

# Is Belarus the next Crimea?

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## Is Belarus The Next Crimea?

Belarus seldom comes to mind when thinking about European security. That might change.

Under the iron rule of Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus has been a roadblock to Vladimir Putin's geostrategic ambitions in Europe. Putin wants to keep Belarus as a buffer between Russia and Europe, use Belarus to discredit NATO as a security guarantor, and to protect Russian energy dominance in Europe.

The Kremlin pressured Belarus to implement the [Belarus-Russian Union](#), a so-called federation founded in April 1996. Since a dictator can share power with no one, Lukashenko has strongly resisted these efforts.

Lukashenko's police state, apart from repressing Belarusian citizens, is protecting Belarusian sovereignty from Russian absorption.

Putin appears intent on seizing Belarus, whether by integration, subversion, or force. Lukashenko's defiance against Putin's plans could turn 'White Rus,' as the name of the country means when translated into English, into the next Crimea.

## How Putin sees the world

Putin misses the old USSR. Westerners have referred to Putin's [comment](#) that the collapse of the Soviet Union is "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," as a blueprint for his aims. But Putin views Russia beyond the scope of the USSR.

"Russia is in the midst of one of the most difficult periods in its history. For the first time in the past 200 – 300 years, it is facing a real threat of sliding to the second, and possible even third, echelon of world states," Putin [wrote](#) shortly after becoming president in 1999.

Rather than restore Russia's perceived greatness, Putin has shepherded its decline. Russia's stature has slid even further in the two decades of Putin's rule. Instead of advancing economically, Russia has deteriorated in almost every economic category. Its demographic trends show an alarming collapse of ethnic Russians and a sharp spike in ethnic minorities that are predominantly Muslim.

Three hundred years ago, Tsar Peter the Great established Russia as a major power, a status the empire maintained until the early 1990s. Putin sees the dissolution of the USSR as a "catastrophe" because for the first time, Russia had become weak. Putin says he intends to restore "historic Russia" – which [means](#) the lands of the empire of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, lands inhabited by Russian speakers and Orthodox Christians – to the top of global power.

Putin's practice of Russian greatness differs from his vision. His practice has excluded economic prosperity and demographic growth of Orthodox Christian Russians, in favor of an expansionist kleptocracy bent on reconquering the European elements of former Soviet-occupied territories in northeastern Estonia, eastern Latvia, most of Ukraine starting with Transdnistria, and all of Belarus. The Russian leader's restoration of a great Russia began with restoration of historic Imperial Russian architecture and revival of the Russian Orthodox Church. The next phase is reconquest of former Imperial Russian- and Soviet-controlled territories in the European side of the country, as Chinese mass migration into Siberia and the Russian Far East threaten to outnumber Russian people in a generation.

## **Russkiy Mir: The 'Russian World'**

Putin justifies expanding the Russian empire through the [Compatriots Doctrine](#), which asserts a duty to protect the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) as a foreign policy priority.

“Russophobia and, regrettably, other forms of extreme aggressive nationalism are being employed,” Putin [said](#) in an address to the 6<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad in October 2018.

He was referring to ethnic Russians and speakers of Russian as a first language living in former Soviet-occupied territory. “The freedom of speech and the right to keep up one’s traditions are defied. Some of our compatriots have been denied the right to practice their professions for political reasons. Many people are feeling the consequences of this harsh pressure. We firmly defend your rights and interests, using all the available bilateral and multilateral mechanisms at our disposal,” Putin continued.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation was established in 2007 [to](#) “reconnect the Russian community abroad with their homeland,” through cultural programs and language classes. In reality, the foundation is used as a tool of subversion in foreign countries.

The Compatriots Doctrine emulates the tradition of forced population transfer, used by both tsarist and Soviet imperial regimes to cement expansion. Without hundreds of years of forced resettlements, there would not be so many Russian speakers outside of Russia.

## **Creation of the Russkiy Mir**

Mass deportation and other forced population transfer began centuries ago. Tsarist Russia did it in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to Russify its annexation of the Crimea, deporting indigenous Crimean Tartars to present-day Romania, the Balkans and Turkey, and replacing the majority with ethnic Russians. Stalin forcibly deported millions of people for settlement and cheap labor in Siberia, Central Asia, and the Far North, and undesirables or “enemies of the people” sent to hostile climates and to perform slave labor.

Where deportation was impractical, Moscow used starvation as a weapon. Ukrainians fell victim to the “[terror famine](#)” imposed from 1932-33. The Politburo blamed “kulaks,” or industrious peasants, for the failure of collectivization, claiming they secretly withheld grain to sabotage the economy.

Stalin had a particular dislike for Ukrainians and their nationalistic tendencies. He ordered mass starvation through grain seizures, and sent in troops to prevent people from leaving their villages as they starved to death. The manufactured Holodomor famine wiped out about 3.9 million Ukrainians, or 13 percent of the population, with Russian peasants brought in to replace the dead.

However, Ukrainians kept their national identity and revived their language after decades of Russification. [Currently](#), 68 percent of Ukraine citizens consider only Ukrainian as their native language, and 17 percent consider both Ukrainian and Russian their dual native languages, meaning that more than 85 percent of Ukrainians identify with the language of their country.

## **Geostrategic Goals**



Russia has had limited access to the world ocean historically. Peter the Great [fought](#) the Tartars to gain access to the Black Sea with the first Russian naval base in Taganrog in 1698. Putin’s naval strategy aims to solidify global access with a focus on the Black, Azov, Baltic and Caspian Seas.

“The Black Sea provides Russia’s direct access to the most important global routes, including energy,” Putin [stated](#) at a 2003 meeting with military leaders. It was clear that Russia could not control its access to the Black Sea without taking control of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine.

Until 2014, Russia and Ukraine shared ownership of the Sea of Azov, a small sea surrounded by Crimea and the Russian coastline.

The Azov allows naval forces to get access to the “[soft underbelly](#)” of mainland countries. Security requires control of all shores and the Kerch Strait that serves as the gateway between the Azov and the Black seas.

Controlling Crimea and the shores deprives another state from access out of the Azov to the Black Sea, and from there to the Mediterranean.

Moscow used mass deportations to gain a permanent ice-free foothold on the Baltic Sea. During and following World War II, the Kremlin deported the entire German population of East Prussia and replaced the people with Russians, creating a Baltic Sea enclave between Poland and Lithuania, which Stalin named after his right-hand man, Mikhail Kalinin.

The enclave, Kaliningrad, had no legal international status, an issue that was to have been resolved by the Big Four allied countries (United States, United Kingdom, France, and Russia) after World War II. But the issue was never decided, and the Western powers quietly let the matter drop as Moscow annexed the region and turned it into a large military base and trading hub.

Georgian and Ukrainian color revolutions in the early 2000s elected leaders friendly to the West, instead of the stalwart pro-Russians leaders Putin prefers. In 2004, Bulgaria and Romania [joined](#) NATO.

“Russia viewed these events as NATO encroachment on its traditional sphere of influence and took measures to reestablish its influence and enhance its military presence in the Black Sea,” Boris Toucas wrote at [CSIS](#).

Whereas his predecessor and sponsor, president Boris Yeltsin, at times viewed NATO as a stabilizing factor in the region and even sought Russia’s membership in the alliance, Putin has long-viewed NATO as an “[external threat](#)” and its expansion as a “violation of norms in international law.” NATO is a defensive alliance and does not threaten Russia, but it may pose a threat to Putin’s regime. Former Soviet republics that democratize and become prosperous may create a [demand](#) for Russia to do the same.

In 2008, NATO [promised](#) Ukraine and Georgia would join the alliance as member states. The Kremlin [warned](#) Georgia that joining NATO would ignite a conflict. Moscow [provoked](#) Georgia into hostilities in South Ossetia in August 2008, taking down the country's electrical grid and starting a five-day war that crushed the Georgian military.

Putin was sending a message that joining NATO would end badly. Instead of caving in, Georgia became more strongly pro-NATO, building its military close to NATO standards and sending combat forces to Afghanistan, providing the third largest combat force in the Coalition in Iraq, and supporting French-led anti-jihadist operations in North Africa.

In 2010, Western-leaning Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, lost the election to Putin-backed Viktor Yanukovich, who ultimately [killed](#) any prospect of NATO membership.

In Russia, Putin's third Presidential term was met with [mass protest](#). Putin came to power by [igniting](#) another conflict in Chechnya, crushing the separatists, and being hailed as the "defender of the people." Putin learned that a threat from a common enemy was a uniting force.

In 2014, Yanukovich was overthrown after rejecting an agreement with the European Union. Putin seized on Ukraine's instability and annexed Crimea, claiming ethnic Russians needed protection.

## **Strategic gains from Crimea**

Publicly, Putin's message focused on the restoration of an important part of Russia. Crimea is where Vladimir the Great converted to Christianity, which Putin [called](#) the "overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus."

Less publicized, Putin achieved long-held geostrategic goals.

First, in addition to Crimea, Putin took two-thirds of Ukrainian waters, and sole ownership of the Sea of Azov.

Second, Moscow claimed the massive gas reserves [found](#) in the Ukrainian sector of the Black Sea in 2012, taking [80 percent](#) of Ukraine's energy deposits and infrastructure. The new deposits would have made Ukraine energy-independent and opened an alternative export market for hard currency thus depriving Russia of powerful leverage over its sovereignty.

Last, the naval base of [Sevastopol](#), on the Crimean Peninsula, home of Russia's Black Sea Fleet and essential for Moscow's power projection in the Black Sea and Mediterranean, became solidified.

Ukraine had leased the naval base to Russia, an accord Kyiv did not want to renew in 2008. The Kremlin successfully used gas prices as [leverage](#), prompting Ukraine to agree to a new [lease](#) signed in 2010. That lease authorized Russian use until 2042. Annexation of the Crimea mooted the lease and made the Russian naval presence permanent.

Putin now claims "in utter defiance of both facts and international law" that Sevastopol has always been Russian.

Historically, control of Crimea without controlling the Sea of Azov could cut off access from the mainland. Putin [literally cemented](#) Crimea to Russia by opening a bridge over the Kerch Strait, ensuring Moscow's advance as permanent. The bridge was deliberately built at a height that [blocks](#) Ukrainian commercial traffic in the Sea of Azov.

Once again casting himself as "defender of the people" paid off for Putin. His approval ratings, to the extent that polling is credible in Russia, [soared](#) from 63 percent – the lowest in a decade – to nearly 90 percent.

## **Putin's decline**

Five years later, Russians [still support](#) the annexation of Ukraine but are frustrated by a low standard of living. Approval of Putin now sits officially

at 68 percent – though it [could be](#) as low as 40 percent. Thousands [protested](#) for weeks this summer after opposition leaders were banned from the Moscow City Council election. Putin’s party barely retained its majority despite [election fraud](#).

Some [Westerners](#) see the protests as a crack in the Kremlin’s armor. While maintaining veneer of legitimacy is necessary, Putin is indifferent to the population. He is, however, [beholden](#) to the oligarchs.

“Putin’s takes seriously only force and big money,” Russian socialist Igor Eidman [says](#). “He is concerned only with those who have serious financial and force resources, above all the West, China and a few oligarchs.”

Acting as the people’s “defender” has kindled Putin’s esteem in the masses, whose main source of information is state-controlled television. But restoring “historic Russia” could also deter the West and provide the oligarchs new industries to fleece.

## **Belarus or Belorussia?**

“For Russia..., Belarus simply doesn’t exist,” Russian Maksim Goryunov [says](#). “Peoples without empires are to disappear in the Russian conception of the world.”

Russians [tend to refer](#) to Belarus as Belorussia, or “White Russia.” Belarus had almost no national sovereignty throughout its history, and was treated by successive Russian empires and governments as a mere region of territory controlled from Moscow. Belarusians are a distinct ethnic group from Russians, with their own language that Russians consider a mere regional dialect,

During his 25 year rule, Lukashenko has revived Belarusian national identity and culture.

Lukashenko is known for dramatic outbursts against both [Russia](#) and [the West](#), and has successfully played to two against each other. Due to his country’s overwhelming economic dependency on Russia and its own

economic backwardness, Lukashenko never broke too far from Moscow. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, Lukashenko has distanced himself, denying Putin’s request to build a Russian military base in Belarus in 2015.



Belarus’ economic lifblood flows from Russia – both in oil and loans.

The Druzhba pipeline supplies Siberian oil to Europe. Russia sells cheap oil to Belarus, allowing Minsk to pocket the extra profit, and to collect toll fees for oil that transits Belarus to hard-currency customers. Belarus is also the Kremlin’s [largest debtor](#), owing \$7.5 billion.

Putin appears to have the absorption of Belarus in mind. Last year, Moscow suddenly became [interested](#) in reviving the Belarus-Russian Federation, a dormant 1996 agreement. [Putin’s regional enforcer](#), Mikhail Babich, previously head of Chechnya’s wartime government, was [appointed](#) Russia’s ambassador to Belarus. Babich angered officials in Minsk for treating Belarus as a region of Russia, drawing [unprecedented](#) criticism from the [Belarusian Foreign Ministry](#).

By the end of 2018, Moscow had tired of Lukashenko's resistance. The Kremlin finally issued the [Medvedev ultimatum](#): integrate with Russia, or lose economic support. Lukashenko angrily [accused](#) Russia of trying to "annex" Belarus and stressed that "sovereignty is a sacred thing for Belarus."

Lukashenko's status as "Europe's last dictator" makes it difficult for Minsk to find broad support in the West. Nevertheless the strongman has been trying.

Belarus [lifted long-standing](#) restrictions on the number of U.S. diplomats allowed. Minsk has expressed [interest](#) in purchasing U.S. crude oil. In August, then National Security Advisor John Bolton, the first senior U.S. official to visit Belarus in over 18 years, [met](#) with Lukashenko. Later, the U.S. and Belarus agreed to [return ambassadors](#), after an 11-year diplomatic freeze.

Meanwhile, Lukashenko has ardently sought other economic ventures.

## **Lukashenko causes shutdown of Russian oil to Europe**

To get around a 2014 Kremlin embargo of European food in retaliation for Western sanctions, and to make some extra revenue, Belarus imported Italian pears and apples, repackaged them, and sold them to Russia. Moscow hit back, [banning](#) Belarusian apples and pears last spring.

Lukashenko would not be intimidated. In response, he [threatened](#) to cut off Russian oil transport through the Druzhba pipeline, and flew to Turkey to find a new market for Belarusian [agriculture](#).

He then acted on his oil cutoff threat by issued a [second warning](#), stating the Belarusian part of the Druzhba pipeline should be closed for "repairs," stating that he had not spoken of the repairs previously because it would "harm the Russian federation." He added that "the good that we do for the Russian Federation turns out to be constantly evil to us."

Then, Belarus [publicly complained](#) about Russian crude oil containing [high levels](#) of an organic chloride contaminant in the Druzhba pipeline.

“A week later, the tainted oil was found, the Polish and Ukrainian pipeline systems stopped accepting the Russian crude, and the Druzhba was shut down – causing the [first-ever](#) shutdown of the main line to Europe,” Leonid Bershidksy wrote at [Bloomberg](#).

Lukashenko launched a brilliant bit of political and economic warfare against Belarus’ giant neighbor.

“This was the best possible way for Belarus to launch its counteroffensive,” Bershidsky continued. “The chlorides were actually there, and if Russia had insisted the oil was fine, it would have destroyed trust with European consumers – something it avoids at all costs. So Russia went into all kinds of contortions to prove that the contamination was a one-off.”

European purchases of Russian oil [fell by up to 10 percent](#), costing Moscow a half a billion dollars a day, further straining Putin’s anemic economy.

Belarus then claimed the tainted oil damaged its refineries. Lukashenko [sought compensation](#) for lost profits, milking the crisis-created leverage for all it was worth.

In an uncharacteristic concession after having ignored previous requests, a defeated Putin [quietly recalled](#) Babich.

## Disinformation campaign out of the Russian embassy in Minsk

Despite Putin's retreat, the departure of Babich the Enforcer did not mean a change in policy. Babich's replacement at the Russian embassy in Minsk, Dmitry Mezentsev, is a "[specialist](#) in information technologies" and [close](#) to Putin. The backgrounds of other embassy officials are significant.

Minister Counselor Aleksey Sukhov is a GRU (Russian military intelligence) [officer](#).

Andrey Klintsevich also has a GRU background. Klintsevich was honored by Putin for his service in Crimea during the annexation, and was [expelled](#) from Ukraine for espionage.

In addition to Sukhov and Klintsevich, there are another three Russian intelligence officers in Minsk known for their exceptional propagandistic abilities.

The Kremlin-[directed disinformation operation](#) run out of the embassy has a few main themes: that integration with Russia is inevitable, Belarus is not independent, and Belarusians are simply Russians. This line is similar to themes Russia has directed at neighboring small countries, such as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Those three Baltic republics, which celebrated their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversaries last year, are not real countries or even nations, according to the Putin propaganda line, but are former German or Soviet territories that should be returned, at least in part, to Russian rule.

Variations on those basic points are driven by government organizations, such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation. Moscow has recently [increased funding](#) for the projects.

Belarusians, like their Russian-speaking neighbors in the Baltic states, prefer to watch Russian television channels because of the superior production quality, making it easy to disseminate propaganda.

“Billions of dollars go into the spreading of disinformation, and Belarus is most vulnerable to this Russian disinformation. The danger there is that Lukashenko is hated, Putin is supported, and the West is invisible. Belarusians have no choice. The opposition doesn’t have access to any meaningful and effective media,” [said](#) Andrei Sannikov, a former Lukashenko opponent.

## Why Belarus?

Bershidksky has [speculated](#) Putin’s interest in cementing a Union State could be a way around constitutional term limits that constrain his permanent presidency of the Russian Federation as presently defined. The addition of Belarus to Russia could make Putin’s realm a new country. Bershidsky could be correct, but Belarus is also geographically important to Putin’s foreign policy.

First, Belarus and Ukraine serve as buffers between Russia and Europe. Both Napoleon and the Nazis used Belarus as the invasion point for their offensives in Russia.

Likewise, a Russian invasion of Europe would likely be through Belarus. Theoretically, Belarus could provide an [early warning](#) to NATO.

During [Zapad 2017](#), a Belarusian and Russian strategic military exercise against three artificial countries that represented Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, Russian troops appeared to cut off the [Suwalki Corridor](#). The 1,400 kilometer stretch in Poland only has two roads and one railway. Control of it would cut off the Baltic states from the rest of NATO, [undermining](#) NATO’s credibility as a security guarantor.

Russia would need a [significant amount](#) of gear and ammunition for any major attack. Under the guise of updating the air-defense system in Belarus, Russia brought in more advanced equipment [according](#) to Deputy Chief of General Staff to the Armed forces of Ukraine Gen Ihor Romaneko. Romaneko also says armed forces in Belarus could strike Ukraine from the North, as the shortest pathway to Kyiv is through the North.

The Druzhba oil and Yamal gas pipelines are also strategic considerations. The significant loss of revenue during the Druzhba crisis earlier this year is a constant reminder of the Kremlin's vulnerability to Lukashenko's will. Russian oligarchs, Putin's main constituency, may be interested in Belarus' [oil-refining industry](#), or at least avoiding another catastrophe like the oil cutoff.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Alexey Goncharuk recently [proposed](#) building a canal through Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. A waterway connecting the Baltic and Black Seas would be "viewed as a threat to the existence of Russia," [according](#) to Russian analyst Andrey Okara.

## Conclusion

Control of Belarus is essential to Putin's geostrategy and possibly his political future.

Moscow does not want full-scale war with NATO, but Putin does want to continue discrediting and disrupting the alliance.

Russia would not be [capable](#) of competing with U.S. forces in a sustained conventional conflict, and has designed its nuclear strategy to prevent it. In a war, the Suwalki Corridor would sever the Baltic states from the rest of NATO. The most efficient way to invade Ukraine would be attacking Kyiv from the North. A west-leaning Belarus threatens these contingencies.

Gradually integrating Belarus has not gone to plan. With a simple passive-aggressive political maneuver, Lukashenko showed the audacity to resist, costing Putin billions of dollars in the Druzhba contaminant scandal and undermining Russian oil credibility in Europe.

[Propagandists](#) in the Russian embassy in Minsk have tried to create division in Belarus, cultivation focusing on groups that could take action against Lukashenko's regime. The method was effective in Ukraine and

Georgia, but has [yet to yield](#) results among Belarusians. Belarus [does not](#) have a large segment of ethnic Russians, so invading to “protect Russian speakers” may not work this time.

If the Kremlin can successfully create a group hostile to Lukashenko, Putin could invade and claim either to be rescuing Belarusians from a dictator, rescuing “White Russians” from a terrible fate, or rescuing Lukashenko from a coup. An authentic protest movement from Belarusians would provide cover for Putin to take action, as he did in Ukraine in 2014.

Any military action is likely to be under the guise of a snap military exercise, as was the case with Ukraine. If an international crisis occurs in the near future, Putin will likely take advantage of the distraction, as he did in during the 2008 financial crisis by [advancing troops](#) into Georgia.

Belarus will be part of Russia voluntarily, through subversion, or by force. With a loathsome regime and no military allies, Belarus stands all alone.