war against Belarus and Russia in late 2020 after initially framing his efforts to suppress Belarusian protests as combating generalized international, primarily Russian, interference.²³⁰ Lukashenko's rhetorical change in 2020 was a significant political and informational inflection; Lukashenko had previously used more balanced rhetoric towards NATO, initially implicated Russia in inciting the protests, and rarely adopted Kremlin talking points wholesale.²³¹ Lukashenko stated in 2018, for example, that Ukrainians are not the enemy as Russian state propaganda portrays them.²³²

The Kremlin is reorienting Belarus' foreign policy to have Belarus explicitly define NATO as Belarus' strategic adversary in Belarusian strategic policy concept documents. A senior Belarusian military official stated that Belarus' draft military doctrine^{IX} announced in January 2024 identifies NATO, the United States, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states as "unfriendly countries and unions" for Belarus.²³³ Belarus and Russia adopted a new Union State military doctrine document in 2021 that defined supposed NATO military buildups near the Union State as a factor negatively impacting regional security for the first time.²³⁴

The updated 2021 Union State doctrine document additionally leverages new language heavily influenced by Russian geopolitical and military thinking about how the West supposedly wages hybrid war against Russia and its allies. The new document defines "attempts to change value orientations and models of development, discredit cultures, religions, and civilizations, falsify history, contributing

to the violation of the spiritual and moral ties of kindred peoples" as a factor negatively impacting the Union State's military-political situation.²³⁵ The new document also identifies the use of information operations with the goals of "discrediting participating states, violating their territorial integrity and state sovereignty, and interfering in their internal affairs" as a key threat.²³⁶ Senior Russian officers, including Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov, commonly discussed such threats as part of the changing character of war and threats to Russia particularly before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and it is more likely that this language was inserted into the new Belarusian documents at the Kremlin's instance than that it originated organically in the Belarusian military.²³⁷ The 2021 document also inserts new language about ensuring that Russian and Belarusian forces have high "ideological" readiness to conduct their tasks; the 2001 document only called for ensuring a high level of "moral, psychological and professional training of personnel" and did not explicitly mention "ideological" readiness.²³⁸ Russian military thinkers see ideological conditioning and protecting friendly forces from enemy information operations as an increasingly important aspect of modern war.²³⁹

The updated 2021 Union State document removes the previous document's language expressing support for international law and norms, likely to support the Kremlin's strategic effort to change the current rules-based liberal world order as a subordinate part of the Kremlin's effort to create a multipolar international system.²⁴⁰ The 2021 Union State document removed the previous 2001 document's statement that Russia and Belarus "proceed from the inviolability of the system of generally recognized principles and norms international law, strictly follow the provisions of the [United Nations] Charter, the Helsinki Agreements, the Charter of Paris, the Istanbul Charter for European Security" and other international treaties and agreements.²⁴¹ The removal of this language supports the Russian effort to establish Russia as one of the dominant poles of a multipolar international system that

IX The Russian and Belarusian public "military doctrine" documents discussed here more closely resemble broad strategic foreign policy concepts than US-style joint military doctrine publications.

would not be dominated by the United States.²⁴² Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin stated in March 2023 that the Union State has a “great future in the emerging multipolar international architecture.”²⁴³ The updated 2021 Union State document also removes the previous document’s declaration that Russia and Belarus support the sovereignty of United Nations member states (which Russia has violated in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and increasingly in Belarus itself).

Belarus’ adoption of an explicitly anti-NATO military doctrine document shaped by current trends in Russian geopolitical and strategic thinking demonstrates the extent to which the Kremlin has come to dominate Belarusian foreign policy since 2020. Belarus used to seek common ground with the EU and NATO in select areas. Lukashenko and then-Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei previously stated that Belarus would like to conduct a dialogue with NATO based on the principles of “parity and transparency” in 2019.²⁴⁴ Moreover, the Kremlin did not always originally seek explicitly to reorient Belarus’ foreign policy. Putin stated in June 2000 that Russia and Belarus cooperate on foreign policy but that their Union State cooperation does not stipulate a unified Union State foreign policy since the Union State Treaty defines both Russia and Belarus as sovereign states.²⁴⁵ This situation clearly no longer holds in 2024.

Russia’s Expanding Control over Belarusian Domestic Governance

The Russian-Belarusian border currently resembles an interior border more than an international one. Belarusians and Russians do not need to go through border control, undergo customs inspection, or fill out migration cards when crossing the unmanned Belarusian-Russian border.²⁴⁶ Russian and Belarusian law requires Belarusians and Russians to acquire a resident permit to stay in the other country for over 90 days, however.²⁴⁷ Russia and Belarus have adopted a suite of migration control and visa policies that effectively treat their international border as one internal boundary.²⁴⁸

...resembles an interior border more than an international border.

A senior Belarusian official stated in 2020 that Russia and Belarus are forming a unified database of Russian and Belarusian citizens banned from traveling abroad.²⁴⁹ Russia and Belarus seek to abolish cell phone roaming charges for Russian and Belarusian mobile service operators in either state.²⁵⁰ Russian and Belarusian officials plan to implement a new unspecified Union State program to improve Union State Border security in 2024.²⁵¹

Russian and Belarusian law enforcement have expanded their integration to grant Russian law enforcement some authorities in Belarus. Belarus’s Committee for State Security (KGB) reportedly signed a classified agreement with the Russian Ministry of Security (the predecessor agency of the Russian Federal Security Service—FSB) in 1992 deepening Russian and Belarusian law enforcement cooperation.²⁵² This 1992 agreement reportedly enables Belarusian KGB officers to operate in Russia in tandem with the FSB to detain and extradite Belarusian citizens wanted in Belarus.²⁵³ While ISW cannot verify the existence of this classified agreement, Belarusian KGB officers reportedly conducted such a raid in tandem with FSB operators to detain a wanted Belarusian lawyer in Moscow in April 2021.²⁵⁴ Belarusian authorities regularly extradite wanted Russian citizens from Belarus to Russia, though it is unclear whether Russian Interior Ministry or FSB operatives have the ability to operate in Belarus. A senior Belarusian legislator noted in 2005 that Russian and Belarusian law enforcement agencies created a legal framework within the Union State for cooperation that enables both states to counter threats “without waiting for political decisions,” but did not provide additional context.²⁵⁵ Russian and Belarusian law enforcement agencies maintain a shared list of wanted persons in Russia and Belarus.²⁵⁶ Belarusian law enforcement can arrest Russian nationals in Belarus and then transfer arrestees without trial or investigation to Russia, where an open Russian criminal case originated.²⁵⁷ Russian law enforcement can do the

same to Belarusian nationals in Russia.²⁵⁸ Russian law enforcement arrested at least 20 Belarusians connected to the 2020 protests who were

in Russia, including Belarusian political prisoners whom Lukashenko had previously pardoned, and extradited several to Belarus.²⁵⁹ Russian authorities detained and extradited Belarusian activists in St. Petersburg and Sochi to Belarus in 2022.²⁶⁰ Belarusian law enforcement arrested a Russian man in Belarus whom Russian authorities accused of “discrediting the Russian army” for criticizing Russia’s war in Ukraine and extradited him to Russia in April 2023.²⁶¹ Belarusian law enforcement also detained a Belarusian woman in Minsk 2024 for participating in an anti-war demonstration in Moscow in 2022.²⁶² Belarusian KGB and security service officials reportedly hang Russian flags and portraits of Russian President Vladimir Putin within their Belarusian offices.²⁶³ In principle, an arm of Russian law enforcement should not have the right to direct Belarusian authorities to arrest and extradite wanted Russians in Belarus “without political decisions.”²⁶⁴ This law enforcement integration erodes Belarus’ sovereignty and represents alarming progress in the Kremlin’s effort to annex Belarus de facto by granting Russian law enforcement jurisdiction in Belarus and implicitly subjecting Belarusians to Russian criminal law.

Elements of the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs are supporting Russia’s deliberate depopulation campaign in occupied Ukrainian territories. A Yale University investigation published in November 2023 found that troops of the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs and other Belarusian officials collaborated with Russian officials to transport at least 2,442 Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to Belarus.²⁶⁵ US Department of State Spokesperson Matthew Miller noted on November 20, 2023, that Belarus is complicit in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and is not a “disinterested third country providing a safe haven for children in conflict.”²⁶⁶ The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent suspended Belarus’ membership on December 2023 due to Belarus’ involvement in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus.²⁶⁷ Belarusian state television documented in January 2024 how Belarusian authorities took a group of 35 Ukrainian children from Russian-occupied Luhansk Oblast, Ukraine, to a Belarusian sanatorium in Mogilev.²⁶⁸ ISW assesses that Russian officials are

conducting a deliberate depopulation campaign in occupied Ukrainian territories and that Russia’s transfer of children from occupied Ukraine to Russia may constitute a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.²⁶⁹ Belarusian officials’ participation in this Russian campaign is consistent with the assessed Russian effort to establish Russian control over Belarusian law enforcement and Belarusian organs of state power more generally.

Union State Political and Governance Institutions

The Union State’s high level political and governing organs largely exist only on paper, and the Kremlin is trying to develop and empower these bodies. Some of the Union State’s enumerated organs (like the Union State’s Parliament and supreme court equivalent) remain entirely unformed. The Union State has formed some of the other governing bodies defined in the Union State Treaty, but these institutions are underdeveloped. The Kremlin is leveraging these bodies, where they exist, to complete the integration measures that are necessary for Russia’s de facto annexation of Belarus.

Russia and Belarus formed the Permanent Committee of the Union State under the Union State Council of Ministers in 2000 in order to coordinate the formation of the Union State.²⁷⁰ The Permanent Committee works to implement the provisions of the Union State Treaty and develop proposals for the Union State’s development strategy to help bring the Union State into existence as a functional government entity.²⁷¹ Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin stated at the March 2023 Union State Council of Ministers meeting that two-thirds of Russian-Belarusian integration efforts are complete and that the council should continue working on integration issues to “maintain momentum,” indicating that the Council of Ministers and the Permanent Committee are still working on establishing the foundations for the Union States’ governing bodies.²⁷²

The Union State Council of Ministers—the organ that the Kremlin intends eventually to become the Union State’s Russian-dominated combined executive branch of government—nominally exists but is far from the powerful combined executive envisioned

in the Union State Treaty.²⁷³ In practice, the Union State Council of Ministers acts more as a recurring Russian-Belarusian working group whose (roughly annual) ministerial-level meetings primarily concern establishing the Union State's envisioned institutions and powers, not executing joint governance.²⁷⁴ The Kremlin continues to use ministerial meetings within the Council of Ministers to press Belarus to implement specific integration concessions through a slow but steady process. The empowerment and formalization of the Union State Council of Ministers is likely the Kremlin's desired and necessary mechanism to trivialize the Belarusian Presidency and Belarusian Council of Ministers—the current executive branch of state power in Belarus—and supplant it with a Kremlin-dominated executive power.

The Kremlin technically formed the Union State Supreme Council—the Union State's highest organ of state power—in 2000, but it does not exercise the powers prescribed to it in the Union State Treaty any more than the Union State Council of Ministers does.²⁷⁵ The Union State Supreme Council's membership includes the presidents and prime ministers of Russia and Belarus, the heads of the Belarusian National Assembly and the Belarusian House of Representatives, and the heads of the Russian Federation Council and Russian State Duma (the upper and lower houses of the Belarusian and Russian parliaments, respectively).²⁷⁶ This senior organ is supposed to create the Union State's various governing bodies, call elections for the Union State's (nonexistent) combined legislature, and approve Union State treaties, among other responsibilities.²⁷⁷ The Union State Supreme Council does not yet perform these tasks, however, and is primarily used as a regular forum for Putin to meet with Lukashenko to pressure him for integration concessions, negotiate the strategic direction of the Union State's development, and pass the Union State's annual budget.²⁷⁸ Belarus currently can and still will be able to call its own elections and ratify its own treaties without direct Russian interference until the Union State Supreme Council actually exercises the powers that the Kremlin seeks to imbue it with.

Russia and Belarus formed a joint “Parliamentary Assembly” in 1996 that is comprised of 72 members of both the Russian and Belarusian upper and lower

houses of parliament.²⁷⁹ This Parliamentary Assembly is supposed to evolve into the full-fledged joint parliament as the Union State's legislative branch of government.²⁸⁰ Russia will likely not be able to subsume Belarus' legislative process until it can use the Parliamentary Assembly or a future joint parliament to bypass or overrule the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus—Belarus' legitimate bicameral parliament.

The Kremlin has made limited but nonetheless important progress in forming the Union State's governing institutions. While the Kremlin has been able to advance some political and governing integration in select areas as noted above, the Kremlin will ultimately need to formalize Union State institutions to annex Belarus de facto by integrating Belarus into a Russian-dominated federated supranational state. The Kremlin likely cannot impose the full suite of laws on Belarus that it seeks to impose so long as a Belarusian parliament can pass laws that hold primacy over any Union State legislature. Moscow likely will not be able to marginalize the Belarusian Constitution's role as the supreme law of the land in Belarus without establishing a superseding Union State constitution (though the Kremlin can and has pressured Belarus to amend its constitution, as discussed above regarding the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons to Belarus). The Supreme Court of Belarus will likely remain the top court of judicial review in Belarus so long as the Court of the Union State does not exist. Russia will not be able to impose a currency union with the Russian ruble without first dissolving or subsuming Belarus' central bank. Russia, therefore, still must turn standing toothless Union State organizations into real governing bodies in order to achieve the de facto annexation of Belarus. Russia can still consolidate and expand its control over elements of Belarusian governance—potentially to a very high level of Russian control over Belarus—without achieving full de facto annexation, of course. However, Russia's creeping control over elements of Belarusian governance, while still dangerous particularly in the ways in which they distort international norms on the inviolability of state sovereignty, will not pose as great an immediate security threat to the West as the Kremlin's progress in military and economic integration.

Economic Integration Achievements

Russia's economic integration effort in Belarus has been the second most successful of the three integration efforts examined in this report. Russia has substantially expedited Russian-Belarusian economic integration since 2018 and has advanced important prerequisites necessary for complete economic integration and Russia's de facto annexation of Belarus.

Union State Roadmaps

Russia began a new phase of its economic integration effort in 2018 by introducing Union State integration roadmaps (also known as "Union State programs")—concretized policy action plans, each intended to advance the integration of a discrete aspect of Belarusian and Russian governance, largely focused on economic issues—to erode Lukashenko's ability to stonewall technically complex integration processes.²⁸¹ Achieving complete economic integration in any context is always extremely complex. In the case of Russia and Belarus, the Kremlin's desired economic integration objectives might be prohibitively difficult to achieve even if Lukashenko were not attempting to resist Russian pressure. Lukashenko previously successfully stalled Union State economic integration development in the 2000s and 2010s by slow-walking poorly defined and nebulous technical integration processes. The Kremlin introduced the concrete integration roadmaps to undermine Lukashenko's ability to evade integration by identifying the Russian and Belarusian action officers responsible for advancing integration and imposing specific action plans with deadlines for Russian and Belarusian officials to achieve that integration, restricting Lukashenko's ability to exploit previously loosely defined integration plans.²⁸² Lukashenko resisted advancing these roadmaps from 2018 to 2020 but eventually ratified an action plan on November 4, 2021, to adopt a package of 28 integration roadmaps.²⁸³






The Union State Roadmaps for 2021-2023







In November 2021, Putin and Lukashenko signed a three-year action plan for Russian and Belarusian integration between 2021-2023. These 28 roadmaps









did not cover the full suite of integration measures that the Kremlin seeks in Belarus, and the number of roadmaps has fluctuated over the years since they were first introduced in 2018. Russian and Belarusian media initially reported 33 distinct roadmaps, but later reduced the sum to 28.²⁸⁴ At least one roadmap was reportedly dropped, and others consolidated into a single roadmap. Three previous roadmaps—the roadmap on unifying tax legislation and two separate roadmaps on customs regulations—were merged into a single roadmap around March 2021, for example.²⁸⁵

The Kremlin stated in January 2024 that Russia and Belarus implemented all 28 roadmaps within the 2021-2023 integration plan in late 2023.²⁸⁶ Russia and Belarus passed a new three-year action plan for 2024-2026 in January 2024 that includes a plan on how to continue developing Union State integration issues addressed in the 2021-2023 roadmaps. The 2024-2026 plan also briefly mentioned some new Union State roadmaps absent from the initial 28 roadmaps.²⁸⁷ These 28 roadmaps, while not exhaustively covering the Kremlin's ultimate desired end state in Belarus, still provide an invaluable guide to understanding the Kremlin's economic integration objectives in Belarus, as they will continue to underpin Russian efforts in the coming years.

Each roadmap concretizes integration criteria for specific technical policy fields to prevent Lukashenko from retreating into the complexities of the policy to stonewall integration. The roadmaps are highly technical in nature and are designed to achieve policy coordination and integration prerequisites so Russia can then introduce the larger institutions that will govern the streamlined Russian-Belarusian policy. Many roadmaps concern joint governance and economic regulation that stipulates reconfiguring Belarusian law in such a manner that Belarus can effectively be governed as a Russian territory, either as a whole unit or in separate parts. The 28 roadmaps that Putin coerced Lukashenko to ratify on November 4, 2021, are:²⁸⁸

	<p>1. Roadmap on Macroeconomic Policy Convergence</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to synchronize Russia’s and Belarus’ strategic management of macroeconomic policy and to synchronize how the states create official statistical information. This roadmap also supports the harmonization of Russian and Belarusian law and policy priorities to create the “foundation” for joint support of small- and medium-sized businesses, and to streamline the ways in which Union State authorities consider situations in which firms become insolvent and undergo bankruptcy.</p>
	<p>2. Roadmap on Harmonization of Monetary Policy and Macroprudential Regulation</p> <p>This roadmap supports transiting Belarus to an inflation targeting system and implementing an agreement between the Russian and Belarusian central banks on the principles and mechanisms for harmonizing monetary policy. The roadmap seeks to achieve a comparable and sustainable low level of inflation for both Russia and Belarus and to create “similar financial conditions” for firms in both countries, likely to support the imposition of a currency union at a future date.</p>
	<p>3. Roadmap on Harmonization of Foreign Exchange Regulation and Foreign Exchange Control</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to unify the rules by which Russians and Belarusians can open bank accounts in banks outside of the Union State, exchange foreign currency, and repatriate foreign currency back to the Union State, among other things.</p>
	<p>4. Roadmap on Harmonization of Requirements in the Field of Financial Sector Information Security</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to harmonize Russia’s and Belarus’ approaches to ensuring information security, create a mechanism for mutual recognition of audit results, and create a system to authenticate the integrity of electronic information exchanges across borders.</p>
	<p>5. Roadmap on the Harmonization of Regulatory Standards for Credit and Non-credit Financial Institutions and the Financial Market as a Whole, Including Ensuring the Creation of Uniform Principles for Deposit Insurance</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to make Russia’s and Belarus’ financial market regulations, including those of leasing organizations and microfinancial institutions, uniform and to ensure that Union State banking and insurance organizations have mutual access to the Union State’s financial markets. Such harmonization is a prerequisite for the Kremlin’s desired common financial market with Belarus.</p>
	<p>6. Roadmap on Harmonization of Financial Sector Anti-Money Laundering and Anti-Financial Terrorism Requirements</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to harmonize the way the Russian and Belarusian central banks counter money laundering and financial terrorism in the financial sector, another prerequisite for the Kremlin’s desired common financial market with Belarus.</p>

	<p>7. Roadmap on the Integration of Payment Systems Within National Card Payment Systems, Integration of Financial Messaging and Settlement Systems, Integration of a System of Rapid Exchange, the Harmonization of Approaches to Monitoring and Supervising Payment Systems, and the Implementation of the International Organization for Standardization 20022 Standard (ISO 20022) for Electronic Data</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to establish a “common payment space” within the Union State by improving the mechanisms for cross-border exchange of financial information between Russian and Belarusian credit institutions and legal entities, as well as to develop cooperation on issues concerning rapid transactions, transmission of financial messages and payments, improve supervision of participants in the payment services market, and to coordinate the development of financial technologies. This is a prerequisite for the Kremlin’s desired common financial market with Belarus.</p>
	<p>8. Roadmap on the Harmonization of Requirements for Consumer Protection Rights in Financial Services Sphere and Investing and Preventing Unfair Practices in the Financial Market</p> <p>This Roadmap supports the harmonization of Russian and Belarusian legislation to ensure an equal scope of consumer protection rights for all investors and financial services consumers within the Union State, a prerequisite for a common market.</p>
	<p>9. Roadmap on Integrating Information Systems for Tracing Goods</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to create a system to trace goods and prevent unfair business practices by synchronizing approaches for the mechanism that the Union State uses to trace goods, and to integrate Russian and Belarusian information systems to automate a data exchange to ensure joint regulation over traceable goods. This is likely a prerequisite for establishing a common market.</p>
	<p>10. Roadmap on Integrating Information Systems for Marked Products</p> <p>This roadmap supports unifying Russian and Belarusian legal regulations and technical approaches for the mandatory marking of marked products (for identification and traceability reasons, and as proof of the product meeting regulatory standards) and to synchronize work necessary for identifying goods to support the Union State’s unhindered access to the marked products market. In theory this should improve Union State regulators’ ability to regulate goods in the Union State market and reduce the number of counterfeit products in circulation.</p>
	<p>11. Roadmap on Harmonizing Taxation and Customs Legislation and Cooperation in the Customs Sphere</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to unify Russian and Belarusian general principles of indirect taxes, deepen interactions between customs authorities, introduce an integrated system for collecting indirect taxes for Russia and Belarus, and create a joint advisory body called the “Union State Committee on Tax Issues” to coordinate Belarusian and Russian tax policy harmonization. This roadmap also supports an effort to harmonize Russia’s and Belarus’ approaches to maintaining statistics on mutual trade and developing a system for cataloging foreign economic activity in Russia and Belarus.</p>
	<p>12. Roadmap on the Integration of State Regulatory Authorities’ Information Systems on Veterinary and Phytosanitary Quarantine Control</p> <p>This roadmap supports information systems integration to automate data exchanges for quarantine phytosanitary control (controls on hygiene related to transporting livestock and plant products) and ensure the traceability of all livestock and plant products to increase the efficiency of quarantine phytosanitary and veterinary control and expedite the movement of goods and vehicles across the Union State’s border. This roadmap should enhance the free flow of goods and services between Russia and Belarus, a prerequisite for a common market.</p>

	<p>13. Roadmap on Integration of Transport Control Information Systems</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to harmonize the way the Russian and Belarusian central banks counter money laundering and financial terrorism in the financial sector, another prerequisite for the Kremlin’s desired common financial market with Belarus.</p>
	<p>14. Roadmap on the Unification of Transport Market Regulations</p> <p>This roadmap supports the unification of a variety of fares and regulations for air, rail, and road transportation, as well as adopting common laws in managing roads. This roadmap specifies that transport ships on the Union State’s inland waterways should fly the Russian and Belarusian flags according to unified rules. This roadmap supports efforts to establish a common market.</p>
	<p>15. Roadmap on the Creation of a Common Gas Market</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to develop the principles under which Russian and Belarusian legal entities have equal treatment and pricing regarding gas transport infrastructure to create and maintain a Union State common market for natural gas. The Kremlin is prioritizing the creation of a common gas market over the creation of the common markets for electricity, oil, and petroleum products.</p>
	<p>16. Roadmap for the Creation of a Common Market for Oil and Petroleum Products</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to unify Russia’s and Belarus’ oil and petroleum products markets and harmonize laws regulating those markets.</p>
	<p>17. Roadmap for the Creation of a Common Electric Energy Market</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to support the creation of a unified electric energy market and harmonize laws regulating the electric energy market.</p>
	<p>18. Roadmap on the Development of Nuclear Energy</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to unify Russian and Belarusian laws governing the operation of nuclear energy facilities, radiation safety regulations, emergency preparedness and response, and the management of nuclear fuel and radioactive waste.</p>
	<p>19. Roadmap on the Formation of a Unified Agrarian Policy</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to establish a unified agrarian policy by further aligning Russian and Belarusian laws on agriculture regulations to increase agricultural products trade volume, remove administrative barriers, ensure food security, and advance joint scientific and technological development.</p>
	<p>20. Roadmap on the Formation of a Unified Industrial Policy</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to establish a unified joint industry policy to support production and sales. The roadmap seeks to help eliminate economic and technical barriers to producing industrial products to increase industrial trade volume and transparency. The roadmap seeks to provide Russian and Belarusian firms equal access to government procurement tenders and subsidies. This roadmap supports efforts to establish a common market and Russian import substitution schemes to offset the effects of Western sanctions.</p>
	<p>21. Roadmap on Introducing Uniform Rules for Public Procurements</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to unify Russia and Belarus’ laws on ensuring equal competitive access to public procurement orders. The roadmap seeks to eliminate restrictions on Belarusian firms’ ability to bid on Russian municipal procurement tenders by using bank guarantees issued by Belarusian banks for government procurement in Russia. This roadmap seeks to help Russia and Belarus form a common market, including a common financial market, within the Union State.</p>

	<p>22. Roadmap on Establishing Uniform Consumer Production Rules</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to finalize an unspecified international agreement on “Unified Consumer Protection Rules in the Union State” that should uniformly regulate relations among consumers, manufacturers, importers, suppliers, and sellers within the Union State. Consumer protection law is a cornerstone of well-functioning markets and involves statutes and regulations that seek to prevent businesses from using unfair, deceptive, or fraudulent practices. Such policy integration is a prerequisite for the Kremlin’s desired common market with Belarus.</p>
	<p>23. Roadmap on Unified Rules of Competition</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to form and implement unified competition rules, including defining the powers of an antimonopoly authority, based on an unspecified intergovernmental agreement. This roadmap seeks to ensure the free movement of goods, labor, and services within the Union State. Such policy integration is a prerequisite for the Kremlin’s desired common market with Belarus.</p>
	<p>24. Roadmap on the Unification of Requirements for Organizing and Implementing Trade Activities</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to unify Russian and Belarusian law to define uniform requirements regulating trade and food service. This roadmap also seeks to achieve the creation of a most favored nation treatment for business entities in both Russia and Belarus. Such policy integration is likely a prerequisite for the Kremlin’s likely desired control over Belarus’ trade policy.</p>
	<p>25. Roadmap on the Unification of Principles for a Communications and Information Common Market</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to create a “common information space” and a “cross-border space of trust” by developing and updating existing intergovernmental, interdepartmental, and other agreements regulating communications and information including the construction of communication network infrastructure, unifying Russian and Belarusian laws on postal services, unifying the use of electronic documents, electronic signatures, and electronic public services, and abolishing cell phone roaming charges within the Union State for Russians and Belarusians.</p>
	<p>26. Roadmap on the Unification of Accounting Regulations and Accounting Statements</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to create conditions for firms’ consolidated financial statements and the creation of an information system for expanding foreign investment by allowing interested potential investors to view these financial statements. Such policy integration is a prerequisite for the Kremlin’s desired common market with Belarus.</p>
	<p>27. Roadmap on the Unification of Tourism Law</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to bring Belarusian tourism legislation closer to Russian legislation by unifying tourism development strategies, tour guide standards, defining general rules for informing consumers about the standardization of hotel quality, and defining the guarantees provided to tourists and the responsibilities of tour operators.</p>
	<p>28. Roadmap on Conducting a Coordinated Labor and Social Policy</p> <p>This roadmap seeks to unify Russian and Belarusian labor law and laws concerning workers’ rights, employment, social security and pensions, support for families with children, and social services. Such policy integration is a prerequisite for the Kremlin’s desired free labor flows and common market with Belarus.</p>

It is important to note that just because the Kremlin claimed that the above 28 Union State roadmaps have been “implemented,” the actual integration in each area may not be complete. The Kremlin’s claim, rather, indicates simply that Russia and Belarus have achieved the integration targets defined for the 2021-2023 period.²⁸⁹ Most of the “implemented” roadmaps still must clear significant bureaucratic hurdles in subsequent integration stages as of this writing. Belarusian officials acknowledge that desired macroeconomic and monetary policy integration will take until at least 2030 to achieve despite the implementation of roadmaps #1 and #2 in the 2021-2023 integration plan, for example.²⁹⁰ Official Russian government documents also indicate that the following 14 roadmaps from the 2021-2023 integration plan are still undergoing some additional refinements (*prorabotka*) as of January 2024, despite declarations that all of them have been implemented:²⁹¹

- Roadmap #1 on Macroeconomic Policy Convergence.
- Roadmap #2 on Harmonization of Monetary Policy and Macroprudential Regulation.
- Roadmap #5 on the Harmonization of Regulatory Standards for Credit and Non-credit Financial Institutions and the Financial Market as a Whole, Including Ensuring the Creation of Uniform Principles for Deposit Insurance.
- Roadmap #6 on Harmonization of Financial Sector Anti-Money Laundering and Anti-Financial Terrorism Requirements.
- Roadmap #7 on the Integration of Payment Systems Within National Card Payment Systems, Integration of Financial Messaging and Settlement Systems, Integration of a System of Rapid Exchange, the Harmonization of Approaches to Monitoring and Supervising Payment Systems, and the Implementation of the International Organization for Standardization 20022 Standard (ISO 20022) for Electronic Data.
- Roadmap #11 on Harmonizing Taxation and Customs Legislation and Cooperation in the Customs Sphere.

- Roadmap #14 on the Unification of Transport Market Regulations.
- Roadmap #16 for the Creation of a Common Market for Oil and Petroleum Products.
- Roadmap #17 for the Creation of a Common Electric Energy Market.
- Roadmap #19 on the Formation of a Unified Agrarian Policy.
- Roadmap #20 on the Formation of a Unified Industrial Policy.
- Roadmap #22 on Establishing Uniform Consumer Production Rules.
- Roadmap #24 on the Unification of Requirements for Organizing and Implementing Trade Activities.
- Roadmap #28 on Conducting a Coordinated Labor and Social Policy.

Russia is developing new Union State programs and roadmaps that are the “organic continuation” of the initial 28 Union State roadmaps.²⁹² Putin and Lukashenko signed a decree outlining a new three-year plan to develop the Union State for 2024-2026 in January 2024.²⁹³ The new decree prioritizes Union State macroeconomic integration; the creation of a common financial market by unifying Russian and Belarusian approaches to monetary policy and foreign exchange regulation; unifying tax policies; developing industrial policy cooperation; establishing common markets for gas, electricity, oil, and petroleum products; and creating a common information space.²⁹⁴ The decree also mentions three new roadmaps not previously publicly discussed: A roadmap for cooperation in the field of microelectronics likely meant to support Russian import substitution for dual use goods targeted by Western sanctions; a roadmap in the field of machine tool industry likely meant to support Russian import substitution for precision machine tools; and a roadmap on creating a common commodity market in the Union State.²⁹⁵

Lukashenko’s ratification of the first package of 28 roadmaps in November 2021 was a critical inflection point for the Kremlin’s Union State

integration campaign. None of the roadmaps had been officially implemented prior to November 2021 even though they had been introduced in 2018. Lukashenko's refusal to adopt the roadmaps in 2019 despite mounting Kremlin pressure seemed firm and economic integration process appeared stalled indefinitely.²⁹⁶ Roadmap implementation progress since November 2021 has been swift in comparison. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin confirmed that 10 Union State roadmaps were implemented as of June 2023.²⁹⁷ A senior Belarusian official confirmed that 13 Union State roadmaps were implemented as of November 2023.²⁹⁸ Mishustin characterized the roadmaps as being 90 percent complete as of November 2023.²⁹⁹ The Kremlin reported in January 2024 that all the roadmaps from the 2021-2023 plan had been implemented and that Russia and Belarus agreed on new integration measures for 2024-2026, including nine other Union State programs.³⁰⁰

Russia likely introduced the roadmaps in 2018 after failing to advance its economic integration objectives for Belarus through Kremlin-dominated international organizations like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in the early 2010s. The Kremlin has long leveraged various Kremlin-dominated international organizations, such as the CIS, EAEU, and CSTO to reestablish dominant Russian influence over former Soviet states.³⁰¹ Belarus has always had the deepest level of integration with Russia of the various post-Soviet states and has been the model for what Russia's integration with other post-Soviet states could look like in its maximalist form. Despite significant efforts, the Kremlin failed to leverage the EAEU to advance the economic integration effort in Belarus as rapidly as Putin likely hoped. The EAEU has so far failed to provide a true common market for goods and services for all its members and not been as effective as Putin envisioned in general.³⁰² The EAEU does not yet have a

common market for gas—among many other goods and services—and the Kremlin seeks to establish a common market for gas in the EAEU no later than 2025.³⁰³ The Kremlin claimed to have established a customs union with Belarus via the EAEU in 2010 and a free trade zone via the CIS in 2011, but these claims were premature since significant market barriers still beleaguer these organizations.³⁰⁴

The Union State roadmaps have advanced Russian-Belarusian economic integration in ways the EAEU and CIS frameworks never did. The Kremlin started making substantial economic integration progress following the adoption of the roadmaps in November 2021. The Kremlin advanced an effort to degrade Belarus' control over its own customs by operationalizing an Intergovernmental Customs Center in December 2022.³⁰⁵ The Kremlin made gains to establish a supranational tax authority to directly control elements of Belarus' fiscal policy; Russia and Belarus ratified an agreement defining the principles for establishing a supranational tax authority in 2022 and created an integrated system for administering indirect taxes (as specifically outlined in roadmap #II) in March 2023.³⁰⁶ Russia and Belarus agreed in November 2023 to create the supranational tax committee stipulated in roadmap #II to coordinate Belarusian and Russian tax policy harmonization.³⁰⁷ These advances are a direct result of the Union State roadmaps and likely would not have occurred without them.

Auxiliary Russian-Belarusian Cooperation Areas

Russia is leveraging Belarus to evade Western sanctions and procure sanctioned dual-use goods critical to Russia's war effort against Ukraine. Russian and Belarusian officials openly discuss how Belarus is an important Russian partner in Russia's effort to source and domestically manufacture microchips and precision machine tools, among other products, which are sanctioned goods and technologies critical in weapons manufacturing.³⁰⁸ Lukashenko

Belarus has always had the deepest level of integration with Russia of the various post-Soviet states and has been the model for what Russia's integration with other post-Soviet states could look like in its maximalist form.

stated in March 2023 that Belarus and Russia signed an agreement on establishing a joint Belarusian-Russian center for the development and production of photomasks (an intermediate good used in the production of integrated circuits), that the two states have developed a list of critically important electronic components, and that Belarusian industry is shipping unspecified microelectronics to Russian enterprises.³⁰⁹ Russian and Belarusian officials also discuss unifying Russian and Belarusian industrial policies so that Belarus can develop Belarusian import substitution capability to help Russia achieve “technological sovereignty”—a term the Kremlin uses to describe a state in which Russia is no longer dependent on Western-sourced technology.³¹⁰ Russia’s Ministry of Industry and Trade and the Belarusian Ministry of Industry have agreed on at least 23 import substitution projects as of November 2023.³¹¹ Russian and Belarusian officials plan to implement a Union State program in the field of microchip and electronics import substitution in 2024.³¹² Belarusian chemicals company Mogilevkhimvolokno and Russian oil and gas company Tatneft plan to create a joint venture in Belarus for the production of polyester products. In addition, Belarusian industry is reportedly examining possibilities for producing reduction drives for Russian vehicles.³¹³

The Kremlin has long leveraged Belarusian economic dependence on Russian oil and natural gas to coerce Belarus into advancing integration with Russia and will continue to do so.³¹⁴ Lukashenko explicitly accused the Kremlin in 2018 of using energy pressure to advance an effort to undermine Belarus’ sovereignty and “destroy” Belarus by absorbing Belarus either as six constituent oblasts or as a single entity into the Russian Federation.³¹⁵ Russia’s energy coercion campaign against Belarus is not the result of a sudden shift but rather the result of over a decade of steady gains. Russian state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom wholly acquired Beltransgaz, Belarus’ state natural gas infrastructure and transportation company, in 2011.³¹⁶ Russian state nuclear power company Rosatom finished the construction of Belarus’ first and only nuclear power plant in 2021.³¹⁷ Gazprom and Belarusneft—a Belarusian state-owned petrochemical company that conducts

geological exploration, development, production, and sale of oil and gas—signed a scientific and technical cooperation agreement on oil and gas fracking in Russia on December 29, 2023.³¹⁸ Russia and Belarus signed an intergovernmental memorandum on deepening strategic cooperation in nuclear energy in January 2024.³¹⁹ Belarusian dependence on Russia’s energy exports and energy industry will likely increase as Russian-Belarusian economic integration intensifies and as Western sanctions decrease Belarus’ economic linkages with the West. Belarus began paying for Russian oil and gas in Russian rubles, rather than in US dollars as previously, in 2022.³²⁰

Russia is advancing agreements to promote free labor flows between Russia and Belarus. Russia and Belarus have an agreement to mutually recognize each other’s academic credentials, degrees, and titles to standardize the way the Union State recognizes academic credentials.³²¹ This agreement and other roadmaps that concern labor policy unification are meant to help promote the development of the Union State’s common market by enabling free labor movement. Such integration measures also effectively treat Russia and Belarus as a single country. Free labor flows are stipulated in the 1999 Union State Treaty and are a critical component of any common market.

Russia’s economic integration effort, while far from complete, has made tangible gains that threaten to intertwine Russia’s and Belarus’ economies in a potentially inseparable way. Russian economic integration progress since 2021 has been swift, and Russia stands to continue making substantial gains, even if Russia ultimately fails to achieve complete economic integration. Russia will be significantly more likely to complete its economic integration of Belarus, complete with a currency union under the Russian ruble, if Russia and Belarus form the common markets and regulatory framework that Moscow is driving towards. Russia will likely continue to secure more economic integration gains in Belarus between 2024 and 2030 in any event and, when compared to political integration, more of the necessary economic structures have been formally established to achieve the Kremlin’s objectives.

Russia's Likely Next Integration Steps

Despite making alarming progress since 2020, the Kremlin still must complete several significant integration measures to achieve its desired de facto annexation of Belarus. This section of the report outlines what Russia has yet to achieve to reach its desired end state for military, political, and economic integration with Belarus to forecast the distance Russia must close.

Military Integration

Russia has achieved nearly all the military integration objectives it seeks in Belarus with two key exceptions: gaining the ability to operationalize Belarusian forces for minor actions below the threshold of a declared regional war, and permanently basing Russian ground forces in Belarus.

The Kremlin still must develop the political influence to be able to operationalize Belarusian forces without formally declaring war and committing them to Russian military operations without political decisions from Minsk getting in the way. The Kremlin could almost certainly directly command the Belarusian military in a large-scale war with NATO. However, Russia does not yet have enough influence to entirely bypass Minsk in order to directly transition Belarusian forces to a wartime footing to support Russian operations below this threshold. Achieving this concession remains a significant hurdle. Lukashenko successfully declined Putin's likely demands throughout 2022 that Belarus commit Belarusian forces to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.³²² Belarusian Lieutenant Colonel Valery Sakhshchyk—the former commander of Belarus's 38th Airborne Brigade and a distinguished Belarusian officer—released a series of personal video appeals to Belarusian servicemen throughout 2022, urgently calling on them to disobey any orders to participate in Russia's invasion

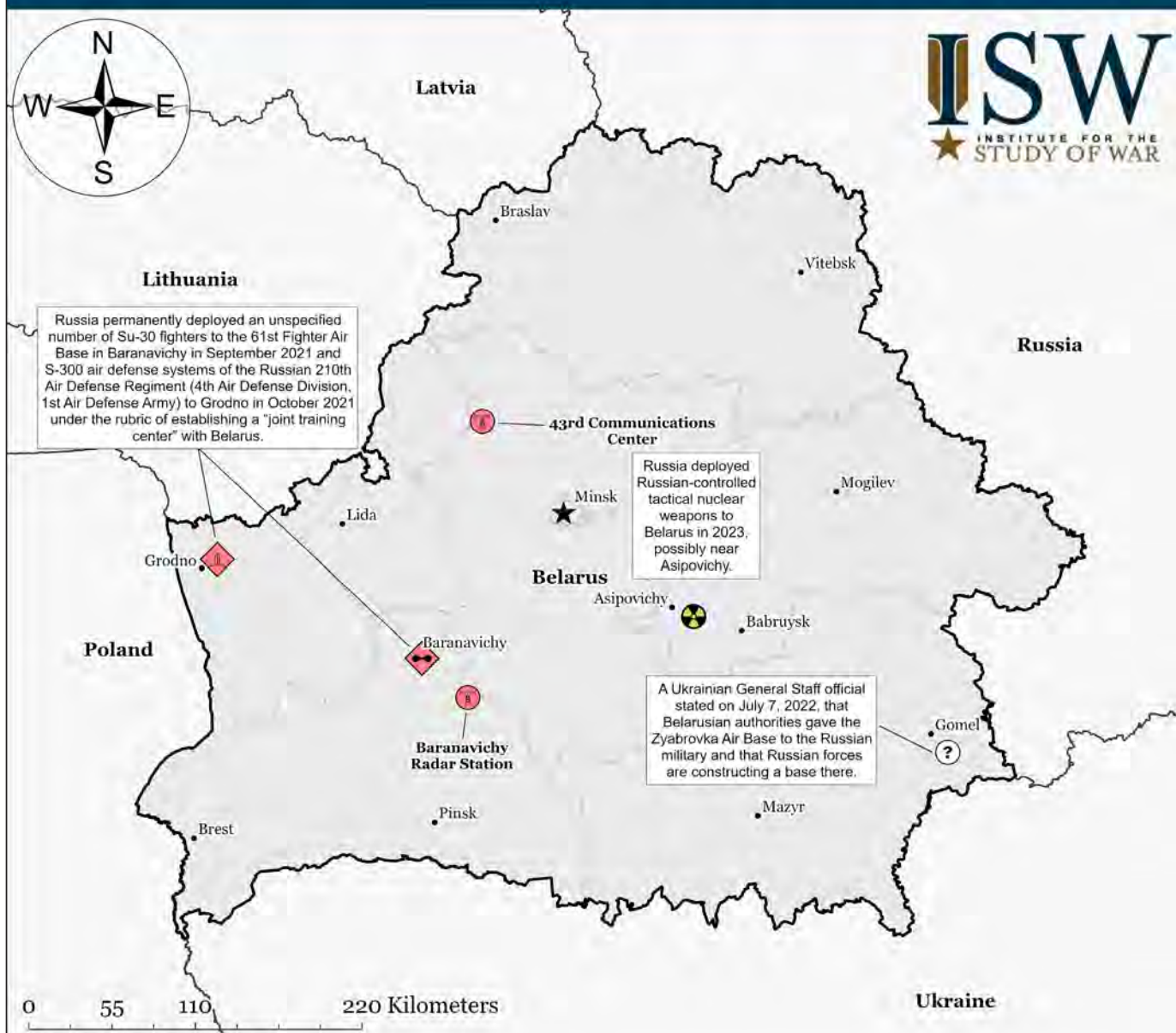
of Ukraine, indicating Russian pressure at the time to have Belarusian forces join Russia's war.³²³

It is unclear how much longer Minsk will be able to continue avoiding making this concession given Russia's growing success integrating the Belarusian military and fostering Belarusian dependency on Russia. Belarus' reliance on the RGV for operational and strategic functions, growing Russian-Belarusian tactical unit interoperability, and continuing Russian domination over Belarusian military education have likely created the joint doctrine, structures, and interoperability measures necessary for Russia to command Belarusian forces, even though the Kremlin has not yet fully managed to secure the influence needed to bypass Minsk to fully operationalize Belarusian ground forces outside of the RGV's wartime framework.

Russia has not necessarily achieved lasting freedom of movement in Belarus and full access to Belarusian military installations despite the unprecedented access in Belarus it had from 2021 to 2023. The Russian military's large withdrawal from Belarus in August 2023 is an ambiguous indicator and raises the question of whether the Russian military's basing access in Belarus in 2021-2023 may have been a temporary phenomenon. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is imposing constraints on Russia's use of Belarusian training capacity, which in turn may be increasing Lukashenko's leverage vis-à-vis the Kremlin. The Kremlin will still need to formalize the freedom of movement that Russian forces demonstrated in Belarus in 2021-2023 if Lukashenko successfully renegotiates his position by leveraging a possible Russian dependence on Belarusian training capacity. The extent of the Russian military's access to Belarus will likely remain unclear until active fighting in Ukraine ends or Russia unambiguously permanently deploys Russian

The extent of the Russian military's access to Belarus will likely remain unclear until active fighting in Ukraine ends or Russia unambiguously permanently deploys Russian forces in Belarus.

The Russian Military's Permanent Basing in Belarus as of May 2024



Map by George Barros
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- Ⓡ Soviet-Era Radar and Communication Stations
- ◆ Permanent Russian Su-30 Deployment at Baranavichy Air Base
- ◆ Permanently Deployed S-300 Elements of the Russian 210th Air Defense Regiment
- ☢ Possible Russian Tactical Nuclear Weapons Storage Near Asipovichy
- ? Unconfirmed Permanent Russian Base at Zyabrovka Air Base

forces to Belarus. Lukashenko will likely continue allowing Russia to conduct large training deployments to Belarus, but it remains to be seen whether the Russian military can establish permanent basing in Belarus that would further threaten NATO or Ukraine. Future large-scale Russian deployments to Belarus that are not connected to major force generation activities or exercises would indicate that the Kremlin has likely achieved permanent basing and full freedom of movement in Belarus.

The Kremlin has already achieved some permanent military basing gains in Belarus, nonetheless. This report's evaluation of Russia's prospects for permanently deploying large ground forces or achieving full freedom of movement in Belarus should not be misconstrued to overlook Russia's other permanent military basing gains in Belarus since 2020. Russia permanently deployed S-300 air defense systems to Grodno, permanently deployed Su-30 fighters to Baranavichy, and succeeded in coercing Belarus to change its constitution to support Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons likely near Asipovichy or Lida. These permanent gains are significant even though the exact extent of Russia's basing access to and freedom of movement in Belarus remains ambiguous.

Political Integration

Political integration is lagging substantially behind the Kremlin's other integration efforts and likely maximalist integration objectives. Russia has seemingly deprioritized some aspirational political integration objectives in favor of reinforcing successes with military integration and prioritizing economic integration through the Union State roadmaps. If the Kremlin still desires its maximal objectives, then it must further advance its political integration objectives by formalizing and empowering Union State governing bodies, despite the gains it has made that undermine Belarus' sovereignty.

Most of the Union State's joint political organs are either unformed or exist as largely toothless organizations without the powers necessary to achieve the Kremlin's desired de facto annexation. The Kremlin has made little if any progress in advancing the creation of Union State political bodies

since the signing of the Union State Treaty in 1999, largely because creating such institutions is a major undertaking and Lukashenko has successfully delayed and postponed making major political integration concessions thus far. There has been little progress in advancing the Union State constitution since Lukashenko blocked its passage in 2005.³²⁴ Lukashenko stated in August 2021 that he and Putin agreed to scrap plans—at least temporarily—for a roadmap on the creation of the Union State's supranational organs.³²⁵ The Union State Parliament, the principal legislative organ of the Union State, remains unformed. Russia and Belarus have a joint parliamentary assembly that is supposed to evolve into this joint parliament, but it has not yet done so.³²⁶ The Kremlin still must form the Court of the Union State as the Union State's judiciary.³²⁷ The Union State Council of Ministers is mostly a working group used to further the creation of Union State and is not yet an actual executive body in its own right.

The Kremlin is unlikely to achieve its ultimate goal of de facto annexing Belarus without fundamentally replacing or supplanting Belarusian governmental bodies with Union State bodies. These institutions matter. There are no legal frameworks under which Russia can de facto annex and govern Belarus without imposing supranational governing institutions. Moscow likely will not be able to marginalize the Belarusian Constitution's role as the supreme law of the land in Belarus so long as there is no superseding Union State constitution. The Supreme Court of Belarus will likely remain the top court of judicial review in Belarus so long as the Court of the Union State does not exist. While Russia has been able to prod the Belarusian parliament to adopt some laws for targeted policy integration in the roadmaps, the Kremlin will not likely be able to bypass the Belarusian parliament without establishing and empowering the Union State parliament. Russia is unlikely to be able to establish a currency union without first subsuming or dissolving Belarus' Central Bank.

Tangible Russian integration progress to date indicates, however, that the Kremlin can still advance dangerous integration with Belarus even without fully formalizing the Union State's governing bodies.

The Kremlin has so far advanced the bulk of its desired military integration successfully without the creation of the Supreme Military Council, after all, and the Kremlin has managed to make many aspects of Russian and Belarusian governance uniform. The Kremlin will be able to continue advancing integration processes without these Union State governing bodies in the long run. The longer Russia can make small integration gains gradually, the easier it will become for the Kremlin to eventually impose the overarching Union State governing bodies on Belarus, though Lukashenko will continue efforts to stall big-ticket integration processes as best he can.

Economic Integration

Russia's desired complete economic integration likely will not be achieved any sooner than 2030 and integration in the Kremlin's desired maximalist form may be exceedingly difficult to achieve, though the Kremlin stands to make more economic integration gains over the next five-to-ten years.

There is no clear path for Russia to achieve its desired currency union with Belarus. The establishment of a common currency is a technically challenging feat even for states that both *desire* to create a currency union, and Lukashenko understands well that the conditions of a currency union the Kremlin desires pose significant threats to Belarusian sovereignty. Lukashenko stated in 2007 that a currency union that eliminates the Belarusian ruble would entail a loss of Belarus' sovereignty.³²⁸ Lukashenko—against tremendous Russian pressure—has postponed a longstanding Russian effort to eliminate Belarus' sovereign monetary policy through a currency union despite making substantial integration concessions elsewhere.³²⁹ Russia will likely struggle to achieve a currency union with Belarus without Lukashenko's unconditional surrender, death, or deposition, and a currency union will likely be among one of the last economic concessions that the Kremlin achieves, if ever. Russia is unlikely to abandon this aspirational objective, however, with Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov confirming in January 2024 that the Kremlin still seeks a currency union with Belarus.³³⁰

The Kremlin's current integration focus with the 28 roadmaps very likely will not be completed until 2030. The 28 roadmaps have multi-year phased implementation plans. Belarusian Ambassador to Russia Dmitry Krutoy stated in April 2023 that the ultimate objectives for macroeconomic and monetary regulation integration as laid out in roadmaps #1 and #2 will take until 2030 to implement.³³¹ Putin and Lukashenko will likely agree on a new package of Union State integration measures for beyond 2027 after the current plan for 2024-2026 is completed. Lukashenko may be able to find more space or time to stall Union State integration processes given this protracted timeline and the dynamic situation with Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

The Kremlin has yet to establish a unified tax policy to eliminate Belarus' sovereign fiscal policy.³³² Lukashenko is poised to further stonewall tax harmonization; Lukashenko stated in January 2023 that the creation of the supranational tax committee would support improving Russian-Belarus tax policy coordination but that Belarus would not cede sovereignty over tax policy—a position incompatible with the Kremlin's likely integration objectives.³³³ Russia and Belarus still have not created the Union State Accounts Chamber, the governing body designed to control Union State finances stipulated in the 1999 Union State Treaty.³³⁴ Russia's desired *de facto* annexation of Belarus and control over Belarusian financial policy will likely not be achieved until the Union State Accounts Chamber or a commensurate institution is formed.

Russia has yet to fully establish the full common markets it seeks with Belarus.³³⁵ The Kremlin still needs to coerce Belarus into ratifying an array of laws and bureaucratic market regulations to achieve the free trade zone and common markets that the Kremlin's EAEU and CIS projects have failed to deliver.³³⁶ Integration of Russia's and Belarus' public procurement systems remains a particularly challenging but necessary step for the formation of a common financial market.³³⁷ Systemic corruption in Belarus' and Russia's respective public procurement systems makes policy harmonization for integrating both systems even more challenging. Corrupt Russian and Belarusian economic actors have their own individual incentives to defend

their graft and prevent any changes to public procurement laws and norms. (A 2021 study estimated that Russia's total amount of bribes in public procurement was \$88.9 billion).³³⁸ Lukashenko may be able to slow-walk these integration efforts given the inherent complexities connected with economic integration at scale.

The Kremlin is prioritizing forming common energy markets for gas, electricity, oil, and petroleum products with Belarus, which likely will not be formalized any sooner than 2025.³³⁹ The Kremlin is prioritizing the creation of a common gas market above the other markets and has defined the creation of the common gas market as a necessary objective to achieve before establishing common markets for electricity, oil, and petroleum products.³⁴⁰ Russia seeks to create a common gas market for the EAEU no later than 2025.³⁴¹ The Kremlin seeks to complete the Union State's common energy market

regulatory framework by a deadline of January 1, 2025, with the common market becoming functional in 2027, though these deadlines are liable to change.³⁴²

The protracted nature of the economic integration roadmaps provides Lukashenko with limited maneuvering space. The lengthy and bureaucratic nature of establishing the common regulatory framework necessary for the Kremlin's envisioned economic integration provides Lukashenko with some depth he may be able to leverage to slow-walk integration. Although the roadmaps strive to eliminate such maneuvering space, the integration processes are still ongoing. Lukashenko has demonstrated the capability to stand up to Russian deadlines and may attempt to do so again, especially as the war in Ukraine saps Russian resources and potentially elevates Lukashenko's leverage against Putin.³⁴³

Implications

Russia is winning in Belarus. NATO must plan for the likely future in which Belarus is mostly if not entirely Russian-controlled, regardless of the outcome of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin stands to advance the de facto annexation of Belarus even in a best-case scenario in which the West helps Ukraine defeat Russia and bolsters NATO's eastern flank. Russia's increasingly likely victory in Belarus will have major implications for NATO's security and Russian capabilities even in that case.

Russia's existing gains in Belarus already threaten NATO and Ukraine. Russia's permanent aircraft and air defense system deployments to Belarus since 2021 increased Russia's military threat to NATO's eastern flank and Ukraine. Russia notably did not need to open any new official bases in Belarus for Russian forces to exercise an unprecedented level of freedom of movement in Belarus since 2021 and invade Ukraine from Belarusian territory in 2022. Russia likely could surge Russian troops to Belarus again if it so chooses. Russia almost certainly has

the capability to operationalize Belarusian forces in any future large-scale war with NATO and is likely making progress toward securing the ability to operationalize Belarusian forces in operations below this threshold. Russian and Belarusian economic integration helps Russia source sanctioned goods, reduces the efficacy of Western sanctions against Russia, and may help Russia alleviate its domestic labor shortage. Russia's political integration is slowly but steadily normalizing the systematic erosion of Belarus' sovereignty, and sets conditions for further Russian integration gains.

Lukashenko will continue searching for opportunities to delay integration, though time is not on his side. The Kremlin will likely secure a permanent ground forces presence in Belarus in the next two-to-three years barring any major disruptions to Russia's current momentum. The pace of economic integration will continue to increase. Political integration processes will likely remain slow but still advance, nonetheless.

The longer Russia continues to divert high volumes of resources to sustain its invasion of Ukraine, the harder it will be for Russia to complete its de facto annexation of Belarus. High Russian losses from the invasion of Ukraine forced the Russian military to cancel its annual strategic command staff exercise for 2023, Zapad-2023—a potential inflection point that Putin could have intended to use to expand Russian ground forces basing in Belarus permanently.³⁴⁴ The strategic situation will likely remain in flux as the war in Ukraine protracts, potentially granting Lukashenko future opportunities to disrupt the Kremlin’s integration pressure. Events such as Lukashenko’s brokering of a deal between Yevgeny Prigozhin and Putin in July 2023 demonstrate that Lukashenko can push back against the Kremlin in significant ways on short notice. Lukashenko is a master of balancing and is actively seeking those opportunities.³⁴⁵ Lukashenko may look for an opportunity to assert Belarusian sovereignty against the Russian-dominated Union State, leveraging the Union State Treaty’s own provisions. Article 67 of the Union State Treaty states that any Union State member can voluntarily leave the Union State following a national referendum.³⁴⁶ Belarus theoretically has the legal right to leave the Union State if it chooses but is highly unlikely to be able to exercise this right.

Russian information operations seek to misrepresent Belarus as Russia’s junior partner eager to embrace integration with Russia and do the Kremlin’s bidding. In reality, Belarus is fighting a losing battle to retain what remains of its sovereignty. Lukashenko has repeatedly spoken out against Belarus ceding sovereignty to Russia via the Union State and made unprecedented concessions since 2020 only under duress. Lukashenko continues to resist many of Russia’s aspirational integration objectives and will likely do so as long as he can.³⁴⁷ Lukashenko still does not fully support the Kremlin’s

framing of its invasion of Ukraine despite significant Russian progress aligning Belarusian foreign policy with that of Russia.³⁴⁸ Lukashenko has never supported the Kremlin’s “Russkiy Mir” concept that posits that Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians comprise a lost “triune Russian nation” that Moscow should reunify, and he likely never will.³⁴⁹ Lukashenko publicly does not support Russia’s official war goals. Lukashenko stated on August 17, 2023, that Russia had “already achieved” its war objectives in Ukraine.³⁵⁰ Lukashenko directly undermined a Kremlin strategic messaging campaign that sought to falsely implicate Ukraine in the Islamic State terrorist attack in Moscow on March 22, 2024, by claiming that the attack’s perpetrators attempted to flee to Belarus, not Ukraine.³⁵¹ Lukashenko, despite being a Russophone who has used state power to suppress the Belarusian language, has increasingly symbolically supported the Belarusian language after Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014.³⁵² Western policymakers must be aware of the rift in strategic objectives between Moscow and Minsk and how Russian information operations seek to misrepresent this reality.

The West must be careful to avoid inadvertently adopting the Kremlin’s desired framing and assumptions about the relationship between Russia and Belarus. Russia has a predatory relationship toward Belarus. Russian information operations undermine Belarus’ agency and have falsely framed Minsk’s efforts to delay Moscow’s de facto annexation campaign as part of a “Western hybrid war” targeting Russia, as opposed to Belarus exercising its right to exist as a sovereign state and associate with

Russia (or other states) on its own terms.³⁵³ The West should support Belarus’ full independence as a sovereign state and should not recognize any agreements subverting that sovereignty that Putin may coerce or has coerced Lukashenko into. It can do so even while criticizing Lukashenko’s abuses

The West must be careful to avoid inadvertently adopting the Kremlin's desired framing and assumptions about the relationship between Russia and Belarus.

Permanent Russian Basing Access and Freedom of Movement in Belarus Will Increase the Frontage that Ukrainian Forces Must Cover by 50 Percent



of power, violent suppression of opposition, and subversion of elections and normal governance.

Near Term Forecasts and Exploitable Opportunities for the Kremlin

The Kremlin may exploit the scheduled Belarusian presidential election in 2025 to secure additional integration concessions. Lukashenko's current term expires in 2025, and Belarusian protesters will very likely take to the streets in 2025 against Lukashenko's choreographed reelection, though these future protests' size and scope are unclear.³⁵⁴ Belarusian protesters have conducted public demonstrations against each of Lukashenko's fraudulent elections since 2001 and Lukashenko's regime successfully extinguished them all, including the most recent 2020 protests, which were abnormally large and dangerous for Lukashenko's regime.³⁵⁵ Any large protests approximating or exceeding the size of the 2020 protest movement could pose significant threats to Lukashenko's regime, and the Kremlin will almost certainly exploit the situation to exert further pressure on Lukashenko, just as it did in 2020.³⁵⁶ Lukashenko's maneuvering space and ability to hedge against the Kremlin will likely be overall weaker by 2025, however.

The creation or absence of functional common markets for gas, electricity, oil, and petroleum products by 2027 will be a key indicator for the progress of the Kremlin's economic integration effort. The formation of the unified gas market, followed by an electricity market, on time by 2025-2027 would indicate that Minsk's ability to stonewall Kremlin deadlines is diminished and that Union State integration processes will likely advance at a brisker pace than they had prior to 2021. The creation of the energy market on time in tandem with other integration progress would indicate that the Kremlin's economic integration effort is succeeding and that Lukashenko's ability to resist the campaign is degraded.

Putin will not remain Russia's president forever, but the Russian campaign in Belarus will likely persist well after Putin departs office. The Kremlin's effort to annex Belarus is a major Russian governmental undertaking that—over the past two decades—has

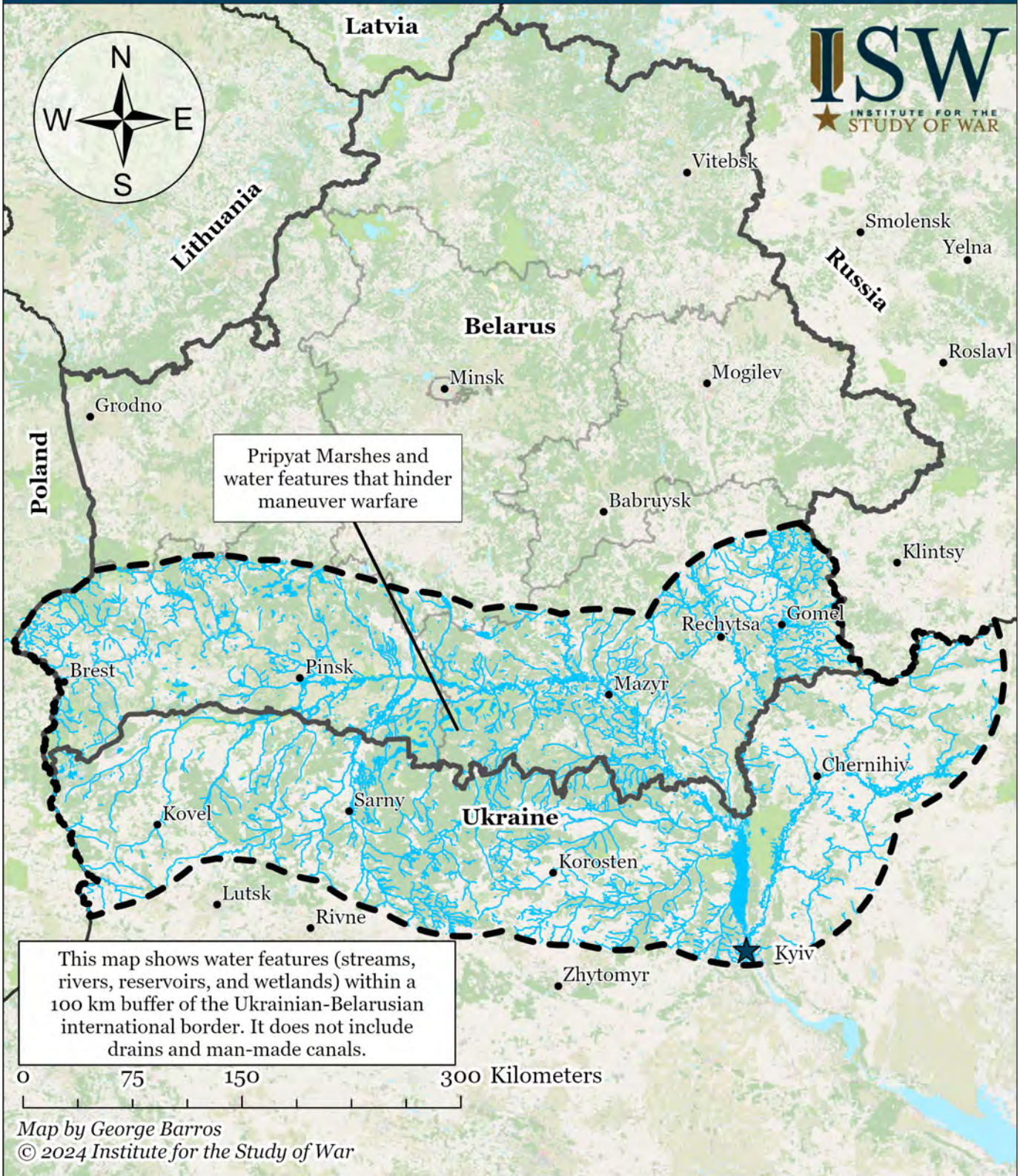
established its roots in a sustainable manner and has recently accumulated momentum. Putin has successfully institutionalized in Russian geopolitical thinking the falsehood that Belarusians—like Ukrainians—are just temporarily lost segments of the Russian nation that the Russian Federation must reunite. Any of the strongmen at the highest echelons of the Russian government who stand to lead a post-Putin Russia will doubtlessly ideologically support Belarus' "reunification" with Russia and thus continue advancing this effort until its completion.

Russia's effort to annex Belarus de facto stands to benefit from Lukashenko's unexpected removal or death. Lukashenko, despite giving much ground, has not surrendered and continues to be the main obstacle standing in the way of the Kremlin's desired de facto annexation of Belarus.³⁵⁷ However, Lukashenko is aging and will not remain Belarusian president forever. The Kremlin has set favorable conditions and has likely prepared contingency plans to exploit Lukashenko's deposition or death. Belarus may lose what remains of its sovereignty—potentially permanently—if Lukashenko's deposition or death is not immediately followed by an orderly transition of power or a protest movement of unprecedented power that manages to preserve Belarusian sovereignty. The Kremlin is likely planning how to defeat any such Belarusian effort and will exploit conditions in a post-Lukashenko Belarus to accelerate the de facto annexation of Belarus.

Russia's further aspirational objectives in Belarus—if achieved—will pose even greater threats to NATO and Ukraine.

NATO planners must reevaluate Russian gains in Belarus as part of the growing requirements to defend NATO's eastern flank. Russia is undertaking large-scale force restructuring for conventional warfare against NATO. A permanent Russian presence in Belarus would increase the Russian military threat directly on NATO's border, especially in the long run as the Russian military reconstitutes, potentially bases new maneuver divisions in Belarus, and continues posturing the RGV against NATO.³⁵⁸ A permanent Russian ground forces presence in Belarus would enhance Russian forces' ability to

The Pripyat Marshes and Water Features Along the Belarusian-Ukrainian Border



threaten the Suwalki Corridor to geographically isolate NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia from the rest of the alliance.³⁵⁹

Additionally, any permanent Russian military presence in Belarus—even if primarily postured against NATO—will increase Ukraine’s defense requirements to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian threats on the Ukraine-Belarus border. Russian basing in Belarus would fix Ukrainian forces in northern and northwestern Ukraine at scale, pulling Ukrainian forces away from the frontline in eastern Ukraine.

Another Russian offensive against northwestern Ukraine remains unlikely due to natural geography and Russian force constraints, but the threat would remain if Russian forces are permanently deployed in Belarus. The Pripjat marshes between Belarus and Ukraine are canalizing terrain that inherently make large scale mechanized maneuver between Belarus and Ukraine difficult—factors that contributed to the failure of Russia’s drive on Kyiv from Belarus in February-March 2022. While a renewed Russian offensive from Belarus is unlikely at this time, it is not impossible.

The West must include Belarus’ training capacity in its assessment of Russian force generation capabilities. The Russian military will most likely leverage the Belarusian military as trainers for new Russian forces. Russia’s training capacity is limited and likely degraded since February 2022, and is a key limiting factor for the volume and rate at which the Russian military can regenerate its losses in Ukraine and generate planned new forces part of Russia’s long-term force restructuring postured against NATO. The Kremlin will likely continue to leverage Belarus’ training capacity during Russian training surges that stress Russia’s organic training capacity. The auxiliary training capacity that Belarusian forces can provide the Russian military is likely a

strategic accelerant for Russian force generation and will help the Kremlin achieve its desired force reconstitution and growth faster than Russia could by itself.³⁶⁰ Belarus’ population could also provide a small but steady supply of recruits if Russia manages to recruit from Belarusian prisons or society at large.

Successful Russian political integration with Belarus will embolden and empower the Kremlin’s global ambitions to establish a multipolar world order. At stake is Belarus’ future as an independent sovereign state. Russia’s de facto annexation of Belarus, if achieved and *gone unchecked*, would be the first effective

annexation of an entire country since the Second World War.^X Russian victory in Belarus would normalize Russia’s strategy of undermining a target state’s sovereignty using coercion and subversion, as opposed to overt force. Successful political integration would accelerate the decline of the rules-based international world order based on the inviolability of state sovereignty

by normalizing effective Russian sovereignty over Belarus.

Russia’s desired economic integration will make the Russian economy more resilient by supporting Russian sanctions evasion and import substitution efforts. Free labor flows between Russia and Belarus can help Russia alleviate its labor shortage by drawing Belarusian workers to Russia. A currency union could marginally stabilize the Russian ruble in the short term by increasing the demand for the Russian ruble and easing its exchange rate and could also grant the Russian Central Bank seigniorage benefits (profit made by a government by issuing currency), granting the Russian state additional income by making interest on the Russian rubles it would lend to Belarusian banks as Belarusian banks acquire initial operating capital.³⁶¹ This monetary stabilization and profits from such effects would likely be quite modest, however.

Russia’s de facto annexation of Belarus, if achieved and gone unchecked, would be the first effective annexation of an entire country since the Second World War.

X Discounting the seven-month Iraqi occupation and annexation of Kuwait, which a US-led coalition swiftly reversed in a four-day operation in 1991.

Belarus' dependency on Russia will likely increase as the Kremlin advances economic integration. A currency union would provide Russia tremendous influence over Belarus and eliminate Belarus' sovereign monetary policy. Successful Russian control over Belarusian trade policies would reduce Belarus' ability to balance with third parties (such as the EU, as Belarus has historically done) to find a counterweight against Russian economic pressure.³⁶² Free labor flows between Russia and Belarus will likely draw skilled Belarusian workers to Russia and likely further erode Belarusians' sense of a unique Belarusian national identity.

The West should sanction Belarus as if it were Russia so long as Belarus continues heading towards becoming a de facto extension of the Russian economy. Belarus is supporting Russia with a myriad of import substitution and sanctions evasion projects aimed at reequipping the Russian military.³⁶³ If Russia succeeds in establishing a common market with Belarus, then Russia will be able to increase the quantity of sanctioned goods it can access if Western sanctions authorities do not also sanction Belarus. Any effective Western sanctions against Russia require sanctions to target Belarus as well.

Russia's de facto annexation of Belarus, if achieved, will be exceedingly difficult to reverse. Belarus would be very unlikely to unshackle itself from a formalized federated government and fully integrated economy with Russian troops stationed in Belarus. Additionally, Russia's de facto annexation of Belarus would foreclose any prospects for a free, open, and democratic Belarus and greatly increase the likelihood that autocratic rule will dominate Belarus for the foreseeable future. The 2020 protest movement presented a brief opportunity for

Belarusians to cast off autocratic rule. Another such chance at a free and democratic Belarus will be far less likely to emerge if Russia succeeds.

The Kremlin seeks to replicate its successful integration strategy in Belarus in other post-Soviet states. The Kremlin has long sought to erode former Soviet states' sovereignty through "bilateral cooperation" and Kremlin-dominated international institutions, like the CIS, EAEU, and the CSTO. The Union State gambit has been the most successful integration format that the Kremlin has used so far bar none. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated in January 2024 that the Union State is the "flagship of the EAEU" and that the Union State "sets the tone" for the further development of the EAEU.³⁶⁴ If Russia succeeds in Belarus, Russia will very likely try to replicate that success in post-Soviet Central Asian countries. Russian sources are already praising Belarus as a "universal integration model" to be exported to Russia's Eurasian partners.³⁶⁵

Russia's protracted campaign against Belarus must serve as a cautionary example for NATO. Russia's gains in Belarus did not occur overnight but were secured as part of a carefully planned strategic effort. Western inattention to the Union State's slow but steady progress over decades enabled Russia to leverage the crises of the 2020 protests and 2022 invasion of Ukraine to accelerate its efforts. This case study demonstrates that Russia's "bilateral cooperation" with post-Soviet states is not a series of one-off cooperation deals; it is a means within long-term predatory campaigns aimed at systematically eroding and ultimately destroying the sovereignty of target states. The West must not ignore small Kremlin integration gains elsewhere, as they build over time into severe threats.

Appendix: Anomaly Six's Analysis of Mobile Device Activity at Belarusian Training Grounds

Anomaly Six (A6) leveraged commercially available precision location data collected from mobile devices to support ISW in assessing the Russian military's likely use of Belarusian training grounds in late 2022 and 2023 to augment Russian force generation efforts. This appendix contains a brief summary of A6's full research report and findings.

Methodology

A6 collects mobile device location data from cell phones, tablets, and other smart mobile devices whose users opted in to share GPS and mobile ad identification (MAID) data with commercial data vendors. A6 researched mobile device activity levels at three military training grounds in Belarus—the Lepel Training Ground at $28.8754600^{\circ}\text{E}$ $54.9341437^{\circ}\text{N}$; the Obuz Lesnovsky Training Ground at $25.7133510^{\circ}\text{E}$ $53.0548802^{\circ}\text{N}$; and the Repischcha (also known as Asipovichy) Training Ground at $28.4140347^{\circ}\text{E}$ $53.2943262^{\circ}\text{N}$ —during a surge and subsequent draw-down between August 2022 and November 2023.

A6 analysts created polygons around the three Belarus-based military training grounds (Lepel, Obuz, and Repischcha) as depicted in Figure 1 and analyzed monthly mobile device activity within those polygons, tracking activity levels and activity locations, between August 2022 and November 2023. A6 analysts collected and sorted unique MAIDs at each training ground and conducted pattern of life (POL) analysis for those MAIDs between August 2022 and November 2023 to determine patterns of travel and notable international travel.

Key Findings

- A6 analysts observed an increase in activity at all three training grounds between August 2022 and October 2022, per Figure 2. Activity levels at the three training grounds endured a slight decrease in November 2022 before almost doubling in December 2022.
- Several of the mobile devices observed at Belarusian
- A6 analysts observed a steady increase in activity at all three training grounds between January 2023 and May 2023. A6's observations on the number of detected signals align with open-source reporting on a significant increase of Russian personnel in Belarus in September 2022, followed by a reduction of Russian personnel in Belarus around May 2023.

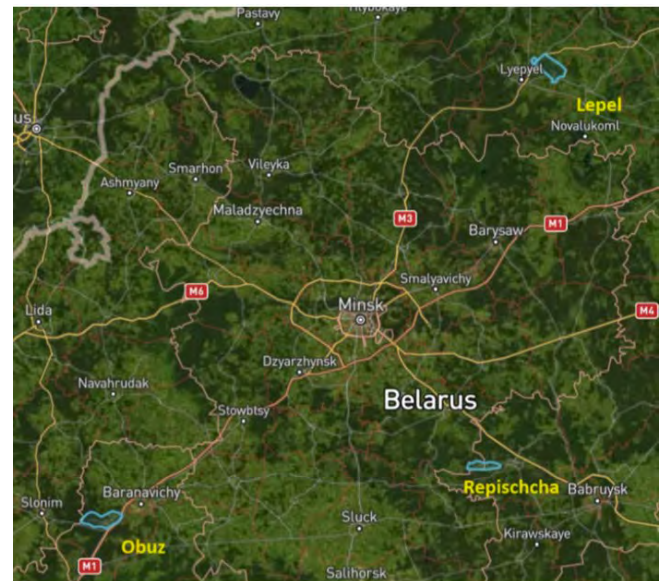


Figure 1: Belarus base locations

Figure 1. Belarusian Training Ground Locations

training grounds in late 2022 were previously observed in Russia and were later tracked to have moved towards Russian border crossings and military staging areas around Ukraine in April 2023. While this study does not dispositively prove the identities of the people whose mobile devices generated the observed signals, the observation of an increase in mobile device signals at training grounds where Russian trainees were reportedly training, and during the time frame in which Russian trainees were reportedly training, prior to the observed mobile devices later moving to border crossings with Ukraine, is significant. The observed signals data is a supporting indicator that increases the confidence of ISW's assessment that Belarusian forces assisted Russia's major training surge in late 2022 following Russia's September 2022 partial mobilization.

A6 Operating Environment Data Tracking MAIDs Per Month

Dates	Lepel Training Ground	Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground	Repischcha Training Ground	Reported Number of Russian troops in Belarus from open sources	Corresponding Event
1-31 August 2022	1	0	1	1,000	
1-30 September 2022	44	19	3	Unknown	Putin declares partial mobilization
1-31 October 2022	99	35	11	9,000	Mobilized troops surge to Belarus for training
1-30 November 2022	82	18	4	12,000	
1-31 December 2022	124	34	10	10,200	
1-31 January 2023	104	39	5	11,000	
1-28 February 2023	145	38	13	9,000	
1-31 March 2023	178	43	20	10,000	
1-30 April 2023	268	62	19	4,000	Russian spring conscription begins
1-31 May 2023	422	122	22	2,500	
1-30 June 2023	391	141	19	1,500	
1-31 July 2023	254	72	17	Unknown	Satellite imagery shows tents on training grounds being dismantled
1-31 August 2023	284	100	31	Unknown	
1-30 September 2023	411	150	25	2,100	
1-31 October 2023	222	58	18	2,000	Russian fall conscription begins
1-30 November 2023	182	34	6	2,000	

A6’s data, however, noted a decrease in November 2022, while open-source reporting continued to reflect increases.

- A6 observed decreased activity between June 2023 and July 2023 as satellite imagery documented the dismantling of tents on the three training grounds. A6’s data, however, showed the highest levels of MAID activity occurred afterwards in September 2023 at all three bases (in August 2023 for Repischcha), suggesting a possible logistics build up to help move troops out of the bases over the coming months. Russia conducted its fall military conscription in October 2023, so Russia may have needed to send more personnel to Belarus to close shop at the training grounds ahead of fall conscription.
- A6’s observations align with open-source information that Russia’s military presence in Belarus dropped off sharply after September 2023.

Several Devices Collected in Belarus Went to Border Crossings Near Ukraine

Per Figure 3 below, A6 conducted polygon searches between 8/1/22 - 1/24/24 for five common Ukraine border crossing areas (from Belarus and from Russia) as drawn from A6’s MAID POL findings. A6 discovered the most prolific border crossing to be the Novoazovsk–Veselo–Voznesenka border crossing between Donetsk Oblast and Rostov-on-Don (lower right red circle) with the most activity there occurring between 4/12/23 - 4/15/23. A6 also observed heightened activity at all border crossing areas in August and early September 2023, which matched peak activity levels at all three training grounds in Belarus.

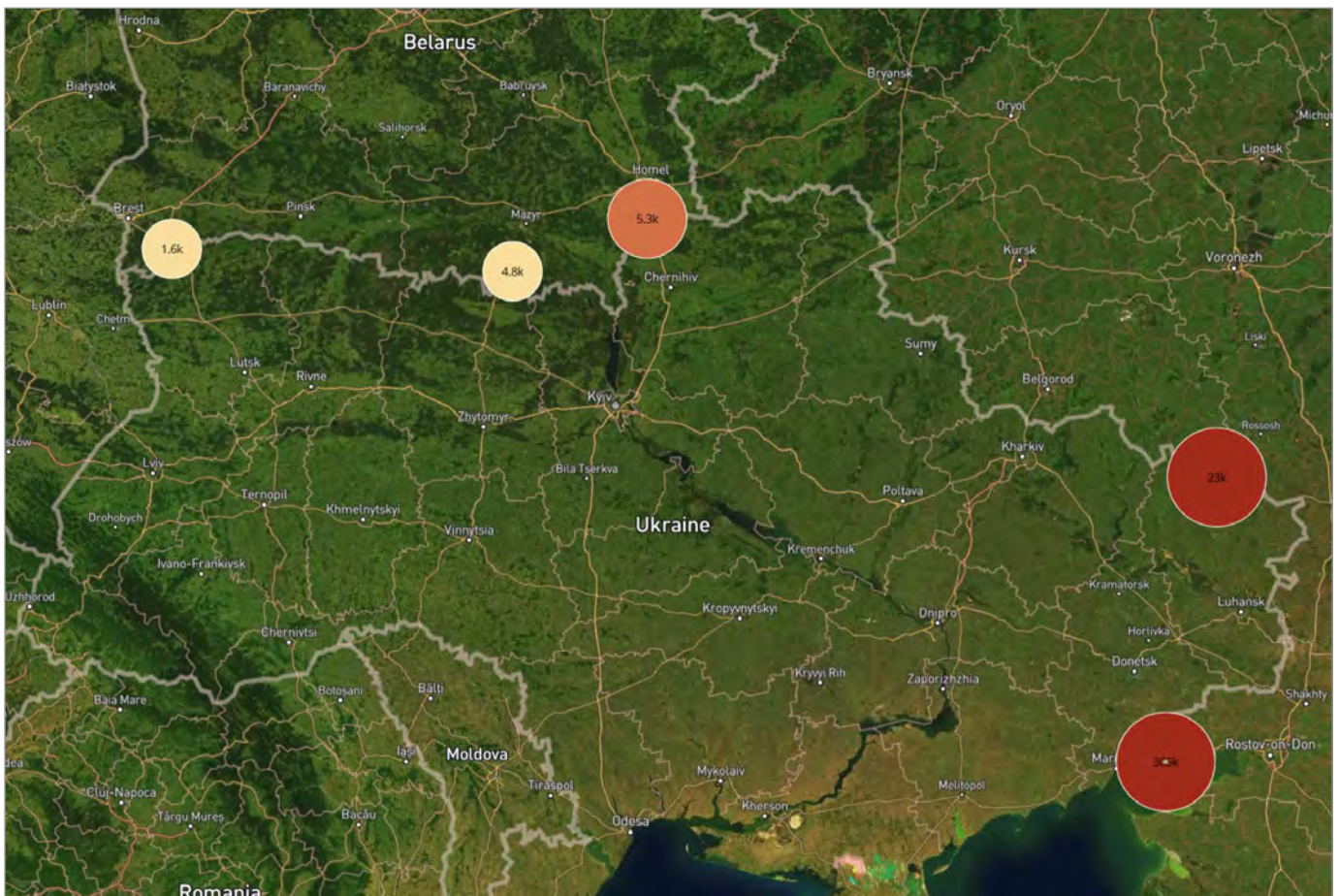


Figure 3. Common Border Crossings Near Ukraine from MAID Activity. (The numbers correspond with the number of MAID signals datapoints collected by Anomaly Six.)

Lepel Training Ground Research

Charts and modeling of mobile device activity at Lepel Training Ground between September 2022 and October 2023.

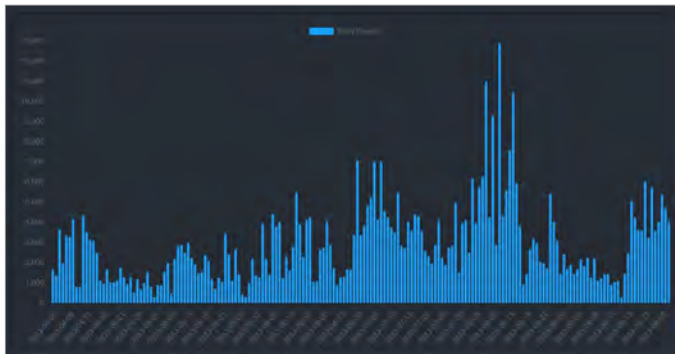


Figure 4: Activity September 2022 - March 2023

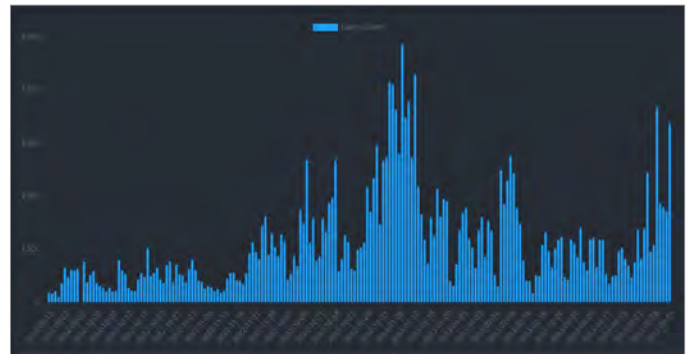
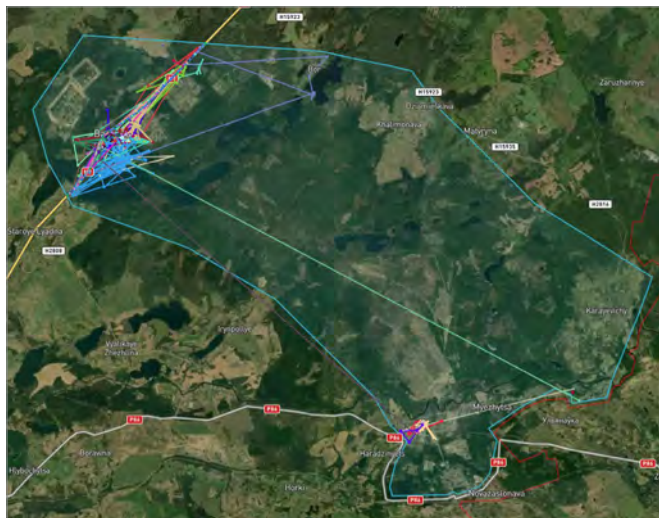
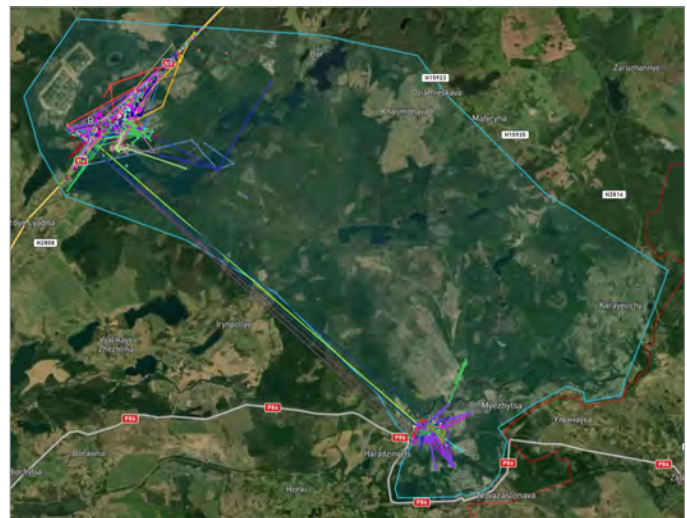


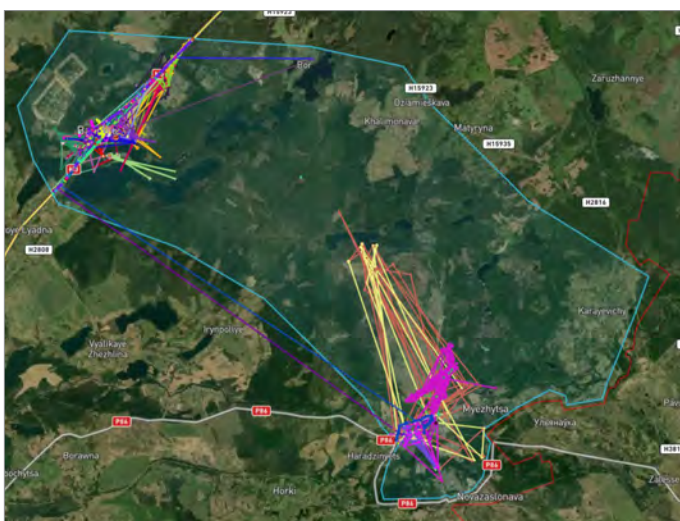
Figure 5: Activity April 2023 - October 2023



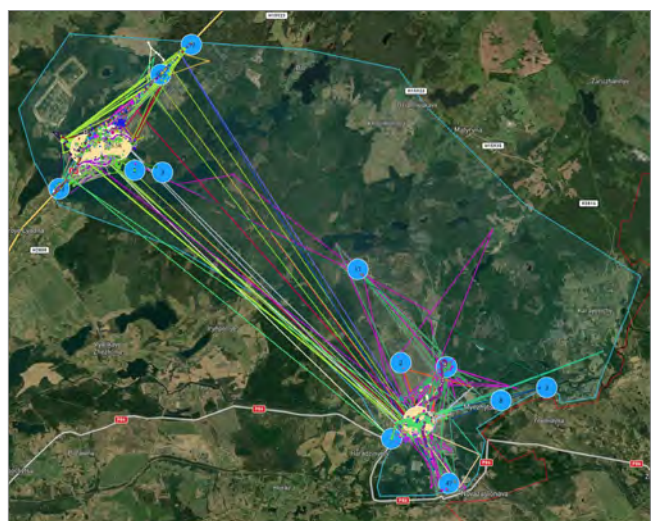
September 2022



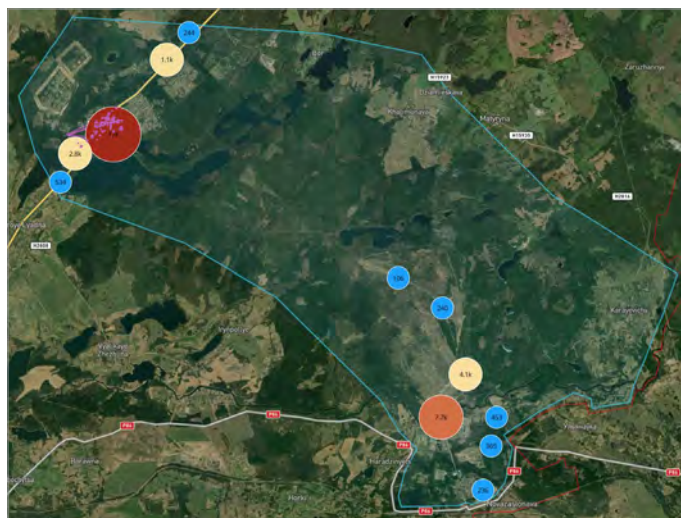
October 2022



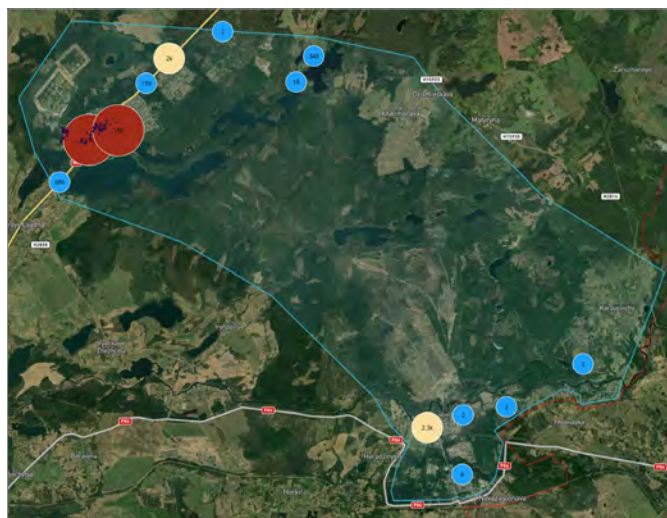
November 2022



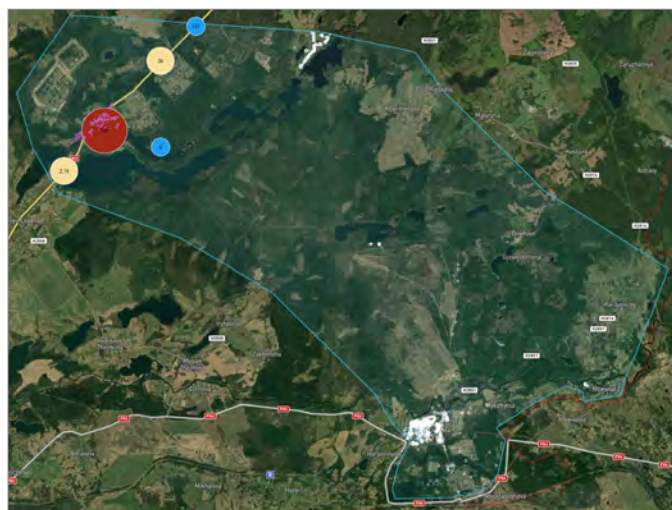
December 2022



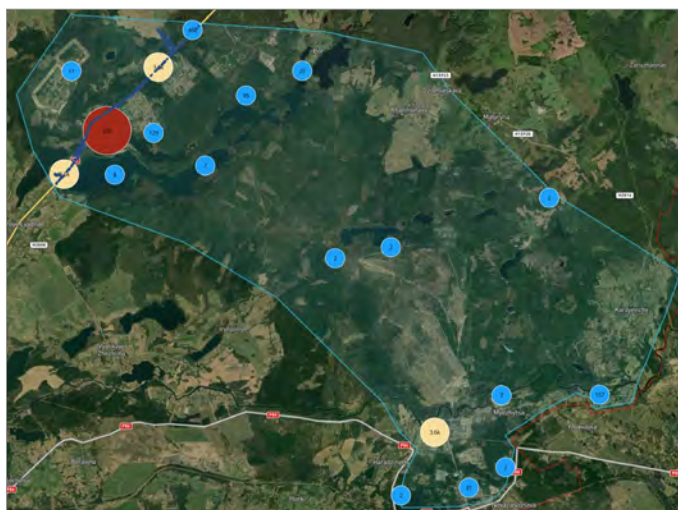
January 2023



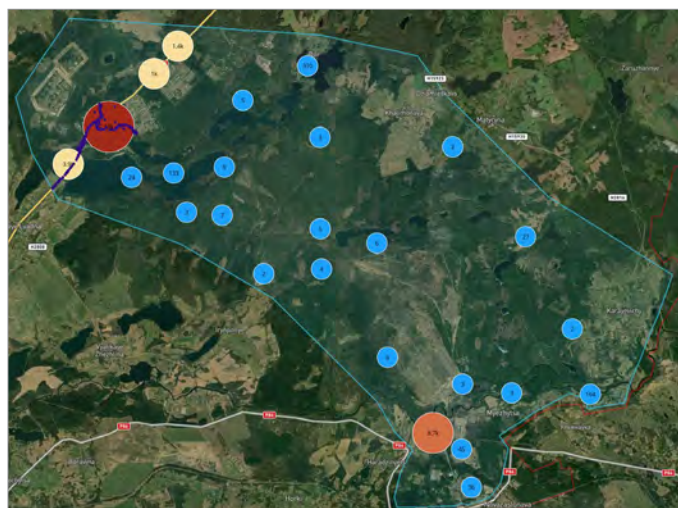
February 2023



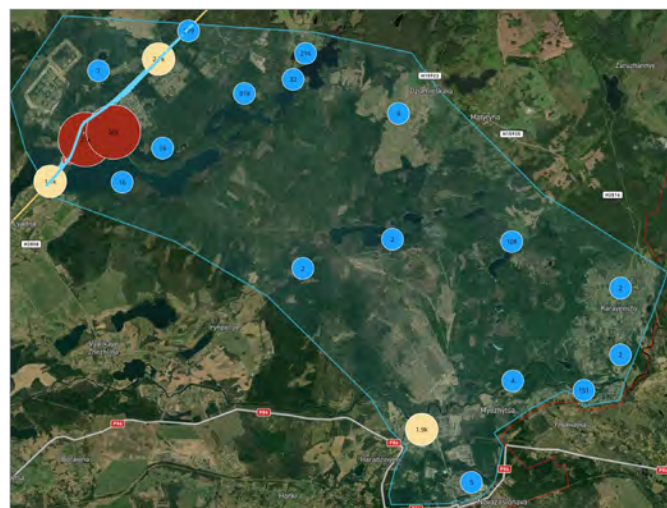
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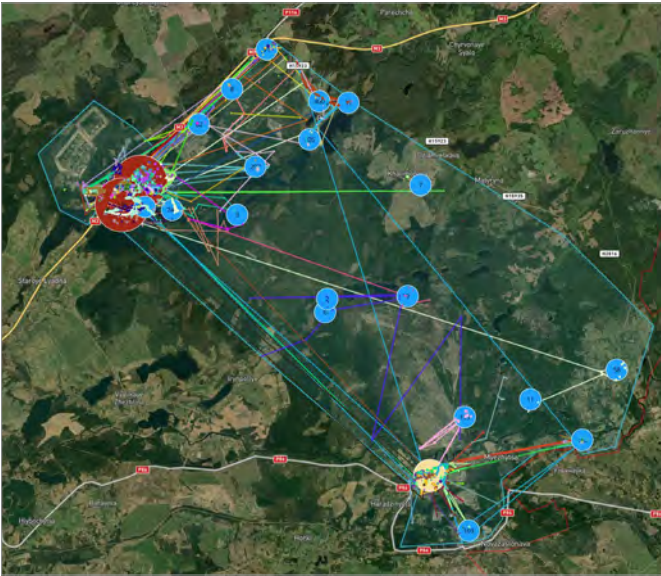
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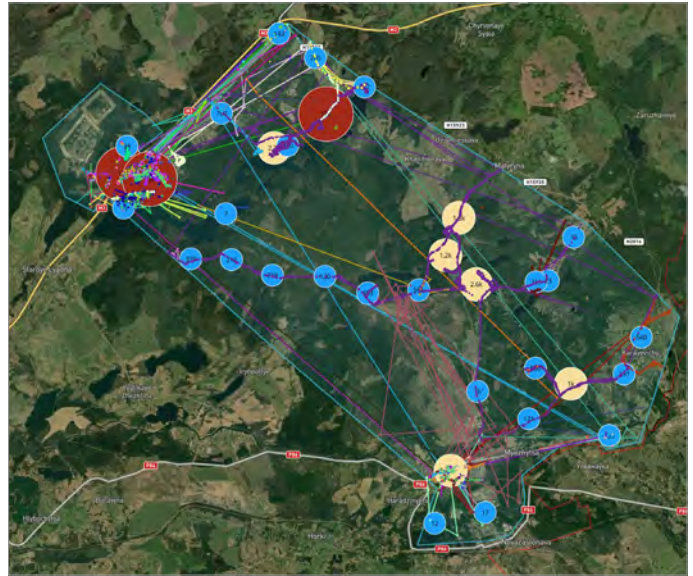
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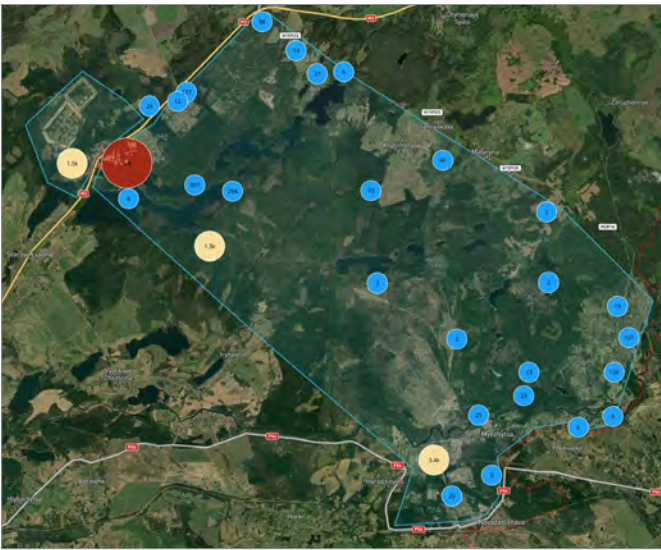
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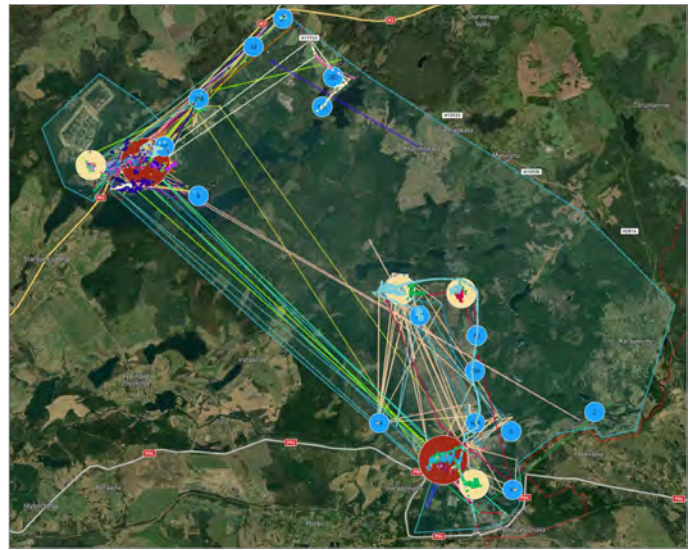
July 2023



August 2023



September 2023



October 2023

Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground Research

Charts and modeling of mobile device activity at Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground between September 2022 and October 2023.

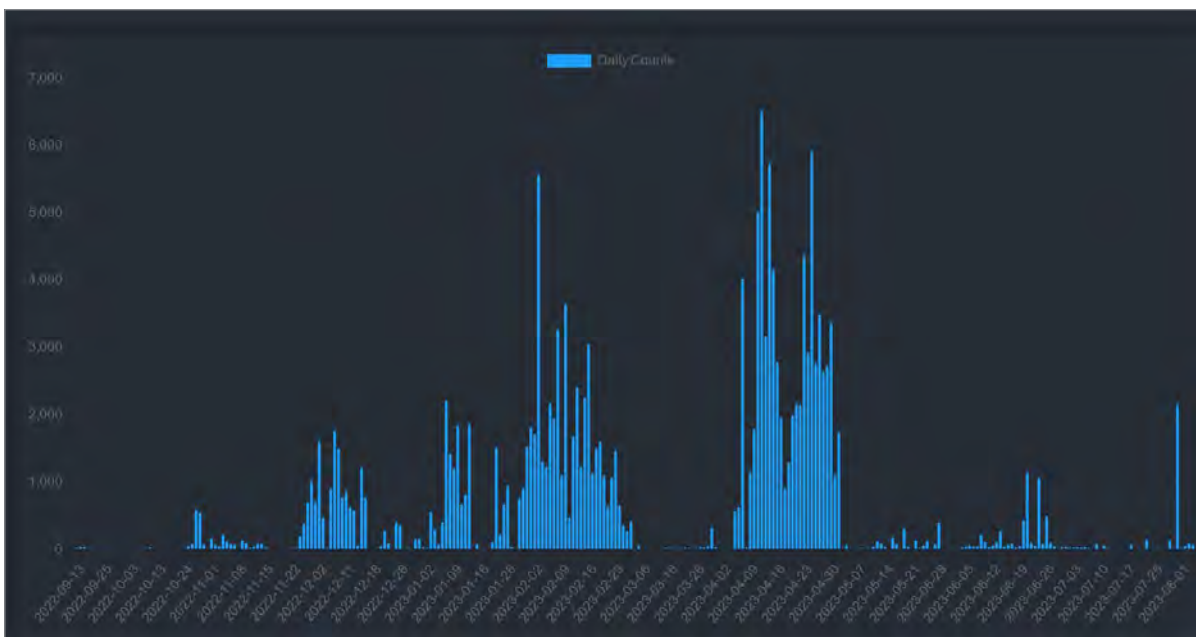


Figure 6: Activity September 2022 — October 2023



September 2022



October 2022



November 2022



December 2022



January 2023



February 2023



March 2023



April 2023



May 2023



June 2023



July 2023



August 2023



September 2023



October 2023

Repischcha Training Ground Research

Charts and modeling of mobile device activity at Repischcha Training Ground between October 2022 and November 2023.

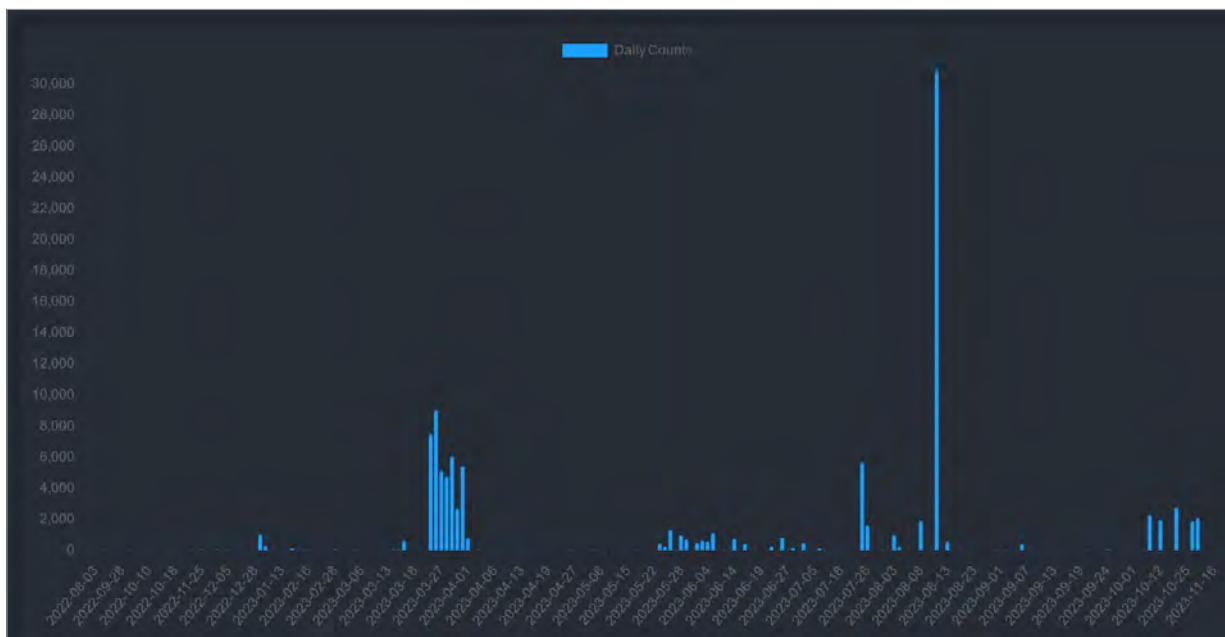


Figure 7: Activity August 2022 — November 2023



October 2022



November 2022



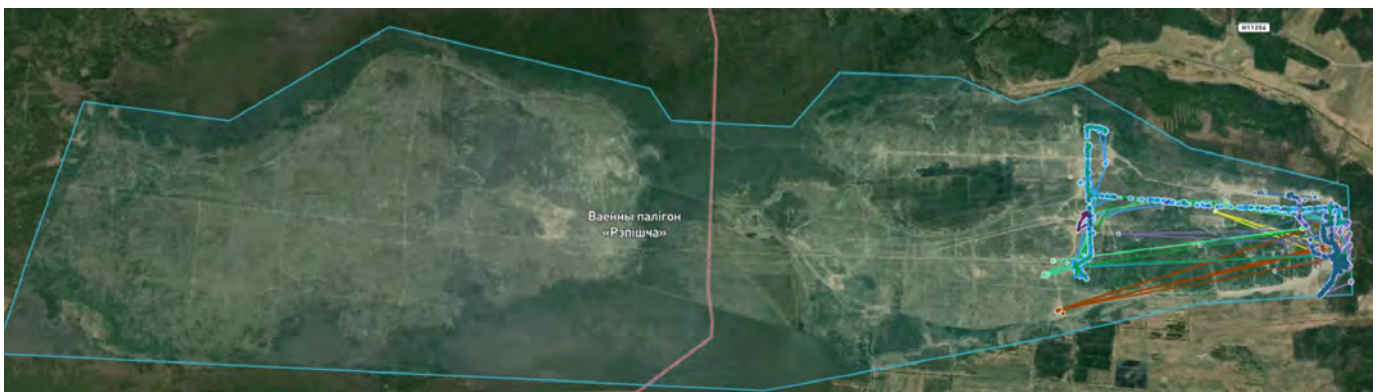
December 2022



January 2023



February 2023



March 2023



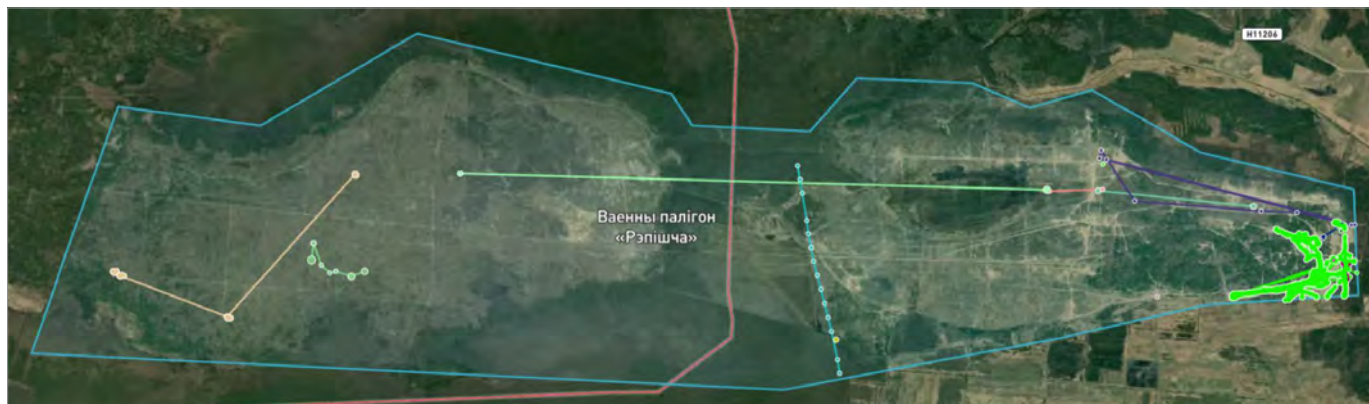
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May 2023



June 2023



July 2023



August 2023



September 2023



October 2023



November 2023

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