

Analysis Structure

The Arguments are developed across seven thematic sections and a reference section:

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Part I: The Making of a Puppet

From Autocrat to Vassal

When Lukashenko brutally suppressed the mass protests that followed the fraudulent 2020 presidential elections, filling prisons with activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens, he effectively burned the last bridge connecting him to international legitimacy. His approval rating collapsed. The economy buckled under Western sanctions. His security apparatus held the country together through raw violence, but the psychological cost was enormous: without Russia's backing, the regime would not have survived the summer of 2020. However, Russia's backing was not for free!

The price of that survival has been sovereignty itself. Since the failed uprising, Lukashenko has met Putin on an almost monthly basis, not as an equal, but as a subordinate reporting to his superior.

The pattern was noted even in Minsk. As analysts at *Al Jazeera* observed, over the course of 20 months following the 2020 crisis, the Belarusian president travelled regularly to Moscow "to report on the state of affairs in Belarus". The language of vassalage could hardly be more explicit.

A leaked Kremlin strategy document, obtained by Yahoo News and later confirmed by a joint investigation involving the Kyiv Independent and multiple European outlets, laid bare what was already evident in practice. Authored in 2021 by Putin's Directorate for Cross-Border Cooperation, the document outlined Russia's step-by-step plan to achieve full political, economic, military, and informational control over Belarus by 2030, through the creation of a "Union State of Russia and Belarus" that would eliminate Belarusian sovereignty entirely. The timeline set benchmarks for 2022, 2025, and 2030, including the "formation of pro-Russian sentiments in political and military elites", the "limiting of nationalist and pro-Western forces", and eventually, a single currency, a shared military command, and unified media space. When confronted with the document, even Lukashenko could only offer a revealing half-admission: **"There might have been such a document"**.

Analysts at *The National Interest* were more direct. Writing in 2025, they concluded that Belarus is "no longer a buffer state, it is a Russian military stronghold", and that Lukashenko, far from resisting this absorption, has embraced it, proposing his own "Union 2.0" at the June 2025 Eurasian Economic Forum and "showcasing how Belarus is being folded into Moscow's orbit under the guise of economic cooperation".

The Decorative President

What remains of Lukashenko's political identity is increasingly ceremonial. He signs documents Putin has already approved. He makes declarations Putin has already authored. He hosts summits whose outcomes are predetermined in the Kremlin. *Ukrainska Pravda* captured the paradox with precision: even as Lukashenko protests that "no one but us governs Belarus", he "supports all (Putin's) actions, constantly talks about the "Union State", and spreads the Kremlin's narratives about the war against Ukraine". The contradiction is not lost on serious observers. A leader who insists daily on his own sovereignty while surrendering it piece by piece is not a statesman, he is an anecdote.

The performance, however, still has strategic utility. A decorative Lukashenko is more useful to Putin than an absent one. As long as Belarus officially remains a "separate state", Russia avoids the legal and diplomatic complications of outright annexation. Lukashenko provides the fiction of Belarusian agency, the plausible deniability of a willing partner, and the rhetorical cover of "brotherly alliance". ***He is the mask. Putin is the face.***

Part II: Nuclear Blackmail and the Architecture of Fear

Missiles as Messages

The most alarming dimension of Belarus's transformation is military. Since 2022, Russia has systematically turned Belarusian territory into a nuclear-armed forward platform aimed directly at the heart of NATO's eastern flank, at Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and ultimately the rest of Europe.

The legal groundwork was laid with characteristic cynicism. On February 27, 2022, just five days after Russian forces rolled into Ukraine, using Belarusian territory as a northern launch corridor, Lukashenko held a referendum removing from Article 18 of the Belarusian constitution the clause declaring Belarus a "nuclear-free zone" and a "neutral state". ***Few democracies have so quickly voted away their own neutrality in the middle of a neighbor's invasion.***

In March 2023, Putin announced that Russia intended to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil. By June of that year, the transfer had officially begun. Lukashenko confirmed the

weapons had arrived in the country, though the exact number and location remain classified. Crucially, Russia has retained full control over the warheads, Lukashenko, despite his posturing, does not have his finger on any nuclear trigger. ***He is custodian of weapons he cannot use.***

The logic was explained with unusual candor by the Institute for the Study of War, which assessed that Putin had “likely refrained from deploying the weapons to Belarus at the start of the 2022 invasion in order to preserve the option to deploy them as part of a future information operation to manipulate the West”. In other words, the nuclear deployment was never primarily a military decision. It was a psychological one, a calculated act of intimidation timed for maximum political effect.

The Oreshnik Gambit

The intimidation escalated significantly in December 2024, when Putin signed a formal security treaty with Lukashenko in Minsk that explicitly placed Belarus under the Russian nuclear umbrella and included provisions for the potential use of Russian nuclear weapons to repel any aggression against Belarus. At the same signing ceremony, Lukashenko publicly “requested” the deployment of Russia's newest intermediate-range hypersonic missile system, the Oreshnik, and Putin graciously agreed, noting that Moscow would retain control of the weapons but would permit Belarus to “***select the targets***”.

The theatre of the request was perfectly staged. Lukashenko plays the eager supplicant; Putin plays the magnanimous protector. The result, nuclear-capable hypersonic missiles on Belarus's territory, pointed at European capitals, is presented as an alliance of equals. It is anything but.

By December 2025, Lukashenko confirmed that Oreshnik systems had arrived in Belarus and entered combat duty. The missiles, with a range covering all of Eastern and Central Europe, and warheads travelling at up to Mach 10, are described by Putin himself as impossible to intercept. Belarus, a country of 9.5 million people that once aspired to European integration, has become Europe's most densely nuclear-armed non-nuclear-weapons state.

Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya put the situation plainly: “Lukashenko has turned Belarus into a platform for Russian threats, but Belarusians don't need these weapons”. What she did not add, though it is equally true, is that Lukashenko himself did not really choose this. He was led here, step by step, by a man who understood that the easiest way to use a country is to first make its leader desperate.

Part III: Humans as Weapons – The Migration Warfare Strategy

Engineering the Crisis

If nuclear weapons represent the hard edge of Putin and Lukashenko's strategy of intimidation, weaponized migration represents the soft blade, no less dangerous, and far more deniable.

The strategy emerged in recognizable form in the summer of 2021. Beginning that June, Lukashenko's regime began issuing tourist visas to thousands of migrants, primarily Iraqis, Kurds, Syrians, Yemenis, and Afghans, advertising Belarus as an easy gateway into the European Union. When these individuals arrived in Minsk, they were bused directly to the borders with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Some were reportedly given tools to cut through border fencing. Belarusian border guards, far from discouraging crossings, were observed actively herding migrants toward the frontier. In some cases, Polish authorities accused their Belarusian counterparts of providing migrants with smoke grenades and other materials to facilitate confrontations.

The pretext was retaliation, for EU sanctions following the 2020 election fraud, and for Poland's granting of asylum to Belarusian Olympic sprinter Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, who had refused to return home from Tokyo fearing for her safety. But the scale and coordination of the operation went far beyond reactive spite. As analysts at *Foreign Affairs* documented, Lukashenko “was staging an artificial humanitarian crisis in an effort to get concessions out of Brussels”. ***The migrants were not incidental victims. They were the instrument.***

Poland deployed approximately 17,000 soldiers to the border zone. Lithuania and Latvia erected reinforced fencing. The EU condemned what Ylva Johansson, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, described as “a new way of using human beings in an act of aggression”. Polish Deputy Interior Minister Maciej Wasik was more blunt: ***“Belarus is waging a hybrid war with the European Union with the help of illegal immigrants”.***

The Strategic Logic of Destabilization

The operation's brilliance, from Putin's perspective, lay in its multi-layered effects. As researchers at the Modern War Institute at West Point noted, the strategy was designed to exploit the EU's most profound internal fracture line, the memory of the 2015 refugee crisis, which had “contributed to a surge in support for far-right Eurosceptic parties in countries including Germany, France, Sweden, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, and Italy, while decisively contributing to Britain's vote to leave the bloc in 2016”.

Every migrant convoy pushed back at the Belarusian border, every Polish soldier deployed away from other duties, every EU member state that argued with another over migration quotas represented a small victory for Moscow. The strategy also forced Poland and its partners into a morally excruciating position: choose between national security and humanitarian obligations. Many of those being pushed toward the border were genuinely vulnerable people fleeing war and poverty. Yet the risk of hostile actors, possibly including Wagner Group mercenaries, embedding themselves within the flows could not be dismissed.

As analysts at *Geopolitical Monitor* observed, “for Putin, whether or not Lukashenko is successful is irrelevant: either way, the EU is that bit more distracted and disunited, while Russian troops continue to march through Ukraine”. The migration weapon does not need to succeed. It only needs to wound.

The tactic has since broadened. Reports have linked similar operations to Russia's involvement in migration pressures on Scandinavian borders, and British government sources have suggested Russian involvement in the “small boats” crisis in the English Channel. ***The Kremlin, through its Belarusian forward base, has industrialized human misery as a geopolitical tool.***

Part IV: God and State – The Russian Orthodox Church as an Ideological Weapon

The Patriarch's War

Behind every tank and missile in Russia's arsenal of intimidation stands a priest with incense. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) under Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has been one of Vladimir Putin's most valuable instruments, not only domestically, but as a global network for ideological warfare, operating in Belarus, across Eastern Europe, through the African continent, and deep into the Western conservative movements that have proven most susceptible to Kremlin narratives.

The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly has called on all states to treat Patriarch Kirill and his church leadership as “an ideological extension of Vladimir Putin's regime complicit in war crimes

and crimes against humanity”. The assessment is well-supported. At the World Russian People's Council in Moscow in March 2024, the ROC approved *The Present and Future of Russian World* (Russkiy Mir), a document designed to codify Kremlin narratives into a formal nationalist-spiritual ideology, anchoring Russia's expansionist ambitions in the language of sacred mission.

The church's domestic propaganda machine operates on several tracks simultaneously. Its priests urge Orthodox believers to sacrifice themselves for their country by enlisting in the war against Ukraine, a war they are told is not an invasion, but a crusade. Patriarch Kirill has recast Russian aggression as “a battle fought by Russia to defend traditional Christian values and preserve the religious, cultural, and axiological unity of Holy Rus, encompassing Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine”. ***The claim is not merely spiritual, it is geopolitical!*** By insisting on the spiritual unity of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as parts of a single “Holy Rus”, the church provides theological cover for Putin's denial of Ukrainian and Belarusian sovereignty, their cultures, languages, and identities recast as regional dialects of a single Russian soul.

The “Traditional Values” Weapon

The Kremlin's most effective ideological export, and the ROC's most potent propaganda tool, has been the concept of “Traditional Values”. The phrase is deployed with extraordinary cynicism. Domestically, it translates into the suppression of LGBTQ+ people, softened penalties for domestic violence, and the subordination of civil rights to religious authority. Externally, it functions as a magnet for Western conservatives who are drawn to what they perceive as a bulwark against liberal decadence, and who do not understand, or do not care, that they are being used.

As Kyrylo Hovorun, a scholar of political theology, has written: the ROC “facilitates the promotion of 'traditional' values among frustrated Western post liberals and right-wing populists” in precisely the same way that the Soviet church once facilitated communist propaganda, “shameless instrumentalization of religion, with the consent of the latter”. These Western admirers are, in Russia's strategic calculation, ***“disposable sputniks, useful just for a short while”***.

The campaign is global in reach. At the Russia-Africa summit, Patriarch Kirill told African leaders: “We are united by adherence to traditional values, conservative view of human nature, rejection of the ideology of permissiveness”. In the United States, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad is gaining members, not only among Russian immigrants, but among Americans attracted to its emphasis on “traditional values”. The church functions as a soft-power transmission belt, converting spiritual authority into political sympathy for the Kremlin.

Indoctrinating Belarusian Children

In Belarus, the ROC's influence has penetrated the state school system with alarming speed. As documented by EUvsDisinfo in 2024, the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church has dramatically expanded its access to Belarusian minors through public schools. In May 2024, authorities instructed schools across Belarus to broadcast video addresses from Fyodor Povnyy, a senior ROC-affiliated priest known for explicitly pro-Russian messaging.

The ideological curriculum being built in Belarusian classrooms is no longer merely patriotic in the Lukashenko sense, it is pro-Soviet, pro-Russian, and anti-Ukrainian. Military and patriotic clubs operating within schools' blend state propaganda with Orthodox symbolism. The message to young Belarusians is consistent: they are not a distinct people with their own language and history. They are part of a greater Russian civilizational project. Their distinctiveness is a Western lie. Their future is in union with Moscow.

Lukashenko himself has actively encouraged this integration of church propaganda into state ideology. Speaking about his appointment of Vladimir Pertsov as deputy chief of his administration

in early 2024, he declared that “ideological work is coming to the fore” and instructed Pertsov to ensure all ideological and media activities serve the regime. ***What he does not appear to grasp is that the ideology he is deploying will ultimately serve Moscow, not Minsk.***

Part V: The Gravediggers in Cassocks

Lemeshonok and the Art of Loyal Subversion

Among the clerical figures who have embedded themselves within Lukashenko's Belarus, few are more instructive than Archpriest Andrei Lemeshonok, the spiritual father and rector of the Saint Elisabeth Convent in Minsk, a large, influential, and internationally connected institution of the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

On the surface, Lemeshonok presents a picture of devoted loyalty. When Lukashenko visited the Convent's church on Christmas Day 2019, it was Lemeshonok who delivered the warmest words, assuring the president of the community's prayers, speaking of love for the Belarusian nation, and gifting the head of state an icon made by the Convent's own artisans. The imagery was calculated: a priest blessing a ruler, the church endorsing the state.

But Lemeshonok's true institutional allegiances lie not with Lukashenko's personal regime, but with the Russian Orthodox Church as an imperial project. The Saint Elisabeth Convent operates as part of the Moscow Patriarchate's Belarusian Exarchate, an institution that answers, ultimately, to Patriarch Kirill in Moscow. Its spiritual formation, its theological framework, its international outreach, all of it flows through and back to the ROC's centralized hierarchy. When Lemeshonok speaks of faith and family, of Belarus's spiritual heritage, of the war between a God-fearing East and a “spiritless” West, he is transmitting a message written in Moscow.

Lemeshonok has publicly declared his solidarity with Lukashenko's rejection of Western liberalism in unmistakable terms. During the [COVID-19](#) pandemic, when Lukashenko famously refused to impose restrictions, Lemeshonok declared he had chosen to follow “Europe's last dictator” and would not be vaccinated, framing disease and death as matters of divine providence beyond human agency. It was, in its way, a performance of solidarity with the regime's defiant anti-Western posture.

Yet the Convent he leads, and the church to which it belongs, is quietly advancing a project Lukashenko himself fears: the spiritual and institutional integration of Belarus into a Russia-dominated Orthodox civilizational bloc, one that does not require Lukashenko to survive it. The ROC's plan for Belarus does not include a strong Lukashenko. It includes a spiritually absorbed Belarus governed by Russian Orthodox culture, loyal to Moscow, and divested of any lingering attachment to Belarusian national distinctiveness. Lukashenko's regime is a useful host for this project, useful until it isn't.

This is the dark comedy at the heart of Lukashenko's position. He believes the church is his. He believes the priests who pray for him are praying with him. He does not see, or refuses to see, that the prayers are for a Belarus that no longer belongs to him. Figures like Lemeshonok perform deference because it is tactically rational. But the Convent's institutional loyalties, its theological identity, and its chain of command all point east, toward the Patriarch, toward Putin, toward a Russia that has a ten-year plan for his country and no particular role in it for Alexander Lukashenko.

The Church's Long Game

The Russian Orthodox Church has always played a longer game than secular politicians. It survived the Soviets. It survived the 1990s chaos. It has aligned itself with Putin not out of conviction but out

of institutional calculation, and it will outlast Putin too, adjusting its allegiances as needed. For Belarus, the ROC's strategy is patient and profound: **absorb the country spiritually before the annexation is complete politically**. Shape the identity of an entire generation of Belarusian children so that when the Union State is finally declared, or when the pretense of Belarusian sovereignty quietly expires, there will be no cultural resistance to speak of. The people will already think of themselves as Russian.

Lukashenko's toleration and active encouragement of this process reveals, once again, the limits of his strategic vision. He sees the church as a useful prop for his authoritarianism, a source of ceremonial legitimacy, a counter to Western liberal values, a vehicle for social conservatism. He does not see that he is handing the keys of Belarusian identity to an institution that serves a power committed to his irrelevance.

Part VI: The View from The West

What Europe Must Understand

The convergence of nuclear intimidation, weaponized migration, and ideological warfare represents a sophisticated, multi-domain strategy that Western liberal democracies have been dangerously slow to understand. Each element is individually deniable. Nuclear weapons in Belarus? Merely a security arrangement between allied states. Migrants pushed to the Polish border? A humanitarian issue unrelated to Minsk's political decisions. **Orthodox priests teaching children about the glories of Holy Rus? Matters of faith and culture, beyond the reach of sanctions.**

But the whole is far greater, and far more threatening, than the sum of its parts. Belarus, under Putin's management and Lukashenko's compliant performance, has become a comprehensive forward base: nuclear-armed, ideologically primed, demographically weaponized, and positioned on the eastern boundary of the European Union and NATO. Poland's Chief of Military Intelligence said it plainly: **"We cannot see it as a classical war with soldiers, with tanks and so on, but the war is exercised by our adversaries, by Belarus and Russia, who are using migrants as an asymmetric weapon against NATO countries"**.

The challenge for Western policymakers is to respond to this multi-domain threat without inadvertently validating either Lukashenko's significance or Putin's framing. Lukashenko is not a strategic partner with whom deals can be struck, he is a dependency, incapable of independent action and increasingly incapable of independent thought. **Treating him as a meaningful actor only serves Moscow's interest in maintaining the fiction of Belarusian sovereignty.**

Part VII: Conclusion

The Hollow Man and the Empire He Serves

Alexander Lukashenko will likely be remembered as one of the most consequential failures in modern European history, not because of what he chose to do, but because of what his choices made possible. By brutalizing his own people in 2020 and throwing himself onto Putin's mercy, he surrendered the last meaningful leverage a small state has: **the ability to choose its own path.**

He is now, in the fullest sense, a decorative figure. He presides over nuclear weapons he cannot fire, deploys migrants at the direction of a strategy he did not design, and invites priests into his schools who are quietly teaching his citizens to forget they are Belarusian. He accepts sacred icons

and delivers grand speeches about sovereignty even as he signs away the last remnants of it. He cannot see the grave before him, because it is dug not with shovels but with prayers, and the gravediggers bow as they bury him.

Still, from time to time, we see Lukashenko publicly berating his own administration, scolding ministers on camera, humiliating officials in televised meetings, denouncing the incompetence of a government he himself assembled and has kept in place for decades. It is a performance of strength, carefully staged for a domestic audience still expected to believe in the strongman myth. He roars at the men he chose, as if their failures are proof of his own exacting standards rather than the inevitable product of a system built on fear, sycophancy, and the elimination of independent thought. The question this spectacle raises, however, is not whether his ministers are incompetent; they plainly are, because competent people do not survive long in authoritarian courts.

The real question is: who do they actually serve? The answer, increasingly, is not Lukashenko. The loyalties of his security chiefs, his ideological apparatchiks, and his church-affiliated advisors run along lines that converge not in Minsk, but in Moscow. He has built an administration of servants, but he simply failed to notice that many of them already had another master.

The real story of Belarus in this era is not Lukashenko's story at all. It is Putin's story: the story of how a diminished autocrat became the perfect instrument for an empire that learned, long ago, that the most useful tools are those that believe they are still in charge.

Sources and References

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