

RELATIONS BETWEEN BELARUS AND CHINA IN 2020-2022: WHAT LIES BEHIND THE “ALL-WEATHER PARTNERSHIP”

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Credit and investment cooperation between Belarus and China has decreased since 2020.



Minsk and Beijing maintain a “strategic silence” with regard to the stagnation in their economic cooperation, while continuing their active political dialogue.



In the state press, the ruling regime's political agenda has completely replaced objective coverage of bilateral relations.

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FOREWORD

This study analyzes political and economic relations between Belarus and China during the years 2020–2022. In September 2022, the countries upgraded relations, speaking of an “all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership.” In both countries, officials, diplomats and the state press frequently voice optimistic assessments of Chinese–Belarusian relations, with little or no attention paid to problematic issues in their bilateral cooperation.

To what extent does the rosy coverage in the press and optimistic rhetoric of officials about relations correspond to reality? What are the key trends of recent years in political and economic relations between the two countries? How have partnership relations been affected by the coronavirus pandemic, the political crisis in Belarus, and Russian aggression against Ukraine? To answer these questions, the researchers studied open information sources, official speeches and statements, conducted a content analysis of the publications by the state news agency Belta, and held a number of expert interviews with researchers and business representatives who are knowledgeable on the topic of Belarusian–Chinese relations.

The relations between Belarus and China in 2020–2022 were largely influenced by several important international and domestic political events.

Coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, the pandemic complicated the trade and investment interaction between the two countries, slowed down the implementation of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, and reduced the number of bilateral contacts in the period under review. On the other hand, despite the fundamental difference in the strategies for combating coronavirus in Belarus and China*, the pandemic contributed to the political rapprochement of the two countries. The Chinese Ambassador to Belarus called the joint fight against coronavirus “a key area of bilateral cooperation.” As a gesture of political attention, Minsk sent two airplanes with

humanitarian cargo to China back in January and February 2020. In the same year, China delivered about 130 tons of medical supplies to Belarus. It is noteworthy that Minsk made a political decision to prevent the Belarusian population from accessing Western vaccines (including ones offered for free) and offered only Chinese, Russian and Cuba-made vaccines. Since the beginning of the epidemic, China has supplied about five million doses of the vaccine to Belarus.

A large-scale political crisis in Belarus and the undermining of sovereignty. China recognized the official results of the 2020 election in Belarus and provided unequivocal political support to Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his policies for even greater centralization of power and militarization of the political regime. China has also repeatedly criticized Western sanctions, evaluating them as an unacceptable foreign policy tool and interference in the internal affairs of Belarus. Lukashenka praised Beijing’s position, saying in 2021 that China and Belarus “showed the whole world a worthy example of cooperation.” At the same time, China did not question Lukashenka’s actions which undermined Belarus’s sovereignty such as: the deployment of Russian troops on the territory of the country and the conclusion of a large-scale “integration” agreement with Russia in November 2021. The latter involves bringing Belarusian legislation in all important areas in line with Russian legislation and creating a number of supranational regulators under Russia’s control.

Russian military aggression against Ukraine, including actions launched from the territory of Belarus. This landmark event further undermined Minsk’s relations with the global community. As a result of increasing Western sanctions against Minsk in connection with the aggression against Ukraine, Beijing began to limit economic and investment cooperation with Belarus, while avoiding any public statements in this regard. Minsk also rarely admits publicly that trade and investment relations with China have deteriorated, preferring to describe the state and prospects of bilateral cooperation positively. According to Minsk’s assessments, China has not changed its attitude toward Belarus and, indeed, has positively assessed its role in working toward a peaceful settlement of the military conflict.

In fact, these three crisis events, which are still unfolding at the time of writing, predetermined the main trends in relations between Minsk and Beijing in the review period. The report’s authors consistently analyze political and economic relations between the two countries and the main trends in official Belarusian rhetoric on the topic of bilateral relations.

* In Belarus, scarce, belated, insufficient and often contradictory measures were taken to limit social ties and slow the spread of the pandemic. This led to high rates of excess mortality and total censorship of mortality statistics, undermined Lukashenka’s poll ratings and trust in government agencies among the population of Belarus, and thereby boosted protest moods during the 2020 presidential election campaign. In contrast, the Chinese leadership has steadfastly pursued zero tolerance in the fight against the coronavirus, which has meant lockdowns affecting tens of millions of people, led to a significant reduction in economic activity and caused public discontent over the drastic measures to restrict mobility.

1

POLITICAL RELATIONS: SUNNY RHETORIC AND BRIGHT EXPECTATIONS

In September 2022, at a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Uzbekistan, Belarus and China adopted a Joint Declaration which ostensibly established an all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership of the two countries. The Chinese Ambassador described the decision on this new level of relations as a "historic breakthrough."¹ This is a new stage in their bilateral cooperation, which is supposed to build on the "relationship of trusting comprehensive strategic partnership and mutually beneficial cooperation" that they established in 2016.

The Belarusian side often emphasizes the intensity and scope of its political relations with China. In early 2021, long before the establishment of the "all-weather partnership", the head of the administration of the China-Belarus Industrial Park (CBIP) "Great Stone" Aliaksandr Yarashenka, speaking at the Sixth Congress of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, said that in the world only the UK, Pakistan and Russia have the same high level of relations with China². Whatever lies behind the Chinese terminology of partnership and its assessments, official rhetoric shows that Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Chinese President Xi Jinping maintain friendly relations. For instance, Xi Jinping was the first foreign leader to congratulate the Belarusian leader on the official results of the 2020 presidential election.

Minsk pursues the following goals in political relations with China:

Political support from China in the international arena.

First, Minsk is pleased about Beijing's critical position on Western sanctions and its criticism of the West's demands with regard to respecting human rights and freedoms, including its calls for holding free and fair elections in Belarus. For example, in June 2021, commenting on the EU's plans to expand sanctions against Belarus, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian stated that he did not condone "threats and unilateral sanctions" and "interference of external forces in the internal affairs of other states."

The Belarusian side, among other things, relied on China's support in the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)

when it considered its report on the Ryanair Flight 4978 incident. Uladzimir Andreichanka, head of the lower chamber of the Belarusian parliament, said: "Such support is especially valuable when pressure is put on our country, and through us, in fact, on our like-minded peers. Not everyone likes the fact that we are closely cooperating with China, that we were among the first to support the Belt and Road initiative."³ At a meeting of the UN Security Council in October 2022 regarding the ICAO report, the representative of China questioned the advisability of discussing the incident in the UN Security Council and criticized the imposition of Western sanctions on the Belarusian aviation industry⁴.

At the same time, friendly political rhetoric from China is not accompanied by commensurate economic and investment support on the scale expected by Minsk. On the contrary, Beijing has actually put a number of economic projects on pause in Belarus over the past two years (see Section 2 below). One expert on Sino-Belarusian relations told the authors:

"The United States is still the most important partner for China, and due to US sanctions, China is no longer cooperating with Belarus in the economic sector as closely as before. The focus on friendly political relations remains, but from an economic standpoint, the situation has changed dramatically."

Legitimization of the political course for the domestic audience.

China is often mentioned in official conspiracy narratives about the reasons for the large-scale protest movement in 2020-2021, the motives for Western sanctions, and the background of a sharp deterioration in relations with Western countries. In such rhetoric, these events are presented as a consequence of a global conspiracy against Belarus, China, and Russia. This is also used to justify both the ongoing political course ("China is with us", "since such great powers as China and Russia are with us, then we must be doing everything right") and the urgency of the actions taken and large-scale repressions ("a forced reaction to a hostile global conspiracy", "protection from Western forces and destructive elements that are trying to destabilize the situation in and around Belarus and China"⁵).

Messages conveyed by state news agency Belta include claims that "the Belarusian plot (an attempt at a 'color revolution,' an attempt at a conspiracy, a sanction and economic war against the country) is of course part of the global confrontation between the West [on one side] and Russia and China [on the other], a new Cold War."⁶ In an address in February 2021, Lukashenka called "our strategic cooperation with China" one of the reasons for "the West's attack on Belarus" in 2020⁷.

State propaganda uses the statements of Chinese diplomats and officials to support the political course pursued by Lukashenka. For example, the former Chinese Ambassador to Belarus, Cui Qiming, in an address to the participants of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, called it "an important platform for the participation of the Belarusian people in the political life of the country."⁸ During the SCO summit in September 2022, the Chinese side announced "the free will of the Belarusian people to introduce amendments and additions to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus during the republican referendum on February 27, 2022."⁹

Belarusian officials depict the political partnership with China (and Russia) as a tool to mitigate the negative effects of Western sanctions and the deterioration of trade and economic relations with Western countries and Ukraine. Given the stagnation of investment cooperation with China after 2020, in one of his statements in 2021, Lukashenka mostly engages in wishful thinking, portraying the earlier stage of investment cooperation with China as the currently remaining format of interaction: "Look: we were under sanctions earlier, there were even more serious sanctions. Who extended a hand to us, except Russia? China did. Seven billion [dollars] in investments was offered immediately for projects. And we implemented quite a few. Is this not the multi-vector approach?"¹⁰

"We are learning from China": adopting technological expertise. Taking advantage of friendly political relations, Minsk seeks to adopt Chinese technological expertise, including control over society. One of Lukashenka's meetings with high-ranking security officials and representatives of civilian departments in 2021 was devoted to the issue of creating a single state regulator of the digital sector, which could "make the most of China's experience in building a digital society."¹¹ According to Hennadziy Davydzka, head of the Commission on Human Rights and Media in the lower house of the Parliament, Belarus should adopt the Chinese experience in internet regulation: "We need to remove the coordinated, aggressive, terrorist capacities that exist."¹²

As Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus Mikalai Snapkou noted, referring to the statements made by Lukashenka, "we are learning from China. We are paving our way into the future together with China and on the basis of its experience."¹³ At the same time, Chinese practices are legitimized, among other things, through references to "civilizational" arguments. "Well, how old is America?

Compared to China, the American history is very short, and Americans have yet to prove their right to exist, and the Chinese have already done it, and many times. So, if we are speaking about who we should learn from, the answer is obvious," said a Belarusian sinology professor in a comment for Belta¹⁴.

For its part, Beijing also pursues a number of key political goals through its partnership with Belarus:

Participation of Belarus in the most important (geo)political projects of China and its support. Above all, this means Chinese investment and the infrastructural Belt and Road Initiative. In practical terms, its implementation in Belarus is primarily realized by ensuring trade relations between China and EU countries, as well as in the functioning of the CBIP. The successes of the Great Stone industrial park are meant to demonstrate Belarus's active participation in the Belt and Road Initiative.

Events of the past two years, in particular the Russia-Ukraine war, negatively affected both the logistical role of Belarus and the development of Great Stone. As one expert said in an interview:

"The war interrupted the plans for the arrival of new Chinese companies in the CBIP; the previous political decisions on this matter are frozen. Now there is no question of the profitability of Great Stone, but it remains a landmark project in itself."

Nevertheless, both sides tend to gloss over the difficulties, and in the official rhetoric, Great Stone remains the most important showcase project, which is "personally promoted by the heads of the two countries." For example, Yan Gang, General Director of Industrial Park Development Company, called the park "a vivid manifestation of friendship between China and Belarus."¹⁵

Belarus's support for Chinese positions on various international platforms and its promotion to the national audience. "I am sure that the Belarusian side will also continue to support China's position on issues related to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet and the South China Sea, and will also openly advocate for justice on these issues within multilateral organizations," said Chinese Ambassador Xie Xiaoyong in a 2021 interview¹⁶. In a joint declaration on September 15, 2022, the Belarusian side reaffirmed its commitment to the "one China" principle, supporting its efforts to restore the country and opposing Taiwan's independence "in all its manifestations."

Against the backdrop of growing tensions in relations with the United States and the increasing influence of "hawks" in the Chinese ruling elite, the Taiwan issue has risen up the Chinese political agenda in recent years. In the context of Belarusian-Chinese relations, this is of particular importance in connection with the Lithuanian-Chinese diplomatic conflict over Taiwan. In November 2021, Taiwan opened

an official office in Lithuania, and a year later Lithuania established a trade office in Taiwan. In December 2021, Lithuania also announced a diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics in China. In this situation, the support of Belarus as a neighboring state in conflict with Lithuania strengthens Xi Jinping's position within the Chinese establishment and becomes a potential channel for Beijing to put pressure on the Lithuanian authorities.

Among other issues that have been important for Beijing on international platforms in the past two years, a particularly notable one is its position on the origin of the coronavirus infection and the fight against it. The Belarusian side often supports the Chinese position in UN bodies, and the Belarusian state press has published statements by the Chinese Foreign Ministry and press releases from the Chinese embassy on this subject (see Section 3).

Supplying Chinese economic and military technological needs. A priority issue for Beijing is ensuring regular supplies of Belarusian potassium on terms that are favorable for China. Belarus is one of the world's largest suppliers of potassium, an essential mineral for agriculture, particularly for countries as big as China or India. Western sanctions against Belarus, including the potassium industry, complicate the task of supplying potassium to China, but it remains on the agenda.

An additional task is to create a favorable political background for ensuring the interests of Chinese business. This applies both to large state corporations that receive contracts under various investment agreements (usually within the so-called "tied" loans), and to private business. From a practical standpoint, the significance of this task for the Chinese side in the review period decreased due to Western sanctions and the unfavorable situation in the Belarusian economy. This is how an expert described the situation:

"Significant Western sanctions, the withdrawal of Western companies from the region and the discussion of shutting down SWIFT have led to the Chinese side suspending many projects in Belarus, although it is trying not to advertise this fact."

As for military and technical cooperation, following the successful cooperation in producing the Polonaise multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) in 2015, Belarus has been unable to offer China projects of commensurate value. However, this sector remains on the agenda¹⁷, as evidenced by the signing of a memorandum on military cooperation by the ministries of defense of both countries in November 2021¹⁸.

2

WAR AND SANCTIONS HINDER ECONOMIC COOPERATION

This section provides an overview of the three pillars of Chinese-Belarusian economic relations: mutual trade and logistics, investment cooperation, and the Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park.

2.1. TRADE RELATIONS AND LOGISTICS

Since 2020, China has been Belarus's second-largest trading partner after Russia, with the trade balance being strongly negative. Potash fertilizers remain important and, for many years, have been the main export product of Belarus. Export of potassium from Belarus to China in 2018–2020 constituted \$280–\$353 million annually; more recently Belstat has stopped publishing statistics for potassium exports. Another significant part of exports to China is petrochemical products with low added value. In contrast, imports from China comprise a much more diverse range of products, including many finished products with high added value, such as communication equipment, computers, and parts for internal combustion engines.

The existing structure of trade with China can hardly satisfy Minsk. In March 2021, while visiting the Minsk Motorcycle and Bicycle Plant, Lukashenka expressed dissatisfaction with trade relations with China:

*"Listen, we carry components from China, we assemble them here. This is a lot of money, massive expense, but they need to be brought from there, and then the finished bike is taken to that market. So, we should do as much as possible here."*¹⁹

The director of the plant, Mikalai Ladutska, pointed out it was unrealistic to expect the production of parts in Belarus due to the considerably higher prices involved: "We constantly turn to enterprises [of Belarus], to private businesses, with a proposal: let's produce components. But the price they quote is one and a half to two times higher than what we bring in from China."²⁰

Belarus imports most Chinese equipment and components through projects implemented with Chinese "tied" loans. These loan agreements usually oblige Belarus to use at

least 50–70% of the credit for the purchase of equipment and services from China.

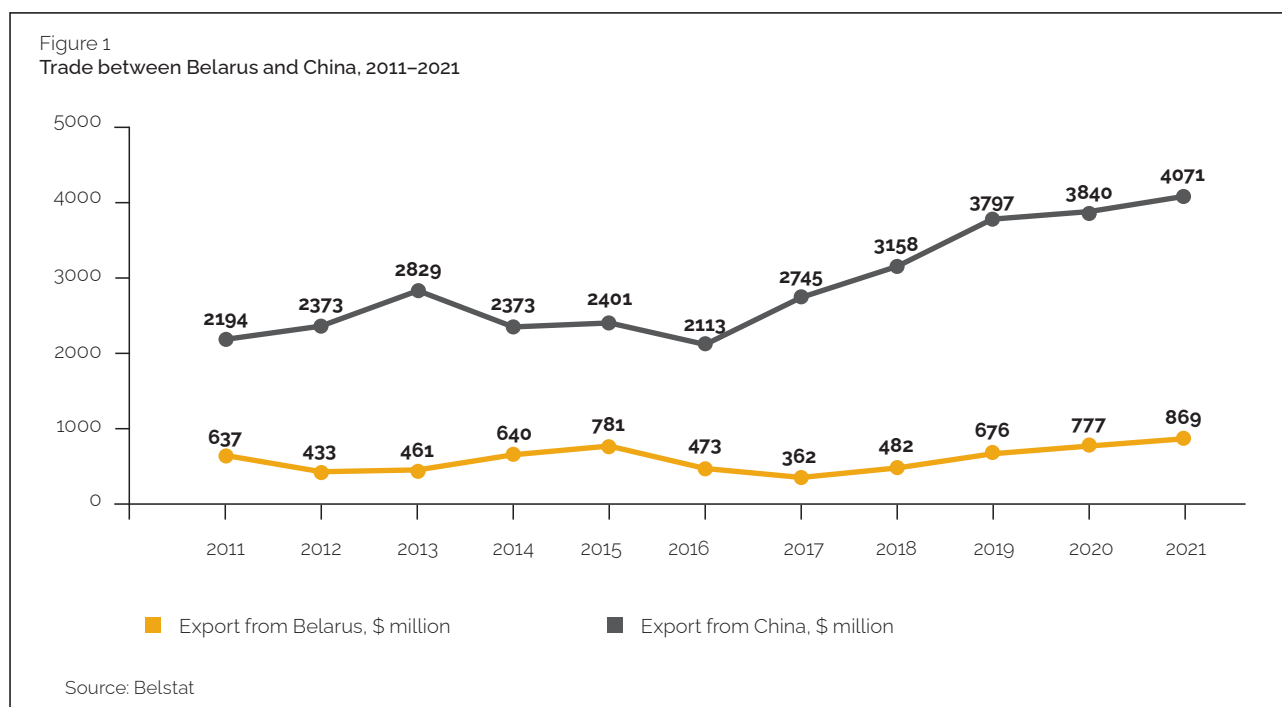
It should be noted that the existing structure of trade with China is largely a consequence of the economic policy pursued by Minsk for many years. This includes slowing down the development of the private sector of the economy for political reasons and the (unsuccessful) implementation of foreign economic relations "from above" through large and clumsy public sector enterprises, as well as the active use of Chinese "tied" loans. These loans are often used in conjunction with low-quality investment plans and the inefficient management of ongoing joint projects.

The Belarusian side has been prudent in its negative assessment of cooperation with China in the public sector. In April 2021, Lukashenka pointed out he was dissatisfied with the "overblown" staff of the Belarusian trade mission of state enterprises in China and the insufficient coordination of their work with the embassy:

*"Let's say China. The trade mission is sometimes unreasonable there; nobody is counting the money. For example, BMZ, Belaruskali, BelAZ and others all have their own offices in China. Why not unite under the roof of the embassy? And then the ambassador takes one, two or three people by the hand and takes them where they would have never gone by themselves."*²¹

In addition, in May 2021, Lukashenka said that he personally addressed Xi Jinping with an offer to help to expand the supply of necessary products to the Chinese market²².

In this context, the only potential positive trend of recent years is the increased export sales volume of Belarusian meat and dairy products, as well as woodworking products. According to official statistics, in 2021, exports of meat, dairy and woodworking products to China amounted to \$203 million, \$122 million and \$78 million respectively. If these data are true (bearing in mind the drastic increase in censorship of Belarusian statistics since 2020), these categories accounted for about 45% of Belarusian exports to China in 2021. The data on trade between Belarus and China for 2021 varies from source to source. According to the Ministry of Economy and the Embassy of Belarus in China, mu-



tual trade in 2021 amounted to \$5.9 billion²³, Belta reported a trade turnover of \$5.1 billion²⁴, while Belstat estimated it at \$4.94 billion²⁵.

Before 2018, the export of Belarusian dairy products to China was practically nonexistent, as was the export of meat and woodworking products until 2019. The state press extensively covers the export successes of these product categories, with news stories about individual enterprises over a period of several months. For example, in mid-2021, Belta reported that the enterprises of the Viciebsk concern Meat and Dairy Products supplied goods to China worth \$4.6 million from January to May 2021, "which is 3.2 times higher than the volume of exports for the same period in 2020."²⁶

Since 2020, the Chinese side has also regularly noted an increase in sales of Belarusian food products. According to an adviser at the Chinese embassy in Belarus, "Trade in agricultural products has become the highlight of bilateral cooperation in the new conditions."²⁷ In recent years, the number of Belarusian food producers accredited to work on the Chinese market has been steadily growing. At the beginning of 2021, there were 105 such enterprises, and by November 2022, their number exceeded 160, according to the Ministry of Economy of Belarus.

Lukashenka estimated the potential for increasing the export of Belarusian agricultural products to the Chinese market at \$700 million – \$1 billion²⁸. Such growth seems unlikely over the next few years and it largely depends on Beijing's continued policy of diversifying food supplies from Eastern Europe and Kazakhstan, which has opened a window of opportunity for Belarusian producers.

In recent years, some mechanisms for trade cooperation between Belarus and China have improved. The parties created a commission on customs and quarantine cooperation and established a working group on the facilitation of trade procedures within the framework of the joint intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation²⁹.

The relationship between the level of political relations and trade interaction is not obvious. In an interview for Belarus 1 TV channel in summer 2022, answering the question of what the upcoming upgrade of political relations with China will mean in practical terms for economic and trade relations between the countries, Belarusian Ambassador to China Yury Sianko did not expect an increase in Belarusian exports or an change in the trade structure favorable to Belarus:

"In practical terms, we understand this [as] trust between our countries, which is characterized by this level of relations. Through the lens of these relations, all strategic relations are built in various areas — in the economy, politics, education, culture [...] This characterizes our friendship — our "all-weather partnership", the ability to quickly and efficiently resolve issues, and treat each other with respect³⁰.

Over the past two years, the parties have been referring to negotiations on an agreement on trading in services and investing, but as of the end of 2022, it is unclear how ready this agreement may be. The Belarusian state press often reports on exchange trade, which began to develop back in 2020. Belta notes an increase in sales of woodworking products through the Belarusian Universal Commodity

Exchange (BUCE), as well as an increase in the number of Chinese companies accredited at BUCE (twenty new residents in the first six months of 2022)³¹. The volume of trade through BUCE has increased in two years, but the achievements in this area remain rather insignificant: in the first six months of 2022 it amounted to \$41 million³².

Minsk has shown great interest in China's Belt and Road Initiative and has expressed high expectations about the potential benefits of Belarus's logistical role on the trade route from China to the EU. In an attempt to increase their investment appeal to China, Belarusian officials continue their long-standing practice of positioning Belarus as a necessary bridge between China and the European Union. "Logistics, especially rail transportation, education and tourism, medical services, banks and finance will become the main growth drivers for the two countries," said Aliaksandr Yarashenka, head of the CBIP administration, assessing the prospects of the relations in early 2021³³.

Representatives of the Chinese side, including Xi Jinping himself, have also repeatedly stated the importance of the logistical role of Belarus in the overland corridor between Asia and Europe. The joint declaration dated September 15, 2022, talks about sharing the transit potential of Belarus and concern for the safe and uninterrupted movement of China-Europe-China trains. In a January 2022 interview marking the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Chinese Ambassador Xie Xiaoyong said:

*"China advocates that Belarus makes full use of the geographical advantages of its location in the center of Eurasia, ensures the stable and uninterrupted operation of China-Europe-China cross-border freight trains, and effectively uses the development dividends brought by China-Europe-China freight trains."*³⁴

According to the official estimate by Belarus, in 2021, more than 80% of the transit of container trains on this route passed through Belarus³⁵. In numerical terms, this surpasses 550,000 containers of twenty-foot equivalent (TEU). For comparison, in 2014, about 40,000 containers were transported as part of the transit movement of goods between China and Europe³⁶.

Both sides consider the logistics potential in conjunction with CBIP. At the beginning of 2021, CBIP and Minsk National Airport signed a memorandum of cooperation on the construction of transportation and logistics infrastructure engaging investments in order to ensure the interfacing of air transportation with rail and road transportation within the boundaries of the CBIP logistics zone. The relevance of that partnership had also increased by that time due to the fact that CBIP planned to begin construction of a multimodal railway cargo terminal³⁷.

However, the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war and large-scale Western sanctions against Belarus offset the

benefits in the field of logistics. Initially, the Chinese corporation China Merchants Group, the German company Duisburger Hafen, which manages the port of Duisburg, the Belarusian Railway and the Swiss company Hupac Intermodal became the co-founders of the international logistics terminal at CBIP. After the war had begun, Duisburger Hafen, which also owned a small stake (0.59%) in the Industrial Park Development Company, announced the termination of its operations in Belarus. In November 2022, it was announced that the multimodal terminal at CBIP would be built by the Belarusian enterprise Beltamozhservis. Obviously, local enterprises are not able to provide competencies and technologies at the level of leading Western companies. In addition, since the end of 2020, transit through the Baltic countries has become problematic. A business sector representative, during an interview conducted for the study, said:

"The success of our business lies in taking advantage of the geographical position of Belarus. Until recently, it was possible to ensure the stable and uninterrupted operation of cross-border freight traffic along the China-Europe-China route, and we were confident in its prospects. Now there is no such confidence."

Even before Russia's wide-scale aggression against Ukraine, sinologists noted³⁸ that the deteriorating relations between Minsk and Brussels are at odds with the economic interests of Beijing and threaten the transit role of Belarus. The Russian-Ukrainian war only exacerbates this trend.

2.2. INVESTMENT COOPERATION

Minsk hopes to replace European financial markets, now closed to it, with Russian subsidies and Chinese loans. It expects Beijing to continue its close political relationship as a generous investor and lender. Directive No. 9 "On the development of bilateral relations between the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China," which was signed by Lukashenka in December 2021, implies an increase in trade, financial, and investment cooperation. Minsk treats this document as an up-to-date roadmap for cooperation with China to replace the earlier Directive No. 5 on the development of bilateral relations, adopted in 2015. New projected indicators appear overestimated and unrealistic.

In particular, Directive No. 9 sets goals of increasing exports of Belarusian goods to China up to \$2 billion by 2025, attracting Chinese loans in the amount of at least \$0.9 billion to refinance the public debt in 2022-2024, ensuring the annual engagement of resources from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and other banks, as well as from the Silk Road Fund and the China-Eurasian Economic Cooperation Fund in the amount of at least \$500 million starting from 2022, ensuring the entry of Chinese investors into the banking system of Belarus by purchasing a Belarusian bank or participating in its equity capital, and attracting technical

and economic assistance from China in the amount of at least 500 million yuan (about \$70 million) per year³⁹.

High-ranking officials have repeatedly expressed hope that China, along with Russia, will make it possible to mitigate, or even level out, the economic effects of Western sanctions. For example, according to the head of the upper house of the Belarusian parliament, Natalya Kachanova, “Trade and economic partnership with China is essential for us. In the conditions of Western sanctions against our country, we understand that now, more than ever, we need to strengthen trade and economic cooperation.”⁴⁰

In mid-2021, Deputy Minister of Economy of Belarus Yury Chabatar shared his optimistic plans for increasing Chinese investment: “We are preparing an agreement with our Chinese friends on a free trade zone for services and investments. Thanks to this, the volume of investments, perhaps, will grow by 30%, and of services — by about 10–15%.”⁴¹

For his part, Vasily Hurski, director of the Institute of Economics of the National Academy of Sciences, argued in March 2021 that Russia and China, the main trading partners of Belarus, allegedly did not pay attention to the investment attractiveness ratings of Belarus compiled by international rating agencies⁴².

However, existing statistics debunk this assessment. According to official data, in January–September 2021, Belarus received only \$14.9 million from the Export-Import Bank of China and paid off debts to Chinese banks for the same period in the amount of \$403.1 million⁴³. Since December 2019 (when Belarus received a loan in the amount of 3.5 billion yuan, or about \$500 million), China has not allocated any intergovernmental loans to Belarus.

This is how an expert on Belarusian–Chinese relations commented on this in an interview:

“Previously opened credit lines for Belarus are preserved, but are currently viewed not through an economic lens, but rather as technical or humanitarian assistance from China. Previously, loans were beneficial to Beijing from an economic perspective, but today, they are rather part of diplomacy and political activity to strengthen its presence in Belarus.”

At the end of 2021, it turned out that the China Development Bank had frozen loans for Slavkalyi to develop the Nezhynskaya field. The line of credit was opened in 2015 in the amount of \$1.4 billion; the contract provided for a 25-year supply of potash fertilizers to China. Considering the strategic importance of the potassium industry for China, observers see this decision as a signal of Beijing’s dissatisfaction with the new geopolitical reality facing Belarus. As one analytical publication suggests:

“The suspension of Slavkalyi’s financing should be seen through the prism of the changing political and economic

situation underway in Belarus since at least mid-2020. The sanctions targeting Lukashenka’s regime are an important factor that impedes Beijing’s plans in terms of potash imports and economic activities in Belarus, and complicates its trade exchanges with the EU.”⁴⁴

Officials in both Belarus and China avoid public statements about the stagnation of investment projects that have already begun. In mid-2022, in an interview with the Belarus 1 state TV channel, answering a question about the prospects for bilateral relations, Belarusian Ambassador to China Yury Sianko did not name a single new joint industrial project being planned at the time⁴⁵. Similarly, in a September 2022 interview with the Chinese international outlet Global Times⁴⁶, Sianko, asked about expected new bilateral projects, called CBIP the “key strategic and most ambitious project” and provided basic statistical information about it.

In November 2022, Deputy Minister of Economy of Belarus Alesya Abramenska said that more than fifty projects are being implemented with the participation of Chinese capital and that “a number of breakthrough joint initiatives” are under preparation, but she did not announce any specific ones⁴⁷. Information on current joint investment projects is fragmented and the parties do not provide these data publicly in any comprehensive, updated form.

The official comments provided by the Chinese side are also framed in positive language and rarely touch on the issues of the slowing down or freezing of economic cooperation. Chinese Ambassador to Belarus, Xie Xiaoyong, said in April 2022, “Looking into the future, Sino–Belarusian cooperation has broad prospects. China will continue to deepen business cooperation with Belarus.”⁴⁸

Exaggerated expectations of Minsk and overly-optimistic assessments of the prospects for investment cooperation with China are not new. This was one of the key characteristics of bilateral relations ten years ago⁴⁹. Still, a newer survey of experts additionally highlights the gap between the reality and Minsk’s expectations of investments from China⁵⁰.

The scarcity of official discussion and assessment of the current state of affairs with earlier unsuccessful investment projects is noteworthy. Since the December 2019 high-level meeting on the implementation of the most problematic investment projects in Belarus, such discussions, which would be widely covered in the official media, have not taken place⁵¹.

One of the discussion points at the aforementioned 2019 meeting was the Svetlahorsk bleached pulp plant costing \$850 million, of which \$654 million came in the form of loans from Chinese banks. Lukashenka officially opened the enterprise during a visit in February 2020, despite initial plans having envisaged its launch in 2015⁵².

Another example of a problematic large investment project is the Dobrush paper mill, which received a Chinese loan

of \$350 million for construction. Although the launch of the enterprise was expected as early as 2015, it was reported in 2020 that Belarus needed to raise an additional \$83 million to complete the modernization of the enterprise. Visiting Dobrush in February 2020, Lukashenka promised to raise the issue of the undisciplined work of Chinese companies in Belarus when communicating with Xi Jinping. The factory was put into operation only in the summer of 2021 after the involvement of specialists from an Austrian company. At the beginning of 2022, financial conflicts between Belarus and the Chinese corporation Xuan Yuan were still not resolved⁵³. In 2018, the Belarusian side terminated its contract with Xuan Yuan, stating that the company was unable to complete the project due to lack of necessary experience.

At the beginning of 2021, a representative of the Chinese embassy in Belarus separately mentioned the Belji enterprise as a successful project:

“The fruits of effective cooperation on major projects are evident. Belji, an enterprise created by the Chinese company Zhejiang Geely Holding Group, the Belarusian BELAZ and other partners, filled the gap in the production of passenger cars in Belarus. The project is developing well; in total in 2020, Belji sold 23,000 cars, including 9,200 in Belarus and about 15,000 to other countries.”⁵⁴

However, by now, Belji has also been affected by the introduced Western sanctions — in August 2022, the Belarusian side acknowledged complications in negotiations with the Chinese company Geely on the supply of car kits. In November 2022, officials announced that the plant plans to produce 25,000 vehicles by the end of 2022 (in contrast to 37,000 vehicles announced in early 2022), while in 2021, the plant produced 29,400. The plant, which started operating in 2013 with a design capacity of 60,000 vehicles per year, produced its 100,000th vehicle only at the end of 2021.

It seems that both sides have not only adopted a position of “strategic silence” on the problematic aspects of investment cooperation, but are also interested in creating the illusion of “business as before.” In November 2022, Lukashenka officially opened the production complex of the Belarusian National Biotechnology Corporation (BNBC), which had begun work a year earlier. In an address to the factory workers and representatives of the Chinese side, Lukashenka called the enterprise “evidence of the highest relations between the two states.”⁵⁵ The Belarus 1 state TV channel also called BNBC a unique production in Europe and “the only project in the world that Chinese partners built during the pandemic,” ranking its importance with space development, an IT park and a nuclear power plant⁵⁶.

The launch of the BNBC in 2021 hardly reflects the current stagnant state of investment cooperation, since the project was initiated even before the troubled period of 2020–2022.

The decree on the establishment of BNBC was signed in 2016, and the construction of the production plant began in mid-2018.

As sporadic news reports indicate, credit and investment cooperation with China has often proved unprofitable for Belarus, particularly due to an insufficiently thorough assessment of the prospects of financed enterprises. In February 2021, the Belarusian government adopted a special resolution, instructing that Belarusbank be compensated from the state budget for losses from loans to light industry enterprises. This particularly applies to the loan issued by the Export-Import Bank of China to Orsha Linen Mill to construct corporate housing for its workers⁵⁷.

Beijing partially compensated for the doubtful benefits of investment cooperation for Belarus with technical and economic assistance. Speaking at the Sixth All-Belarusian National Assembly in 2021, the head of the administration of the CBIP Great Stone Aliaksandr Yarashenka estimated the volume of China’s technical and economic assistance since 2005 at \$0.5 billion across seventeen projects.

One of its vectors since 2015 has been the construction of social housing in Belarus. During the first phase in 2017, Chinese grants funded the building of sixteen buildings providing 1,432 social housing apartments. Twenty-two more residential buildings comprising 1,854 apartments were built as part of the second stage in 2019. In February 2021, an agreement was announced for the third phase of the construction of social housing which would provide twenty more apartment buildings⁵⁸.

Two months later, a representative of the construction industry Aliaksandr Auramenka reported that the agreement on the implementation of the third stage had still not been signed because the coronavirus pandemic meant the “personal presence of a representative of the Chinese government” was not possible. Nevertheless, Auramenka gave a positive forecast regarding the implementation of the project: “New buildings will appear as soon as this year, and we plan to commission them in 2022. Get ready for new housing!”⁵⁹

Speaking about generous Chinese aid, observers note that it often comes with a degree of conditionality and is therefore not really “free”, instead it is “paid for” by concessions by the Belarusian side in the economic and political spheres.

2.3. THE GREAT STONE INDUSTRIAL PARK

Both sides attach special importance to the China–Belarus Industrial Park. According to the head of the park administration, Aliaksandr Yarashenka, CBIP is “an element of Belarus’s global positioning and a fulcrum for China,” “one of the key platforms of the New Silk Road and the only one

in our region," and in the long term represents "an international smart eco-city of the future for 10,000 people with the most advanced future-oriented production."⁶⁰

The Chinese side, in turn, calls CBIP a "significant and exemplary project" within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative⁶¹. Hu Zheng, former CEO of the China-Belarus Industrial Park Development Company, called CBIP "a symbol and a model" for the practical implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. According to him, the implementation of the CBIP became possible thanks to the personal support of Lukashenka and Xi Jinping.⁶² According to the Chinese Ambassador to Belarus, CBIP is a "pearl project" within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and "a key project of mutual interest, actively promoted by the heads of the two states."⁶³

As of mid-November 2022, the park housed ninety-nine companies with declared investments of more than \$1.2 billion, while at the end of 2019, sixty resident companies were registered with CBIP, thirty-three of which are Chinese. One example of a large production project is the MAZ-Weichai plant, focused on the production of diesel engines for trucks, special vehicles and buses⁶⁴.

According to Minsk's earlier plans, the number of CBIP residents was to be at least 100 by the end of 2019. According to a Belarusian official's 2016 comment: "We set the task of attracting 100 business entities to the Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park within three years. If there are 100 enterprises, it will already be a real park."⁶⁵ As of November 2022, this target has not been reached. One of the tasks set in Directive No. 9 is to ensure at least 170 CBIP resident companies, including five companies investing over \$50 million each, by 2025.

Table 1.
The number of residents of Great Stone, as of the end of each year

2019	2020	2021	2022 (November)
60	68	85	99

The issue of quality, rather than quantity, or more specifically the technologies and prospects of companies registered with the CBIP, deserves a special discussion. One of the areas of activity of CBIP residents most actively covered in state media in 2021-2022 has been traditional Chinese medicine, which can hardly be considered a high-tech industry. In general, production in the CBIP is organized with in four clusters: automotive components, electric vehicles and electrical equipment, medical products and equipment (pharmaceuticals), as well as integrated logistics.

In September 2021, Presidential Decree No. 215 on the CBIP came into force, the fourth such decree (the previous ones

were adopted in 2012, 2014, and 2017). Among other things, the new decree simplified bureaucratic procedures for CBIP residents, expanded priority activities (including the addition of the medical field and biotechnology), introduced incentives to support start-ups and preferential conditions for large investment projects with an investment of \$50 million or more.

Hu Zheng, Chief Executive Officer of the Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park Development Company was optimistic about the prospects for the CBIP at the beginning of 2020. Summing up his five-year leadership of the company in 2015-2019 he said:

*"Obviously, the park has the most favorable conditions for attracting investments. And now we can attract residents of any scale, investments of any size, since the industrial park no longer exists on paper alone, but has acquired a real look."*⁶⁶

According to Kiryl Karatseyeu, the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the CBIP:

*"Thanks to the adoption of the decree, in the next five years, it is planned to begin the second stage of the development of the park (417 hectares), increase the number of residents to 170, bring the number of employees to about 5 thousand people and provide investments at the level of almost \$1 billion over 5 years, increase the annual exports up to \$350 million."*⁶⁷

As follows from official reports, the infrastructure of the CBIP is indeed quite developed. The total investment in the park's infrastructure as of the end of 2020 was estimated at \$263 million⁶⁸. However, the investment background has deteriorated significantly due to the military conflict and Western sanctions. Without Western companies, the creation of international industrial clusters, which Hu Zheng defined as the main task of the CBIP, is hardly achievable in the foreseeable future.

The painful impact of sanctions on Belarusian-Chinese interactions was indirectly confirmed by Karatseyeu in his comments to the state press. According to him, the initiative of Belarusian manufacturers to reach Chinese consumers through the Chinese online platforms Jingdong and Douyin emerged "when investor interest decreased due to sanctions."⁶⁹ As a result, the Industrial Park Development Company initiated and operated the so-called National Digital Trade Pavilion of Belarus, which opened in July 2022. An informed expert told the authors:

"The CBIP is a landmark project for Beijing. It is joined by large state corporations because they are allocated state money for the implementation of showcase projects abroad. There is no question of profitability and, at present, China does not expect any profit from the park."

According to the expert, the imposition of Western sanctions against Belarus has worried both the Chinese government and private Chinese companies, which negatively affects prospects for economic cooperation.

Another expert familiar with the situation at the CBIP said in an interview conducted for the study that, since 2020, the number of Chinese residents has decreased, and companies from the EU have begun to wind down their activities:

"The park received considerable investments by Belarusian standards; many projects are long-term, so the companies cannot just leave the ranks [of CBIP residents]. There are those few that were able to do so quickly and painlessly, and there are those — the majority — which cannot do that. They are gradually winding down their activity. The general attitude is to suspend operations. Do nothing without obstructing anything."

Karatseyeu also noted the gradual reorientation of the CBIP toward cooperation with Russia under the new conditions: "Here are the latest trends: we are seeing a huge interest on the part of Russian business and government circles in the industrial park. We have meetings with Russian delegations literally every day. Before the imposition of sanctions, we focused on the European and Chinese markets."⁷⁰ According to him, alongside Russian businesses, the CBIP hosts projects developing UAVs, helicopter construction, and projects in the field of fine chemistry.

3

RELATIONS BETWEEN BELARUS AND CHINA IN OFFICIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE: KEY FEATURES

The authors studied news materials (688 publications in total)* published by the state news agency, Belta, between October 2020 and September 2022 regarding Belarusian-Chinese relations.** The content analysis showed that most of the materials (56.5%) related to the economic sphere, 23.5% to the political sphere, with the remaining 20% concerning the humanitarian sphere***, military and technological cooperation, and the environment. The coverage of the last two sectors of cooperation in news materials was negligible.

3.1. TRENDS

The study identified the following characteristics of Chinese-Belarusian relations as covered by Belta.

The complete absence of news about Sino-Belarusian relations with a negative connotation

Most of the messages characterized political, economic and cultural interaction between Minsk and Beijing positively. In the materials of the Belta agency, unsuccessful joint investment projects were not covered; problematic aspects of bilateral relations were not voiced or discussed. Some materials, especially in the fields of culture and sports (for example, the Chinese Xiangqi chess tournament at the Belarusian State University), were more or less neutral in tone; at the same time, the very fact of their presence in the Belta news feed intended to show progress in bilateral humanitarian cooperation.

Moreover, the news agency frequently published news about high-profile crimes, man-made disasters, and natural disasters in China.**** The common mention of China in these situations is not a matter of editorial policy, but apparently a side effect of the objective fact that many of the incidents in the world occur in China.

Disproportionate attention to the activities of Great Stone while avoiding coverage of the problems of other major joint investment projects

Belta often published economic materials on relatively unimportant issues (for example, a slight increase in exports of dairy products), and also regularly covered the registration of individual companies as new CBIP residents. For example, in 2021, several news items were related to the registration of the Novoera Biotech company with a project in the field of traditional Chinese medicine⁷¹. Great Stone was mentioned in about a third of all publications concerning Belarus-China relations in the review period. With disproportionately frequent posting of news about the CBIP, the current state of affairs with other large problematic investment projects (for example the Svetlahorsk pulp and paper mill, the Dobrush paper mill, and cement enterprises) was entirely ignored.

Coverage of cultural events (co)organized by the Chinese Embassy in Belarus portrayed in a political manner

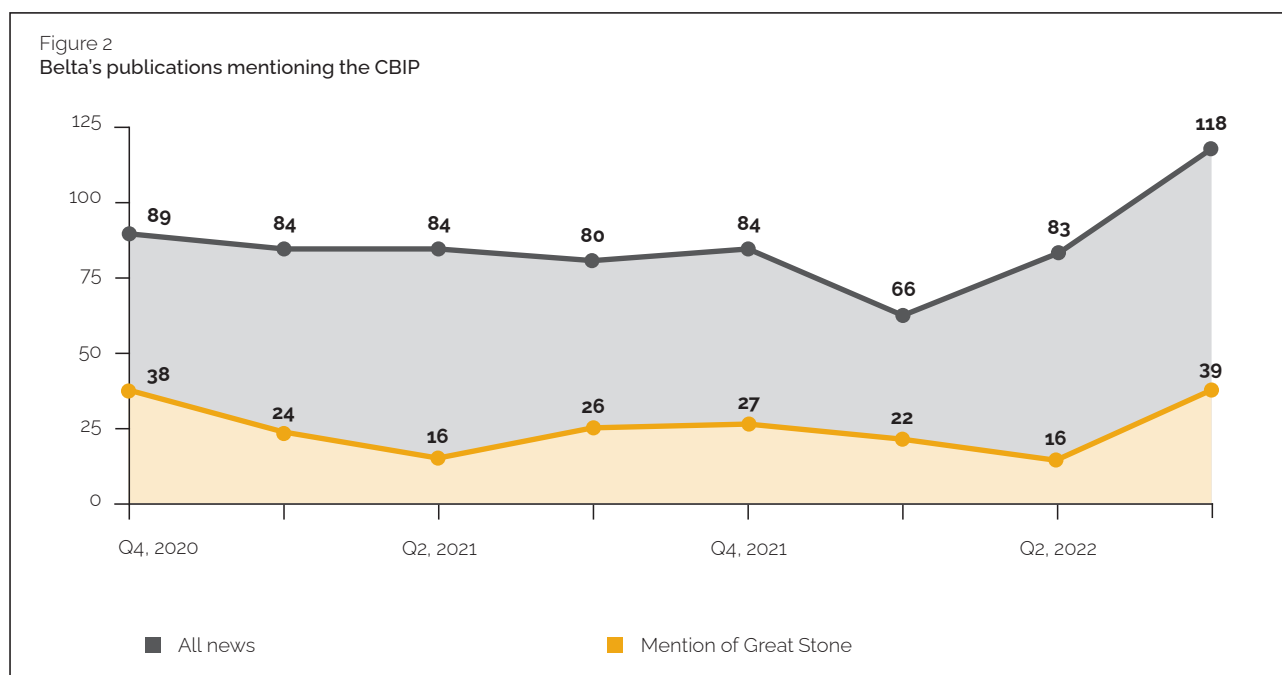
Coverage of significant joint cultural events was often used for the promotion of China's political agenda. For example, in response to a March 2021 photo exhibition

* The statistics disregarded materials devoted to China, but which did not directly relate to relations between China and Belarus or did so only indirectly.

** All news was rated by tone (positive, neutral or negative) and categorized by sector: politics, economics, humanitarian issues, the environment, and military and technological cooperation. The mentions of the CBIP were also taken into account regardless of whether the publication was primarily dedicated to the CBIP.

*** Includes publications about sports competitions, cultural and educational events, humanitarian aid, university cooperation, or similar.

**** Examples of similar news headlines from Belta: "A residential building collapsed in China — 5 people died under the rubble," "Gas leak at a nuclear power plant in China," "Gas exploded in a food market in China, 11 dead," "At least 18 people injured in an earthquake in western China," "An explosion occurred at a repair plant in China," "A sandstorm hit Beijing," "In China, man attacks kindergarten students with a knife," "In China, a cargo ship collided with an oil tanker."



in Minsk, 'Striving for a Better Life — China's Achievements in the Fight against Poverty', an article by Belta comprised a collection of lengthy quotes from the Chinese Ambassador on the social and economic achievements of the Chinese Communist Party⁷². This material was published in the Politics section of Belta's website. In general, the events organized by the Chinese side are covered in great detail. For example, its publication about a photo exhibition called "Centenary of the Communist Party of China" discussed the stages of China's development and described each of the four expositions in detail.

The Chinese Embassy as an important newsmaker actively promoting its political agenda

Between November 2020 and October 2022, Belta published eleven interviews with Chinese Ambassador Xie Xiaoyong. Only three of the interviews were devoted to relations between China and Belarus. The rest outlined China's domestic and foreign policy agenda (such as changes in the electoral system of Hong Kong, Xi Jinping's speech on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of China's membership in the UN, the 6th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping's initiative on global development, the 73rd anniversary formation of People's Republic of China) and either do not discuss Chinese-Belarusian relations at all, or only do so in passing.

In addition to publishing interviews with Chinese diplomats, Belta paid special attention to Chinese embassy statements on certain subjects. For example, a long story (about 500 words) refuting claims that Chinese coronavirus vaccines

lacked effectiveness was based entirely on a comment from the Chinese embassy and contained lengthy quotes from a diplomatic message⁷³.

Thus, Belta failed to provide the audience with an objective analysis of bilateral relations, but transmitted exclusively positive (or at most neutral) news about Sino-Belarusian relations and served as a relay of China's political agenda.

The Embassy of Belarus and propagandists are among the important newsmakers

In addition to the above-mentioned CBIP and the Chinese embassy, the Belarusian embassy and Belarusian and Russian propagandists were important newsmakers in respect of Belarusian-Chinese relations for Belta. The Belarusian diplomatic department in China provides the agency with news about the Ambassador's meetings with representatives of large Chinese companies (for example, Sinotrans Limited) and business trips around the country (for example, to the city of Chongqing). As evidenced by the news stories, the priority sector for the Belarusian side at such meetings is logistics — increasing the scope of rail container transit from China to Europe and back through the territory of Belarus.

Belta regularly shared the opinions of propagandists regarding Belarus and China, expressed in various state media. For example, according to the opinion of Elena Ponomareva (Russia), whom Belta cited with reference to the ONT TV channel, "Belarus, Russia, China are outposts of sovereignty in the modern world," resisting the pressure of the Western "deep state."⁷⁴

Table 2.
The interviews of the Chinese Ambassador published by Belta

Date of the interview	Title	Key points, illustrative quotes
November 30, 2020	"China opposes outside interference in the internal affairs of Belarus"	Two priority areas in bilateral cooperation are deepening cooperation in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (Great Stone is the "model project") and expanding trade and economic ties. Fruitful cooperation in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic: <i>"In troubled times the Chinese and Belarusian nations have shown themselves true friends."</i>
February 8, 2021	"Taking the Bull by the Horns — Chinese Ambassador's Advice on How to Celebrate the Chinese New Year"	Only a fifth of the long interview (about 500 words out of 2,500) deals with bilateral relations and contains "expected" optimistic assessments: cooperation in the fight against coronavirus <i>"fully reflects the high level and special nature of relations between the two countries"</i> ; the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative is <i>"steadily advancing"</i> ; trade and economic cooperation is developing <i>"quite actively"</i> .
March 17, 2021	"Each country has the right to make decisions about its own internal affairs"	This interview is entirely devoted to Beijing's position on the functioning of Hong Kong and changes in the local electoral system aimed at preventing an attempted "color revolution" with the support of "certain external forces."
August 4, 2021	"Belarus and China: the growth of business cooperation and interaction in the production of coronavirus medication"	<i>"Political mutual trust is getting deeper every day, and business cooperation is rising to a new level."</i> <i>"Powerful growth"</i> of mutual trade. The industrial park <i>"maintained a good development momentum in the face of the epidemic."</i> The development of Chinese traditional medicine at Great Stone as a great achievement.
November 1, 2021	"Half a century since China's return to the UN: what this means for China, Belarus, and the world"	This interview is dedicated to the speech of Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of PRC's membership in the UN and China's achievements: <i>"A moderately prosperous society has been built in the state and a great new path has begun to comprehensively build a socialist modernized state."</i> Only a small part of the interview concerns the interaction between China and Belarus within the UN framework: <i>"China and Belarus will provide strong support to each other on issues related to the key interests and important concerns of the two countries."</i>
November 30, 2021	"Chinese Ambassador to Belarus: democracy is not Coca-Cola where one taste fits all"	Interview in the context of the 6th Plenum of the CPC Central Committee held in China, about the achievements of the country and the party. A small fragment of the publication promotes a statement on the mutual support of Belarus and China in the international arena.
January 20, 2022	"The strength of the tiger and friendship as unbending as iron. Ambassador on the 30-year path of cooperation between Belarus and China"	This interview is dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries: <i>"China and Belarus can be called truly close political and mutually beneficial trade and economic partners, confidently supporting each other in difficult epidemiological conditions, friends in the humanitarian sphere."</i> Great Stone is <i>"a key project of mutual interest actively promoted by the heads of the two states."</i> Plans to produce Chinese traditional medicines at Great Stone for treating the coronavirus. Joint fight against the pandemic as a reflection of the high level of relations.
April 11, 2022	"Chinese Ambassador on the Ukrainian issue: our mentality is not about contemplating the fire and pouring oil into it"	Beijing's position on the Russian-Ukrainian war (in an interview, the expressions "the Ukrainian issue" and "the Ukrainian crisis" are used to refer to the war): <i>"Dialog and negotiations are the only way out of the crisis; we call for a ceasefire and support direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine."</i> Rejection of Western sanctions: <i>"We oppose unilateral sanctions that violate international law."</i>
May 27, 2022	"China and Belarus will play strong music of the era of joint development"	This interview focuses on Beijing's vision of international development and the global development initiative proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping. It only indirectly concerns Chinese-Belarusian relations and contains a forecast that the two countries will continue fruitfully interacting in the international arena.
September 22, 2022	"On the summit meeting in Samarkand, the rise of the Shanghai spirit and the new status of Belarus"	An interview dedicated to the SCO summit in Samarkand on September 15-16, 2022. Priority coverage is given to Beijing's vision of the SCO and the results of Xi Jinping's visit to the summit. In addition, it emphasizes the importance of Chinese-Belarusian relations, the <i>"historic negotiations"</i> between Lukashenko and Xi Jinping. <i>"Certainly, the most important outcome of the meeting was the decision of the heads of the two states to bring bilateral relations to the level of an all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership; this is a historic breakthrough."</i>
September 29, 2022	"Making progress without losing stability. China is accelerating the formation of a new development architecture"	Interview on China's socio-economic achievements and expectations from the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on the occasion of the 73rd anniversary of the founding of the PRC.

3.2. KEY MESSAGES

In Belta's coverage of Belarus-China relations between 2020 and 2022, the following messages prevailed.

Mutual assistance in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic confirmed the strong friendship between the two countries

Most materials on this topic were published in the first half of 2021, when the process of vaccinating the population with Chinese vaccines began in Belarus. When accepting Chinese humanitarian aid, Belarusian officials noted the "exemplary cooperation" between the two countries in the fight against the coronavirus, while Beijing called it a "symbol of friendly relations" between the two peoples. The Chinese Ambassador to Belarus called the joint fight against coronavirus "a key area of bilateral cooperation."⁷⁵ It was also reported that the parties were discussing localizing the production of the Chinese vaccine in Belarus, and that it might take place on the premises of the CBIP⁷⁶.

Bilateral relations were continuously strengthening; the beginning of the war did not change the friendly attitude of China toward Belarus

In official rhetoric, Chinese terminology is often used to describe the relations. This peaked in the signing of the joint declaration in September 2022. "Belarus is an iron brother, a reliable friend and strategic partner of China. Despite geopolitical pressure from the collective West, Minsk and Beijing are consistently developing cooperation in a wide range of areas on an equal and mutually beneficial basis,"⁷⁷ said Natalya Kachanava, head of the upper house of the Belarusian parliament in April 2022.

The negative consequences of the war and Western sanctions for economic cooperation are largely ignored and "camouflaged" by political statements about a high level of cooperation. Moreover, officials tend to refute reports of a worsening situation. As the Ambassador of Belarus to China Yury Sianko said, "My personal conviction is that all those fakes about China or the fact that it changed its attitude to Russia, to Belarus, are unfounded."⁷⁸

China as an important ally and one of the key security guarantors of Belarus alongside Russia

This narrative became more expressive after the start of the large-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine. One comment carried in state media said that "to ensure security, [Belarus] needs to strengthen its ties to Russia and

China, solidifying the security sector of Eurasia."⁷⁸ According to a statement from Aliaksandr Valfovich, State Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus, China and Belarus are successfully implementing their "interaction in the field of defense and security."⁸⁰

It is possible that this message in the official rhetoric intensified not only due to the aggravation of relations with the West, but also because of Minsk's fears about Moscow's possible encroachments on Belarusian statehood. At least some high-ranking Belarusian officials may view China as a guarantor of security in a broader sense than what is publicly voiced in official statements.

One of the most important areas where China was viewed as an important contributor to security is the information sector, particularly the task of introducing more rigid control over the internet. One of Belta's publications presented China as the only country in the world to boast of a "sovereign internet," suggesting that Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO countries need to consider "creating their own internet."⁸¹

Belarus and China have jointly resisted Western provocations and aggression. Belarus mitigates the effect of Western sanctions through cooperation with China

The materials of Belta and other state outlets often broadcast the expectations of the Belarusian side regarding increased exports of their products to China, and the replacement of Western capital markets and technologies with Chinese ones. "This is a matter of economic sovereignty. The work is carried out in two main directions. The first is the search for alternative suppliers. Import applications have been formed and sent to China as well,"⁸² said Deputy Prime Minister Mikalai Snapkou in May 2022.

In mid-2021, Prime Minister Raman Halouchanka announced plans to abandon Western technologies in favor of Chinese and Russian ones: "Of course, we will be forced to move away from Western goods, from Western technologies [...] According to preliminary estimates, China alone can replace 90% European and American tech. In addition, there are Russian technologies, which are developing quite rapidly."⁸³

Although Beijing sent repeated signals after 2020 about a slowdown, or even a suspension, in certain areas of economic and investment cooperation (see Section 2), Minsk's expectations found public support from representatives of China. For instance, former adviser to the Chinese embassy in Belarus, Wang Xianju, said in March 2022: "China is against sanctions, for starters. Secondly, China is not afraid of sanctions. I think that in this situation we will continue cooperation with Belarus in the economy, trade, financial and other areas."⁸⁴

Figure 3
Topics of publications in the period before the Russian military aggression (October 2020 – February 24, 2022) and after the start of the war (February 25 – September 30, 2022)

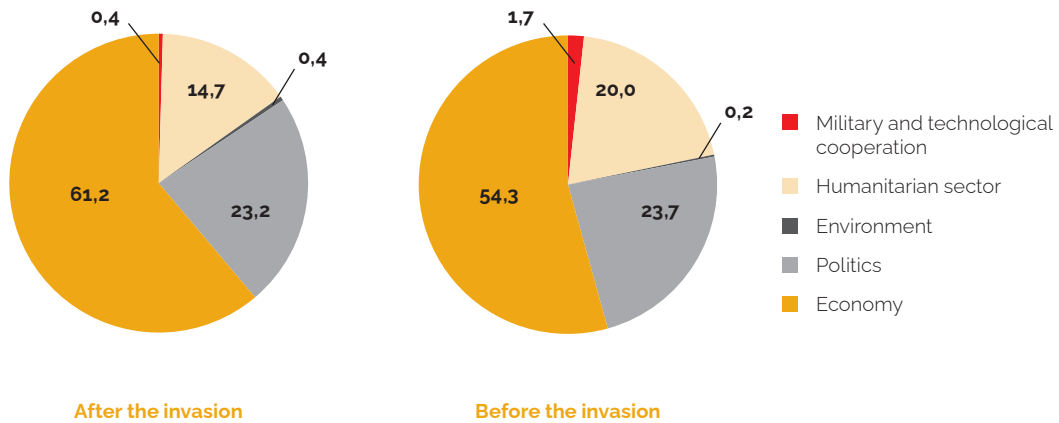
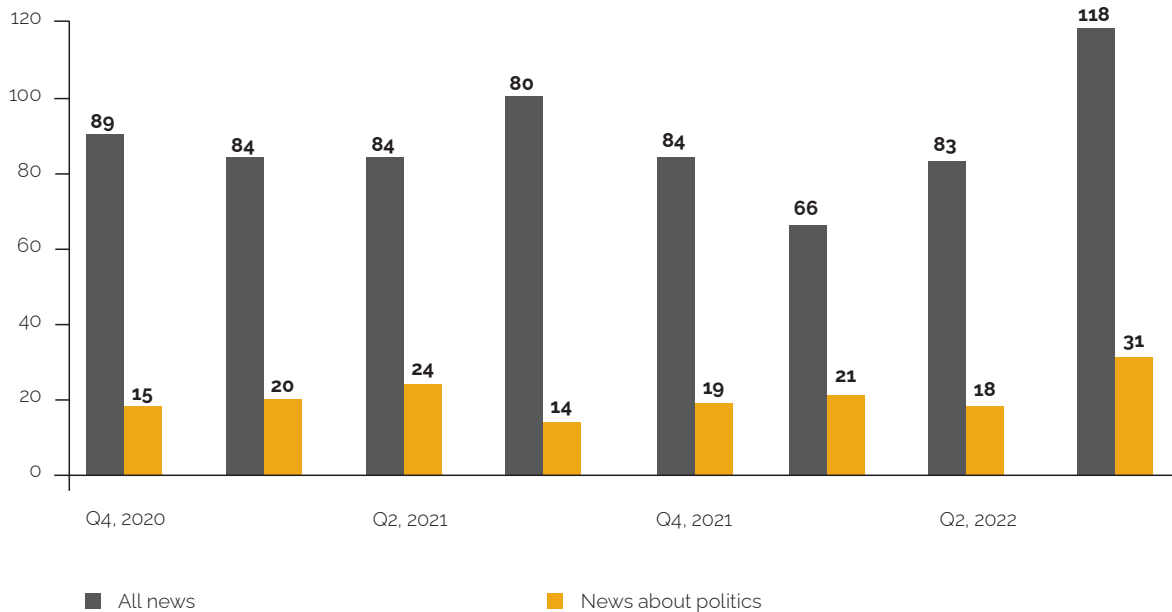


Figure 4
Publications on political topics



The Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park depicted as a promising project, the success of which is due to the initiative of the two heads of state

Officials in both countries often use a variety of positive adjectives to describe the CBIP, which received regular broadcast attention from state outlets, including the Bel-ta agency. For instance, according to the Chinese Ambassador to Belarus, Great Stone demonstrates "the true meaning of mutually beneficial cooperation" and is "a landmark and exemplary project of cooperation between the

two countries within the Belt and Road Initiative."⁸⁵ Both sides also separately note that the development of the CBIP and its success can be attributed personally to Lukashenka and Xi Jinping.

* For reference: in Q4 of 2020, the CBIP was mentioned in 42% of news stories on the topic of cooperation between Belarus and China.

3.3. MEDIA COVERAGE FOLLOWING FEBRUARY 24, 2022

As was the case before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so the economic and political sectors dominated coverage of relations between Belarus and China after February 24. Publications on military and technical cooperation, or on the environment, continued to be few in comparison. There were some changes. First, the start of the war saw the share of economic news increase by almost 7 percentage points, while the number of news items about humanitarian matters decreased (almost 15% of all publications, compared with 20% before the war). Second, the share of publications on the topic of military and technological cooperation slightly increased after the war (from 0.4% to 1.7%).

In March–September 2022, the share of materials mentioning Great Stone remained at the 2021 level (about 28% of the total number of news dedicated to Belarus–China relations)* The narrative about the great importance and bright prospects of the CBIP also remained unchanged, but the number of materials containing a description of specific successes in the development of the CBIP had decreased. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a significant number of stories about the CBIP focused on the activity

of new resident companies, be they in the sector of production of electronic boards, special gas equipment, interactive ATMs and pharmacy terminals or electric scooters. After Russia's invasion, Belta mainly continued to publish evaluative official statements about the good prospects of the CBIP; however, the volume of factual information about the development of the industrial park decreased.

As for political news, their number increased significantly in September 2022, but this was not related to the Russian-Ukrainian war. The main reason was the meeting between Lukashenka and Xi Jinping in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) on September 15 as part of an SCO summit, which Belta described as “historic.”

In summary, even in the war period, marked by an even greater stagnation of economic and investment cooperation between Belarus and China, Belta maintained a focus on the positive aspects of interaction. Only a more detailed analysis of media content reveals minor changes in the coverage of bilateral cooperation, which do not reflect the objective difficulties in the economic relations between Minsk and Beijing — difficulties which worsened after Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine.

CONCLUSIONS

China has reduced credit and investment cooperation with Belarus in recent years, though both sides avoid publicly discussing negative events and trends in bilateral interactions

The three crisis phenomena in the period under review — the coronavirus pandemic, the political crisis in Belarus, and the Russian-Ukrainian war — had a negative impact on the economic interaction between the two countries, especially on investment cooperation. The acute political conflict between Minsk and the European Union, and the Western sanctions, especially the ones imposed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, called into question the benefits of Belarus's transit role and stoked Beijing's fears about the prospects for economic relations. The positive trade trend for Belarus in recent years — the growth of exports of Belarusian food and woodworking products to China — cannot seriously change the situation given the limited export of high value-added goods and a large negative trade balance for Minsk.

Minsk and Beijing continued active political cooperation, despite the stagnation of economic and investment cooperation, and China will maintain a political presence in Belarus

China plans to maintain and increase its political presence in Belarus, but it is unlikely to reinvigorate the stagnant investment cooperation until the acute political crisis in Minsk's relations with Western countries is resolved, which largely depends on the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Minsk and Beijing retain similar positions on ideological matters, especially in respect of human rights and freedoms, and provide mutual support to each other in international forums. While official Chinese representatives repeatedly criticized the policy of Western countries toward Belarus in 2020–2022, Minsk continued to support Beijing's agenda, particularly on the issues of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the origin of the coronavirus.

There is a widening gap between Minsk's expectations about the scale of economic benefits from cooperation with China and the reality

Minsk's expectations for the transformation of positive political relations into tangible financial benefits remain overstated.

Moreover, the gap between expectations and reality, which was typical in Belarusian perspectives on Chinese cooperation even before 2020, has only increased since then.

Minsk's rhetoric and official documents regarding bilateral relations depict China, along with Russia, as a key strategic partner able to replace the closed Western commodity and financial markets and technologies. In particular, Directive No. 9, adopted in 2021, set unrealistic targets for bilateral trade and investment cooperation for the coming years.

Current (geo)political events have negatively affected the development of the China-Belarus Industrial Park, but it remains a key joint project between the two countries

The stagnation also applies to the key object of bilateral cooperation — the Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park. With Western companies withdrawing from the park and the increased fears of Chinese partners, its administration is reorienting itself toward attracting Belarusian and Russian residents. Despite a gradual formal increase in the number of companies registered in the CBIP, the emergent problem is the technological effectiveness of the residents and, ultimately, the profitability of their projects and the strategic mission of the park.

Official rhetoric and coverage of Belarusian-Chinese relations in the state press reflects the objective state of bilateral cooperation only to a small extent

Based on the authors' analysis of official statements and state news agency Belta's content, while positive trends of the political interaction between Minsk and Beijing are actively covered and discussed, the negative trends and problematic issues of economic and investment interaction are largely ignored. Belta does not provide its audience with an objective analysis of bilateral relations, only broadcasting positive news about them and reflecting the political agenda of Minsk and Beijing.

In the current situation, one of Minsk's priorities is ensuring continued political support from China. Beijing may be considered, at least by some Belarusian officials, as a guarantor of Belarusian statehood and protection against Russian encroachment on Belarus's sovereignty. Public criticism from Minsk about the lack of economic and investment involvement of China is therefore likely to remain a rarity for the foreseeable future.

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RELATIONS BETWEEN BELARUS AND CHINA IN 2020-2022: WHAT LIES BEHIND THE "ALL-WEATHER PARTNERSHIP"



Credit and investment cooperation between Belarus and China has decreased since 2020.



Minsk and Beijing maintain a "strategic silence" with regard to the stagnation in their economic cooperation, while continuing their active political dialogue.



In the state press, the ruling regime's political agenda has completely replaced objective coverage of bilateral relations.