From close companion to fraternal foe: How the 2020 anti-establishment protests affected Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine

Haas, Martijn Ingmar

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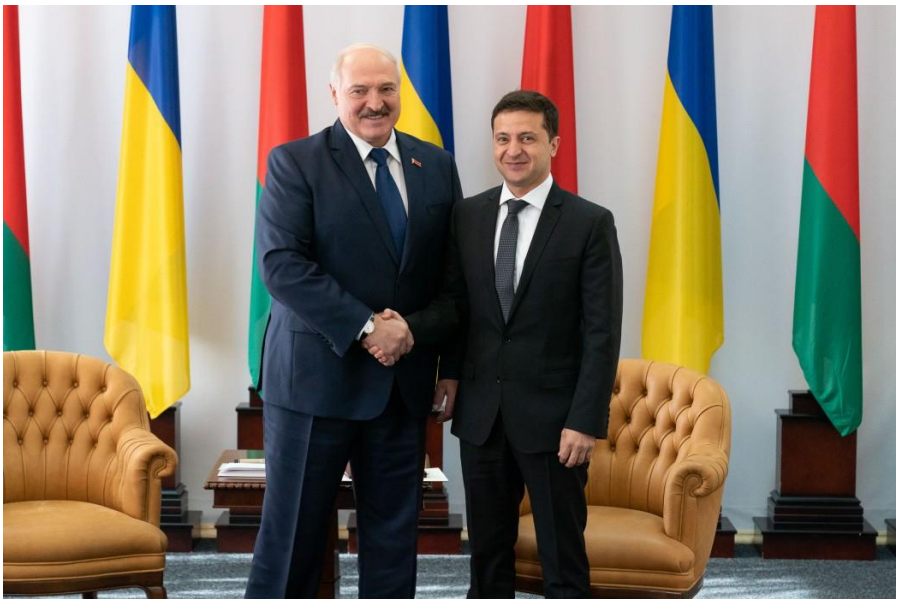

Master Thesis

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Martijn Ingmar Haas BA BSc

Supervisor: Dr. Matthew Frear, Faculty for Humanities

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1. Introduction

Ukraine and Belarus have a complicated relationship. Stuck between Russia and the European Union, both states have in the past expressed their interest in closer cooperation to reduce both countries' dependence on Russia (Iwański and Kłysiński 2017). The latter tries to keep Ukraine in its sphere of influence and is united with Belarus in the Union State, which presents a major obstacle for Belarusian-Ukrainian relations (Khylko 2021a). The prospects of a deepening of ties between both states however disappeared in the wake of the 2020 elections in Belarus. Accusations of electoral fraud sparked a wave of protests that was met with heavy repression, leading to widespread condemnation and the implementation of sanctions by the European Union and Ukraine (Council of the European Union 2020; RFE/RL 2020). Yet President Lukashenka[1] managed to stay in power, unlike President Yanukovich of Ukraine during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy condemned the repression of Belarusians, refused to recognise the election results, and refused to recognise Aliaksandr Lukashenka as the legitimate president of Belarus (Sorokin 2020). In response, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka has increasingly practised hostile rhetoric toward Ukraine and president Zelenskyy (Żochowski and Iwański 2021; Coakley 2022).

This thesis will take a closer look at Belarusian foreign policy discourse toward Ukraine since the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections and explore the reasons behind the increase in hostile rhetoric toward Ukraine. Though Belarus and Ukraine have common interests in safeguarding their independence vis-à-vis Russia, it appears that the Belarusian president has remained wary of his Ukrainian colleague, who rejects the Belarusian leader's authoritarian model of governance (Zelenskyy 2019; Moshes 2018). It remains unclear to what extent the 2020 protests led to a substantive change in Belarusian attitudes toward Ukraine. Therefore, my research question is: how did the 2020 Belarusian protests affect Belarusian foreign policy discourse vis-à-vis Ukraine?

The analysis is based on a comparative analysis of Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine before and after the 2020 protests. Using strategic culture for the conceptual framework, I will explore domestic and international factors that are most likely to explain the changes in foreign policy rhetoric after the 2020 protests.

I hypothesise that the domestic anti-establishment protests and the Ukrainian anti-establishment government's support for these protests have led Belarusian foreign policy elites to increasingly see Ukraine's government as a threat to their power base. Since Belarusian foreign policy tends to follow the interests of the domestic political and economic elite, a threat perceived by the elite may consequently affect the foreign policy of the entire state (Hansbury 2021). The analysis will account for trends within the Belarusian-Russian relationship as well, as Russia holds increasingly more influence over Belarusian policymakers and has also increasingly practised hostile rhetoric toward Ukraine since the 2014 Revolution of Dignity (Usov 2020; Dreyer 2018, 552–53).

This thesis contributes to the academic literature in a number of ways. Firstly, the body of academic literature on Belarus-Ukraine relations is relatively small. A large share of the literature on Belarusian foreign policy instead focuses on Belarusian foreign policy vis-à-vis the European Union and Russia and the associated multi-vector foreign policy pursued by President Lukashenka. The results of this thesis may also shed more light on how autocrats deal with democratic, anti-establishment governments that support anti-authoritarian opposition. On a theoretical level, this thesis

[1] This thesis uses Belarusian forms for the personal names of Belarusian citizens and place names. Similarly, the appropriate Ukrainian and Russian forms are used when respectively referring to Ukrainian or Russian persons or places. The choice of any language, orthography, script, or transliteration system should not be interpreted as a political statement. Citations follow the spelling of the authors' names used in the original publication.

contributes to the foreign policy analysis literature that emphasises the importance of domestic factors in explaining foreign policy outcomes.

Due to the dynamic nature of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war and the difficulty of interpreting events as they are still developing, the analysis will not include the events of 2022. Instead, the first, pre-election stage of the analysis focuses on the period from 2019 to August 2020. The post-election section then looks at events from August 2020 to August 2021. Rather than taking reducing the value of my research, this thesis provides new insights into the developments of the Belarusian attitude toward Ukraine over the past years, and may thus be used in later research that takes a closer look at the Belarusian behaviour during the 2022 full-fledged invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

This thesis starts with a literature review. This review looks at the theoretical frameworks, debates, and research gaps on causes of foreign policy change in general and Belarusian foreign policy in particular. The next chapter will then take the insights from the literature review and present the conceptual framework, which is built around strategic culture. This section also provides a general overview of Belarusian strategic culture and its main vectors. Chapter 4 discusses methodological issues such as research design, variables, operationalisation, data, and methods. Chapter 5 then prepares for the analysis by providing an overview of Belarus-Ukraine relations after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity up to the pre-election period in 2019. Chapter 6 then contains three sections analysing the pre-election and post-election period and presenting and interpreting the results. The thesis finishes with a final chapter containing conclusions and a discussion of the research results and their limitations.

2. Theoretical approaches to foreign policy analysis

To explore the mechanisms behind the Belarusian change of rhetoric in the wake of the 2020 protests, it's important to first review the literature on foreign policy change. The goal of this literature review is to identify the mechanisms that can alter foreign policy rhetoric and attitudes, while also looking at the various approaches used to study foreign policy more generally. To that end, I will first provide an overview of the various debates and main theories on foreign policy behaviour that emerged in the FPA (foreign policy analysis) literature over the last few decades and compare them to my conceptual framework of choice, strategic culture. Integrated into this review is a critical assessment of the main strengths and weaknesses of the various theories and methodological frameworks employed previously to study foreign policy change.

The literature review is structured as follows. Firstly, I identify the concepts that are most frequently employed in studying foreign policy. After discussing the main paradigms in FPA, I will zoom in on strategic culture and competing frameworks that may be used to study Belarusian rhetoric toward Ukraine. Secondly, I take a look at the different factors that influence foreign policy behaviour, such as institutions and (domestic) actors. The third and final section provides a brief conclusion.

2.1. The making of foreign policy change

Before turning to the various approaches used to study foreign policy change, it's important to acknowledge the large diversity in theoretical frameworks on this topic. In the academic literature, my thesis fits the mid-level theories of foreign policy analysis. FPA is specifically concerned with studying state behaviour in the context of domestic and international trends (Alden and Aran 2017, 3; Neack 2003, 8–11). This makes the mid-level theory of FPA more fit for the purpose of my thesis than the more prevalent structuralist theories of international relations (IR). Scholars of IR are more concerned with understanding the international system as a whole, as well as the various ways in which the structure of this system affects the behaviour of individual states (Alden and Aran 2017, 3). Though this can offer relevant explanations as to why Belarus would or wouldn't change its foreign policy, most major IR theories such as realism do not use domestic factors as the central explanans for state behaviour. As I aim to generate results that take into account the unique Belarusian domestic and regional context, the one-size-fits-all approach of the major schools of thought in international relations is unfit for this thesis.

2.1.1. Rationality and culture in foreign policy analysis

An important debate to be aware of when analysing foreign policy behaviour is the paradigmatic rationalist-constructivist debate, which has significantly influenced the research orientation of FPA scholars (Sprout and Sprout 1957; Ruggie 1998; Anand 2020, 4–5). As such, this debate is important to understand the choice for using strategic culture for my analysis, as plenty of other alternative theoretical frameworks exist.

Rationalist scholars aim to explain foreign policy change through rational choice theory. Rational choice models assume that all actors behave the same way when faced with similar incentive structures, bracketing out issues such as history, identity, learning, or socialisation processes (Carlsnaes 1992, 249). This approach came under increasing criticism as scholars found that policymakers do in practice not always make the same choices when facing similar situations. One example of a frequently used rationalist-oriented framework is neorealism. Neorealism assumes that small states adapt their foreign and security policies to the great powers of the moment: small states will either bandwagon with a more powerful state, or join a coalition that balances against one, depending on what brings the most benefits and security to the small state (Waltz 1979, 118–20, 125–26; Brooks and Wohlforth 2002, 76–77). Though the logic behind this theory may be obvious, as

small states cannot be expected to single-handedly oppose large states, neorealist thinking has failed to explain a number of key moments in Belarusian foreign policy. Russia has in the past pressured Belarus to recognise the breakaway territories of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, as well as Russian-occupied Crimea. Though neorealist logic states that Belarus will bandwagon with Russia in order to not risk any repercussions or negative effects on its security, Belarus defied Russia and refused to recognise these territories as being independent or part of Russia (Preiherman 2017, 9). Belarus also didn't join a coalition opposing Russian power in the region (ibid). Belarus thus didn't pick either of the two options that small states have according to neorealism. The answer as to why Belarus didn't join the Russian line on these territories cannot be found in rationalist theories that assume all states behave the same in similar situations, instead requiring an approach that respects Belarus' unique characteristics and policy options.

In response to this criticism of rationalist approaches, the constructivist school of thought designed a different approach. Constructivists explain state behaviour using the social environment in which policymakers, also referred to as actors, operate (George 1969; Wendt 1992). Each state's identity is unique and shaped by the state's history, environment, and interactions with other states (Wendt 1992, 396–98; Houghton 2007, 29). Foreign policy goals and interests are consequently derived from a state's identity (Wendt 1992, 398). This identity in turn determines the way a state perceives its policy options and environment, the incentive structure as perceived by this state, and e.g. whether a neighbouring state constitutes a threat or not (Weldes 1996). Constructivist approaches generally respect the uniqueness of individual states and offer explanations that account for these unique characteristics. This makes them most suitable for this thesis, which aims to find out more specifically about Belarusian behaviour in the international arena.

2.1.2. Strategic culture: main tenets and debates

The constructivist concept I base my conceptual framework on is strategic culture. Though strategic culture has been subject of academic debate for over four decades, scholars remain divided over the definition of strategic culture. In his original work on strategic culture, Jack Snyder defines strategic culture as:

> "a set of general beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour patterns with regard to nuclear strategy that has achieved a state of semi-permanence that places them on the level of "cultural" rather than mere policy" (Snyder 1977, v).

This definition specifically focuses on security and defence, since Snyder employed strategic culture as a conceptual framework for studying the nuclear policies of the USSR and the US during the Cold War (Snyder 1977). This makes the definition somewhat too narrow for the aims of this thesis, which focuses specifically on foreign policy discourse in a non-nuclear scenario. More appropriate may be the definition by Meyer, who states that strategic culture can broadly be defined as compromising

"the socially transmitted, identity-derived norms, ideas and patterns of behaviour that are shared among a broad majority of actors and social groups within a given security community, which help to shape a ranked set of options for a community's pursuit of security and defence goals" (Meyer 2005, 528).

Meyer integrates the constructivist element of Snyder's definition and also defines the 'carriers' of strategic culture: security communities. Strategic culture however also finds its roots in the structural characteristics of a state, such as its geography and resources (Lantis and Howlett 2019, 93–94). Belarus's proximity to Russia and the EU has significantly impacted Belarusian strategic culture, requiring the integration of these structural elements (Miklóssy and Smith 2019, xv–xvi; Frear

2019b). My analysis also specifically focuses on foreign and security discourses vis-à-vis Ukraine, requiring a broadening of the group defined as carrying strategic culture. According to constructivists, past interactions and common experiences are also key determinants of state identity and a state's perception of others (Glenn 2009, 530). The definition of strategic culture as applied in this thesis will thus be structural factors and socially transmitted, identity-derived norms, beliefs, and assumptions derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which influence the appropriate ends and means chosen for achieving security objectives.

Of key importance is thus the way the Belarusian elite perceives the world, based on their shared experience, history, etc. I will employ strategic culture as a type of operational code or toolbox, which has a few important consequences for how strategic culture affects policymakers (George 1969). Strategic culture as an operational code may lead to actors selecting information that is most consistent with their views through cognitive bias (Jervis 2017, 117). A policymaker's attention is also unequally divided: events that relate to the actor's current concerns, in line with that actor's culture, may be more influential than events that are of lower salience to the policymaker (Mintz and DeRouen Jr. 2010, 99–100). For Belarus, this may mean that e.g. the threat of post-election domestic unrest and the response of foreign states to this unrest may have a high impact on the assessment of bilateral ties compared to e.g. current developments in bilateral trade relations, which may be perceived to as less of a salient issue. The perception of e.g. President Zelenskyy's support of the Belarusian opposition may also be tied to Belarusian foreign policymakers' belief system and mental images about external actors' response to domestic protests (ibid, 100-102). Strategic culture is thus a conceptual framework that informs the interpretation and analysis of information, a type of 'lens' through which to view events of interest.

In this thesis, I build on the work of post-structuralist scholars of strategic culture who use this conceptual framework to explain the observed social behaviour of states and policymakers (Glenn 2009, 536). Post-structuralists pay special attention to discourse and narratives, as politicians often use these to provide meaning to a situation and develop discourses that serve the foreign policy goals of the state and its policymakers (ibid). The creation of political narratives is a key tool for policymakers to prepare the population for new policies, as these narratives legitimate policymakers' actions and make the policies understandable and legitimate for themselves and the broader population (ibid, 537). The Belarusian government uses state media and government ideologists and propagandists to create the necessary narratives, making a post-structuralist approach suitable for studying Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine (Burov 2019, 11; Frear 2019a, 102–3). This also makes studying narratives more interesting than studying foreign policy actions per se, as rhetoric is used to legitimate policies that may later come into force.

Strategic culture also does not have to be a determinant of behaviour per se. Strategic culture and its application in FPA have been discussed by three generations of scholars, who disagree on the uses of strategic culture and the relationship between strategic culture and strategic behaviour (Miklóssy and Smith 2019, xiii–xiv). The first generation of strategic culture, led by Colin S. Gray, finds that all strategic behaviour is cultural, requiring a broad range of inputs (Gray 1999a, 129; Johnston 1995, 37). The large number of inputs on different levels made the framework hard to apply in empirical research, and the assumed consistency over time of strategic culture also didn't find strong confirmation in empirical studies (Johnston 1995, 38). Strategic culture doesn't have to be consistent over time, as so-called 'subcultures' may temporarily take over the dominating culture and lead to a deviation in a state's strategic behaviour (Bloomfield 2012, 452–54; Snyder 1977, 10). The second generation of strategic culture consequently saw strategic culture as an influential, but not a decisive

determinant of strategic behaviour (Lock 2010, 697–98). The third generation of scholars, led by A. Johnston, adapted strategic culture to be falsifiable and is mostly focused on theory testing (Johnston 1995, 41–42, 45). My application of strategic culture takes somewhat of a middle ground, as I use strategic culture as a framework through which I analyse the effect of the 2020 protests on Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine. Strategic culture thus rather helps identify the object of analysis and offers a prism through which I look for possible explanations for changes in Belarusian rhetoric after the 2020 elections. Strategic culture is thus the missing link that can explain the connection between the 2020 protests and changes in Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine.

2.1.3. Strategic culture and competing theories of foreign policy

Though strategic culture has long established itself in the foreign policy analysis literature, there are a number of other theoretical frameworks that also lend themselves to conducting the type of analysis I perform for this thesis. In this short section, I will lay out the main competing theoretical frameworks and the reasons why they are less fit for this analysis than strategic culture.

One theoretical school that can be applied to (foreign) policy analysis is new institutionalism, which consists of three distinct analytical approaches (Hall and Taylor 1996, 936). One of these approaches, historical institutionalism, incorporates historical processes, past interactions with other actors, and the presence of policymaking and other institutions as key determinants of behaviour (Pierson and Skocpol 2002, 695–96). Historical institutionalists would thus look at Belarus' centralised and personalised policymaking institutions to explain policy change. This framework is however somewhat unsuitable for my analysis, as its heavy focus on history may exclude the importance of international politics in Belarusian behaviour and historical institutionalism explicitly focuses on policy change, rather than rhetoric. The second branch of institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, does focus on norms, values and the behaviour of others to explain policymakers' changing behaviour (Thelen and Conran 2016, 52–53). This branch however also focuses mostly on policymaking instead of rhetoric. It also assumes a very high level of stability of norms and values, mirroring first-generation strategic culture scholars (Hall and Taylor 1996, 454). This makes the framework unfit for studying change, which is exactly the subject of interest in my research puzzle.

The final theoretical framework that has in the past been used to analyse Belarusian behaviour is strategic hedging (Preiherman 2017). Strategic hedging is a type of behaviour in which states try to minimise risks arising from uncertainties in the international system by increasing their freedom of manoeuvre, diversifying their strategic options, and shaping the preferences of other states (Wang 2015, 64; Tessman 2012, 209). Preiherman (2017) has shown that strategic hedging is a promising framework for analysing Belarusian foreign policy behaviour, which according to Preiherman doesn't conform to the models of traditional IR models such as neorealism. The problem with strategic hedging however is that it considers the behaviour of large states to be a key determinant of the behaviour of smaller states, such as Belarus. Preiherman also dismisses the merit of analysing domestic factors as co-determinants of foreign policy attitudes, directly contradicting scholars that argue that the Belarusian foreign policy rhetoric changed after the 2020 protests (Żochowski and Iwański 2021).

2.2. Shaping the foreign policymaking process

A change in foreign policy (rhetoric) may be caused by domestic political institutions or the political system of a country more generally, or by political actors. A common, agency-oriented approach assumes that state leaders rely on the support of certain constituencies to remain in power, and foreign policy may thus change when the preferences of these key constituencies change (Hermann 1990, 6–7, 12; Gilpin 1981, 16). Though this logic appears to copy the basic logic of democratic

accountability, non-democratic politicians' policymaking is also informed by a concern for long-term political survival through maintaining popular or elite support (Hagan 1995, 125–26). In such regimes, key constituencies do not necessarily have to be voters. In post-Soviet Eastern Europe for example, oligarchs and other businesspeople as well as certain groups within the state security apparatus have played key roles in influencing policy directions (Hansbury 2021; Bateman 2014; Szeptycki 2008). The importance of constituencies makes an analysis of Belarusian state rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine relevant, as this form of communication also has to succeed in keeping elite and popular constituencies on board with the actions of the regime.

Key constituencies may affect foreign policy in a couple of different ways. The beliefs of a core constituency may change, the primary constituency that influences FP may change, or the competing dominant constituencies may have one winner that simply imposes its preference upon the others (Hermann 1990, 7). These latter two propositions are in line with the literature on strategic subcultures. The influence of constituencies may be somewhat mitigated by domestic (political) structures or institutions more generally (Carlsnaes 1992; Risse-Kappen 1991; Hagan 1995, 135–36; Goldmann 1988). Domestic structures regulate the power balance between groups and the 'rules of the game' of interaction between them (Carlsnaes 1993, 267). Bureaucracies may also hold significant influence over foreign policymaking (Alden and Aran 2017, 7–8; Hudson 2016, 20–21). However, Belarus' political and foreign policymaking institutions are characterised by their organisation into a 'vertical of power', the sheer reach of Lukashenka's personal power may mitigate changes in the opinion of his subordinates in the wake of the 2020 elections and surrounding events (Frear 2019a; Pierson-Lyzhina 2021, 59–61). This makes strategic culture and the concept of strategic subcultures all the more interesting since a change in foreign policy could be caused either by a change in the President's opinion or by dissent in his bureaucracy, though that seems unlikely considering the personalisation of Belarusian governing structures. Nevertheless, Belarusian political and economic elites have in the past been shown to have significant influence over Belarusian policy if their core interests are concerned, so they are important actors to observe in the analysis when their core interests are the subject of discussion (Hansbury 2021). This may however be complicated by the lack of transparency in Belarusian decision-making, making it an issue of secondary importance.

Strategic culture incorporates elements of role theory, such as the idea that policymakers have a certain vision of the role their state plays in the world, and that foreign policy is shaped in accordance with these views (Alden and Aran 2017, 127; Cantir and Kaarbo 2012). The 2020 elections, protests, and the response of neighbouring states may have contributed to a change in Belarusian rhetoric by amending the self-perception of foreign policymakers, affecting the way they see their state's role in the world. If the domestic protests led policymakers to focus more on sovereignty and stability, Belarus may have changed their rhetoric toward Ukraine as a consequence of Ukraine's criticism of Lukashenka and his government, which the re-elected Belarusian president may perceive as a threat. This may prompt Belarus to perceive of itself as a state that can only rely on its autocratic neighbours, threatened by anti-establishment governments such as Ukraine and also threatened by democracy-minded states like those of the European Union. Scholars of role theory propose that such a change in national role conception can have significant effects on how a state interacts with others (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Wish 1980; Wallace 1991; Jervis 2017).

2.3. Conclusion

To summarise, there are several key elements in foreign policy analysis that should be integrated into my conceptual framework due to their importance in past FPA research. Firstly, constructivist approaches are crucial to understanding foreign policy in its historical and political context. Models

purely based on a rational choice paradigm base their research on assumptions that are not reflected in reality, and have in the past been shown to lack explanatory power in numerous studies, including the study of Belarusian foreign policy. A constructivist-based conceptual framework such as strategic culture not only fits the purposes of this study better but also fits the focus of an area studies thesis.

Strategic culture itself is not a unitary theoretical school, as three generations of scholars have clashed over definitions and causal linkages between e.g. behaviour and culture. I however draw from the various generations and their insights to distil my own definition of strategic culture. What's more, the relatively novel concept of strategic subcultures helps explain foreign policy rhetoric that may not be in line with the dominant strategic culture. This can be integrated into my conceptual framework so that the analysis can account for subcultures and the foreign policymakers competing for dominance among these subcultures.

Finally, a change in foreign policy behaviour may be changed by numerous factors, whether it be through actors, the institutional context in which they operate, or the influence of constituencies or popular support. Since Belarus is a highly personalised and centralised autocracy, I will focus mostly on agency, the power of individual actors, to shape foreign policy. The importance of elites and other constituencies in influencing foreign policy behaviour complements the concept of strategic subcultures, though their influence may similarly be constrained by the authoritarian nature of Belarusian governing institutions. The key to exploring the underlying mechanisms that generate foreign policy behaviour in Belarus can be found in the foreign policymaking elite and their perception of the Belarusian role in the world, and how they consequently interpret the actions of Ukraine and other states. A deep understanding of Belarusian strategic culture and the views held by foreign policymakers is thus a key prerequisite for conducting my analysis.

3. Conceptual framework

This section presents my conceptual framework and justifies the choices made in constructing it. The first section will provide an overview of this framework and justify my choice for a constructivist conceptualisation of strategic culture as the cornerstone of my analysis. The second section describes Belarusian strategic culture and past research on Belarusian strategic culture and foreign policy. The third section presents the main variables and causal logic of my research puzzle and ends with my hypothesis.

3.1. Strategic culture, foreign policy discourse, and change

The core of my conceptual framework builds on the work of Wendt (1992), Glenn (2009), and Bloomfield (2012) by using elements from constructivist theory, strategic culture, and foreign policy analysis. Building on the work of Glenn (2009, 353), Meyer (2005, 528), and Lantis and Howlett (2019, 93-94) my constructivist definition of strategic culture is: structural factors and socially transmitted, identity-derived norms, beliefs, and assumptions derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which influence the appropriate ends and means chosen for achieving security objectives.

I opted for a constructivist conceptualisation of strategic culture, as this is specifically aimed at explaining state behaviour using empirical cases and causal theorising (Glenn 2009, 533). Other conceptualisations of strategic culture instead focus on descriptive research or eschew searching for generalised explanations of state behaviour, making them less suitable for the purposes of this thesis (ibid, 530-541). Rather than being a theoretical theory which I aim to test, I thus use strategic culture as an instrument through which I can interpret the information gathered for the analysis. Strategic culture can offer several explanations as to why Belarusian officials practice a certain rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine and how and why changes in this rhetoric might have taken place.

My definition of strategic culture encompasses a variety of different inputs, some of which are more relevant than others in the context of my analysis. Structural factors generally included in strategic culture, such as geography and climate, are not subject to change in the timeframe of my analysis (Lantis and Howlett 2019, 93–94). The states surrounding Belarus also do not change significantly in terms of their capabilities and power, and except for developments in the entrenched Donbas war, there are no significant territorial changes in Eastern Europe between 2019 and 2021. Belarus' proximity to Russia and the EU and its position in-between these two powers however constitutes an important part of Belarusian strategic culture, necessitating the inclusion of structural factors in my conceptual framework (Frear 2019b, 229–30).

Socially transmitted, identity-derived norms, ideas, and patterns of behaviour are key inputs in my conceptual framework and constructivist strategic culture more generally (Glenn 2009, 535). This follows the work of Wendt (1992), who finds that identity is a key determinant of state behaviour (Wendt 1992, 397–98). Every state's identity is unique, and so is the way a state perceives of other states' behaviour (ibid). Similar actions may thus have different meanings for different states.

The first step in my analysis will consequently be to determine what constitutes the Belarusian (strategic) identity in international affairs, as it is a defining part of Belarusian strategic culture and thus an important determinant of Belarusian behaviour toward Ukraine. A state's identity can be explored in three steps (Bloomfield 2012, 451). The first is to determine the Belarusian opinion on the various states around it. The second step involves determining the extent to which Belarus fears or trusts other states. The final step is then to understand Belarus' strategic risk analysis, which ranks

the relative power and vulnerabilities of its allies and enemies. A literature review of Belarusian foreign policy and perception of its neighbours would suffice for identifying general orientations in Belarusian strategic culture and could lean on previous work on Belarusian strategic culture (see e.g. Frear 2019).

The historical experiences and shared narratives among Belarusian foreign policymakers are the third input relevant to Belarusian strategic identity. Historical interactions with Ukraine in the Soviet Union or the narrative of Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians as 'brotherly nations' may consequently affect the way Belarus perceives Ukraine. These historical experiences and shared narratives are well-recorded in the academic literature and will be discussed in my review of Belarusian strategic culture in a later section of this chapter. The literature review already established that policymakers can use certain narratives to legitimise (future) policy choices. Belarusian policymakers have in the past frequently made use of historical narratives to frame certain issues, making an understanding of rhetoric used in the Belarusian context even more important (Frear 2019b, 233–34).

Another important part of my conceptual framework is the concept of strategic subcultures. Strategic culture, as implied by the term culture, is generally considered to be fairly stable over time (Gray 1999b, 52). This stability does however not exclude competition among the various strategic cognitive schemes, or subcultures, that collectively compose strategic culture (Bloomfield 2012, 452). Though one of those schemes is generally dominant, these schemes are in constant competition which may in turn lead to a state deviating from its standard behaviour if one of these subcultures temporarily attains dominance (ibid). These subcultures essentially contain different perspectives on a state's strategic situation and consequently affect how it responds to other states. Subcultures are pushed for by domestic elites representing their own interests (Snyder 1977, 10; Bloomfield 2012, 453). Relevant to my analysis is that these subcultures manifest themselves through speech acts, which makes it important to take note of Belarusian foreign policy narratives that deviate from the dominant strategic culture of the country.

3.2. The nature of Belarusian strategic culture

This section provides an overview of Belarusian strategic culture, characterising it in a way congruent with my conceptual framework and its application in the following analysis. The goal is to understand Belarusian strategic identity, the narratives and historical experiences employed and shaping it, and the identity-derived norms, ideas, and patterns of behaviour that manifested in Belarusian foreign and security policy.

Belarusian identity is tough to define, as a variety of multilingual and multicultural political formations historically occupied the parts or the entirety of the territory of contemporary Belarus (Frear 2019b, 230–31). For most of the 20th century, the country was part of the Soviet Union, and Belarusian national identity is still characterised in part by its historical Soviet heritage (Titarenko 2007, 83). The identity of contemporary Belarus thus had to be constructed, in identity-building processes that were a common occurrence for newly independent states after the fall of the Soviet Union (Kuzio 2002). In general, Belarus thinks of itself as a neutral country that pursues constructive relationships with a wide variety of states (Frear 2019b, 242). This neutrality is enshrined in the Belarusian constitution, which stresses the importance of international law and excludes military aggression targeted at foreign states from taking place on Belarusian soil (President of Belarus 2022).

This neutrality features in the concept underpinning Belarusian foreign policy since independence: multi-vectorism. Belarus finds itself between two major powers, the EU and Russia. As part of its multi-vector foreign policy, Belarus has traditionally tried to manoeuvre relations between these actors to extract benefits from them but without committing to alliances with either that would

constrain Belarusian foreign policy autonomy too much (Preiherman 2017, 4; Melyantsou 2018, 174). This multi-vectorism is informed by different Belarusian strategic subcultures (Frear 2019b, 240). The Belarusian elite is not a unitary group, as certain groups among this elite prefer economic development and closer ties with the EU over the special relationship with Russia (Hansbury 2021). Yet other subgroups prefer the engagement with Russia, as Russia provides security and the political support necessary to keep the regime in power (ibid).

Despite the constitutional and preached neutrality, Belarus did commit itself to multiple integration projects in the post-Soviet space, such as the Union State between Belarus and Russia, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Russia plays a special role in Belarusian strategic culture, as both countries are bound by deep cultural and historical ties and Russia currently represents the main ally of and also the main threat to Belarus (Astakhova 2020; Usov 2020). Russia plays an important, yet not decisive role in Belarusian strategic culture (Frear 2019a, 229–30).

The relationship with Russia is complicated, meaning Belarus sees Russia as an ally and a type of adversary at the same time. President Lukashenka heavily depends on Russian economic support to keep the Belarusian economy running and guarantee the Belarusian population a decent standard of living, which is key in maintaining popular support for Lukashenka's regime (Burov 2017, 14; 2018, 17). Russia is also the main security guarantor of Belarus, thanks to bilateral cooperation and the CSTO (Frear 2019b, 234). At the same time, Russia has been consistently pushing for more integration with Belarus, sparking Belarusian fears that Russia may threaten the country's sovereignty or even absorb Belarus altogether (Usov 2020; Sivitsky 2019). Attempts at further political integration in the framework of the Union State and Russian pressure on Belarus to increase military integration and allow Russian military bases on Belarusian soil have been special points of contention (ibid, Porotnikov 2016, 36–37; Astapenia 2020). Russia has in the past attempted to coerce Belarus through concerted media campaigns, reductions in energy subsidies, and the implementation of trade barriers between both countries (Pan'kovskiy 2016, 76–77; Melyantsou 2018, 175; Pan'kovskiy 2018, 61; Porotnikov 2018, 33). Belarusian strategic culture thus focuses on striking a security balance with Russia: Belarusian authorities require political and economic support from the Kremlin, but the conditions attached to this support shouldn't pose too severe a threat to Belarusian sovereignty. The manoeuvring space for Belarus in foreign policy is however limited by Belarusian commitments to the Union State, EAEU, and the CSTO, which pose a legal constraint on Belarusian policymaking and can be complemented by additional political or economic pressure by Russia or the EU if Belarus does not live up to the expectations of its partners.

Belarus' relationship with the European Union follows a somewhat similar dynamic. Belarus has in the past successfully cooperated with the EU on economic issues. Limited economic liberalisation or the freeing of political prisoners have in the past been traded for investments, economic opportunities, loans, and technical assistance for Belarus (Portela 2011, 498). Pushes for political liberalisation, democracy promotion, or sanctions in response to human rights abuse and electoral fraud however regularly reverse positive trends in EU-Belarus relations, pushing Belarus away from the EU and closer to Russia or China (Yakouchyk 2016; Frear 2019b, 240). Political liberalisation and democracy promotion are a potential threat to the Lukashenka regime and are thus seen as a red line in Belarusian engagement with the EU.

Belarusian strategic culture is thus focused on the concept of Belarus as a neutral state or bridge between Russia and the EU. Its key interest is remaining a sovereign state with sufficient foreign policy manoeuvring room for the regime to remain in power and receive the political or economic support it needs at the moment. Belarus manages its relationships with its foreign partners using a

multi-vector foreign policy that draws from a variety of strategic subcultures. These strategic subcultures can draw on the historical and cultural ties between Belarus and Russia, or instead appeal to the EU by referring to Belarus' past as part of various European historical entities and its role as a key diplomatic forum for regional security. Belarus manoeuvres between the EU and Russia depending on its needs and the perceived threat posed by the demands of the other in exchange for political or economic support. Russia is seen as both an essential ally as well as a potentially existential threat. The EU is mostly seen as a partner in economic affairs, but the difference in views on governing systems and human rights remain a permanent barrier to the development of durable political ties that could supplant Russia as Belarus' main partner.

3.3. Variables, causal logic, and hypothesis

As strategic culture is a fairly abstract concept, it's important to understand the variables and causal logic that I use to answer my research question. My variable of interest, or dependent variable, is a change in Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine. My independent variable is the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections and Ukraine's response to the post-election protest movement in Belarus. Strategic culture is the conceptual instrument which offers explanations for the connection between my independent and dependent variables.

I assume that the interests represented by the Belarusian state are first and foremost the interests of its elite, specifically those of President Lukashenka. The Belarusian political apparatus is a fairly closed system, defined by the absolute control of President Lukashenka himself over all branches of government (Frear 2019a, 31–47). The relationship between Lukashenka's political system and society was traditionally based on a social contract: the government gets exclusive rights to regulate and legislate as they see fit and in return, the citizens received decent social standards, inherited from the USSR (Korshunov 2021, 133–34). This gives the governing elite ample opportunity to use public institutions for private gain, resembling a neo-patrimonial system of government (Frear 2019a, 13). President Lukashenka's foreign policy has in the past also focused mostly on extracting maximum benefits from the EU, Russia, and others, while giving up as little as possible in order to maintain autonomy as has been shown in the previous section (Preiherman 2017; Frear 2022). The benefits, e.g. in the form of credit lines or subsidies on fossil fuels could in turn be used for private gain by the elite or to uphold the government's end of the Belarusian social contracts (Frear 2019a, 71–73; Korshunov 2021, 133–34). Due to this personalised political system, I will apply strategic culture to President Lukashenka and Belarus' political elite, as they essentially represent and define Belarusian state interests. This elite also shapes the national identity of Belarus as they understand it, and represents that view in foreign and domestic politics (Frear 2019a, 78–84).

The causal logic of my conceptual framework is as follows. The protests themselves, as well as the international response to the elections and the harsh repression of the protests, are both perceived as a threat by the Belarusian regime. The protests themselves are a threat because their objective is the establishment of a new government that excludes President Lukashenka and his cronies (Harding 2020). The international response by the EU is a threat because it both supports the protest movement and implements sanctions on specific individuals in the Belarusian government, reducing the profits gained from their office and possibly increasing the chances of success for the Belarusian protest movement (Council of the European Union 2022). Ukraine's response is perceived as a threat due to the anti-establishment government in Ukraine, its eventual support for the protest movement, and the eventual implementation of sanctions on the Belarusian regime by Ukraine (Ukrinform 2020a; 2020b; Dickinson 2021). President Zelenskyy already hinted in his inauguration speech that he would be glad to see more anti-establishment regimes come to power in neighbouring post-Soviet states, voicing a preference that directly goes against President

Lukashenka's interests (Zelenskyy 2019). The eventual support by Ukraine for the protest movement and Ukraine's alignment with EU sanctions against Belarus added an operational element to this early anti-establishment rhetoric, thus contributing to what the Belarusian government may perceive as behavioural patterns that constitute an existential threat to the regime. As these acts are seen as hostile by Belarusian foreign policymaking elites, their rhetoric changes. This rhetoric now strikes a negative tone and refers to potential threats, such as the idea of armed aggression from the West (BelTA 2021c; 2021b; Office of the President of Belarus 2021a; Kurier 2021).

I hypothesise that Ukraine's response to the protests in Belarus, which included support for Belarusian opposition and non-recognition of Aliaksandr Lukashenka as the legitimate president of Belarus has changed Belarus' perception of Ukraine for the worse. By supporting those opposing the domestic Belarusian elite, Ukraine has itself become an opponent in the eyes of the Belarusian foreign policymaking elite. This should consequently be reflected in the rhetoric employed by key figures in Belarusian foreign policymaking, such as the president and foreign minister.

4. Methodology

This section will lay out the methodological framework I use for my analysis and justifies the choices I made in the process of creating a research design, choosing a research method, and selecting a case. Data sources as well as the various limitations of the available data and methodology I'll be using will also be discussed.

4.1. Case selection and research design

Studying foreign policy rhetoric using the case of Belarusian foreign policy discourse in the context of the 2020 protests can lead to more insights into some key areas. Firstly, though foreign policy change and autocracies have been studied extensively in the past, the scholarly literature on Belarus remains relatively limited. This is even more so for the literature on the 2020 protests, as it is a relatively recent event, and its consequences are still taking shape and being assessed. Secondly, the case of Belarus' change in foreign policy can be described as a typical case in the context of my conceptual framework (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 299). My hypothesis is that Belarusian foreign policy discourses changed due to a change in threat perception and a change in perception of Ukrainian intentions vis-à-vis Belarus, thus leading to Belarus adopting a more hostile stance toward Ukraine. Since this hypothesis follows logically from my conceptual approach, my analysis is instead focused on the within-case workings of the causal mechanisms proposed in strategic culture. I thus add to the literature on strategic culture by testing whether the assumptions and causal logic of the conceptual framework hold in this case. Thirdly, in the context of the post-Soviet region, the case of Belarus may be used to learn more about how authoritarian post-Soviet states interact with other post-Soviet states that have chosen a different trajectory as Ukraine did. This makes my choice for this topic relevant and meaningful in the context of Belarusian studies.

I chose a case study design to answer my research question. Quantitative analyses can be of interest when studying the phenomenon of autocratic regimes, foreign policy change and the effects of domestic unrest more generally, but quantitative, large-N studies are generally less suited for explaining underlying mechanisms and the specifics of one specific case (Goertz and Mahoney 2012, 87–88). What's more, quantitative analysis would require a large number of observations, and since the country of interest is Belarus, there's no other case that includes an authoritarian Belarus, an anti-establishment post-Soviet neighbour, and large domestic political unrest. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, a qualitative, case study design also allows for the integration of historical and contemporary domestic and international trends that may influence Belarus' strategic culture. Such a comprehensive approach would be difficult in a comparative case study due to the limited size of this thesis.

The case study is designed as a before-after analysis, with the 2020 elections as the focal point. By analysing the situation the year prior to the elections as well as the year following the elections, I'm able to verify whether changes in rhetoric have actually taken place such as stated by Żochowski and Iwański (2021). Secondly, it allows me to see what events helped generate changes in rhetoric that I observe. Events directly before the elections or after the protest may have affected Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine. The before-after design combined with process tracing allows for zooming in on special episodes that generated change and prevents an overemphasis or confirmation bias about the importance of the elections and protests merely based on them being the event of interest in my thesis.

4.2. Process tracing

I will employ process tracing as research method. Process tracing is generally used to explore underlying mechanisms that shaped the outcome of interest, fitting the purpose of my research

(Checkel and Bennett 2011, 7). Starting at the outcome of interest, process tracing attempts to discover the mechanisms that create change by carefully analysing each step of what is theorised to be a causal process (Bennett and George 2005, 147; Farrell 2002, 61–62). Process tracing has in the past been named as well-suited method when employing strategic culture as conceptual framework, as it allows for cumulative research and can thus easily build on previous studies on this topic (Howlett 2005, 10–11).

Though there is merit in aiming for the identification of causal mechanisms, I do not aim to claim causality. The Belarusian regime is very closed, and it is impossible to discover the motives behind the behaviour of President Lukashenka and his state apparatus by using public information. I rely on other sources, such as state documents, interviews, and speeches. Though these sources are the best available sources for identifying the factors shaping Belarusian attitudes toward Ukraine, causal explanations can hardly be made based on these sources. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section on data.

As I'm conducting a before-after study, I can identify change with relative ease using process tracing. First, I will establish the pre-election rhetoric of Belarus and how it fits with the strategic culture of the Belarusian elite. This can consequently be used as a baseline against which I assess the rhetoric employed by Belarusian foreign policymakers when referring to and interacting with Ukraine. By rigorously assessing all available documents containing statements about Ukraine I can then confirm whether a change in rhetoric has taken place as stated by past research, while also looking for clues as to why Belarus changed its rhetoric. This is especially important during key events of contention between Belarus and Ukraine, such as the first weeks after the election and the Ukrainian alignment with European Union sanctions. Justifications for the rhetoric employed by Belarus as described in the documents I analyse or a theoretical link between the strategic culture of Belarus and changes in rhetoric are thus key points of interest which I will trace.

Another issue with process tracing is the lack of a standardised terminology and a standardised way of applying this method in empirical research (Kittel and Kuehn 2013, 3). The internal validity of my analysis thus highly depends on the justifications I use for claiming a correlation between the protests and a change in Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine (Bennett and George 1997, 20). This makes the triangulation of my analytical findings with expert reports and scholarly literature even more important, since the lack of a formalised procedure for applying process tracing may lead to my overestimation of the importance of certain pieces of evidence found in my primary sources, in turn skewing my research results and conclusion. I will use triangulation for similar reasons to improve reliability, reducing the chances of excluding important documents from the analysis or ascribing significance to rather insignificant statements. What's more, external validity is also likely to be very low. I perform a case study that is specifically focused on Belarusian and its unique situation, and the results of my analysis will thus be difficult to generalise to other countries in similar situations. I may however identify certain mechanisms that aided the shift in Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine that may be found in similar cases, but this would require further research by scholars focused on theory-building.

4.3. Data

My analysis will mostly rely on public statements and foreign policy documents of foreign policymakers as the object of analysis. My units of analysis are the President, the Presidential Administration, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as key actors in Belarusian foreign policymaking (Leukavets 2017). My objects of analysis are therefore press releases, speeches, interviews, news reports and similar documents that contain rhetoric targeted at Ukraine practised by these actors. Of special interest are documents that include rhetoric by President Lukashenka, as he's the head of

state and the single most influential actor in Belarusian foreign policymaking (ibid, 34). Due to the limited timeframe and scope of my analysis, the number of documents that include political rhetoric on Ukraine will is limited as well, excluding the need for a rigorous selection of only the most relevant documents. Documents of a mere descriptive nature about e.g. a conference between Ukrainian and Belarusian local governments or documents that do discuss Ukraine but do not include any political rhetoric or normative statements on Ukraine and its behaviour toward Belarus will however be excluded, as they are not relevant to my analysis. The documents I will be analysing are publicly available in Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian, and/or English, which means language barriers will not affect my analysis.

For the analysis I used 26 relevant statements found on the website of the presidential administration, all of them referring directly to statements by President Lukashenka. One document of the Belarusian Embassy in Kyiv is included, describing an interview of Belarusian ambassador Sokol with a journalist. 7 documents of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry are also included. Last but not least, I included 35 articles, interviews, and other material found in Belarusian and international media that refer to statements made by Belarusian officials or otherwise provide background information relevant to the analysis.

There are few scholarly sources available on Belarus. I will however triangulate my research and findings with think tank reports, podcasts and interviews with experts in news media whenever those are available. This increases the validity and credibility of my analysis, and could thus further strengthen the academic quality of my results.

Since my analysis uses data gathered through desk research and doesn't involve experimental approaches or data gathering methods that include people, there are no ethical considerations or limitations that must be taken into account.

4.4. Operationalisation

Operationalisation of variables when employing an abstract conceptual framework such as strategic culture is a crucial element toward improving reliability and validity. My independent and dependent variables are both manifest, as I can directly observe the protests and related events in news media. Hostile rhetoric manifests itself in speeches, interviews, and other written and oral statements by Belarus' foreign policymakers. The difficulty lies in the elements of strategic culture, which with the exception of behaviour are all latent.

Though identity itself is difficult to operationalise, I will use the previously described three-step plan by Bloomfield (2012) to assess the Belarusian national identity as constructed by its elite and consequently explore how this identity affects strategic culture. However, since identity is derived from the Belarusian perception and use of norms, ideas, and patterns of behaviour, I will instead focus on those to inductively assess the Belarus' foreign policymaking identity, combining it with the three-step descriptive plan by Bloomfield. The way Belarus perceives norms, ideas, and patterns of behaviour can be deduced from the data I analyse: positive behaviour or ideas by Ukraine will likely be responded to with rhetoric of good neighbourliness or strategic partnership, as was previously practised in periods characterised by a positive dynamic in the Ukrainian-Belarusian relationship (see e.g. Office of the President of Belarus 2019c; 2019g). Negative rhetoric likely uses narratives about enemies or foreign interference in Belarusian domestic issues, as those would threaten the nature of the Belarusian regime.

So long as my unit and object of analysis are analysed through rigorous application of process tracing, the research results should meet standards of reliability and validity thanks to triangulation and the role of strategic culture as an interpretative tool.

5. Belarus-Ukraine relations since the 2014 Revolution of Dignity

Before starting the analysis, I will briefly line out the main developments in and characteristics of the Belarusian-Ukrainian relationship since 2014. 2014 was a critical juncture point for Ukraine and the region more generally, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 has overshadowed relations between Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine ever since.

Ukraine has traditionally been an important economic partner for Belarus, and at the start of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic turn in 2013 Ukraine was the second most important trade partner for Minsk (Bogutsky 2015, 99). This economic relationship is regularly used by both sides to put pressure on the other in order to extract economic or political benefits, but such trade barriers are usually lifted after a period of political discussions (Bogutsky 2014, 111–14; 2015, 105; 2017, 107). These deep economic ties are the main link between Belarus and Ukraine and have been decisive in determining Belarus' response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the conflict that followed.

Political relations between both states have been fairly stable during the presidency of Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko. Unlike his Russian colleague, President Lukashenka was quick to recognise President Poroshenko as the first legitimate president of Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity (Maksak 2014, 16; Yurchak 2014, 37; Office of the President of Belarus 2019c). President Lukashenka has traditionally tried to maintain close personal ties with Ukrainian presidents, establishing a permanent channel for political dialogue (Maksak 2020, 88).

These close personal ties and essential economic ties have characterised the Belarusian relationship with Ukraine since 2014. The main difficulty for Belarus was navigating the situation that arose after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 and after Russia started to regularly pressure Belarus to recognise the Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory (Preiherman 2017, 9). President Lukashenka has managed to keep both sides content enough to maintain close political ties, without giving either side truly what they want. On the one hand, Belarus has regularly frustrated Ukraine by voting against UN resolutions on Ukrainian territorial integrity and refusing to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Bogutsky 2015, 100; Maksak 2019, 93; Moshes 2018). On the other hand, Belarus deviated from the Russian positions on Ukraine by consistently stating its support for Ukrainian territorial integrity and Ukraine's desire for Euro-Atlantic integration (Betlii and Preiherman 2016, 11; Bogutsky 2014, 119; 2015, 100; 2016, 110). In 2013 Belarus and Kazakhstan worked together to prevent Russia from instrumentalising the Eurasian Economic Union to put pressure on Ukraine not to sign a comprehensive trade agreement with the European Union (Melyantsou 2015, 101). Belarus has also not stated its opposition to Ukraine's cooperation with NATO, as it doesn't consider NATO a threat to Belarusian security in the way Russia does (Bogutsky 2017, 102; Porotnikov 2017, 37). On the other hand, Belarus does not *de jure* recognise the Russian annexation of Crimea, though it admitted that *de facto* Crimea should be treated as a subject of Russia (Bogutsky 2015, 100; 2016, 110). Belarus has in the past similarly expressed some measure of support and understanding for Russian actions in Crimea (Mudrov 2020, 86–88).

This ambiguous position is not only caused by the Belarusian tradition of multi-vectorism but also was the most appropriate approach to the conflict considering Belarus' involvement as host for the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) (Preiherman 2017, 15; Melyantsou 2018, 174). The Trilateral Contact Group is a conflict management mechanism that aims at finding a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Ukraine through negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, presided over by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (Tagliavini 2016, 217). By hosting these talks, Minsk had to remain neutral in the conflict to not jeopardise their perceived neutrality (Preiherman 2017, 15). Russia accepted the limitations that hosting the TCG put on the extent to which Belarus could be

pushed to support Russian positions on Ukraine, leaving some space for Belarus to remain neutral and continue its balancing between Ukraine and Russia (Pan'kovskiy 2016, 75). Though Belarusian neutrality was doubted at times, it did manage to retain its position as the main diplomatic forum for resolving Russia's conflict in Ukraine (Bogutsky 2017, 102–3). The neutral position of Belarus as host of the TCG also led to a warming of relations with the European Union, providing additional benefits for the regime in the form of deeper economic and financial ties and the lifting of sanctions (Bogutsky 2016, 111; Melyantsou 2018, 175, 177).

Minsk's ambiguous position on Russia's activities in Ukraine can be explained not only by its desire to maintain close economic ties with Ukraine and the political and economic support from Russia. Another important factor is the precedent that Russia set by invading a neighbouring country and annexing part of its territory in response to domestic political events, as happened to Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. The consistent push for integration by Moscow has in the past successfully been rejected by Minsk, but the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 showed that Russia was willing to resort to military means of achieving its goals if economic and political pressure did not net the desired results. The option of Russian armed aggression toward Belarus for the Kremlin to achieve its political goals played an important role in the wake of the 2020 protests, and this security aspect will be discussed in the analysis (Khylko 2021a).

The final episode in Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, directly preceding the start of the analysis, starts with the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy as president of Ukraine. Zelenskyy may be the polar opposite of Lukashenka in terms of his political preferences, as Zelenskyy can be characterised as an anti-establishment, democracy-oriented leader and a populist (Kudelia 2019). The already established personal connection with President Poroshenko and the anti-establishment platform of his electoral opponent led to Aliaksandr Lukashenka's public support for Petro Poroshenko during the campaign (Maksak 2020, 88). Poroshenko lost, creating a need for Lukashenka to establish personal ties with the new Ukrainian president despite their different political preferences. In his inauguration speech, President Zelenskyy condemned corrupt, experienced politicians who enrich themselves at expense of their population, not quite unlike the system created by President Lukashenka in Belarus (Zelenskyy 2019). This appears to have been a message for the domestic audience only, as Ukraine didn't condemn the Belarusian political system before the 2020 elections. Pragmatically, president Lukashenka established personal contacts with President Zelenskyy by the end of 2019, which will be discussed in the following analysis (Maksak 2020, 88).

6. The 2020 Belarusian presidential elections and rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine (2019-2022)

Having reviewed the relations between Belarus and Ukraine prior to August 2019, this section will conduct an analysis of Belarusian foreign policy rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine between August 2019 and August 2021. The analysis is conducted by reviewing speeches, interviews, and other statements on Ukraine by the foreign policymaking elite of Belarus, which includes the Belarusian president, foreign minister, and the Belarusian ambassador to Ukraine, as well as documents of the presidential administration, foreign ministry, and Belarusian embassy in Kyiv. The first section covers the period from 9 August 2019 to 9 August 2020, the day of the Belarusian presidential elections. The second section then covers the period from the elections up until the 9th of August 2021. A third section then presents the results of my analysis. Besides focusing on the research question, this section will also assess the extent to which a change of rhetoric manifested itself, as argued by Żochowski and Iwański (2021) and Shandro and Khylko (2021).

6.1. 2019-2020: the run-up to the presidential elections

The year preceding the presidential election on August 9, 2020, mostly shows a continuation of the Ukrainian-Belarusian relations and strategic culture as described in the previous two chapters.

When talking about Ukraine President Lukashenka often referred to the country as a 'brotherly nation', invoking the historical, religious and cultural ties between both nations in line with Belarusian strategic culture as sketched in section 3.2. (Office of the President of Belarus 2019c; 2019e; 2019g; 2019b; 2019f; Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019; 2020a; Office of the President of Belarus 2020c). When congratulating President Zelenskyy on the Ukrainian Independence Day, President Lukashenka said: "Today, the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples are united by fraternal relations, spiritual roots, the desire to live in harmony, numerous joint projects" (Office of the President of Belarus 2019c). In terms of strategic culture, this shows two things: firstly, Belarus sees Ukraine as an ally at this point. Secondly, Belarus views Ukraine through a historical, cultural, and ethnic lens, meaning that the perceived natural friendship and alliance between both states rely on a subculture defined more by history and perceived interethnic ties than on issues such as security or geopolitics. The Belarusian desire for cooperation with Ukraine on the basis of these ties is mentioned frequently and in a variety of contexts, ranging from agriculture to the regulation of the conflict in Donbas (Office of the President of Belarus 2019d; 2019e). The necessity of being involved in the Donbas conflict is supported by President Lukashenka's statements on the conflict, that "fraternal people were fighting each other", and "we all suffer from the conflict in Ukraine. This is a painful problem for me both personally and as the Head of State - a neighbour of Ukraine." (Office of the President of Belarus 2019e). In economic terms, Belarus continued its rhetoric of Ukraine being a strategic economic partner, as is exemplified by statements of the Belarusian Embassy in Kyiv and President Lukashenka (Office of the President of Belarus 2019f; Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020a).

This constructive approach toward Ukraine took place in the context of the warming of relations between Belarus, the European Union, and the United States (Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019; Office of the President of Belarus 2019g). The European Union had previously suspended most sanctions against Belarus and the State Secretary of the United States visited Belarus for the first time in over two decades (Makhovsky 2020a). The usual issues that cause friction, such as human rights and democratic standards, were pushed to the background as the EU and the US increasingly began to see Belarus as a key partner in maintaining stability and improving the security in the region (Melyantsou 2018, 175).

This is reflected in Belarusian rhetoric on the Donbas conflict. As previously mentioned, President Lukashenka invoked Belarus' close ties with Ukraine as a core reason to explain why he is determined to contribute in any way possible to a resolution of the conflict (Office of the President of Belarus 2019e). The conflict is equally seen as a threat by Lukashenka, as he and his ambassador in Kyiv argue that weapons used in the conflict in Ukraine increasingly find their way into Belarus (Office of the President of Belarus 2019e; 2019g; Yurchenko 2019). No reference is however made to any involvement of the Ukrainian government in this, which makes it seem that the inflow of weapons from Ukraine into Belarus was considered by Minsk to be a mere spill-over of the conflict in Donbas rather than a targeted Ukrainian effort to traffic arms into Belarus for political purposes.

Belarus' multi-vector policy similarly appears to hold in this period, as reflected in its rhetoric on its own role in the region and the role of the United States and NATO. President Lukashenka and Foreign Minister Makei portrayed Belarus as a neutral peacemaker, committed to working with any state willing to cooperate constructively (Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019; Marin 2020, 3; Office of the President of Belarus 2019g). When asked how Belarus handles its complicated geopolitical position between the West and Russia, Foreign Minister Makei maintained that "we would like to maintain balanced relations with everyone", despite the difficult geopolitical position of his country (Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019). This can be argued to be part of the reason why Belarus is working together more closely with the United States, as President Lukashenka announced that no resolution of the Donbas conflict is possible without the involvement of the US (Office of the President of Belarus 2019h). As he put it, the current parties (including Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, France, and Germany) are unable to negotiate a diplomatic resolution, necessitating the entry of more countries into the diplomatic process to find a new way to solve the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (ibid). Unlike Russia, Belarus thus does not see the US as a security threat. President Lukashenka rather sees the US as a state that may be able to improve the security situation in the region, benefiting both Belarus and Ukraine. This further cooperation is however conditional: if the US were to force Ukraine to choose between East and West, Belarus would cease the intensification of ties with the US said President Lukashenka (Office of the President of Belarus 2019g). The president and his foreign ministry also stated that sovereignty and independence remain more important in foreign policy than alignment with geopolitical blocks (Office of the President of Belarus 2019g; Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019; Marin 2020).

Belarus similarly continued its neutral rhetoric on NATO's increasing cooperation with Ukraine until the start of July (Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020a). Belarusian officials invoke the key principles of sovereignty and independence to justify their stance on Ukraine's determination to become a NATO member (Office of the President of Belarus 2019a; Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020a; Yurchenko 2019). As Ambassador Sokol put it: "Ukraine receiving a special status within NATO is quite expected, taking into account the vector of foreign policy that you (*the Ukrainian government - Ed.*) have enshrined in the Constitution. This is not new for us, it is the sovereign right of Ukraine to determine its external policy vector and where it should move." (Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020a). Ukraine and Belarus have different foreign policy vectors, but this shouldn't impede the ability of both states to cooperate argues Makei (ibid).

My expectation that the personal ties between President Zelenskyy and President Lukashenka would be characterised by some animosity due to Zelenskyy's staunch democratic and anti-establishment campaign platform did not crystalise at this stage. Zelenskyy and Lukashenka talked on the phone a number of times and met up in Zhytomyr, during the Forum of the Regions of Ukraine and Belarus (Office of the President of Belarus 2019f; 2019b; 2020k). Lukashenka invoked the historical, ethnic, and cultural ties between both states in his conversations with Zelenskyy, swiftly establishing a

constructive personal relationship with the new Ukrainian president (Office of the President of Belarus 2019b; Yurchenko 2019). An example of this rhetoric can be found in an interview of President Lukashenka with representatives of Ukrainian media: "We, Belarusians and Ukrainians, are so closely connected by common roots: historical, spiritual, family, that we simply have no right to lose this unity." (Office of the President of Belarus 2019g).

This overall positive rhetoric characterised by Belarus' desire for independence and sovereignty exhibited by its multi-vector foreign policy somewhat changes from July 2020, the month directly preceding the presidential elections. During protests in the summer, Foreign Minister Makei argues that most of these protests and the communication channels used to organise them are in fact coordinated from abroad (BelTA 2020b). This narrative was then fully launched after Belarus arrested 33 mercenaries belonging to the private military company called 'Wagner Group' (Meduza.io 2020). The Wagner Group is closely associated with President Putin's inner circle and the Kremlin more generally and has in recent years been active in the Donbas, Syria, and Libya (the Economist 2022; UNIAN 2018). Due to its close association with the Kremlin, the organisation has in the past been referred to as 'Putin's private army', employed in situations where official Russian soldiers can't afford to be seen (Censor.net 2019; Galeotti 2017). In late July 2020, Belarusian authorities announced the arrest of this group of mercenaries based on a charge of preparing mass unrest, with the president going as far as convening the Belarusian National Security Council to discuss the matter (BelTA 2020a). Ukraine later requested the extradition of the mercenaries, as Ukrainian investigators suspected members of the group of being involved in fighting in the Donbas on the side of the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (Office of the President of Belarus 2020k; Meduza.io 2020).

President Lukashenka's narrative on the Wagner associates is particularly characteristic of the shift in rhetoric that started when popular protests in Belarus gained traction. Prior to the elections and shortly after their arrest, the Wagner soldiers were framed as being sent by Moscow to interfere with the elections and Belarus' domestic order (Nechepurenko 2020; BBC 2020b).

As the judicial authorities of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine all laid claim to the mercenaries, Lukashenka invited prosecutors from all three states to sit together and figure out how to deal with the situation in accordance with international law and the obligations of the three states toward each other (ibid). He also mentions that this is the start of a hybrid war in which Belarus can expect attacks from any direction, whether it be Ukraine, NATO, or even Russia. This statement however doesn't appear to be a sign of a change in the Belarusian perception of the Ukrainian state as such, as President Lukashenka and the Belarusian ambassador to Kyiv, Ihar Sokol, expressed their support for Ukraine and kept highlighting the brotherly ties connecting both countries in the week immediately prior to the presidential elections (Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020a; Office of the President of Belarus 2020c; 2020k; 2020b). One example of this is President Lukashenka's 2020 address to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly, which used the multicultural and multi-ethnic heritage of the modern Belarusian lands: "We are native people. We, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, Jews, we have always lived here in peace." (Office of the President of Belarus 2020c).

In the context of my conceptual framework, a few conclusions can be drawn from the Belarusian rhetoric on Ukraine in the year before the presidential elections. The threat perception of Ukraine did not deviate from previous years, as Ukraine was consistently named as a strategic economic partner and brotherly nation with deep ethnic, cultural, and historical ties binding it to Belarus. Change in the Belarusian narrative only occurs once protests start to emerge in the summer of 2020, but this change in rhetoric is not aimed at the Ukrainian state as such, but rather at non-state actors that supposedly arrive from Ukraine to Belarus. A similar approach is taken on the issue of weapon

flows from Ukraine to Belarus, which are similarly characterised as a security threat, but not one emanating from the Ukrainian state as such, but rather being a negative spill-over from the conflict in the Donbas, providing an extra incentive for a Belarusian contribution to a swift resolution of the conflict.

6.2. 2020-2021: Ukraine's transition from strategic partner to 'unfriendly state'

On 9 August 2020, the sixth presidential elections of modern Belarus took place. President Lukashenka was re-elected to a sixth term in office, having attained over 80% of the votes according to official Belarusian sources (Makhovsky, Balmforth, and Osborn 2020). Widespread protests quickly erupted amid claims of widespread electoral fraud. Lukashenka's main opponent, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, was forced to leave the country and created a Coordination Council. The Council's objective was to facilitate a democratic transfer of power from President Lukashenka to a new government, which was to be elected through free and fair elections (Kennedy and Associated Press 2020; Coordination Council of Belarus 2020). The protests continued, as did the increasingly violent repression of the protests by Belarusian security services (Deutsche Welle 2020; TRT World 2020). Amid fears of a potential overthrow of the government, President Lukashenka was seen carrying an assault rifle, indicating his fear of the protests' consequences for his personal security (BBC 2020a). Lukashenka insisted the protests were directed by foreign-backed revolutionaries instead of ordinary Belarusians, as the latter had, according to Lukashenka, shown their overwhelming support for the dictator at the polls (Makhovsky 2020b; BBC 2020c).

6.2.1. August 2021: Ukraine becomes the enemy

The rhetoric of Belarusian officials, specifically the president, shifted significantly after the elections. President Lukashenka repeated his pre-election message that troublemakers were coming in from abroad and threatened the stability of Belarus, yet in the post-election situation, he started to name individual countries whence the troublemakers came from, such as the Czech Republic, Poland, and Ukraine (Office of the President of Belarus 2020d; 2020h; 2020i). This rhetoric also appears to signify a change in the strategic subculture applied to the situation, as Lukashenka proclaimed that Belarus was situated in the centre of Europe, and should therefore be ready to face challenges from any direction (Office of the President of Belarus 2020j). This is a significant shift from earlier rhetoric, where Belarus attempted to relate to Ukraine and Russia using brotherly ties and a shared history, with the immediate post-election narrative being more focused on Belarus as being surrounded by threats instead of historical friends. Belarus similarly shifted its stance on NATO, suddenly announcing its concern about NATO troop build-ups in Lithuania and Poland (ibid).

A change in rhetoric about the Ukrainian state as such is first found in a statement on 15 August, almost a week after the elections. Ukraine initially took a neutral stance on the protests and called for a peaceful resolution and restraint (Office of the President of Ukraine 2020b). Yet relations between Minsk and Kyiv had already severely deteriorated at this stage, as Belarus handed the Wagner mercenaries over to Russia and President Lukashenka reached out to Russia again for necessary political support and security guarantees (Office of the President of Ukraine 2020a; Nahaylo 2020). The extradition of the mercenaries to Russia explicitly went against Ukraine's wish for the mercenaries to be handed over to Ukrainian judicial authorities. Ukraine consequently recalled its ambassador from Minsk, condemned the extradition of the mercenaries to Moscow, and aligned itself with the position of the EU, calling for re-elections in Belarus (Nahaylo 2020; Zinets, Williams, and Lawson 2020).

Around the same time, in the week after the elections, President Lukashenka adopted a friendlier attitude to the mercenaries themselves, sending his son to visit the prison in which they were held to make sure the Wagner associates were being treated well (Nechepurenko 2020). President Lukashenka also called President Putin four times during this period, indicating a change in his attitude toward Russia after the elections (ibid). Whereas Lukashenka was sceptical of Russia's intentions toward Belarus prior to the elections, he embraces Russia as an ally once the post-election protests start representing a threat to his power.

Before the Wagner episode, Ukraine had not aligned with the EU condemnation of the violent repression of protests in Belarus, nor had it called for re-elections or doubted the legitimacy of Lukashenka as head of state after the flawed elections. Belarusian officials however accused Ukraine of domestic interference in Belarus and attempts to destabilise the country by financing riots and calling for re-elections (UNIAN 2020; Office of the President of Belarus 2020l; Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020c; Office of the President of Belarus 2020e). Though Lukashenka still referred to Ukraine as a fraternal nation, he started to frame Ukraine as a security threat in the wake of the elections. This creates a somewhat incongruent picture through the lens of strategic culture: Ukraine can hardly be a threat to Belarusian sovereignty and independence while maintaining its role as a fraternal state, as these two conceptions draw on completely different threat perceptions. This may be a sign of strategic subcultures in competition for dominance, but since there are no statements to the same effect, the statement may also be interpreted as a frame directed at a domestic or foreign audience: our traditional friend Ukraine has betrayed us. This seems a more likely explanation, as the hostile rhetoric continued without attempts at rapprochement by invoking the historical, cultural, and ethnic ties between Belarus and Ukraine.

The rhetoric on Ukraine and the change in attitude toward the Wagner group and the rapprochement toward Russia at the expense of ties with Ukraine seems to suggest a shift toward Belarus' Russian vector in its strategic culture, in order to attain the necessary political support for President Lukashenka to stay in power.

6.2.2. Ukraine as a Western puppet

After the first month of protests, Belarusian rhetoric started to develop a distinct anti-American narrative, which also affected the rhetoric toward EU member states and Ukraine. President Lukashenka framed the Wagner group members as being sent from abroad to cause unrest during the presidential elections, asserting that a number of the mercenaries had either American passports, American partners, or worked for the US State Department (Office of the President of Belarus 2020g). Following this anti-American discourse, Lukashenka later argued that the protests were instigated by the United States of America, which started coordinating the movement from Warsaw, Vilnius, and Prague (Office of the President of Belarus 2020a; 2020m).

At this stage, hostile rhetoric directed at the Ukrainian government also appears to take off. Lukashenka sowed doubt about the role of the Ukrainian government in assisting the protest movement due to attempts of leading individuals to escape from Belarus into Ukraine (Office of the President of Belarus 2020a). President Lukashenka talked of Ukraine as being under the control of the USA, which aimed to further support the Belarusian opposition by controlling Ukraine (Office of the President of Belarus 2020m; 2020a). Though these claims are fact-free, it does show a further shift away from the traditional multi-vectorism, with Belarus abandoning its Western vector (Giles 2021).

The shift away from Ukraine was further exacerbated by the eventual Ukrainian support for the protest movement and its choice not to recognise President Lukashenka as the legitimate head of

state of Belarus (Ukraine Crisis Media Center 2020; Khylko 2021a). Though Ukraine initially showed more restraint than Western states and didn't implement sanctions against Belarus, President Lukashenka did change his rhetoric toward Ukraine. This may have been the case for several distinct reasons, which can only be theorised about using the available facts since interviews with the Belarusian political elite are not a viable way to gather the information that may explain this shift.

Firstly, Belarus pivoted back to Russia after the protests, as it relied on Russia for political support and security guarantees if things were to get out of hand (Khylko 2021b). This granted Russia some leverage with which it could force Belarus to take a tougher stance against Ukraine. This is evidenced by a sort of synchronisation of propaganda, with President Lukashenka consistently using the same narratives as Moscow right after he visits Russia or talks with high-ranking Russian officials or President Putin (Shandro and Khylko 2021; Burov 2021, 31). An example of this is the story of 200 extremists who infiltrated Belarus after being trained in camps on Ukrainian territory, which was first spread by President Lukashenka on 8 September (Office of the President of Belarus 2020e). This exact narrative, in similar wordings, was spread by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov few days prior to Lukashenka's statement on the issue (Kurnosova and Kotlyar 2020). It can thus be theorised that Belarus pivoted back to its reliance on Russia for security, as this is its most reliable partner: there are bilateral and multilateral treaties in the form of the Union State and the CSTO that can support the position of President Lukashenka in case the protests were to escalate further, as happened in Ukraine in 2013-2014. On the other hand, Belarus may also have initiated the synchronisation of propaganda itself in order to please Russia and remain assured of political and other support needed at the time. This would be in line with its strategic culture, which sees the maintenance of close ties with Russia as the cornerstone of Belarusian security. Copying Russian narratives may thus well have been a self-interested move. Based on the available information, either explanation appears credible when analysing the issue using strategic culture.

Another reason for this shift in rhetoric may be a change in perception of Ukraine by Belarus, due to Ukraine's refusal to recognise President Lukashenka. Following Belarus' strategic culture as sketched in the previous sections, Ukraine did not take the position it was expected to take as a friendly and constructive neighbour. The perception of Ukraine by Belarus thus shifted toward a view that is more similar to the Belarusian view of the Western states that support the Belarusian opposition: a potential threat to national sovereignty and stability, and also to the regime of President Lukashenka.

A new stage in rhetoric started mid-September as President Lukashenka and his foreign minister Makei started to nuance their rhetoric. They stated on multiple occasions that Belarus supports the Ukrainian people, but that Ukrainian politicians, puppets of the US, are not taking rational decisions anymore (Office of the President of Belarus 2020m; 2020n; Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020c; Office of the President of Belarus 2020f; Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020d). President Lukashenka similarly called on the Ukrainian people to free themselves of their government, and thus from Western domination over their political situation (ibid). This once again followed previous Russian narratives, which had already started to frame the Ukrainian government as hostile and even extremist in the past few years (Putin 2014; 2021; Office of the President of Russia 2021; EUvsDisinfo 2019). The Ukrainian extremist narrative was further peddled by the Belarusian foreign ministry in response to protests outside its embassy in Kyiv: the protestors were referred to as extremist elements, and Belarus argued in a diplomatic note that Ukraine was no longer able to protect Belarusian representatives per Ukraine's international obligations under the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (Interfax Ukraine 2020; Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020b).

6.2.3. Détente, undone

In the first months of 2021, Belarus appeared to take a more nuanced approach as protests slowly subsided. The Belarusian ambassador to Kyiv and Foreign Minister Makei repeatedly referred to Ukraine as a brotherly nation and expressed the continued Belarusian interest in constructive economic cooperation with Ukraine (Embassy of Belarus in Ukraine 2021; Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021b; Office of the President of Belarus 2021d). This changed in May 2021. On 23 May 2021, Belarusian authorities forced a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius to land in Minsk due to a supposed terrorist threat (International Civil Aviation Organization 2022). This forced landing took place under false pretences, as the Belarusian security service used the landing to arrest Raman Pratasevich, a Belarusian journalist, and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega (Asthana, Liubakova, and Roth 2021).

In response, Ukraine quickly banned flight connections with Belarus, even before Western states responded with sanctions (Ukrinform 2021). President Lukashenka then ratcheted up the hostile rhetoric and started spreading similar narratives to the ones spread after the August 2020 elections and preceding the détente in the first four months of 2021. The Ukrainian government was consequently depicted as anti-Belarusian and acting on orders of the US. Foreign Minister Makei put it very bluntly in an interview with the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*: “Ukraine is taking orders from outside. It is obvious.” (Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021a). Makei and Lukashenka also continued to state that lots of weapons were entering Belarus from Ukraine and that extremists were being trained abroad to destabilise Belarus (Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021a; Kurier 2021; Office of the President of Belarus 2021c; 2021a; 2021b). The Ukrainian government was explicitly accused of working with these terrorist groups and supporting their efforts to destabilise Belarus (BelTA 2021b). At the same time, Belarus still related positively to the Ukrainian people, which was portrayed as a brotherly nation (Office of the President of Belarus 2021b; 2021e; BelTA 2021a; 2021c; NASH 2021). As Foreign Minister Makei put it: “We regard the Ukrainian people as truly brotherly and close. And we believe that all of us, the Slavs, must stick together. We must distinguish between the position of the people and the position of the authorities” (BelTA 2021b). The Belarusian rhetoric after the arrest of Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega thus shows clear resemblances to the rhetoric in the months immediately after the 2020 presidential elections.

6.3. Conclusion

To conclude, it appears there was a clear change in official Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine between August 2019 and August 2021, which became most pronounced directly after the Belarusian presidential elections on 9 August 2020. In the year preceding the elections, Ukraine was mostly referred to as a friendly, brotherly nation and strategic economic partner. Belarus portrayed itself as a neutral country, invested in resolving the Donbas conflict through diplomacy and improving the security situation in the region. NATO and the US were not perceived as a threat, and the US was even considered as a potential crucial actor in resolving the Donbas conflict. The only security threat mentioned was the inflow of weapons from the Donbas conflict into Belarus, but this concern was not related to the Ukrainian government itself.

As popular protests started in the summer of 2020, the Belarusian rhetoric changed. The arrest of the Wagner group mercenaries was accompanied by a change in rhetoric toward Russia, which was initially accused of trying to interfere in the electoral process. The protests thus appeared to have triggered a change in threat perception by Belarus, which became wary of events that may strengthen or aid the domestic protest movement. The animosity toward Russia however quickly faded after the elections as Belarus had to rely on Russia as its last ally and security guarantor.

A change in rhetoric toward Ukraine becomes directly visible after the presidential elections, as widespread protests were held around the country. Belarus started leaning on its ties with Russia, as Russia was seen as the ultimate guarantor of the security of the Belarusian regime in case the protests were to escalate further. At the same time, Ukraine was increasingly talked of as an enemy, as it failed to support President Lukashenka and recognise the presidential elections. Instead, Ukraine was accused of interfering in the domestic affairs of Belarus.

As Belarusian rhetoric about the West turned increasingly negative after the West imposed sanctions on Belarus and denounced the elections and repression of protests, the Belarusian rhetoric on the West and Ukraine introduced an anti-American angle. EU member states who were openly supportive of the Belarusian opposition movement were portrayed as American puppets, as were the Wagner mercenaries. Ukraine is later similarly referred to as an American puppet, characterised by irrational politicians who implement anti-Belarusian policies. This anti-American narrative synchronised with Russian talking points. This appears to either have been an attempt by Belarus to gain more favours from Russia in order to attain the political and other support it needed to stay in power, or it shows that Russia used the additional leverage it gained over Belarus due to Belarus being unable to rely on its Western vector. It may also have been a sign of a change in the Belarusian perception of Ukraine, as Ukraine did not behave in accordance with its role in Belarusian strategic culture. Instead of supporting the Belarusian regime like a true ally would, Ukraine initially didn't comment on the political situation in Belarus, but later followed EU member states in refusing to recognise Lukashenka as the legitimate president of Belarus.

As the protests subsided, Belarusian rhetoric cooled down in the first months of 2021 in an apparent attempt by Belarus to normalise ties with Ukraine. Ukraine remained an important economic partner and could in theory be used to balance Belarus away from Russia since an overreliance on Russia has traditionally been something Belarus tried to prevent as this tends to come at the cost of further Belarusian-Russian integration projects. This was of even higher importance after the 2020 protests, the fallout of which caused Belarus to lose its Western vector and rely on Russia even more than before for political and economic support. The attempt at rapprochement later failed as Belarus forced a Ryanair flight to land and arrested journalist Raman Pratasevich and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega in May 2021. In response to Ukraine's decision to ban flights to Belarus, Belarusian representatives once again started referring to the Ukrainian government as an anti-Belarusian US puppet. The Ukrainian people were referred to as a brotherly nation, but Ukraine itself was talked of as an existential threat to Belarus, as weapon flows from Ukraine into Belarus increased and anti-Belarusian extremists were supposedly trained on Ukrainian territory.

7. Conclusion and discussion

To conclude, the 2020 protests in Belarus significantly changed Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine. Before the protests, Belarus often referred to historical, cultural, and ethnic ties that bind both countries and framed Belarus and Ukraine as brotherly nations whose fate is to be closely linked and support each other. After the protests, the Ukrainian government was depicted as an anti-Belarusian, extremist puppet of the United States.

Belarusian strategic culture is traditionally characterised by the centrality of the values of sovereignty and stability, operationalised in a multi-vector foreign policy. The country's geographical position forces the country to work with West and East, balancing both in order to extract benefits without jeopardising the country's sovereignty. Russia has traditionally been the stronger vector due to the Belarusian membership in Russian-led integration projects such as the Union State, EAEU, and the CSTO. Yet enough manoeuvring space is left for Belarus to pursue constructive relations with Ukraine and the West to safeguard an excess of Russian influence over Belarus.

Belarus cherished its economic relationship with Ukraine and retained a politically ambiguous stance on sensitive political issues that relate to the conflict with Russia, such as the recognition of Crimea as Russian territory in order to balance its relationships with both countries. The Belarusian-Ukrainian relationship was strengthened by Belarus' position as host of the Minsk negotiations, allowing the country to portray itself as being somewhat neutral and a contributor to stability in the region. The election of the anti-establishment, democracy-oriented president Zelenskyy did not change the dynamics between Belarus and Ukraine, since Belarus initially did not see him as a threat to Belarus' core security interests.

Belarus managed to balance its relationships between West and East in the year prior to the elections, while also maintaining a positive relationship with Ukraine. The first small shift in rhetoric is noticeable as soon as protests emerged in the summer of 2020: weapons from Ukraine are mentioned as a first threat emerging from Ukrainian territory, but the positive rhetoric toward the Ukrainian government and nation generally persisted. The arrest of PMC Wagner mercenaries further generated a shift in rhetoric. The mercenaries were initially portrayed as being sent by Russia to interfere in the Belarusian presidential elections but were later framed as American puppets sent to destabilise Belarus. At this stage, Belarus started to use rhetoric that signified a perceived increase in threats directed against Belarus and domestic stability.

After the elections and the start of widespread protests and their suppression, the Belarusian rhetoric turned anti-Ukrainian and anti-American. This is in spite of the fact that Ukraine initially took a fairly reserved stance toward Belarus despite the flawed elections and widespread repressions taking place in Belarus. At the same time, Belarus started improving relations with Russia. The anti-US and anti-Ukrainian narratives are characteristic of the synchronisation of Belarusian narratives with those of Russia, which had already used the image of Ukrainian extremists and US-controlled governments from 2014 onward.

When viewing these events through the lens of strategic culture, there are a number of different explanations for the changed Belarusian rhetoric. Firstly, it appears that Belarus saw Ukraine as a threat due to its failure to support Lukashenka, which is unexpected behaviour from an ally. As Western countries similarly didn't support Lukashenka, Belarus started equating Ukraine's response to that of Western states, who were more vocal about their opposition against Lukashenka and his regime. The Ukrainian behaviour is also talked of as a threat to Belarusian stability and independence, which are the key values of Belarusian strategic culture and also the key personal interests of President Lukashenka. Secondly, the shift in rhetoric away from Ukraine and toward

Russia may be explained by the Belarusian need for Russian political support and security guarantees that would allow for the survival of the regime in case the protests further escalated. Following the Russian narratives could thus demonstrate that Belarus was a reliable and loyal ally to Russia, which should support its closest ally in its time of need. Thirdly, Russia may have used its additional leverage over Belarus to convince it to follow Russian narratives about Ukraine. Belarus lost its Western vector after the flawed elections and repression of protestors, leaving Russia as the country's only ally and source of essential political and economic support. Realising this, Russia may have capitalised on the situation and forced Belarus to adapt its behaviour in order to remain assured of the Kremlin's support.

As the protests calmed down, Belarusian officials once again started talking about Ukraine as a fraternal nation. When viewing this détente from the perspective of Belarusian strategic culture, this may well have been an attempt to repair the relationship with Ukraine, which remained an important economic partner for Belarus. If ties with Ukraine were to further deteriorate, Belarus would have only Russia left as an ally, which may allow Russia to push for further integration and threaten Belarusian sovereignty. This attempt at rapprochement stopped after Belarus arrested Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega and Ukraine cut all flight connections with Belarus. Belarus returned to its rhetoric of Ukraine being an anti-Belarusian puppet state of the United States. There was no rapprochement after this, as tensions between both states increased in the autumn of 2021 after the Russian army started massing troops on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border (Whitmore 2021).

The protests thus appear to have been a trigger that prompted the Belarusian regime to pivot back to its closest ally and security guarantor, Russia. The relationship with Ukraine seems to have been collateral damage, damaged by Ukraine's failure to support Lukashenka after the fraudulent presidential elections and damaged even further by Ukraine's later alignment with EU positions and sanctions. This went against Ukraine's ascribed role in Belarusian strategic culture, turning the country from ally to enemy in the Belarusian perception. The Belarusian refusal to extradite the Wagner mercenaries to Ukraine also played an important role in the deterioration of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, but this was not explicitly recognised in Belarusian rhetoric, which exclusively focused on Ukraine's actions and rhetoric.

I employed process tracing as methodology since it allows for causal theorising. Future research may however benefit from interviews with Belarusian political and foreign policy elites or experts on the matter, as this may generate new insights as to why Belarus shifted its rhetoric toward Ukraine. I relied on publicly available sources, and those may thus not contain the full story as to why Belarus shifted its rhetoric. However, since it's currently unrealistic to conduct interviews with Belarusian foreign policymaking elites to generate data that allows for the identification of causal mechanisms, process tracing remains the second-best method for a step-by-step exploration of when, why, and how Belarusian rhetoric vis-à-vis Ukraine changed.

This analysis aimed to learn more about the dynamics of the Belarus-Ukraine relationship, which has traditionally been under-researched. Yet my conclusion shows that it is close to impossible to look at this relationship without considering the broader regional context, and the relations of both states with the West and Russia. The manoeuvring space at the disposal of Belarus within the Union State is especially important after Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when it's become unclear to what extent Belarus retains autonomy over Russian activities on its territory and whether Belarus will eventually participate in Russia's war (BelTA 2022; Wolff and Bayok 2022).

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