

The Sino-Belarusian Relationship: Asymmetric and Symbolic

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Introduction

The Sino-Belarusian relationship has gained widespread attention in Western analyses over the last years, especially since the strained Russo-Belarusian relations in late 2019. However, Minsk has become an ever-closer ally for the People's Republic of China (PRC) for more than a decade. The Republic of Belarus, therefore, is a great case study for China's expansion before and since its use of the overarching theme of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or, respectively, its non-contestation of Russia's predominant role in Eastern Europe.

The recent surge of literature on the relations between Minsk and Beijing provides an excellent basis for evaluating the actual influence of China in

Belarus and its implications for European security. Moreover, the high expectations of both partners are being confronted with geopolitical realities. However, proclaimed interest and diplomatic announcements do not necessarily translate into actual projects, as this analysis will show. Therefore, this paper outlines the development of the Chinese-Belarusian comprehensive strategic partnership in different areas of cooperation. The following four sections examine the political, economic, military and, finally, the cultural-societal sphere. The last section synthesises the findings and draws conclusions for an assessment of Sino-Belarusian relations.

Politics: the Sino-Belarusian strategic partnership falters

The 1990s and 2000s: growing attraction of the Asian vector

After becoming independent in August 1991, Minsk established diplomatic connections with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in January 1992. Already in 1995, Aljaksandr Lukashenka paid his first visit to China. In the same year, Li Peng, premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, visited Belarus in return. In 2000, the "Joint Declaration on Strengthening Comprehensive Cooperation in the 21st Century" was signed.¹ The first president of the PRC to visit Belarus was Jiang Zemin in 2001.² Amidst the intensifying dispute with newly elected Russian President Vladimir Putin over the development of the Russo-Belarusian Union State, China became increasingly attractive to Lukashenka in the early 2000s. Difficult relations with the EU further spurred Lukashenka to tell Xinhua in 2005: "So long as we [Belarus] develop such relations with China, we cannot be isolated."³

Paul Goble adds that during Lukashenka's 2005 visit to Beijing, the Chinese hosts were "impressed by his socialist commitments," making Belarus a

¹ Aliaksandr Tsikhamirau, "China as a Foreign Policy Priority of the Republic of Belarus (1992–2019) [in Russian]," *Actual problems of international relations and global development: collection of scientific papers*, no. 7 (December 30, 2019), 79, <https://doi.org/10.33581/2311-9470-2019-7-71-89>.

² Roza Turabekova, "Belarus in the Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative': The Regional Dimension [in German]," *Belarus-Analysen*, no. 45 (October 31, 2019), 2, <https://doi.org/10.31205/BA.045.01>.

³ Lukashenko quoted in Temur Umarov, "In Belarus, China Is Neither at Odds With Russia nor Wedded to Lukashenko," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, September 7, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82662>; brackets in the original.

“westerly socialist beachhead.”⁴ Due to this ideological proximity, Minsk has been a valuable ally in China’s “anti-Western (and especially anti-American) coalition” until today.⁵ Wooing Beijing became a centrepiece of Belarusian multi-vector foreign policy, not least after the 2006/7 “oil and gas war” with Russia and the EU sanctions against the regime in Minsk.⁶ In fact, the economic and diplomatic relationship has rapidly intensified since 2005. Belarus also began to support China on internationally disputed issues like Taiwan and Tibet.

When, due to the 2008 financial and economic crisis, the economic situation in Belarus seriously deteriorated, China stepped in and secured Belarus’ economic independence for the first time. Finally, in 2009, China supported the status of the Republic of Belarus as a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as the only non-Asian country to date. Despite such positive signals from Beijing, in the end, Lukashenka pushed the relationship forward in this phase.⁷

2010 until 2013: friends become strategic partners

The early 2010s saw new global and regional trends. First, the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 heralded the return of military power as a means of the Kremlin’s foreign policy. In 2009, the EU launched its Eastern Partnership, creating new conditions for a possible cooperation with the countries along the EU’s eastern external border. Moreover, in 2010, the Kremlin incited a de-facto competition over Eurasian integration by creating the Customs Union, which aimed to maintain Russia’s supremacy in, and exclude external actors from its Near Abroad, Turabekova argues.⁸ Meanwhile, a generational change in the Chinese leadership took place in 2012/13. Xi Jinping succeeded Hu Jintao as President of the PRC. As a

⁴ Paul Goble, “Belarus-China Cooperation Ideological as Well as Economic,” *Jamestown Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 171 (December 10, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-china-cooperation-ideological-as-well-as-economic/>.

⁵ Stefan Wolff, *China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for OSCE* (Birmingham/Hamburg/Vienna: OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, March 2021), 34, https://osce-network.net/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/China-BRI-Report-2021-fin.pdf.

⁶ Umarov, “In Belarus,” Turabekova, “Belarus,” 2-3.

⁷ Turabekova, “Belarus,” 2-3; Goble, “Belarus-China Cooperation.”

⁸ Turabekova, “Belarus,” 4.

result, an outward looking foreign policy oriented towards economic interests replaced the previous selective cooperation with ideologically close countries like Belarus.⁹

However, as Turabekova also stresses, the common roots of the Belarusian and Chinese leadership in the Marxist-Leninist ideology continues to influence the relationship.¹⁰ Besides, Xi and Lukashenka seem to have a close personal friendship. In 2010, then Vice-President Xi Jinping visited Belarus for the first time.¹¹

During the early 2010s, Sino-Belarusian relations developed smoothly. New joint ventures of Belarusian and Chinese companies were established, an agreement on constructing a joint industrial park was reached, and cultural relations intensified.¹² Finally, the relationship was taken to a new level on July 16, 2013, when Lukashenka and Xi Jinping signed a joint statement on establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership in Beijing.¹³

While Belarus celebrated the comprehensive strategic partnership as a huge success, China still displayed modest interest in the political partnership. Marin suggests that Lukashenka is “overestimating the link between *political* relations and an *economic* partnership.”¹⁴ China’s interest at the time was mainly in expanding the transit of goods, Belarus’ growing role as a buyer of Chinese products, and the realisation of a joint industrial park (today known

⁹ Turabekova, “Belarus,” 4.

¹⁰ Roza Turabekova, “Belarusian-Chinese Relations: Origins, Formats, Structure [in Russian],” *Nashe Mnenie* [Our Opinion], December 4, 2019, <https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/6988.html>.

¹¹ “Lukashenka told what he considers the most important in the Belarusian-Chinese friendship [in Russian],” *BeITA*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-rasskazal-cto-schitaet-samym-vazhnym-v-belorussko-kitajskoj-druzhbe-212564-2016/>.

¹² Turabekova, “Belarus,” 4.

¹³ President of the People’s Republic of China and President of the Republic of Belarus, “Joint Declaration of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Belarus on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership [in Russian],” July 16, 2013, http://russian.china.org.cn/exclusive/txt/2013-07/17/content_29440117.htm.

¹⁴ Anaïs Marin, *Minsk-Beijing: What Kind of Strategic Partnership?*, *Russie.Nei.Vision* 102 (Paris: IFRI, 2017), 14, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/marin_minsk_beijing_strategic_partnership_2017.pdf.

as *Great Stone*).¹⁵ In addition, Lukashenka proposed Belarus as the point of departure for deeper integration of China and the Eurasian Economic Space (former Customs Union) in 2012, proclaiming: “If you come to Belarus, consider that you have come to Kazakhstan, consider that you have come to Russia.”¹⁶

Lukashenka’s integration attempt did not catch much attention, whereas Xi Jinping’s presentation of his bold “One Belt, One Road” strategy (now Belt-Road-Initiative or BRI) in September 2013 received particular attention.¹⁷ However, it soon became apparent that the initiative “brought together in an increasingly coherent and ambitious strategy multiple separate domestic and foreign policies that predated the launch of the BRI.”¹⁸ Indeed, China signed strategic partnership agreements with Kazakhstan and Ukraine already in 2011.¹⁹ Moreover, a year before the BRI, China launched the 17+1 initiative, including most countries of Central Eastern Europe, but not Belarus (and Ukraine). All in all, the BRI established a framework to connect the capacious European market with China’s potent factories along several land-based corridors (the Silk Road Economic Belt or SREB) and sea routes. China, nonetheless, was seemingly aware of the geopolitical competition over the gateway countries in-between the EU and Russia, above all Ukraine and Belarus.²⁰

Jaszczuk suggests that in 2013 “Belarus itself was certainly not China’s first choice for BRI.”²¹ Instead, Ukraine was Beijing’s preferred partner, due to

¹⁵ Turabekova, “Belarus,” 4.

¹⁶ “Years of Friendship and Cooperation [in Russian],” *Segodnya Belarus’ [Belarus Today]*, January 19, 2012, <https://www.sb.by/articles/gody-druzhby-i-sotrudnichestva.html>.

¹⁷ For the origins of China’s BRI, Wolff, *China’s Belt and Road Initiative*, 9-11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹ On the development of BRI in Eurasia, Peter Braga and Kaneshko Sangar, “Strategy Amidst Ambiguity: The Belt and Road and China’s Foreign Policy Approach to Eurasia,” *The Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues/La Revue de Dialogues Inter-Régionaux*, January 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.25518/2593-9483.132>.

²⁰ Anthony V. Rinna, “The Beijing–Minsk Partnership and Belarus’s Role in China’s Economic Relations with the European Union,” *China Report* 57, no. 1 (2021): 81-82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445520984756>; Braga and Sangar, “Strategy Amidst Ambiguity.”

²¹ Waldemar Jaszczuk, “The Belarus Crisis Threatens China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *China Monitor*, Warsaw Institute, September 4, 2020, <https://warsawinstitute.org/belarus-crisis-threatens-chinas-belt-road-initiative/>.

its access to the Black Sea, its better industrial base and established role as a major food exporter.²² Furthermore, Kyiv was to sign a free trade and association agreement with the EU, making it an even better fit for China's intentions.²³

2014-2019: an exemplary relationship

Consequently, Euromaidan and Russia's military intervention in Ukraine troubled China, both politically and in terms of its economic plans.²⁴ Now, Minsk could convince Beijing with "its appearance of stability and predictability [...] and the country presented relatively low military and political risks compared to its neighbours."²⁵ Thus, the war in Eastern Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea brought China and Belarus closer. Unsurprisingly, in 2014 Belarusian national media started to dedicate more attention to Sino-Belarusian relations, contends Astapenia.²⁶ Foreign interest, by contrast, remained low.²⁷

Both states further invested in the relationship. Exchanges of high-level officials frequently occurred.²⁸ In addition, Lukashenka visited China every year between 2015 and 2019. Xi Jinping's visit in May 2015 underscored the importance of Belarus in China's BRI strategy as, on this occasion, the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed.²⁹ The second "capstone"

²² Jakub Jakóbowski and Kamil Kłysiński, *The Non-Strategic Partnership Belarus-China Relations*, OSW Studies 81 (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2021), 12, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW-Studies_The-non-strategic-partnership_net.pdf; Jaszczuk, "Belarus Crisis Threatens."

²³ Marin, *Minsk-Beijing*, 24.

²⁴ Anthony Rinna, "The China Factor in Russia's Response to the Belarus Crisis," *New Eastern Europe*, August 21, 2020, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/08/21/the-china-factor-in-russias-response-to-the-belarus-crisis/>.

²⁵ Jaszczuk, "Belarus Crisis Threatens."

²⁶ Ryhor Astapenia, "Belarusian-Chinese Relations: From Great Promise to Failure," *Belarus Digest*, April 11, 2014, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarusian-chinese-relations-from-great-promise-to-failure/>.

²⁷ See a notable exception in Artem Shrajbman, "Belarusian-Chinese Relations: Expectations, Problems and Perspectives" (Kyiv: FES - Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2014), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/11022.pdf>.

²⁸ Siarhei Bohdan, "China as An Epic Failure of Belarusian Foreign Policy," *Belarus Digest*, September 14, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210316150831/https://belarusdigest.com/story/china-as-an-epic-failure-of-belarusian-foreign-policy/>.

²⁹ Rinna, "Beijing-Minsk Partnership," 81.

document is Lukashenka's Presidential Directive No. 5 "On the development of bilateral relations of the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China" from September 2015. These documents highlight two central features of the Sino-Belarusian political cooperation: mutual support of sovereignty and territorial integrity.³⁰ Hence, Belarus supports China's position on Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Falungong.³¹

China's strong principle of non-interference in domestic affairs and its promise of mutual support allow Lukashenka to play the "China card" in order to gain – at least symbolically – in sovereignty when Belarus' independence is contested.³² In other words, Belarus is using its multi-vector foreign policy to signal Russia that it might become (mostly economically) independent.³³ For example, when tensions between Minsk and Moscow rose following the crisis in Ukraine, Lukashenka sought closer relations with Beijing and, in addition, with the EU. The Belarusian Foreign Policy Index indicates this re-dimensioning of foreign policy (see figure 1, p. 154).³⁴

³⁰ President of the Republic of Belarus and President of the People's Republic of China, "Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China [in Russian]," May 10, 2015, para.1, https://www.pravo.by/upload/docs/op/I01500037_1445979600.pdf; President of the Republic of Belarus, "Directive No. 5. On the development of bilateral relations of the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China [in Russian]," August 31, 2015, 1, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P01500005&p1=1>.

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Relations between China and Belarus [in Chinese]," updated February 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_678892/sbgx_678896/.

³² Jaszczyk, "Belarus Crisis Threatens."

³³ Krzysztof Mrozek, "Belarus in the Multipolar World", *New Eastern Europe*, March 5, 2019, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/03/05/belarus-in-the-multipolar-world/>.

³⁴ Both the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) and Minsk Dialogue (MD) allocate positive and negative points to diplomatic, economic, and political events. The index results from the addition of all points in the observation period. While BISS published both a detailed rating of the events for each country as well as a generalized guideline on how to assess events, MD only publishes the accounts for each country. See for example Dzianis Melyantsou, ed., *Belarus Foreign Policy Index*, no. 31, March-April 2016 (Vilnius: Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016), 19-23, https://belinstitute.com/sites/default/files/2020-06/BISS_FPI31_2016en.pdf; Dzianis Melyantsou, ed., *Minsk Barometer*, no. 1, January-February 2018 (Minsk: Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations, 2018), 26-30, <http://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/reports/pdf/1-en.pdf>.

BELARUSIAN FOREIGN POLICY INDEX **BELARUSIAN INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES NO. 1-35**

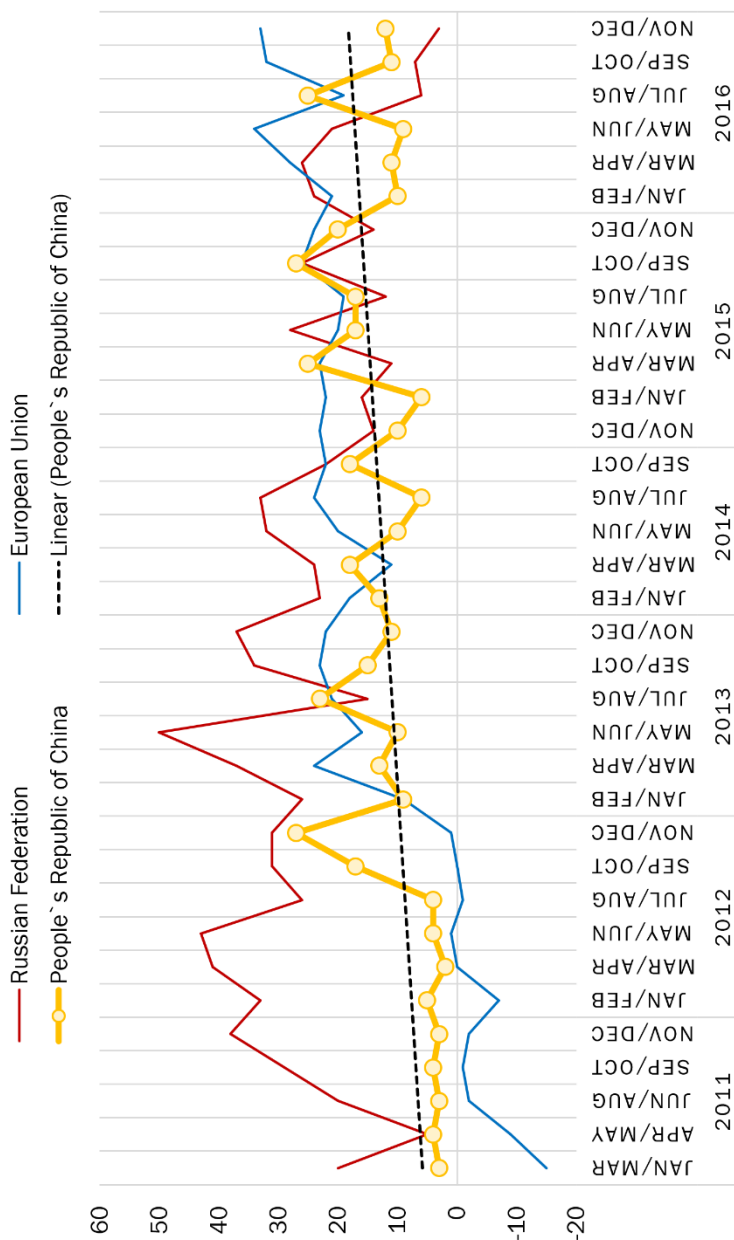


Figure 1 - Belarusian Foreign Policy Index 2011-2016 for the Russian Federation, the European Union and the People's Republic of China including a linear trend of the PRC's index (own presentation, source: Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, Foreign Policy Index No. 1-35).

BELARUSIAN FOREIGN POLICY INDEX MINSK BAROMETER NO. 1-20

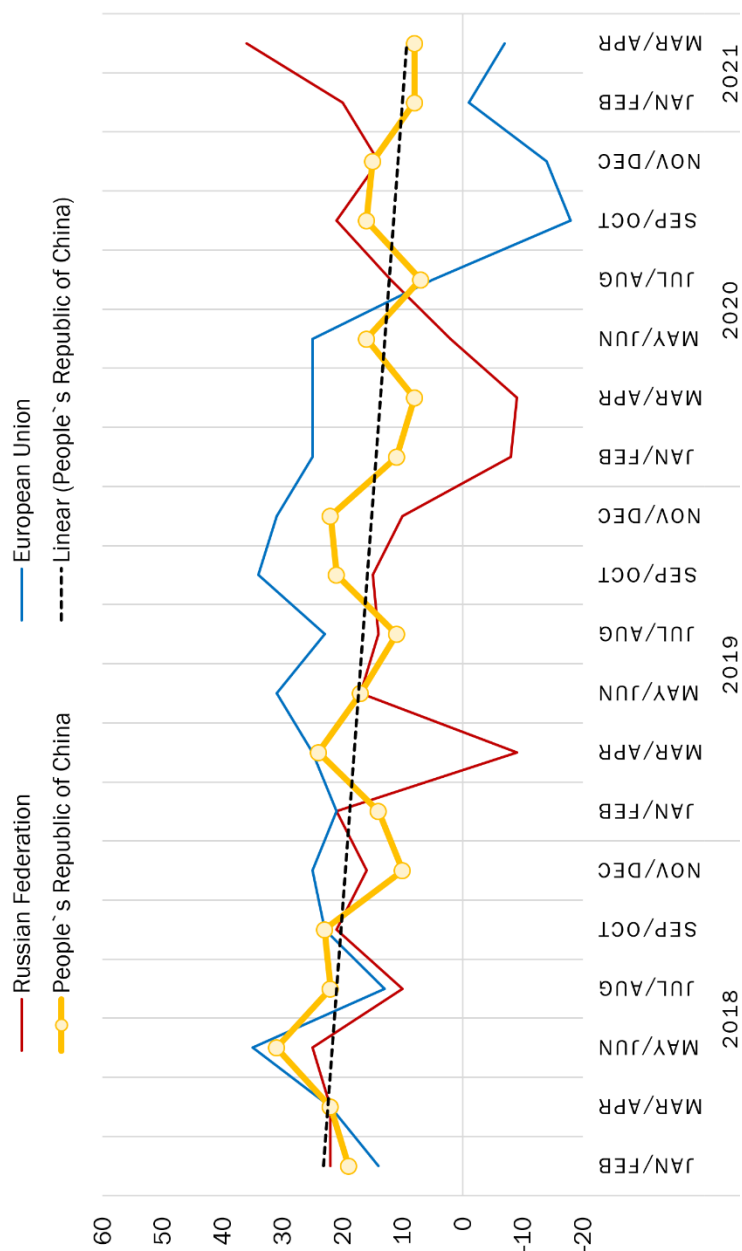


Figure 2 - Belarusian Foreign Policy Index 2011-2016 for the Russian Federation, the European Union and the People's Republic of China including a linear trend of the PRC's index (own presentation, source: Minsk Dialogue, Minsk Barometer No. 1-20).

Since 2015, most bilateral cooperation has been labelled as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.³⁵ In 2016, Lukashenka and Xi presented the “Joint Statement on Establishing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Featuring Mutual Trust and Win-Win Cooperation.”³⁶ Thus, the political partnership reached the highest possible level as defined in China’s partnership hierarchy.³⁷

At that time, Belarus’ China policy shifted towards a more economy-driven approach. Lukashenka, in 2016, underscored the importance of economy in the relationship appointing his Economic Advisor Kiryl Rudy as the new Belarusian ambassador to the PRC.³⁸ Furthermore, Minsk became an observer in the 17+1 initiative,³⁹ and China began opening its market to Belarusian food exports.⁴⁰ In 2017, Lukashenka took part in the first “Belt and Road” Summit. Belarus expressed confidence in becoming “a leading regional participant in the Belt and Road initiative along the continental bridge between Europe and Asia.”⁴¹ In 2019, Lukashenka paid an official visit to China for the second “Belt and Road” Summit. For all these reasons, the BRI has certainly become the “backbone” of the relationship.

Creating a bridge from China to Europe required Minsk to dismantle the sanctions imposed by the EU since 2006 and improve its relations with Brussels and other European capitals. The EU lifted its sanctions in 2015/16, but Belarus’ distinct pro-Russian orientation prevented a more profound

³⁵ Turabekova, “Belarus,” 5.

³⁶ Wolff, *China’s Belt and Road Initiative*, 34.

³⁷ Braga and Sangar, “Strategy Amidst Ambiguity.”

³⁸ Turabekova, “Belarus,” 5.

³⁹ Huo Yuzhen, “The China-CEEC Summit Opens a New Chapter in China-CEEC Cooperation,” Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:viJtO-tUzmIJ:www.cpifa.org/en/cms/book/322+&cd=1&hl=de&ct=clnk&gl=at>.

⁴⁰ Alexandra Murphy, “Belarus-China Relations,” Backgrounder No. 6 (Minsk: Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations, February 6, 2019), http://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/backgrounders/pdf/2019-02-06_MD_Backgrounder-6_Murphy.pdf.

⁴¹ Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the People’s Republic of China, “On Political Relations between Belarus and China [in Russian],” <https://china.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral/>.

integration than limited access to the Eastern Partnership program and prospective visa liberalisations.

In 2015, Russia founded the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), replacing the Eurasian Economic Space and the Customs Union. Moscow quickly showed its acceptance of the BRI announcing to link the Silk Road Economic Belt and the EAEU. However, the question of the practical implementation remained unanswered. As a result, Belarus found itself amidst a threefold politico-economic integration process. The signing of the BRI-EAEU cooperation agreement in May 2018 helped deconflict the two integration projects and increased Belarus' importance as a transit country.⁴² The agreement, however, does not provide lower tariffs but harmonises the legal frameworks for customs, sanitary and phytosanitary measures and other technical issues of the cooperation with China. Regarding Belarus, the agreement also establishes a legal framework for compliance with WTO key principles, as Minsk is only joining WTO.⁴³ Furthermore, bilateral relations between China and Belarus reached another high point with visa-free travel in 2018.⁴⁴

Despite these positive dynamics, the Belarusian Foreign Policy Index has shown a slight downward trend in the Sino-Belarusian partnership since 2018 (see figure 2, p. 155). However, it is noteworthy that the PRC index is almost exclusively made up of positive scores. In contrast, the more dynamic relations with Russia and the EU over the same period are characterised by greater volatility of their points. Therefore, this trend only shows a plateau in the Belarusian relationship with China, not a deterioration.

⁴² Rinna, "Beijing-Minsk Partnership," 83-84, 86-88; Brian G. Carlson, "Why China Will Support Russia in Belarus," *Diplomat*, August 31, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/why-china-will-support-russia-in-belarus/>; Ziguu Li, "Connecting the BRI with Eurasian Economic Union Is Strategic Choice of China, Russia," CGTN.com, April 26, 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514d78676a4d34457a6333566d54/index.html>.

⁴³ "EAEU-China Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement Takes Effect," *BelTA*, October 25, 2019, <https://eng.belta.by/economics/view/eaec-china-trade-and-economic-cooperation-agreement-takes-effect-125378-2019/>.

⁴⁴ "Belarus-China Visa-Free Agreement Comes into Force," *Xinhua*, August 10, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/12/c_137383908.htm.

Simultaneously, since 2018, Moscow has articulated with increasing frequency its “desire” to deepen the integration of the Russo-Belarusian Union State.⁴⁵ For this reason, China may have taken a more cautious approach vis-à-vis Belarus. Playing a geopolitical game over Belarus, as some researchers argue, is not worth the effort for Beijing.⁴⁶ Minsk, for its part, repeatedly tried to play China and Russia off to its advantage.⁴⁷ Beijing supported Lukashenka several times through loans and credit lines, thus strengthening Belarus’ financial independence. Still, many Chinese credit lines come with economic conditionality, despite the titular non-conditional political relationship. In December 2019, however, China significantly strengthened Lukashenka’s negotiating position versus Putin with a non-tied loan of USD 500 million.⁴⁸ Although, it is false to assume that Beijing was (and still is) motivated to “subsidise the Belarusian economy or to stand up for Minsk in a possible conflict with Moscow.”⁴⁹

2020 and beyond: a Health Silk Road with potholes

As Lukashenka scored a victory in the December 2019 negotiations with Putin over subsidies for oil, gas and the coordination of tax systems, at the beginning of 2020, Belarus urgently needed to diversify its diplomatic relations and economy further.⁵⁰ Over the horizon, however, a health crisis emerged in China.

Following the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan at the turn of the year, Belarus sent its first humanitarian aid to China in January 2020. Later that year, China sent masks, other medical supplies and advice on how to handle

⁴⁵ Yauheni Preiherman, “Unsettled Union: The Future of the Belarus-Russia Relationship,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, January 21, 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_unsettled_union_the_future_of_the_belarus_russia_relationship/.

⁴⁶ Maxim Samorukov and Temur Umarov, “China’s Relations with Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova: Less Than Meets the Eye,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, December 31, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83538>.

⁴⁷ Lydia Misnik, “Replace Russia?: how Belarus is friends with China [in Russian],” *Gazeta.Ru*, August 11, 2020, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/08/11_a_13189927.shtml.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 12.

⁵⁰ Preiherman, “Unsettled Union.”

the Corona pandemic in return.⁵¹ However, Lukashenka largely downplayed the pandemic before the presidential elections in August 2020.⁵² He only really changed his mind after the elections. As Belarus became the second country worldwide to approve Russia's vaccine *Sputnik V* in December 2020, he even called on the people to get vaccinated.⁵³ In February 2021, Belarus received 100,000 doses of China's *Sinopharm* free of charge, starting vaccination in mid-March.⁵⁴ Another batch of Chinese vaccines for 150,000 people was delivered in May.⁵⁵ Belarus is expecting one million additional doses by the end of August.⁵⁶

While cooperation along the *Health Silk Road* seemingly worked well, the mass protests following the presidential elections in August 2020 strained Sino-Belarusian relations noticeably. Before the elections, China already refrained from granting Belarus new projects or loans over its quarrels with Russia.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, Xi Jinping was the first head of state to congratulate Lukashenka on his "election victory." He noted:

China and Belarus are 'iron brothers' and all-weather partners. I attach great importance to the development of Sino-Belarusian relations and value the good working relations and personal friendship with you.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 9.

⁵² Benno Zogg, "Europe's Outlier: Belarus and Covid-19," April 29, 2020, <https://isnblog.ethz.ch/politics/europes-outlier-belarus-and-covid-19>.

⁵³ "Lukashenko 'grateful' for Russian Aid as Belarus Leader Meets Putin", *Euronews*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/02/22/lukashenko-grateful-for-russian-aid-as-belarus-leader-meets-putin-in-sochi>.

⁵⁴ Dzianis Melyantsov, ed., *Minsk Barometer*, no. 20, March-April 2021 (Minsk: Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations, 2021), 11, http://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/reports/pdf/MB_20_en.pdf

⁵⁵ "Plane with 300,000 Doses of Chinese COVID-19 Vaccine Lands in Minsk," *BelTA*, May 18, 2021, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/plane-with-300000-chinese-covid-19-vaccine-lands-in-minsk-139976-2021/>.

⁵⁶ "Belarus to Get Million Doses of China's COVID-19 Vaccine in August," *BelTA*, August 16, 2021, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-to-get-million-doses-of-chinas-covid-19-vaccine-in-august-142498-2021/>.

⁵⁷ Reid Standish, "Is China Cooling On Belarus's Lukashenka?", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-china-cooling-on-lukashenka-investment-leverage-eu-moscow/31136175.html>.

⁵⁸ "Foreign leaders congratulate Alexander Lukashenko on winning elections [in Russian]," *BelTA*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/zarubezhnye-lidery-pozdravljajut-aleksandra-lukashenko-s-pobedoy-na-vyborah-402300-2020/>.

In August 2020, Chinese officials spoke out against international interference in Belarus' internal affairs following Western criticism of the crackdown. However, this referred to Western support for the opposition only. Russia's "support" for Lukashenka got tacit approval. In the end, China and Russia have the same interests towards Belarus: prevention of a colour revolution and non-interference by external (Western) actors.⁵⁹

Chinese party media at first paid little attention to the 2020 post-election protests. As political unrest continued for days, the coverage followed Russia's propaganda line and some official statements of Lukashenka himself but refrained from adopting other Belarusian narratives.⁶⁰ One article even emphasised that Lukashenka may need Russia's assistance in handling the situation after the elections.⁶¹ It is even possible that China would have backed an open Russian intervention despite all the argumentative difficulties.⁶² Beijing generally prefers to preserve the status quo in its partner countries but not at all costs. China fears the deterioration of EU-Belarus relations, which could harm its economic interests, especially Belarus' transit role in the SREB.⁶³ Hence, Xi Jinping will ultimately be choosing stability over Lukashenka.⁶⁴

The presidential election of 2020 marked a change in the Belarus-China relationship. The sanctions imposed by the EU deepen the financial and political dependency on Russia. Lukashenka, therefore, seeks China's support even more often, as he clings to power and wants to appear

⁵⁹ Carlson, "Why China;" Reid Standish, "Belarusian Protests Upend Lukashenka's Geopolitical Game With Russia, China, The West," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarusian-protests-upend-lukashenka-s-geopolitical-game-with-russia-china-the-west-/30784169.html>.

⁶⁰ Umarov, "In Belarus;" Interview with a Minsk-based China expert, March 12, 2021.

⁶¹ Zhang Yanlu, "Will Belarus Face the Same Fate as Ukraine with Intervention from the West?," *Global Times*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1198391.shtml>.

⁶² Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 10.

⁶³ Carlson, "Why China;" Standish, "Is China Cooling?"

⁶⁴ Dimitri Simes and David Saveliev, "China's Support for Belarus' Lukashenko Masks Belt and Road Qualms," *Nikkei Asia*, October 9, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-s-support-for-Belarus-Lukashenko-masks-Belt-and-Road-qualms>.

sovereign.⁶⁵ He constantly tries to sweet-talk China into turning on the money supply again.⁶⁶ However, it seems that China is respecting Russia's leadership role in the Belarusian crisis. The appointment of Xie Xiaoyong as the PRC's ambassador to Belarus in autumn 2020 underlines this; he has a long experience working with Russia and is well connected in Moscow.⁶⁷

In contrast to Beijing's cautious stance of 2020, increasing Western sanctions in 2021 seem to amplify Russian and Chinese support for Belarus.⁶⁸ As Jakóbowski noted, Chinese party media took an anti-Western attitude criticising the EU's sanctions after the forced landing of a civil airliner in Minsk on 23 May 2021.⁶⁹ Moreover, Minsk supported China on non-interference in Hong Kong, and Beijing rejected the EU's draft resolution on human rights in Belarus in the UN.⁷⁰ However, China is still aware of the risks of supporting Lukashenka. Arseny Sivitski indicates that Beijing knows that "cooperation on a whole series of fronts could become frozen as a result."⁷¹ In a recent interview, he added that "despite Beijing's rhetoric, its interest in Belarus is decreasing day by day."⁷²

It remains to be seen how the political dimension of Sino-Belarusian relations will develop. In any case, the Russian factor has once again gained more importance since 2020. China trusts Russia's intentions in Belarus,

⁶⁵ "Lukashenko: There is no surrender of sovereignty with me [in Russian]," *BelTA*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-sdacha-suvereniteta-to-ne-so-mnoj-443163-2021/>.

⁶⁶ "Lukashenko: Minsk and Beijing successfully resist all hostile attacks and demonstrate the strength of friendship and resilience [in Russian]," *BelTA*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-minsk-i-pekín-uspeshno-protivostojat-vsem-vrazhdebny-m-vypadam-i-demonstrirujut-krepost-445926-2021/>.

⁶⁷ Interview with Minsk-based China expert.

⁶⁸ Raffaello Pantucci, "Why Russia and China Are Competing to Woo Belarus," *Spectator Australia*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/how-russia-and-china-seek-to-woo-pariah-states-like-belarus>.

⁶⁹ Jakub Jakóbowski, "The Belarus-China 'Iron Brotherhood' Begins to Rust," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, May 27, 2021, <https://cepa.org/the-belarus-china-iron-brotherhood-begins-to-rust/>.

⁷⁰ Melyantsou, *Minsk Barometer no. 20*, 10.

⁷¹ Simes and Saveliev, "China's Support."

⁷² Arseny Sivitsky, "Scenario of Lukashenka's Resignation Satisfies Washington DC, Moscow and Brussels," *Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies*, July 2, 2021, <https://forstrategy.org/en/posts/20210702>.

while Moscow respects Beijing's (economic) interests too. The open question is whether the Belarusian China policy is now driven by Minsk, Moscow, or Beijing. To a lesser extent, the fate of Lukashenka will have an impact too, given his personal investment in the relations.

Economics: an odd couple and a Great Stone

Trade and economic interests

Belarus's geographic distance from China, limited resources, and small market narrow the prospects for Sino-Belarusian economic cooperation.⁷³ In fact, Minsk is not an important trading partner for the PRC. Belarus' main export products are fertilisers (61%) and milk and meat (12%).⁷⁴ In addition, about 10% of Belarusian exports are plastics. The remaining approx. 17% account for other categories like wood and machinery.⁷⁵ In contrast, China's exports to Belarus include more advanced products. However, until today Belarus has not managed to enter the Chinese market with its machinery and heavy-duty vehicles.

Moreover, Marin notes that China is a tough business partner.⁷⁶ The trade balance is negative, with Belarus importing roughly five times worth of goods than exporting. In 2020, Belarus exported goods worth USD 748.2 million, imports from China amounted to USD 3.7 billion.⁷⁷ Thus, China was heads-up with Ukraine as Belarus' second-largest trading partner after Russia (or third, like figure 3 indicates, if the EU is taken as a whole).

⁷³ Umarov, "In Belarus."

⁷⁴ Samorukov and Umarov, "China's Relations."

⁷⁵ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 18.

⁷⁶ Marin, *Minsk-Beijing*, 8.

⁷⁷ National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, "Commodity Exports from the Republic of Belarus by Non-CIS Countries," 2021, https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-excel/Oficial_statistika/Godovwe/Export_vne_SNG20g-1-en.xlsx; National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, "Commodity Imports to the Republic of Belarus by Non-CIS Countries," 2021, https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-excel/Oficial_statistika/Godovwe/Import_vne_SNG20g-1-en.xlsx.

FOREIGN TRADE IN GOODS OF BELARUS

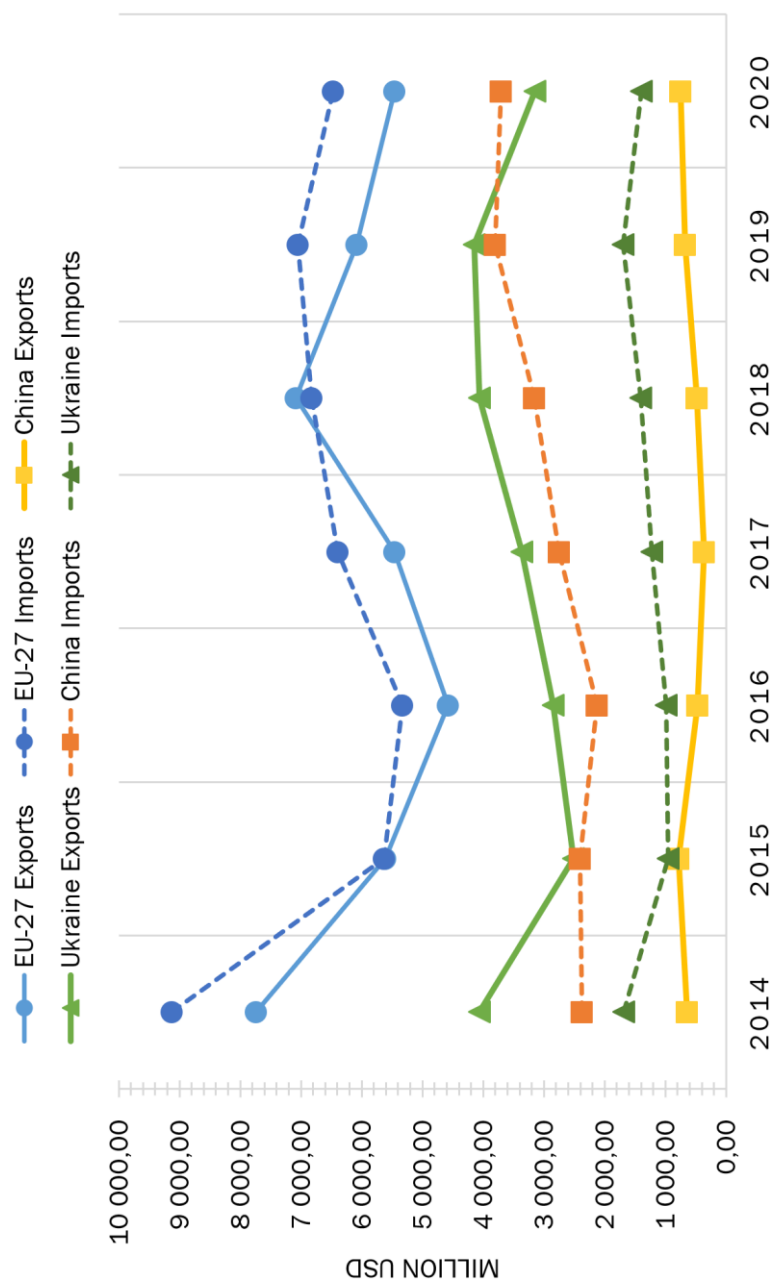


Figure 3 - Foreign Trade (goods) of Belarus 2014-2020 with the EU-27 members (as of 2021), China and Ukraine (own presentation, source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus).

Belarus has established itself as an intermediary in the EU-China trade, Belarusian economics argue.⁷⁸ Several experts identify the geographical location as a great asset. Establishing a presence in Belarus is arguably one of Beijing's core interests, as the country is a steppingstone to the markets of the EU and EAEU.⁷⁹ Yet, using the EAEU Customs Code, Russia is effectively curtailing the free entry of Chinese goods assembled in Belarus to the EAEU.⁸⁰ One victim of this practice is the car manufacturer BelGee, a joint venture of Belarus' BelAZ and China's Geely launched in November 2017. The company never became profitable and suspended production in mid-2020.⁸¹

As Chinese products cannot easily access the EAEU market, China was not eager to open its market for foreign goods from Belarus too. However, Belarus wants to sell food, trucks, and agricultural machinery to China, which is a potent alternative to the Russian market.⁸² Especially the high demand for food imports in China, accompanied by political promotion from Xi and Lukashenka, leads to continuous growth in this sector.⁸³ Thus, Belarus' food exports amounted to USD 250 million or a third of the overall exports in 2020.⁸⁴

Furthermore, Belarus seeks short-term profits from foreign direct investments, economic modernisation and wants to attract Chinese residents and investors in the joint Chinese-Belarusian industrial park. Developing

⁷⁸ P.V. Hushcha and A.V. Gribov, "The Current State and Prospects of Economic Cooperation between Belarus and China," *Ehkonomika i Banki (Economics and Banks)*, no. 2 (2018): 75-76.

⁷⁹ Rinna, "Beijing–Minsk Partnership," e.g. 80, 85; see also Wolff, *China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 34.

⁸⁰ Arseny Sivitsky, "Belarus-China strategic partners and iron brothers," *Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies*, October 21, 2020, <https://forstrategy.org/en/posts/20201021>.

⁸¹ Samorukov and Umarov, "China's Relations."

⁸² Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 8.

⁸³ "Lukashenko: Belarusian companies have broken into the Chinese market and are now expanding there [in Russian]," *BelTA*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belorusskie-predpriyatija-prorvalis-na-kitajskij-rynok-i-teper-razvorachivajutsja-tam-433436-2021/>; Kiryl Rudy, "Belarus and China: Growth and Development," interview, *Export of Belarus (Advertising and Information Magazine)* 15, no. 4 (2018): 17.

⁸⁴ "Lukashenko: Belarusian companies," National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, "Commodity Exports from the Republic of Belarus by Non-CIS Countries."

high-tech sectors such as space and navigation, biotechnologies, and quantum computing are Belarus long-term goals.⁸⁵ That way, the Belarusian leadership wants to reduce its dependence on Russia's economic influence.

Investments, loans, and modernisation

Also, in terms of financial support, Russia remains the largest donor of Belarus with 45.5% or about USD 7.6 billion.⁸⁶ Belarusian debts to China amount to only 20% of total foreign public debt.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, Chinese money helped to keep Belarus' economy afloat. Credits to Belarus totalled USD 16 billion by 2014.⁸⁸ In addition, several hundred million USD flow into Belarus annually as non-conditional and non-refundable development aid (e.g., housing construction or the *Great Stone Industrial Park*). However, the bulk of Belarusian debt to China arises from tied loans.⁸⁹ Moreover, Belarus is not the principal benefactor of China's money in the wider region, as Wolff observes:

While Belarus is generally hailed as one of the great success stories of the BRI [...], in terms of actual investment China's engagement with Ukraine has by far exceeded its engagement with Belarus and Moldova, both in the period before and since the inception of the BRI.⁹⁰

However, in 2019, China granted a USD 15 billion line of credit to the Development Bank of the Republic of Belarus.⁹¹ Belarus also actively seeks Chinese support to modernise, its "petrified and ineffective Belarusian economic system."⁹² From 2007 to 2019, China provided a meagre USD 4.6 billion in export loans for infrastructure and production projects in Belarus.⁹³ Although a word of warning is in order about drawing conclusions based on

⁸⁵ Hushcha and Gribov, "Current State and Prospects," 77-78.

⁸⁶ Sergei Kuznetsov, "Belarus Seeks Spot on China's Expansion Map," *Observator Finansowy* [*Financial Observer*], January 20, 2019, <https://www.observatorfinansowy.pl/in-english/business/belarus-seeks-spot-on-chinas-expansion-map/>.

⁸⁷ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 23.

⁸⁸ Astapenia, "Belarusian-Chinese Relations."

⁸⁹ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 9.

⁹⁰ Wolff, *China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 34.

⁹¹ Standish, "Belarusian Protests."

⁹² Jakóbowski, "'Iron Brotherhood'."

⁹³ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 21.

these billion USD credits as they rarely materialize, because most of the time, Belarusian banks and companies only partially retrieve the committed money. Samorukov and Umarov argue that rather than Chinese disinterest, the reason is Belarus' conviction of its "own indispensability."⁹⁴ Katsiaryna Zaitsava rightly adds that the investment climate still needs extensive improvements to attract more Chinese money.⁹⁵ For instance, Austria's 7.4% share of inward Belarusian FDI easily exceeds China's 3%.⁹⁶ Moreover, Belarus and China have different senses of privatisation, argue Jakóbowski and Klysiński. China wants to increase profits and reduce staff levels, while Belarus wants investors to keep up high social benefits and headcounts. To spur up Chinese investments, Minsk unsuccessfully offered large (even majority) shares of 22 state-owned enterprises in 2017.⁹⁷

Additionally, modernisation via tied (or export) loans often did not work out.⁹⁸ The tied loans "usually bind Belarusian companies to purchase 50-75 percent of project equipment from China."⁹⁹ Critics note the poor quality of Chinese equipment and often a flagrant lack of know-how.¹⁰⁰ In 2020 Belarusian media extensively covered the failed modernisations of the Svietlahorsk pulp and paper plant (loss of USD 850 million) and the Dobrush paper plant (loss of USD 350 million). Completing the Dobrush factory's modernisation takes another USD 83 million and assistance from an Austrian company. The failed modernisation of three cement plants

⁹⁴ Samorukov and Umarov, "China's Relations."

⁹⁵ Katsiaryna Zaitsava, "Cooperation of the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China in the Investment Field [in Russian]," *Bankaiŭski Vesnik [Banking Bulletin of the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus]*, no. 8 (673) (2019): 43.

⁹⁶ National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, "Structure of Foreign Investment in Real Sector of the Economy of the Republic of Belarus by Main Investing Countries in 2020," <https://www.belstat.gov.by/en/ofitsialnaya-statistika/real-sector-of-the-economy/foreign-investment/graphical-data-graphs-diagrams/structure-of-foreign-investment-in-real-sector-of-the-economy-of-the-republic-of-belarus-by-main-inv/>; Jakóbowski, "Iron Brotherhood'."

⁹⁷ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 20.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁹ Andrei Yeliseyev, "China Fails to Deliver on Its Promises in Belarus," *Chinaobservers*, July 31, 2020, <https://chinaobservers.eu/china-fails-to-deliver-on-its-promises-in-belarus/>.

¹⁰⁰ Siarhei Bohdan, "Myths of Chinese Engagement in Belarus: No Money Between Friends?", *Belarus Digest*, July 9, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210302140214/https://belarusdigest.com/story/myths-of-chinese-engagement-in-belarus-no-money-between-friends/>.

accounted for over one billion USD outstanding debts in 2019.¹⁰¹ Even Lukashenka himself announced in early 2020 that he needed to talk with Xi Jinping about the disappointing outcomes of several investment projects.¹⁰²

Great Stone Industrial Park

In stark contrast, the China-Belarus Industrial Park (CBIP or “the Park”), also known as *Great Stone Industrial Park*, turns out to be no disappointment but has its own problems. The Park itself is a 112 km² special economic zone in line with China’s Oversea Economic and Trade Cooperation Zones policy. It is the largest of its type created outside of the PRC.¹⁰³ It is built in the Smolevichy district, about 25 km southwest of the Belarusian capital. The location is particularly advantageous. Minsk International Airport, transnational roads and railways connect the park with the markets in the EU and the EAEU. In addition, the port of Klaipeda is only 500 km northeast.¹⁰⁴ China holds 68% of the Park, while 31.33% belong to Belarus. The German Duisburger Hafen AG has held a minor share of 0.67% since 2018.¹⁰⁵ The CBIP’s system of governance is a copy of the three-level system of the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park.¹⁰⁶

Lukashenka proposed his idea of constructing a joint industrial park for the first time in 2010. Work started after he decreed to establish a special economic zone in 2012.¹⁰⁷ Although, the construction was delayed and in 2014 Lukashenka called the pace a “disgrace to the government.”¹⁰⁸ Finally, when Xi Jinping visited Belarus in 2015, the CBIP was included in the Belt

¹⁰¹ Yeliseyev, “China Fails to Deliver.”

¹⁰² Jakóbowski and Kłysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 22.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Zhigao Liu, Michael Dunford and Weidong Liu, “Coupling National Geo-Political Economic Strategies and the Belt and Road Initiative: The China-Belarus Great Stone Industrial Park,” *Political Geography* 84 (January 2021), 7, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102296>.

¹⁰⁵ Zhangxi Cheng, “Building the Belt and Road Initiative? – Practices En Route,” *The Pacific Review* 33, no. 5 (September 2, 2020), 795, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2019.1589560>.

¹⁰⁶ Liu, Dunford and Liu, “Coupling National Geo-Political Economic Strategies,” 10.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Astapenia, “Belarusian-Chinese Relations.”

Road Initiative.¹⁰⁹ As a result, the CBIP is often praised as a strategic project and the “pearl of China’s New Silk Road.”¹¹⁰ The priority industries of the Park include machine building, electronics, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, new materials, intermodal transport, e-commerce, big data, and research and development. Moreover, Belarus wants the CBIP to become a centre for green industries.¹¹¹

The overall building costs amount to USD 30-60 billion.¹¹² The project should be completed by 2060. The first phase – including the Park’s headquarters – was finished in 2018.¹¹³ However, *Great Stone* is lagging behind the original assumptions, several researchers argue.¹¹⁴ According to Belarusian and Chinese official sources, the Park had a goal of 100 residents by the end of 2020.¹¹⁵ However, in June 2021, only 69 residents were registered in the Park.¹¹⁶ Also, in terms of investments, CBIP does not meet

¹⁰⁹ Bogdan Góralczyk, “What Is China Doing in Belarus?”, *Observator Finansowy [Financial Observer]*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.obserwatorfinansowy.pl/in-english/business/what-is-china-doing-in-belarus/>.

¹¹⁰ An Baijie, “Xi Says Belarus Is a Good Partner,” *China Daily*, September 30, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-09/30/content_26944007.htm; see also Cheng, “Building the Belt and Road Initiative”, 796.

¹¹¹ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 16.

¹¹² “China’s Friendship with Belarus Threatens Russian Interests,” Office for a Democratic Belarus, July 31, 2013, <https://odb-office.eu/policy-briefs/chinas-friendship-belarus-threatens-russian-interests>.

¹¹³ Great Stone Industrial Park Administration, “General plan [in Russian],” *industrialpark.by*, <https://industrialpark.by/o-parke/generalnyj-plan/>; Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 16.

¹¹⁴ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 15; Yeliseyeu, “China Fails to Deliver;” Adrian Brona, “The Curious Timing of the Chinese Loan to Belarus,” *Chinaobservers*, January 14, 2020, <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-curious-timing-of-chinese-loan-to-belarus/>.

¹¹⁵ “Shapiro: 100 Companies to Be Attracted to China-Belarus Industrial Park in Three Years [in Russian],” *Tut.by*, April 8, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201127183607/https://news.tut.by/economics/491858.html>; “China-Belarus Industrial Park,” *China.org.cn*, April 17, 2019, http://www.china.org.cn/english/china_key_words/2019-04/17/content_74691639.html.

¹¹⁶ “Lukashenko on the development of the Great Stone: We will proceed from the interests of the state and investors [in Russian],” *BelTA*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-o-razviti-velikogo-kamnja-ishodit-budem-iz-interesov-gosudarstva-i-investorov-444802-2021/>.

the expectations.¹¹⁷ Despite all of this, the CBIP should grow to 170 residents and ensure new investments worth one billion USD in the coming years.¹¹⁸

In general, the CBIP suffers from several systemic weaknesses. First of all, differing development ideas of the two countries delay the project regularly.¹¹⁹ Secondly, Belarus' economy is not adapted to the modern and high tech needs of the intended industries in the Park.¹²⁰ Thirdly, the overall threshold for entering the Park is too high.¹²¹ Furthermore, the Belarusian tax exemptions are faulty, as the 10-year tax-free period starts with the signature of a resident contract no matter the actual status of the infrastructure in the Park.¹²² Many investors also mistrust legal certainty in Belarus and fear a deteriorating fiscal framework.¹²³ In addition, the Belarusian authorities reportedly insist on high environmental standards.¹²⁴ Finally, an unfriendly geo-economic environment further reduces the CBIP's attractiveness. Some products intended for US and EU markets suffer from sanctions. In addition, poor connectivity may become an issue, as Belarusian-EU relations are on an all-time low following the crackdown on the opposition since August 2020. Due to different technical standards and indirect protective measures (by Russia), the EAEU markets are not as easily accessible as intended.¹²⁵ Nonetheless, the recent increase in residents shows that some of these problems might have been solved. Overall, the CBIP is probably still the most successful Belarusian-Chinese economic project with high potential and high risk for the future.

Economic results from the 2020 mass protests

Following the mass protests in Belarus since 2020, China repeatedly demonstrated its reluctance to keep Lukashenka's regime politically and financially alive. As a result, funds for joint projects were frozen in, as

¹¹⁷ "Lukashenko on the development"; Brona, "Curious Timing."

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Cheng, "Building the Belt and Road Initiative," 796.

¹²⁰ Ibid.; Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 16.

¹²¹ Cheng, "Building the Belt and Road Initiative", 796-97.

¹²² Ibid., 797.

¹²³ Kuznetsov, "Belarus Seeks Spot."

¹²⁴ Liu, Dunford and Liu, "Coupling National Geo-Political Economic Strategies," 7.

¹²⁵ Cheng, "Building the Belt and Road Initiative," 797.

Lukashenka's massive crackdown on the opposition severely damaged the relationship with the EU.¹²⁶ A further obstacle for Belarusian external trade are the EU's sanctions following the forced diversion of a Ryanair flight to Minsk on 23 May 2021. Hence, the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda, the main port for Belarus' global trade, is now partially closed for Belarus' potash fertiliser export. However, experts do not see an immediate threat to the Belarusian economy. They, moreover, indicate that even without EU sanctions, Lukashenka wants more exports to be redirected via Russia's Baltic Sea ports as already practised with refined oil products.¹²⁷ Although, if China redirects its transits, this would severely damage Belarus' economy.

Despite the bump in the relations following the elections, 2020 turned out a very positive year for Sino-Belarusian bilateral trade, which reached a new high at USD 4.6 billion. The trade balance even improved for Belarus.¹²⁸ Lukashenka is trying to attract more Chinese investment and expand Belarus' access to Chinese military technology to deter potential external threats.¹²⁹ Although, Chinese experts argue that following the global economic slowdown is "making it even more unlikely that China would provide new major economic assistance to Belarus."¹³⁰ It remains to be seen for all these reasons if future economic cooperation will be as prosperous as before 2020.

¹²⁶ Standish, "Is China Cooling."

¹²⁷ "Most Belarus Potash Exports Not Affected by EU Sanctions – Analysts", *MINING.COM*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.mining.com/web/most-belarus-potash-exports-not-affected-by-eu-sanctions-analysts/>; Sofija Lapeniene, "How Painful Will Belarus Sanctions Be for Lithuanian Economy?", *LRT.lt*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1443929/how-painful-will-belarus-sanctions-be-for-lithuanian-economy>; Valery Karbalevich, "New post-sanctioned reality [in Russian]," *Svobodnye Novosti Plus [Free News Plus]*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.sn-plus.com/2021/06/29/novaya-postsankcionnaya-realnost/>.

¹²⁸ Dzianis Melyantsou, ed., *Minsk Barometer*, no. 19, January-February 2021 (Minsk: Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations, 2021), 12, http://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/reports/pdf/MB_19_en.pdf

¹²⁹ Simes and Saveliev, "China's Support."

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Military: exercises, donations and the joint *Polonez*

Sino-Belarusian defence cooperation

China started its defence cooperation with Ukraine and Belarus already in the 1990s.¹³¹ Minsk delivered many surplus weapons systems from the dissolved Soviet Armed Forces to China, as Beijing was under an arms embargo since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.¹³² Since the two countries signed another agreement in 2010, the cooperation significantly increased.¹³³ Overall, by 2018, five treaties on military-technical cooperation had been signed.¹³⁴

Military aid from China encompasses utility and all-terrain vehicles, automobiles, spare parts, medical equipment and language learning materials. Moreover, in 2015 China delivered two exclusive FAW HongQi L5 cabriolets for parade duty, e.g. at the Victory Day parade.¹³⁵ In 2017, Belarus received free military equipment from China worth USD 4.5 million.¹³⁶ Furthermore, Belarus uses donated Chinese *Kaïman* and *Volat V1* armoured reconnaissance and patrol vehicles.¹³⁷ Aleksandr Gronsky points out that these Chinese donations are often technically inferior to own Belarusian

¹³¹ Samorukov and Umarov, "China's Relations with Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova."

¹³² Aleksandr Gronsky, "Military-Technical Cooperation between Belarus and China in Rocketry [in Russian]," *Rossija i Norye Gosudarstva Evrazii [Russia and New States of Eurasia]*, no. 3 (2018), 135, <https://doi.org/10.20542/2073-4786-2018-3-135-146>.

¹³³ Anna Maria Dyer, "The Importance of Cooperation with China for Belarus," *PSIM Bulletin No. 106* (1177) (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, August 8, 2018), https://pism.pl/publications/The_Importance_of_Cooperation_with_China_for_Belarus.

¹³⁴ "Lukashenko: China played a decisive role in strengthening the defense capability of Belarus [in Russian]," *BeITA*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-kitaj-sygral-reshajuschuju-rol-v-usilenii-oboronosposobnosti-belarusi-297481-2018/>.

¹³⁵ Aleksandr Gronsky, "Cooperation between Belarus and China in Military Sphere [in Russian]," *Rossija i Norye Gosudarstva Evrazii [Russia and New States of Eurasia]*, no. 4 (2018), 159-60; "China Hands over Two Exclusive Cars for Victory Day Parade in Belarus," *Belarus.by*, April 8, 2015, https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/70th-anniversary-of-the-great-victory/china-hands-over-two-exclusive-cars-for-victory-day-parade-in-belarus_i_0000021496.html.

¹³⁶ Dyer, "The Importance of Cooperation."

¹³⁷ Gronsky, "Cooperation in Military Sphere [in Russian]," 164-65.

products or licenced productions of battle-tested Russian equipment like the *Lis-PM* (a copy of the Russian *Tigr*). However, the logic behind accepting them is not military necessity, but saving money and “a desire not to offend China.”¹³⁸ However, as Russia remains Belarus’ essential military-technical partner, any agreements with China would not contradict Russia’s interests.¹³⁹

According to Dyner, the importance of military cooperation was highlighted when Chinese Minister of Defence Wei Fenghe visited Belarus on his second official foreign visit – right after Russia.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, high-ranking visits from both Ministries of Defence (MoD) are frequent. For example, from 2013 to 2017, Belarusian MoD leadership visited China seven times, and Chinese MoD leadership visited Belarus 13 times.¹⁴¹

China’s primary goal is to advance its military industries.¹⁴² As Gronskey points out, China’s particular interest at the beginning of Sino-Belarusian cooperation in the 1990s was in optics, LASER technologies, electronics, software and optical ground sensing.¹⁴³ Vasily Kashin highlights that technology transfers to China “sometimes irritated Moscow,” for instance when Minsk gave away know-how for heavy multi-axle chassis with high cross-country abilities (as used for the *Polonez* system).¹⁴⁴ Samorukov and Umarov claimed that China meanwhile developed alternatives to most of the technologies Belarus could offer.¹⁴⁵ Still, the military-industrial cooperation

¹³⁸ Ibid., 165.

¹³⁹ Anna Maria Dyner, “The Armed Forces of Belarus,” *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2017), 57.

¹⁴⁰ Dyner, “The Importance of Cooperation.”

¹⁴¹ “Lukashenko: China played a decisive role.”

¹⁴² Marin, *Minsk-Beijing*, 17.

¹⁴³ Gronskey, “Military-Technical Cooperation,” 135.

¹⁴⁴ Vasily Kashin, “How the Myth about the Special Relationship between China and Belorussia Appeared [in Russian],” *Member Comments, Russian Council for International Affairs* (blog), September 2, 2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/kak-poyavilsya-mif-ob-osobykh-otnosheniyakh-kitaya-i-belorussii/>.

¹⁴⁵ Samorukov and Umarov, “China’s Relations.”

is the most attractive economic sector to China, Marin argues based on opinions from Belarusian experts.¹⁴⁶

The Polonez: successful military-industrial cooperation

The landmark project of the Chinese-Belarusian military-industrial collaboration is the multiple rocket launcher system *Polonez*. Development started in 2008, and the prototype was presented in 2015. In 2018, Azerbaijan bought several units of the *Polonez* MLRS.¹⁴⁷ Despite criticism from Russian and Belarusian experts, the *Polonez* is “the result of advanced industrial cooperation,” concludes Marin.¹⁴⁸ It successfully reduced Belarus’ dependence on Russian military technology – i.e., the old *Uragan* and *Smerch* MLRS.¹⁴⁹ Gronskey even argues that it “was a Belarusian response to Russia’s reluctance to supply Belarus for free or at domestic prices with such cutting-edge military equipment [like the Iskander intermediate-range ballistic missile system].”¹⁵⁰

In 2021, Belarusian *Gosvoenprom* announced that Belarus developed its own missiles for the *Polonez*, reducing the share of Chinese parts in the system further. The new rocket should have a range of 300 km.¹⁵¹ However, other plans never materialised, such as an idea from the early 2010s to jointly develop a Sino-Belarusian SAM system.¹⁵² Nevertheless, a notable outcome of the Sino-Belarusian defence cooperation is the fact “that Chinese weapons have entered the markets of post-Soviet republics and are being sold in a country at the junction of Russia and Europe, a crucial factor for China’s future growth.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁶ Marin, *Minsk-Beijing*, 15.

¹⁴⁷ Gronskey, “Military-Technical Cooperation,” 136; Marin, *Minsk-Beijing*, 16.

¹⁴⁸ Marin, *Minsk-Beijing*, 17.

¹⁴⁹ Dynier, “The Armed Forces of Belarus,” 50.

¹⁵⁰ Gronskey, “Military-Technical Cooperation,” 136.

¹⁵¹ “Belarus Makes Own Missile for Polonez Rocket System,” *Belsat.eu*, March 2, 2021, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/02-03-2021-belarus-makes-own-missile-for-polonez-rocket-system/>; Misnik, “Replace Russia.”

¹⁵² Siarhei Bohdan, “Not All Roads Lead to Moscow: Belarusian Arms Industries between Russia and China,” *Belarus Digest*, August 14, 2017, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/not-all-roads-lead-to-moscow-belarusian-arms-industries-between-russia-and-china/>.

¹⁵³ Misnik, “Replace Russia.”

In 2016, Belarus launched its first Chinese-built telecommunications satellite from the Satellite Launch Center Xichang.¹⁵⁴ Belarus' armed forces might benefit from the cooperation in space engineering, as China uses satellite technologies developed together with Belarus in its military geospatial intelligence satellites. Hence, they could provide imagery for the *Polonez* rockets' navigational systems, as Belarus still lacks its own satellites for this purpose.¹⁵⁵

Joint exercises and military-educational exchange

When China supported Belarus' Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) observer status in 2009, the Asian politico-military organisation became Eurasian.¹⁵⁶ The SCO, however, is primarily a catalyst for know-how transfer from and to Belarus. Moreover, since the 2000s a bilateral partnership in training military officers has existed, which should be further developed and enhanced to general combat preparation of soldiers.¹⁵⁷ Until 2018, 277 Chinese officers received diplomas from the Military Academy of Belarus, while 77 Belarusian soldiers underwent courses in China.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, Belarusian military know-how is highly appreciated in China, as in 2018, a Chinese article praised the "advanced military management concepts and tactical ideas."¹⁵⁹

Minsk and Beijing have also held joint exercises since 2011. For example, Belarusian special operations units, special forces of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Chinese airborne units and delegations of the People's Armed Police trained in Belarus and the PRC between 2011 and 2017.¹⁶⁰ In 2018, Belarusian special forces joined Chinese troops in the

¹⁵⁴ Gronskey, "Military-Technical Cooperation," 143.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 144-45.

¹⁵⁶ Marin, *Minsk-Beijing*, 15.

¹⁵⁷ Dyer, "The Importance of Cooperation."

¹⁵⁸ "Lukashenko: China played a decisive role."

¹⁵⁹ Jacob Zenn, "China Praises Cooperation with Belarus and Its Special Forces," *OE Watch* 8, no. 8 (August 2018), 11.

¹⁶⁰ Sivitsky, "Belarus-China strategic partners;" "Lukashenko: China played a decisive role."

“Eagle Assault” training exercise to improve counter-terrorism tactics.¹⁶¹ So far, China and Serbia are the only countries outside the CIS that have participated in joint military exercises with the Belarusian Armed Forces.¹⁶²

China also participated in the annual Independence Day parade on July 3 twice already, in 2018 and 2019.¹⁶³ In 2020, both the Russian and Chinese Armed Forces refused to take part in the Victory Day parade on May 9 due to the Corona pandemic.¹⁶⁴

Besides high-profile activities like joint exercises and military personnel exchanges, the future for Sino-Belarusian defence cooperation is grim, according to Samorukov and Umarov.¹⁶⁵ It is still unclear if the PRC will be taking place in the Russian-Belarusian strategic exercise *Zapad 2021* (West 2021). Moscow invited the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, which took part in the last Russian strategic exercises *Vostok 2018* (East 2021), *Centr 2019* (Centre 2019) and *Kavkaz 2020* (Caucasus 2020).¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ “Chinese, Belarusian Special Operations Forces Commence Joint Training,” *China Military*, August 7, 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-08/07/content_9244657.htm.

¹⁶² Marin, *Minsk-Beijing*, 15.

¹⁶³ “Unprecedented Level of Development of Belarusian-Chinese Relations Noted,” *BelTA*, September 24, 2020, <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/unprecedented-level-of-development-of-belarusian-chinese-relations-noted-133735-2020/>; “Chinese Troops Join Belarus Military Parade as Ties Grow,” *China Military*, July 4, 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-07/04/content_8079655.htm.

¹⁶⁴ “Russian, Chinese Troops Not to Take Part in Victory Day Parade in Minsk,” *Belsat.eu*, April 30, 2020, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/russian-chinese-troops-not-to-take-part-in-victory-day-parade-in-minsk/>.

¹⁶⁵ Samorukov and Umarov, “China’s Relations.”

¹⁶⁶ Andrius Balčiūnas, “‘Million Troops on Your Borders’: Can Belarus-China Ties Pose Threat to Baltics?,” *lrt.lt*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1395681/million-troops-on-your-borders-can-belarus-china-ties-pose-threat-to-baltics>; Michael Kofman, “Assessing Vostok-2018,” *Russia Military Analysis* (blog), September 28, 2018, <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/2018/09/28/assessing-vostok-2018/>; Franz-Stefan Gady, “China Sends Strategic Bombers, Tanks and 1,600 Troops to Russia for Large Military Drill,” *Diplomat*, September 17, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/china-sends-strategic-bombers-tanks-and-1600-troops-to-russia-for-large-military-drill/>; Michael Kofman, “Overview: Kavkaz-2020,” *Russia Military Analysis* (blog), September 22, 2020, <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/2020/09/22/overview-kavkaz-2020/>.

Social/Cultural: educational exchange, language training and a cautious public

Cooperation in the social and cultural sphere between China and Belarus is quite active. Already in the early 2000s, Days of Belarusian and Chinese Culture were hosted in each country. In addition, the ministries of education signed cooperation protocols.¹⁶⁷ Cultural relations became even more intense since 2007. As a result of the 2013 Joint Declaration, the relationship was institutionalized in a separate commission of the Intergovernmental Committee on Cooperation.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, the 2015 Directive intensively covers social and cultural cooperation. There, Lukashenka announced to promote cooperation of motion picture studios, create specialised tourism agencies and open centres for Traditional Chinese Medicine and Gymnastics in each Belarusian regional capital.¹⁶⁹ The Directive also foresees establishing student exchange programs and funds, which apparently was realised in 2016 with new memoranda of understandings between the ministries of education.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, Lukashenka announced during his 2016 visit to Beijing that Belarus eased the visa formalities and invited Chinese students and teachers to come to Belarus.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ U.S. Embassy to Belarus, “Minsk’s Deepening Relations with China,” Cable 05MINSK956_a (Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy, August 16, 2005), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05MINSK956_a.html

¹⁶⁸ Yingjie Sun, “Interaction between China and Belarus in the Field of Culture (1992-2018) [in Russian],” *Zhurnal mezhdunarodnogo prava i mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy* [Journal of International Law and International Relations], no. 3–4 (2018), 36.

¹⁶⁹ President of the Republic of Belarus, “On the development of bilateral relations.”

¹⁷⁰ “Belarus and China sign a package of agreements and memoranda on cooperation in various fields,” *BeITA*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/belarus-i-kitaj-zakljuchili-paket-soglashenij-i-memorandumov-o-sotrudnichestve-v-raznyh-sferah-212427-2016/>; President of the Republic of Belarus, “On the development of bilateral relations.”

¹⁷¹ “Lukashenka and Xi Jinping Count on Development of Youth and Student Belarusian-Chinese Cooperation [in Russian],” *BeITA*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-si-tsinpin-rasschityvajut-na-razvitie-molodezhnogo-i-studencheskogo-belorusko-212616-2016/>.

Student and youth exchanges

The number of Chinese students at Belarusian universities and schools is constantly rising. For years, China has been the third-largest country of origin of international students at Belarusian universities (= 1,113 individuals or 7.2% in the academic year 2018/19) after Russia (9%) and Turkmenistan (50%).¹⁷² In 2020, according to China's ambassador Cui Qiming, approximately 5,000 Chinese students were enrolled in Belarus.¹⁷³ Compared to about 1,000 students in 2005 and 2,000 in 2016, this constitutes a significant rise. In contrast, some 1,000 Belarusians studying in China in 2020 is only a slight increase from about 600 in 2016.¹⁷⁴

Developing networks between both countries' youths seems to be a pillar of Sino-Belarusian societal relations. For example, the "Belarusian Republican Youth Union" signed a cooperation agreement with the "All-China Youth Federation" in 2011.¹⁷⁵ Yet, polls among young Belarusians in Minsk and the regional capitals suggest no desire for closer relations with Beijing (only 3.6%).¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Olga Dryndova, ed., "Statistik: Studierende aus China in Belarus [in German]," *Belarus-Analysen*, no. 45 (31 October 2019), 11, <https://doi.org/10.31205/BA.045.01>.

¹⁷³ "Cui Qiming: we highly appreciate the support and assistance that Chinese students receive in Belarus [in Russian]," *BelTA*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/tsuj-tsimin-my-vysoko-tsenim-podderzhku-i-pomosch-kotoruju-poluchajut-kitajskie-studenty-v-belarusi-379251-2020/>.

¹⁷⁴ U.S. Embassy to Belarus, "Minsk's Deepening Relations with China;" "Results of Education Year of Belarus in China Supped up in Minsk [in Russian]," *Belradiotelekompaniya [Belteleradiocompany]*, February 11, 2020, https://www.tvr.by/news/obshchestvo/v_minske_podveli_itogi_goda_obrazovaniya_belarusi_v_kitae/.

¹⁷⁵ "Leading youth organizations of Belarus and China intend to strengthen contacts [in Russian]," *BelTA*, September 17, 2015, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/veduschie-molodezhnye-organizatsii-belarusi-i-kitaja-namereny-ukrepit-kontakty-163130-2015/>.

¹⁷⁶ Félix Krawatzek, *Youth in Belarus: Outlook on Life and Political Attitudes*, ZOIS Report 5 (Berlin: Centre for East European and International Studies [ZOIS], 2019), 22, https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOIS_Reports/ZOIS_Report_5_2019.pdf.

During the 2019 Education Year of Belarus in the PRC, three new Belarusian culture and language studies centres at Chinese Universities were opened.¹⁷⁷ As of March 2021, there are 14 such centres in China. In February 2021, the first Belarusian-Chinese dictionary was presented at the Belarusian State University. Chinese has been taught at the Minsk State Linguistic University since 1993 and Belarusian schools since 2006. Overall, there are 130 schools and ten universities offering Chinese classes.¹⁷⁸ Among them, there are five Confucius Institutes and one Confucius Class.

The first so-called “Republican Institute of Sinology named after Confucius” opened at the Belarusian State University in Minsk in 2006. In addition, it has offices and centres at several secondary schools throughout the country and at the Belarusian State Economic University and the Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno.¹⁷⁹ In 2019, the institute became the first Confucius institute in the former Soviet countries to be awarded the title of “exemplary.”¹⁸⁰

In Minsk, there are two more Confucius institutes at Minsk State Linguistic University (since 2011)¹⁸¹ and at Belarusian National Technical University with a unique focus on technical Chinese (since 2014).¹⁸² Other Confucius

¹⁷⁷ “Results of Education Year.”

¹⁷⁸ “The First Chinese-Belarusian Dictionary in Belarus and China Was Published at BSU [in Russian],” *Interfax-Zapad*, February 3, 2021, <https://interfax.by>; “Results of Education Year.”

¹⁷⁹ “About Us [in Russian],” Republican Institute of Sinology named after Confucius of the Belarusian State University, 2021, <https://rci.bsu.by/about-ru.html>.

¹⁸⁰ “The Confucius Republican Institute of Sinology of BSU Was Awarded the Title of Exemplary [in Russian],” *BelTA*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/respublikanskomu-institutu-kitaevedenija-imkonfutsija-bgu-prisvoeno-zvanie-obraztsovogo-361299-2019/>.

¹⁸¹ Confucius Institute at MSLU, “About the Institute [in Russian],” *Minsk State Linguistic University*, <http://ci.mslu.by/ob-institute>.

¹⁸² “Confucius Institute for Science and Technology Is the Pride of BNTU [in Russian],” *Belarusian National Technical University*, May 25, 2020, <https://times.bntu.by/news/7110-institut-konfuciya-gordost-bntu>.

institutes exist in Gomel (since 2017)¹⁸³ and Brest (since 2020).¹⁸⁴ The sixth Confucius Institute will be established at Baranovich State University in 2024, as a Confucius Class opened in February 2021.¹⁸⁵ Overall, there are widespread opportunities to study Chinese in Belarus. The “most prominent” Chinese language student may be Nikolay Lukashenka, the Belarusian ruler’s youngest son, who gained popularity in the PRC in 2018 for his New Year’s wishes.¹⁸⁶

Behind the scenes: public perception vs. official display

The public perception of China’s activities in Belarus, however, is still somewhat unclear. A poll from April 2021 by Chatham House suggests that 13% have a very positive and 58% a positive attitude towards China (compared to 33% very positive and 46% somewhat positive for Russia). Only 7% have negative feelings. Thus, China scores better than the EU (and also the immediate neighbours Ukraine, Poland and Latvia).¹⁸⁷ Another Belarusian poll indicates that between 33% (50 years and older) and 44% (30 years and younger) support more intensive economic relations with China.¹⁸⁸ These are remarkable results, compared to the de-facto inexistent desire for

¹⁸³ “Opening of the First Regional Confucius Institute at GSU Named After F. Skorina [in Russian],” Francisk Skorina State University Gomel, December 20, 2017, <http://www.gsu.by/node/436>.

¹⁸⁴ “Confucius Institute Opened at Brest University [in Russian],” *BeITA*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/regions/view/institut-konfutsija-otkrylja-v-brestskom-universitete-413981-2020/>.

¹⁸⁵ “Confucius Class Opened at Baranovich State University [in Russian],” *BeITA*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.belta.by/regions/view/klass-konfutsija-otkryli-v-baranovichskom-gosuniversitete-428093-2021/>.

¹⁸⁶ “Nikolai Lukashenko Celebrated Independence Day along with the Country’s Top Leadership [in Russian],” *Sputnik Belarus*, July 3, 2021, <https://sputnik.by/20210703/nikolay-lukashenko-naravne-s-vyshim-rukovodstvom-strany-otprazdnoval-den-nezavisimosti-1053119066.html>; “Nikolai Lukashenko Wished the Chinese People a Happy New Year [in Russian],” *Sputnik Belarus*, February 15, 2018, <https://sputnik.by/20180215/nikolaj-lukashenko-kitaj-novyj-god-1033664587.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Ryhor Astapenia, “Belarusians’ Views on the Political Crisis. Results of a Public Opinion Poll Conducted between 20 and 30 April 2021,” (London, Chatham House, June 2021), 16, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021-06-14-belarusians-views-political-crisis.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ Olga Dryndova, ed., “Meinungsumfragen [in German],” *Belarus-Analysen*, no. 45 (October 31, 2019), 12-13, <https://doi.org/10.31205/BA.045.01>.

closer relations with China among the urban youth, as presented above already.

With China's expansion into the Belarusian economy, workers from the PRC permanently or temporarily resettle to Belarus (about 4,300 in 2019).¹⁸⁹ Not surprisingly, the Region of Minsk, where the *Great Stone Industrial Park* is located, has the highest Chinese population (about 3,500 in 2019).¹⁹⁰ A few people are reportedly spreading the fear of Belarus becoming a "White China,"¹⁹¹ that is, the Chinese replacing Belarusians.¹⁹² By and large, Chinese and Belarusians come along nicely, as the almost complete lack of reports on (major) conflicts with Chinese immigrants shows. Even when, in 2015, during a protest over outstanding wages, some 200 Chinese workers clashed with Belarusian police in Dobrush, there was solidarity from the local Belarusian population.¹⁹³

Unfortunately, there is still a lack of reliable data, if it exists at all. And as other experts noted already, often propaganda instead of facts dominate the discussion.¹⁹⁴ Hence, the actual societal effects of China's presence in Belarus cannot be comprehensively assessed here. Moreover, it remains unclear what Tsikhamirau intended when he emphasised that in contrast to the positive official accounts of the partnership with China, the "Belarusian society had other assessments of the results achieved."¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ "The Number of Foreigners Coming to Belarus for Work Is Growing [in Russian]," *Sputnik Belarus*, February 3, 2020, <https://sputnik.by/20200203/Rastet-kolichestvo-inostrantsev-kotorye-edut-v-Belarus-rabotat-1043857310.html>.

¹⁹⁰ "More than 3.5 Thousand Chinese Came to Work in Belarus in 2019 [in Russian]," *Telegraf.By*, January 27, 2020, <https://telegraf.by/in-belarus/v-2019-goda-v-belarus-na-rabotu-priehalo-bolee-3-5-tysyach-kitajcev/>.

¹⁹¹ Using the term "Belokitaj"/"Belakitaj", a portmanteau from "Belarus" and "Kitaj" (en. China), for an online search with yandex.ru delivers 639/263 results.

¹⁹² Alexander Shapovsky, "Belarus - China: What Is a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership? [in Russian]," *MLYN.BY - Novosti Minskoj Oblasti [News from the Region of Minsk]*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.mlyn.by/novosti/2021/02/belarus-kitaj-chto-takoe-vsestoronnee-strategicheskoe-partnerstvo/>.

¹⁹³ Claire Bigg, "Crushed Like Ants: Chinese Workers Meet Harsh Reality In Belarus," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 21, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/chinese-workers-belarus/27141591.html>.

¹⁹⁴ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 7; Astapenia, "Belarusian-Chinese Relations."

¹⁹⁵ Tsikhamirau, "China as a Foreign Policy Priority," 86.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the China-Belarus comprehensive strategic partnership in four different areas of cooperation: political, economic, military, and societal-cultural. Prior research focused primarily on Sino-Belarusian relations' political and economic aspects, providing a point of departure for the present paper. Unfortunately, most analyses of the Belarusian-Chinese partnership suffer from a lack of reliable data. However, China's growing importance makes an assessment of its relations with the European neighbourhood inevitable to formulate a common EU strategy. Moreover, as the case of Belarus shows, in the geopolitical competition over the "in-between countries" (Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova), Russia, Europe and the United States are not the sole players on the ground. The People's Republic of China is gradually entering the game.

The first section on the political relationship recapitulated the origins of the very close and amicable relations between Belarusian ruler Aljaksandr Lukashenka and China's President Xi Jinping. Besides personal affections, Belarus provides a geographically advantageous position for China's Belt-Road Initiative (BRI). The country is currently the most reliable land route along the Silk Road Economic Belt. However, its role is dependent on Russia's goodwill,¹⁹⁶ and – as a Russian expert maintains – Poland.¹⁹⁷ Nonetheless, Belarus (except for Russia) has the nominally best relationship with the PRC of all countries in the region. Its status, however, is threatened as a result of EU sanctions against the regime in Minsk following the 2020 crisis. An internationally fully integrated Belarus is much more interesting for Beijing in any field of cooperation than the continuation of the Lukashenka regime.¹⁹⁸ In addition, China accepted Russia's predominance in the Belarusian question. China, for the moment, has only economic and no strategic ambitions. Therefore, any resolution of the crisis would most likely serve China's interests as long as it ensures Belarus' stability and a predictable foreign policy.¹⁹⁹ Similarly, the Sino-Belarusian relations are a welcome propaganda tool in China, regardless of their real success.²⁰⁰ For Lukashenka,

¹⁹⁶ Brona, "Curious Timing."

¹⁹⁷ Kashin, "Myth about the Special Relationship."

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Minsk-based China expert.

¹⁹⁹ Sivitsky, "Belarus-China strategic partners;" Carlson, "Why China."

²⁰⁰ Jakóbowski and Klysiński, *Non-Strategic Partnership*, 11.

however, China is a pillar of the Belarusian “multi-vector” foreign policy and a welcome partner in defending his “sovereignty.”

The second sections turned to the economic relationship. Predictability and finding a way out of the political isolation is directly linked to regaining access to the European markets. Connectivity with surrounding markets in the EU and the EAEU is vital for Sino-Belarusian economic cooperation. In fact, the BRI has become the determining factor of the relations.²⁰¹ Reportedly, a Chinese expert even calls Belarus “Our Pakistan in Europe” for its extraordinary openness to the Initiative.²⁰² The *Great Stone Industrial Park* has become a decent success for both countries, with considerable potential for the future. In contrast, the trading partner Belarus is of no actual worth to China. The trade balance is negative. Belarus is primarily a source of potash fertilisers and some food products, while China sells refined products, machinery and high-tech equipment.

Moreover, Belarus is trying to modernise its economy with Chinese help and attract more foreign direct investments. However, as structural and ideological problems prevent close cooperation, Belarus cannot use China’s great potential without internal reforms.

Cooperation in the military-technical field is limited. The joint production of the multiple rocket launcher *Polonez* is the greatest success in this sector. However, as mentioned in the third section, Belarus has established close ties with the Peoples’ Liberation Army to educate soldiers and officers at military academies and in joint training. China, furthermore, delivers free military aid from time to time, although the equipment provided is inferior to domestic Belarusian products.

The social and cultural cooperation is tackled upon in the fourth section. For example, Lukashenka declared its intent to disseminate Chinese culture in Belarus in several documents, most notably his Presidential Decree from 2015. Moreover, the exchange of students and youth is working, but the

²⁰¹ Braga and Sangar, “Strategy Amidst Ambiguity.”

²⁰² Jakóbowski, “‘Iron Brotherhood’.”

actual numbers are relatively low. Nevertheless, China is very present in Belarus. Confucius institutes or classes exist in every regional centre.

However, it is relatively unclear what the broader public in Belarus thinks of cooperation with China. As Tsikhamirau argues that since the bilateral dialogue intensified from 2015, the Belarusian leadership had grounds to “positively assess the effectiveness of the Chinese vector of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus, although Belarusian society had other assessments of the results achieved.”²⁰³ Likewise, a recent opinion poll among Belarusian youths shows that only 3.6% want closer relations with China.²⁰⁴ In contrast, another survey found that 71% of Belarusians have very or somewhat positive feelings for China.²⁰⁵

In conclusion, it can be noted that, first of all, both partners use the Sino-Belarusian strategic partnership to their own benefit. China does not follow a comprehensive integrational strategy but takes advantage of Belarus’ openness to cooperation. As a result, China is neither motivated to invest politically in the country nor to risk its more critical relationships with Russia and ultimately with the EU over the political crisis caused by Lukashenka. On the other hand, Belarus is seeking investments and support from China. From Lukashenka’s point of view, however, most importantly, no sovereign Republic of Belarus could exist without Chinese support, but it is clear that this would not be the case in reality. Finally, China remains an important political actor, a potent partner for the modernisation of Belarus’ economy, but also a distant partner with interests rather than a close friend. More important for Belarus and Europe’s security are Russia’s plans for the future of the country.

²⁰³ Tsikhamirau, “China as a Foreign Policy Priority,” 86.

²⁰⁴ Krawatzek, *Youth in Belarus*, 22.

²⁰⁵ Astapenia, “Belarusians’ Views on the Political Crisis,” 28.