

Belarus Defence and Security Report Q1 2011

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Abstracts

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More signs of Belarus's shift towards Europe and away from Russia, and changes in its security strategy, became evident in a speech by Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko in October 2010, as reported by RT. The president spoke in favour of closer ties with the European Union and NATO, and against the use of Russian (actually more widely spoken in the country than Belarussian) as a state language.

Lukashenko signaled a shift in national security policy to face 'contemporary global challenges and threats', making pre-emptive moves to tackle security problems, including extremism, terrorism, humanitarian crises and information threats. Whether the last issue referred to cyber warfare or Russian press attacks on the president's regime or both is not clear.

Relations between Belarus and Russia have worsened considerably over the past two years, despite the countries' strong economic, cultural and indeed military ties. Accusations and counter-accusations have been flying around. In October 2010, The Moscow News reported that Aleksandr Lukashenko had threatened to pull Belarus out of the Union State and customs union with Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an organisation of former Soviet countries, if Moscow did not recognise his victory in upcoming elections. Russian President Medvedev has said that Russia will look at the results 'impartially' – which could be a coded message, as votes in Belarus are widely considered to be neither free nor fair.

Lukashenko has hinted that Russia had not been respecting Belarussian sovereignty, and that the Russian leadership was partly responsible for the decline in relations. Lukashenko issued a clear veiled threat that if diplomatic relations deteriorated, Belarus would turn to other countries. With European countries increasingly tending to extend

the olive branch to Belarus, this is a more substantial threat than perhaps it might have been five years ago.

We expect relations between Belarus and Russia to remain strained for the foreseeable future, as Lukashenko continues to balance his foreign policy objectives. Indeed, while Belarus has joined a customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan in order to gain economic benefits from increased trade, the relationship between Moscow and Minsk is expected to periodically sour given Lukashenko's reluctance to allow stronger Russian influence within Belarus.

Lukashenko remains the most likely candidate to win the presidential election in the beginning of 2011, with power set to remain firmly concentrated within the executive branch for the foreseeable future as a result.

Meanwhile, Belarus is seen as a 'cyber sanctuary' from which cyber criminals and those involved in cyber warfare and espionage can operate without interference from the authorities. Cyber warfare poses a rising risk to global political and economic stability and could represent a wild card in any major international confrontation. BMI expects the world's major powers – and indeed, smaller states – to step up their cyber warfare capabilities over the coming years, with a view to deterring others from attacking them."

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