

## Post-Brexit British Foreign Policy Toward Belarus: Global Actor or Irrelevant Power?

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(All translations by Anna Ayers)

*Over the last few years, a budding relationship between the UK and Belarus has been slowly developing. 2020, an eventful year for both states, has however appeared to put this on hold. With the UK officially leaving the European Union and Belarus facing political troubles and turbulence after its most recent presidential elections, it seems there is no better time to assess the UK's foreign policy on the matter. This paper claims that the UK are acting on two strategies in Belarus: reinforcing soft power through the championing of human rights and balancing Russia for security purposes. This is reflected in the three areas where UK foreign policy has been most proactive: human rights and freedom of press, military cooperation and economic cooperation. Each area will be analysed in terms of whether or/and how it has diverged from the EU and if there are signs of a 'Global Britain' emerging. The paper will argue that if the UK does not properly manage the two strategies, they may come to inhibit one another, similar to what the EU has experienced (Bosse, 2009). So far, the UK has scaled back bilateral cooperation with Belarus and taken a cautious approach, not straying too far off the EU. The paper concludes that the UK foreign policy appears to have ambitions for playing the role of 'Global Britain'; however, due to the tensions of interests in relation to Belarus, despite there being potential in branching out and cooperating with transatlantic states, bold moves may be difficult.*

### Introduction

Over the last few years, a budding relationship between the UK and Belarus has been slowly developing. This seems interesting, as Belarus may be described as a rather peripheral state. To make sense of this, we must look at the UK's broader interests and assess how relations with Belarus fit in to achieving them.

As a result of the most recent political and civil unrest caused by the 2020 Belarus presidential elections, the UK-Belarus relations have deteriorated <sup>1</sup>. With the UK's departure from the European Union, this appears to be a suitable time to analyse the UK's foreign policy towards Belarus. The paper sets out to demonstrate that the UK has two main strategic aims; to balance Russia through engagement with Belarus and to exercise and build its soft power, championing democracy and human rights. It is important to note here that these two aims are not mutually exclusive, however are hard to effectively coordinate. Three key areas have been identified where the UK has been most proactive in its foreign policy: human rights and freedom of press, military cooperation, as well as economic and trade cooperation. The paper will discuss how the strategies are reflected in these areas and perform a comparison to EU policy on the same matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Defence ministry says Belarus-UK drill 'bilateral' (2020, March 2), *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/defence-ministry-says-belarus-uk-drill-bilateral/docview/2369543324/se-2?accountid=9630>

The paper will argue that the UK is attempting to strengthen its role as “Global Britain”<sup>2</sup> through its policy with Belarus by exhibiting to the world and its allies that it is proactive in protecting human rights and by demonstrating to Belarus that it is still a strong actor and relevant without the EU. It will contend, however, that the UK’s aims are proving to be difficult to balance (Bosse, 2009) and thus the tensions between security and values are jeopardising the ‘Global Britain’ ambition. One thing to note, is that the UK has exhibited the ability to act independently and branch out in its cooperation beyond the EU on human rights matters, which is somewhat promising. However, despite this, it does not seem like the UK has greatly diverged from EU policy and in fact may be making similar mistakes. The paper concludes that cooperation on human rights matters and support for civil society would be the best strategy for the UK, to optimise achieving its interests.

## Brief History and Context

The last 20 years of the political scene in Belarus have been rather turbulent due to Alexander Lukashenko’s questionable hold on presidential power. This has made the EU hesitant to closely cooperate with Belarus. In 2006, The EU imposed economic sanctions for the first time in response to the Belarus Presidential elections (Godovanyuk, 2018, p47). This was followed by a withdrawal of its “trade preferences to Belarus under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences, in response to Belarus’ violations of the core principle of the International Labour Organisation”<sup>3</sup>. In 2010, problems persisted, and the U.K was one of the main lobbyists for economic sanctions<sup>4</sup>. However, in 2016, things started to appear a little more optimistic, as sanctions were lifted and negotiations began on an EU-Belarus Partnership, where the EU started look at strengthening the bilateral relationship, and Belarus had participated in the ‘Eastern Partnership’ as well<sup>5</sup>.

The most recent Belarus Presidential election on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2020 has become apparent as fraudulent and political violence broke out with severe repression of civil society. The EU has once again ‘scaled down’ the bilateral cooperation, focusing much more on civil society in Belarus, and attempting to direct its financial assistance away from the authorities “towards non-state, local and regional actors”<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> P. Potapeyko (2020, February, 24), "Aligning to Washington". Should we expect a warming in relations between Belarus and Great Britain? *Eurasia Expert*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://eurasia.expert/zhdai-li-potepleniya-v-otnosheniyakh-belarusi-i-britanii/>

<sup>3</sup>European Commission (n.d), Trade: Countries and Regions: Belarus. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from [https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/belarus/index\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/belarus/index_en.htm)

<sup>4</sup> I. Gubarevich (2017, October 5), Is the United Kingdom finally interested in Belarus? *Belarus Digest*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://belarusdigest.com/story/has-the-united-kingdom-finally-got-interested-in-belarus/>

<sup>5</sup>European Union External Action Service (2016, June 11), Belarus and the EU. *Delegation of the European Union to Belarus*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/15975/belarus-and-eu\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/15975/belarus-and-eu_en)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## List of Important Meetings between UK and Belarus Officials

Dates	Specified Meetings
26/9/2017	Minister for Europe, Sir Alan Duncan visits Belarus for the first time since its independence and has discussions with President Lukashenko
27-28/3/2018	Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, pays official visit to UK and has talks with UK Foreign Minister, Jeremy Hunt about economic cooperation.
18/12/2018	Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus and Minister of Foreign Affairs of UK meet in London and sign a military cooperation plan for 2018
5/10/2019	UK Director of International Security Policy, Nick Gurr and Director of International Military Cooperation Department of the Republic of Belarus, Major General Oleg Voinov meet in London and sign bilateral co-operation plan for 2020.
23/1/2020	Deputy Minister of Foreign affairs, Kravchenko and ambassador of UK to Belarus meet at the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and discuss bilateral relations

### Soft Power Strategy

There have been numerous statements made in British foreign policy documents about the UK pursuing a soft power strategy.<sup>7</sup> This involves working on championing liberal values, democracy and human rights and therefore wielding normative power (Nye, 1990). Currently the UK is ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> as a super power in the world.<sup>8</sup> This section will look at how this strategy is playing out in Belarus.

### Human Rights

The U.K has been a consistent propagator of freedom, democracy and the protection of human rights. This does not seem to have changed with its departure from the European Union as it declared the nature of the 2020 elections in Belarus “fraudulent”, condemning the political violence that had erupted.<sup>9</sup> In fact, after the EU were experiencing delays as a result of Cyprus vetoing certain sanctions towards Belarus due to unrelated foreign policy issues,<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2019, June 27), Foreign and Commonwealth Office departmental plan. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan-2019-20>, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/305461/FCO\\_priorities\\_14-15.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/305461/FCO_priorities_14-15.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Cabinet Office (2021, March 17), Global Britain in a competitive age: the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy. Retrieved April 13 2021, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>

<sup>9</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2020, December 4), Human Rights Council Interactive Dialogue on Belarus: UK statement. *GOV.UK*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/human-rights-council-interactive-dialogue-on-belarus-uk-statement>

<sup>10</sup> European Security Committee (2020, December 1), EU sanctions update: Russia, Belarus and Turkey. Retrieved from April 12, 2021, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeuleg/229-xxvi/22906.htm>

the UK seized its opportunity to take initiative and act without the EU. The UK cooperated with Canada to impose sanctions on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September, targeting Lukashenko and 7 other members of the regime, by setting a travel ban against them and freezing their assets.<sup>11</sup> The EU did follow swiftly and imposed sanctions on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October on an additional 55 individuals, which the UK was required to follow until the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2020,<sup>12</sup> when the transitional exit period came to an end. The UK has in fact continued with them. The first move made by the UK should be noteworthy though, as it was a powerful signal, showing that it will independently and assertively stand against human rights violations and, at least initially, take a tough line in response to anti-democratic actions. The UK has shown its assertiveness through other means too, such as expelling Belarus diplomats in response to the expulsion of British diplomats.<sup>13</sup>

These events have enabled the UK to pursue the ‘Global Britain’ role by reinforcing and showcasing its soft power.<sup>14</sup> However, this has been an important part of British foreign policy from before WWII and has been a vital tool in both the Soviet and Post-Soviet era to consolidate democracy and security in Eastern Europe (Nye, 2008, p105). Therefore, it can hardly be seen as a new strategy. The reality reflects that ‘Global Britain’ sounds more like rhetoric than actual novel action. Despite this, there have been cooperation opportunities to branch out beyond Europe. Although this may not be sufficient to be perceived as a ‘Global Britain’, it is likely necessary to strengthen relations and partnerships, particularly with the U.S. The new Biden administration is more concerned with propagating liberal and democratic values than Trump, so the UK has an opportunity to show solidarity to this.

### ***Free Media & Press***

Sanctions have not been the only mechanism of the UK’s proactivity in matters of human rights and democratic freedom. In fact, by 2015, the UK had contributed just under £3 million in international aid, and on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2020, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office declared UK will double their financial support to “human rights groups, independent media and community groups in Belarus to £1.5 million over the next 2 years”.<sup>15</sup> Another £800,000 was given to support Belarus journalists,<sup>16</sup> and on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, the UK working alongside with Canada announced that a Media and Freedom Award will be awarded to Belarus,<sup>17</sup> another sign of potential stronger partnerships. There has also

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2020, November 10), UK expels Belarusian diplomats in clear message to Lukashenko’s regime. GOV.UK Retrieved from April 12, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-expels-belarusian-diplomats-in-clear-message-to-lukashenkos-regime>

<sup>14</sup> Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2019, June 27), Foreign and Commonwealth Office departmental plan. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan-2019-20>, N. Westcott (2020, March 23), The big squeeze: British foreign policy after Brexit. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_big\\_squeeze\\_british\\_foreign\\_policy\\_after\\_brexit/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_big_squeeze_british_foreign_policy_after_brexit/)

<sup>15</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2020, December 4), Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2020, September 24), Foreign Secretary’s Statement on Belarus: 24 September 2020. GOV.UK. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-statement-on-belarus-24-september-2020>

been an ongoing process regarding LGBTQ+ rights as well as the death penalty, specifically in relation to Belarus,<sup>18</sup> which the UK ambassadors have frequently brought up. Nothing drastic has been done on these matters though. This again appears to reflect the soft power strategy.

## **Security Interests of Balancing Russia**

According to the British integrated review of security, defence and development in foreign policy “Russia will remain the most acute direct threat to the UK,” and they are aware that it is becoming more “active around the wider European Neighbourhood”.<sup>19</sup> This is a shared concern with the EU. “Russia’s efforts to recreate a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe represent the most pressing geostrategic challenge for European stability and order,” (Simon, 2015, p21) and this is even more so post-Brexit. To counter this, both the EU and the UK are attempting to focus on European cohesiveness (Naumescu & Nicolescu, 2018). The UK’s foreign policy towards Belarus reflects these interests. This has largely been done through military and economic cooperation and diplomacy, which this section will explore. It is hard to argue that this constitutes a ‘Global Britain’ since the security policy is very much similar to that of the EU, albeit with minor divergences, and the EU is an extremely influential actor in this, meaning the UK has little leverage by itself.

### ***Military Cooperation***

The EU has had little to do with Belarus in terms of any military activities, and actually has a ban on any military equipment being transferred into Belarus, although there are no limitations on military assistance such as training.<sup>20</sup> It appears the EU has also “put pressure” on states such as Serbia to suspend their military drills in Belarus in the recent light of political events,<sup>21</sup> suggesting it does not condone military involvement.

The UK too has not had much military engagement up until a couple of years ago. On the 27-28<sup>th</sup> March 2018 the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Belarus came to London, to have talks with the UK Foreign Minister, Jeremy Hunt (Godovanyuk, 2018, p49). Following this, more talks took place on the 18<sup>th</sup> December 2018, by the defence ministries of the two states (Godovanyuk, 2018, p48). A military cooperation statement was signed by both sides, followed by another bilateral cooperation plan for 2020 signed in November 2019<sup>22</sup>. This

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<sup>17</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2020, November 16), United Kingdom and Canada announce recipient of first Media Freedom Award. *GOV.UK*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/united-kingdom-and-canada-announce-recipient-of-first-media-freedom-award>

<sup>18</sup> P. Potapeyko(2020, February, 24) Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Cabinet Office (2021, March 16), Ibid. See also, Leonardo De Agostini, 2021, “Post-Brexit British foreign policy towards Russia: a test for Global Britain”, BRIFPO Paper, London: LSE European Foreign Policy Unit.

<sup>20</sup> M. Curtis (2020, August 20), Belarus military received assistance from the UK a dozen times in the last five year. *British Foreign Policy Declassified*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <http://markcurtis.info/2020/08/20/belarus-military-has-received-assistance-from-the-uk-a-dozen-times-in-last-five-years/>

<sup>21</sup> I. Sekularac (2020, September 9) Serbia suspend Belarus military drill, citing EU pressure. *Reuters*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-serbia-military-drills-idUKKBN2602Y2>

<sup>22</sup> M. Curtis (2020, August 20), Ibid.

resulted in regular military training events on bilateral terms within a “framework of cooperation in training peacekeeping personnel”.<sup>23</sup> The UK provided training courses for the officers of Belarus, and according to the U.K Minister of Defence, such operations are about “mutual learning, such as UN peacekeeping operations, language tuition and arms control”.<sup>24</sup> Cooperation has also included “a mix of reciprocal English-Russian language training, visits, teaching skills in the sphere of Peacekeeping Operations, Winter Warfare Training and Studies in Military History”.<sup>25</sup> It appears that military cooperation is being used as a security tool to attempt to balance Russia and gain “intelligence on a Russian-linked military,”<sup>26</sup> since tensions have been rising between the Kremlin and the UK, while Russia has been becoming more involved in the domestic matters of Belarus.

In light of the recent political events happening in Belarus and the human rights violations, what direction military cooperation will take is likely to set the tone for the future of the relationship. Some have already been stern critics of the existing cooperation, suggesting that the UK is actually contributing to ‘strengthening’ and ‘legitimising’ the dictatorship of Belarus through its military training, although there are also arguments that claim that there is little evidence of this in practice.<sup>27</sup> Currently, according to the junior defence minister, James Heapey, the UK has suspended any military training to the army of Belarus.<sup>28</sup> However, there is nothing to say this is long-term. A representative of the Campaign Against Arms Trade, Andrew Smith said, “there cannot simply be a return to business as usual once the headlines have gone away”.<sup>29</sup> There is a possibility that this will be the case. Although the UK may be retreating like the EU right now, it must be highlighted here that the UK still decided to engage with Belarus in military terms, despite previously calling for sanctions against the same regime years back. This suggests it is highly likely things will indeed resume, once attention is diverted, which could affect their soft power strategy. If it does however, this could definitely be seen as an innovation to the ‘Global Britain’ role, particularly from the Belarus perspective. They could view the UK as a stronger and more relevant actor.

## ***Economic & Trade Agreements***

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<sup>23</sup> Defence ministry says Belarus-UK drill 'bilateral' (2020, Mar 02), *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/defence-ministry-says-belarus-uk-drill-bilateral/docview/2369543324/se-2?accountid=9630>

<sup>24</sup> J, Stone (2020, September 5), UK government suspends military training to Belarus dictatorship after outcry; Campaigners say UK should not have been training country's forces in the first place. *The Independent*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=717ab7cd-1512-43f3-b647-5fdd9db8572b&pdcontentfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A60S5-T901-F021-616D-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=382507&pdteaserkey=sr58&pditab=allpods&ecomp=5zgnk&earg=sr58&prid=c36c43ad-61d7-4c16-ba9a-43acd098ab4b&federationidp=WTX3KD59615&cbc=0>

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Defence (2020, February 29), Royal Marines travel to Belarus for winter warfare exercise. *GOV.UK*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/royal-marines-travel-to-belarus-for-winter-warfare-exercise>, M. Curtis (2020, August 20), *Ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, J, Stone, (2020, August 23). *UK 'strengthening' Belarus dictatorship's army with military training*. London: Independent Digital News & Media. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/other-sources/uk-strengthening-belarus-dictatorships-army-with/docview/2436697085/se-2?accountid=9630>

The EU has historically had a difficult relationship with Belarus, and this has persisted in the economic sphere. It has been rather frustrated at the fact that Belarus is the ‘last dictatorship in Europe’.<sup>30</sup> Due to Belarus’ “lack of commitment to democracy and political and civil rights,” it still has not ratified the bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which was made with Belarus in 1995, and operates by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement which was made with the Soviet Union in 1989.<sup>31</sup> Despite this, the EU actually represents 18.1% of Belarus’ overall trade in goods, coming in second place after Russia. The “EU-Belarus bilateral trade in goods has been growing steadily, increasing by 45% over the last 10 years”.<sup>32</sup> In 2016, The EU initiated a “dialogue on trade...in order to facilitate exchanges on trade-related matters at experts’ level,” and this takes place twice a year.<sup>33</sup> However, in light of recent events, the EU has made it clear there will not be any movement to a closer economic partnership until civil and democratic rights within Belarus are restored and sustained.<sup>34</sup>

The UK appears to have a stronger relationship with Belarus, being one of the first countries to ratify the 1995 cooperation agreement, and in November 2008 the second ever visit of the Belarus Prime Minister to the UK took place to discuss matters of cooperation (Godovanyuk, 2018, p47). However, relations deteriorated as the 2006 EU sanctions were imposed against Belarus, and no separate bilateral agreements were made with Belarus and the UK until after the triggering of Article 50. Following this, the economic and trade relationship between the UK and Belarus seemed to have grown significantly,<sup>35</sup> after a number of meetings in regard to bilateral relations. Sir Alan Duncan visited Belarus on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2017,<sup>36</sup> followed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei in 2018, the first visit to the UK in 25 years.<sup>37</sup> This could be part of UK’s economic diplomacy.<sup>38</sup> Over the past years it has allegedly been “among the top-6 investors to Belarusian economy,”<sup>39</sup> and came in as the third largest trade partner in 2018 in Belarus.<sup>40</sup> The most recent talks took place in

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<sup>30</sup>A. Aslund (2020, August 9) Europe’s last dictator: The rise and (possible) fall of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. *Atlantic Council*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/europes-last-dictator-the-rise-and-possible-fall-of-alexander-lukashenko/>

<sup>31</sup> European Commission (n.d), Trade: Countries and Regions: Belarus. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from [https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/belarus/index\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/belarus/index_en.htm)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> European Union External Action Service (2016, June 11), Belarus and the EU. *Delegation of the European Union to Belarus*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/15975/belarus-and-eu\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/15975/belarus-and-eu_en)

<sup>34</sup> European Commission. (n.d), Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Belarus, UK seek to deepen ties (2020, January 24), Belta. Retrieved from <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-uk-seek-to-deepen-ties-127535-2020/>

<sup>36</sup> Embassy of the Republic of Belarus to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (n.d), Belarus-United Kingdom: Political Dialogue. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from [http://uk.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral\\_relations/](http://uk.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral_relations/)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2019, June 27), Ibid.. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan-2019-20>

<sup>39</sup> I. Gubarevich (2017, October 5), Is the United Kingdom finally interested in Belarus? *Belarus Digest*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://belarusdigest.com/story/has-the-united-kingdom-finally-got-interested-in-belarus/>

<sup>40</sup> UK ambassador’s contribution to developing relations with Belarus praised (2019, August 7), Belta. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-uk-seek-to-deepen-ties-127535-2020/>

London between the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kravchenko and ambassador to of the UK to Belarus, Jacqueline Perkins on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020.<sup>41</sup>

Despite all this, Belarus is only the 114th largest trading partner and accounts for less than 0.1 of UK's trade. This begs the question of why the UK is putting in so much effort. A possible answer is that it may be acting out of security interests, using its freedom from the EU to build a closer economic relationship with Belarus to try and balance Russia through closer ties and cohesiveness. Russia is allegedly attempting to "deepen its economic representation in Belarus," as well as well as diversifying "the number of figures and organisations inside Belarus it can work with".<sup>42</sup> In addition to this, it has discussed with Belarus constitutional matters,<sup>43</sup> suggesting influence at an even deeper level. Therefore, the UK may be trying to counteract this.

The recent human rights violations of Lukashenko's regime, and the condemnation of the "rigged election" by Dominic Raab,<sup>44</sup> have made this strategy rather difficult. Although most of the trade rests largely on private companies, and therefore there may not have a large impact on ground, the UK will have to decide whether to continue the close bilateral agreements. If the UK plans to follow the EU's footsteps and put constraints on the economic relations, it may risk pushing Belarus further away into Russian influence and power. The humanitarian aspirations are again coming in to conflict with security ambitions. It could be risky to push Belarus even further into the arms of Russia by suspension of cooperation. However, continuing would be harmful to its soft power strategy and image.

### ***Counter Disinformation and Media Development***

The UK has a Counter Disinformation and Media Development programme (CDMD) in place,<sup>45</sup> which targets Eastern Europe and Central Asia and includes Belarus. It has been running from April 2016 and is set to end in March 2021 and stresses the UK's perception of "access to reliable information" as "crucial to the ongoing stability of Europe". Although this relates to human rights, the paper has included this section under the strategy of balancing Russia as it would argue that this is its primary focus. The UK is attempting to tackle Russia's 'global cultural power projections' and influence in Belarus, which is a concern stated in its integrated review of foreign policy.<sup>46</sup> The CSSF launched another programme,

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<sup>41</sup> Belarusian People's Congress (2020, January 23), Belarus-UK relations amid Brexit discussed in Minsk. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from [https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/belarus-uk-relations-amid-brexit-discussed-in-minsk\\_i\\_0000107682.html](https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/belarus-uk-relations-amid-brexit-discussed-in-minsk_i_0000107682.html)

<sup>42</sup> Is Russia set to snatch Belarus' independence right under the EU's nose? (2020, November 27), Newstex Blogs. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=16334308-7c5a-425b-8955-30df0973d994&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A61CX-VT11-JCMN-Y2RD-00000-00&pdccontentcomponentid=299488&pdteaserkey=sr57&pditab=allpods&ecom=5zgnk&earg=sr57&prid=c36c43ad-61d7-4c16-ba9a-43acd098ab4b&federationidp=WTX3KD59615&cbc=0>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2020, September 29), Belarus: UK sanctions 8 members of regime, including Alexander Lukashenko. GOV.UK Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/belarus-uk-sanctions-eight-members-of-regime-including-alexander-lukashenko>

<sup>45</sup> Foreign & Commonwealth Office (n.d), Counter Disinformation and Media Development (CDMD) Retrieved April 12, 2021, from [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/842428/Counter\\_Disinformation\\_and\\_Media\\_Development\\_Programme.odt](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/842428/Counter_Disinformation_and_Media_Development_Programme.odt)

<sup>46</sup> Cabinet Office (2021, March 16), Ibid.



enhancing English Language in South Caucasus, Moldova and Belarus, spending around £1.5 million here and running from 2019 for 36 months.<sup>47</sup>

This is similar to EU's concerns, as the UK perceives Russian disinformation as a big security threat to Europe and has cooperated over these issues with the EU in the past.<sup>48</sup> This is a clear instance where human rights and security measures are not mutually exclusive but rather complement each other. By working with the civil society, there is more opportunity for productive positive progress, as it weakens the government of Belarus, and in turn Russia's grip of influence.

## Conclusion

From what we can observe in the past year, the UK's foreign policy in relation to Belarus cannot be perceived as radically diverging from that of the European Union. This is largely because the two interests the UK have exhibited are very similar to EU's concerns. These are soft power strength in relation to human rights and security concerns about Russia. Saying this, the UK has perhaps been more proactive in methods of addressing these issues through military and economic cooperation.

What has been illuminated by the recent political events in Belarus is the tension between the two interests. The UK could face the danger of committing the same mistake as the EU, which is to attempt to balance its values (of freedom, democracy and bottom-up civil society) against its concerns for security and the desire for Belarus to be a stable state (Bosse, 2009) and stay out of the grasp of Russia in this case. This tension also comes from the ambitiousness of the concept of 'Global Britain'. The UK is still deciding what role it wants to project (Oppermann, Beasley & Kaarbo, 2020). In the case of Belarus, championing humanitarian values while pursuing strategic security interests could fail to achieve either, like in the case of the EU (Bosse, 2009). Moreover, because of the similarity in policy, it is not too convincing that the UK is moving beyond rhetoric and fulfilling the role of 'Global Britain' despite the British government claiming that what "Global Britain means in practice is best defined by actions rather than words".<sup>49</sup>

The difficult choice British foreign policy faces is how to work with Belarus in the future. It seems that change in the behaviour of Belarus could only happen in two scenarios. The first is for Lukashenko to be replaced by a leader who is far more distant from Russia. Although Lukashenko has claimed in the past that Belarus will be pursuing a multilateral foreign policy, he has gone as far as to make statements such as "my Russia".<sup>50</sup> The likelihood of his replacement being any more independent is also low, largely due to the heavy involvement Russia already has in Belarus. The other option then is for Putin to go; this again, however, is

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<sup>47</sup> British Council (2020), New Projects since June 2019. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.britishcouncil.org/partner/international-development/news-and-events/nov-2019/new-projects-june-2019>

<sup>48</sup>A. Legucka (2020, March 19) Russia's longterm campaign of disinformation in Europe. *Carnegie Europe*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/81322>

<sup>49</sup> Cabinet Office (2021, March 16), Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Lukashenko said that Belarus has always had and will have a multi-vector foreign policy (2020, October 20), TASS. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9877475>

most probable only in the distant future. This paper's realistic takeaway is that Russia's influence over Belarus will be hard to address. There is another option, however, that could target both the threat of Russia and humanitarian values in a complementary way and the UK is already engaged with this; efforts to tackle disinformation and provide support to the Belarus media and civil society. By focusing on civil society, the UK could successfully wield its soft power while simultaneously weakening the control of Lukashenko. This would mean that humanitarian involvement would not only be less likely to have an impact on increasing Russian influence, it may limit it all together, weaking Russia as a whole as well.

## *Appendix*

### **Local Perceptions on British Foreign Policy**

Overall, there was optimism over UK-Belarus relations at the beginning of 2020. Lukashenko himself, despite admitting that he sees post-Brexit UK as vulnerable, recognising the EU as a “prop to the planet” (опора планеты) and stressing its significance,<sup>51</sup> states he was very much looking forward to cooperation. This mood appears to have shifted since the recent events.

There has been a range of local opinions in Belarus in regard to the expected success of the sanctions put in place by the UK, as well as suggestions on what can be done to alter the domestic political situation of Belarus. Lukashenko himself has allegedly asserted that the instigations for the political protests were in fact arising from commands coming from Poland, the UK and the Czech Republic.<sup>52</sup> This implies not only Lukashenko's negative attitude towards the sanctions, but targeting the UK shows tensions in the personal relationship with the state. According to Belarus media, Anatoliy Glaz, the press secretary of the Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs, made statements about how counterproductive he thought these sanctions are, how little effect they will have, as the previous ones had, as well as claiming that Belarus will retaliate by imposing their own sanctions on UK officials.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, again supposedly as stated by the Belarus media, the opposition leader, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has actually called on a number of states, including the UK to extend their sanctions, implying she thinks this is an effective method of trying to create change.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, Stepan Putilo, the 22-year-old founder of Nexta, a new channel in

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<sup>51</sup> E. Kovalenko (2019, August 7), Lukashenka sees Brexit as an opportunity for relations between Belarus and Great Britain. *KP in Ukraine*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://kp.ua/politics/643977-lukashenko-vydyt-v-breksyte-vozmozhnosty-dlia-otnoshenvi-belarusy-y-velykobrytanyy>

<sup>52</sup> Translated: “Lukashenko: Protests in Belarus coordinated from Britain, Poland and Czech Republic (2020, August 10). *EurAsia Daily*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2020/08/10/lukashenko-protesty-v-belorussii-koordinirovali-iz-britanii-polshi-i-chehi>

<sup>53</sup> *Evropeyskaya Pravda (European Truth)*, (2020, October 2) Belarus imposes symmetric sanctions against Great Britain and Canada. *Ukrainian Truth*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2020/10/2/7114955/>, Great Britain duplicated EU sanctions against Belarus (2020, December 18), *RBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/18/12/2020/5fdd025f9a794730b8bde316>.

Britain will keep imposed sanctions against Belarus after Brexit. (Великобритания сохранит санкции против Беларуси после Brexit) (2020, January 15), *Sputnik*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://sputnik.by/politics/20200115/1043699608/Velikobritaniya-vvodit-sanktsii-protiv-Belarusi.html>

<sup>54</sup> Tikhanovskaya urged EU, UK, USA and Canada to expand sanctions against Belarus (2021, January 29), *Interfax*. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/719777.html>

Belarus operating through YouTube and the Telegram <sup>55</sup> has suggested another method. He asserts that cutting off Belarus from the international bank payment systems, SWIFT, could bring down the Belarus government within a week as it would serve a big blow to the economy very quickly, making it difficult to manage for Lukashenko. This is something the people of Belarus are apparently willing to bear.<sup>56</sup>

## Chronology of Events

**November 1989:** Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) concluded by the then European Economic Community and the Soviet Union in 1989.11 (there are no other substantial agreements between the EU and Belarus) <http://kmlpj.ukma.edu.ua/article/view/153252>

**1<sup>st</sup> March 1994:** Agreement signed between the Republic of Belarus and UK to ensure Economic Cooperation. [http://uk.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral\\_relations/legal/](http://uk.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/legal/)  
UK was the first country in the EU to ratify the agreement of partnership and cooperation between Belarus and the EU from 1995

**2006:** After Belarus Presidential elections, EU put in economic sanctions in place as well as visa limitations for high officials including President Lukashenko [https://librarysearch.lse.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN cdi doaj primary oai doaj org article 07fb6bf97ff84a66826f5aa9f44997b7&context=PC&vid=44LSE\\_VU1&lang=en\\_US&search\\_scope=CSCOP\\_ALL&adaptor=primo\\_central\\_multiple\\_f&tab=default\\_tab&query=any,contains,UK%20Belarus](https://librarysearch.lse.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN%20cdi%20doaj%20primary%20oai%20doaj%20org%20article%2007fb6bf97ff84a66826f5aa9f44997b7&context=PC&vid=44LSE_VU1&lang=en_US&search_scope=CSCOP_ALL&adaptor=primo_central_multiple_f&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,UK%20Belarus)

**June 2007:** EU withdraws its trade preferences to Belarus under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences, in response to Belarus' violations of the core principles of the International Labour Organisation. [https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/belarus/index\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/belarus/index_en.htm)

**2010:** Presidential Election in Belarus. UK government lobbied hard for economic sanctions against Lukashenko's regime (within the EU) <https://belarusdigest.com/story/has-the-united-kingdom-finally-got-interested-in-belarus/>

**2015:** Presidential Election in Belarus free from violence. UK through the international aid programme directed nearly £3 million into Belarus. [https://librarysearch.lse.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN cdi doaj primary oai doaj org article 07fb6bf97ff84a66826f5aa9f44997b7&context=PC&vid=44LSE\\_VU1&lang=en\\_US&search\\_scope=CSCOP\\_ALL&adaptor=primo\\_central\\_multiple\\_f&tab=default\\_tab&query=any,contains,UK%20Belarus](https://librarysearch.lse.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN%20cdi%20doaj%20primary%20oai%20doaj%20org%20article%2007fb6bf97ff84a66826f5aa9f44997b7&context=PC&vid=44LSE_VU1&lang=en_US&search_scope=CSCOP_ALL&adaptor=primo_central_multiple_f&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,UK%20Belarus)

**August 2015:** Authorities in Minsk fulfilled EU's main condition by releasing political prisoners before Presidential election. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/77765/1/blogs.lse.ac.uk-Between%20Presidential%20and%20Parliamentary%20elections%20%20which%20way%20in%20the%20EU-Belarus%20relations.pdf>

**2016:** Most of EU sanctions on Belarus lifted. EU-Belarus Coordination Group established as forum for policy dialogue. <http://kmlpj.ukma.edu.ua/article/view/153252>

**29<sup>th</sup> March 2017:** UK Prime Minister formally triggered Article 50, beginning 2 Year count-down to UK leaving the EU. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7960/>

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<sup>55</sup> D. Kuryshko (2020, August 12) Belarus election: How Nexta channel bypassed news blackout. BBC News. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53753412>

<sup>56</sup> Founder of Nexta: Lukashenka's regime has no more than a year left (2020, December 17), Deutsche Welle. Retrieved April 12, 2021, from <https://www.dw.com/ru/osnovatel-nexta-rezhimu-lukashenko-ostalos-ne-bolshe-goda/a-55965257>

**26<sup>th</sup> September 2017:** Minister for Europe, Sir Alan Duncan visited Belarus to strengthen relations and cooperation. (First since... [http://uk.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral\\_relations/legal/](http://uk.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/legal/))

**27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> March 2018:** Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, pays official visit to UK. First since 1993. [http://uk.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral\\_relations/](http://uk.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral_relations/)

**18<sup>th</sup> December 2018:** Talks take place in London between Foreign Ministers of UK and Belarus. Signed statement on military cooperation and a military cooperation plan for 2018. [https://librarysearch.lse.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_cdi\\_doaj\\_primary\\_oai\\_doaj\\_org\\_article\\_07fb6bf97ff84a66826f5aa9f44997b7&context=PC&vid=44LSE\\_VU1&lang=en\\_US&search\\_scope=CSCOP\\_ALL&adaptor=primo\\_central\\_multiple\\_fe&tab=default\\_tab&query=any,contains,UK%20Belarus](https://librarysearch.lse.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_cdi_doaj_primary_oai_doaj_org_article_07fb6bf97ff84a66826f5aa9f44997b7&context=PC&vid=44LSE_VU1&lang=en_US&search_scope=CSCOP_ALL&adaptor=primo_central_multiple_fe&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,UK%20Belarus)

**23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020:** Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Oleg Kravchenko and Ambassador of the UK to the Republic of Belarus, Jacqueline Perkins meets at Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, discussing bilateral relations in context of UK's withdrawal from EU. [https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/belarus-uk-relations-amid-brexite-discussed-in-minsk\\_i\\_0000107682.html](https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/belarus-uk-relations-amid-brexite-discussed-in-minsk_i_0000107682.html)

**July 2020:** UK imposes sanctions on President Lukashenko in response to torture and mistreatment of peaceful protestors. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/belarus-uk-sanctions-eight-members-of-regime-including-alexander-lukashenko>

**9<sup>th</sup> of August 2020:** Presidential Elections in the Republic of Belarus, with Lukashenko being re-elected but perceived as electoral fraud. Widespread protests erupt, with many being detained, sentenced and at least 5 people killed. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/amid-crisis-belarusian-identity-changing>

**17<sup>th</sup> September 2020:** Moscow Mechanism of human dimension of OSCE invoked by 17 participating states, including the UK. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/b/469539.pdf>

**24<sup>th</sup> September 2020:** UK funds £800,000 to support of journalists in particular in Belarus. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-statement-on-belarus-24-september-2020>

**29<sup>th</sup> September 2020:** UK working with Canadian Government, imposes sanctions on 8 members of Belarussian regime in the form of travel ban and asset freeze, including on Lukashenko himself. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeuleg/229-xxvi/22906.htm>

**2<sup>nd</sup> October:** EU imposes sanctions on fifty-five additional individuals associated with Belarussian regime. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeuleg/229-xxvi/22906.htm>

**10<sup>th</sup> November:** Belarussian diplomats expelled from UK after legitimate observation of protests in Minsk on Sunday. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/human-rights-council-interactive-dialogue-on-belarus-uk-statement>

**16<sup>th</sup> November 2020:** United Kingdom and Canada announce recipient for first Media Freedom Award as Belarus. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/united-kingdom-and-canada-announce-recipient-of-first-media-freedom-award>

**31<sup>st</sup> January 2020:** UK left the EU and entered a transition period. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7960/>

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