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Rasmus Nilsson

UNCANNY ALLIES

Russia and Belarus on the Edge, 2012–2024

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Introduction

The Topic

The war in Ukraine shows no sign of ending. Now in its eleventh year the conflict has killed many thousands of people with civilians often bearing the brunt of Russian aggression. This has particularly been the case since February 2022, when the Kremlin unleashed its full-scale invasion on its neighbour. Russia's crimes have been assisted by Belarus. The smaller dictatorship along Russia's western borders has kept its own troops out of direct combat yet has been ready to offer its territory and resources to facilitate Russian attacks and to keep alive the possibility, if slight, of a renewed, land-based assault on Kyiv.

We are witnessing the most severe crisis in European security since the Second World War. The continent has frequently seen bloodshed over the last eight decades. Terrorist attacks have sought to disrupt societies, often through indiscriminate attacks and sometimes with the aid of individual governments. However, this is the first instance in Europe in which a country has officially chosen to break the fundamental principle of international law as it was established under the United Nations: that a state cannot engage in warfare without authorisation from the Security Council or due to the need of self-defence because of an imminent threat.

That the aggression has been perpetrated by Russia—a permanent, veto-wielding member of the Security Council—only increases the challenge to European and global order. For more than a decade the Russian regime has fostered militarisation within the country. It has promoted a Manichaean identity, believing in a struggle between absolute good and absolute evil. It has used historical tropes to further the narrative that Russia is under siege and that all true believers must be ready to sacrifice themselves so that the collective can live. In that sense, it is not an exaggeration to state that the regime, wittingly or unwittingly, is now promoting a death cult.

Into this maelstrom Belarus has been drawn. Ever since Aleksandr Lukashenka became president of Belarus in 1994 the

country has been a close ally of Russia. Many analysts would argue that Belarus has been the closest ally. This is certainly what Lukashenka and his Russian counterparts have said. So, when Russia was going to challenge international order, was going to set Europe aflame again, it seemed inevitable that Belarus would follow. Yet is Belarus prepared to do so? And if Lukashenka decides to, or is forced to, stay close to Russia does this benefit the Kremlin or potentially make it more vulnerable?

The Russian leadership of today claims to be the vanguard of a civilisation, not a state. That Russian civilisation of which it speaks is the antithesis of a liberal democratic West. A West with powerful European and American backers which seeks to spread its totalising ideology and hierarchy across the globe. A West which is aggressive, subversive, and—ultimately—decaying. Against that egotistic individualism stands the Russian civilisation, centred on the Russian people but with Belarusians and true Ukrainians as brothers in arms. Ready to fight for a new world order in which traditional values and strong, masculine leadership rule over all.

For those of us who do not believe in the Russian elite and its values, who see the Kremlin and its allies as threatening us and the world, it is time to consider what can be done and what should be done in response. Yet in order to craft such a response we need to understand better the specific aims and motivations of Russia abroad. It is of particular importance to learn why and how Russia engages with allies, with those countries which seem to be fuelled by similar motivations and work towards similar aims. Such a country is Belarus.

The Argument

There are many similarities between Russia and Belarus and those similarities often stretch far back in time. Both countries are autocracies, which today offer almost no political or civic freedoms to their populations. Economic integration has been deep between the countries ever since Soviet days when the Russian and Belorussian Soviet republics were highly important to the Union. Military integration has picked up in recent years but has been pronounced for

many decades if not centuries. And in terms of culture and identity many, and traditionally most, Russians and Belarusians see each other as part of the same community.

Nevertheless, a main point of this book is to show how Russia and Belarus also differ in numerous, important ways. True, they are both autocracies, but whereas the Russian autocrat seeks dominion over amorphous civilisation his Belarusian counterpart stands for statist sovereignty. Economically, they are closely integrated yet with increasingly diverging interests as Russia pulls away from Europe. Both Russia and Belarus are militarised, yet with a very different emphasis on the value of glorious conquest and stalwart defence. And while cultural links remain profound and are likely to last, Belarusian nationalism has become increasingly present in a form which is often incompatible with what Russia has become today.

Whether observers see Russia and Belarus as largely identical or not, there seems broad agreement that affairs in Belarus nowadays are largely controlled from Moscow. Particularly after 2020, when Lukashenka required economic and political assistance from Russia's Vladimir Putin to suppress and then largely suspend widespread popular domestic opposition to his rule. Even before that development, however, the Belarusian economy—indeed, its entire socio-economic system—was highly dependent on Russian help. A dependence which the Russian leadership learnt to very skilfully tie the smaller neighbour into a set of obligations reinforced by the presence of Russian military personnel in Belarus.

Unsurprisingly, war in Ukraine has strengthened Russian resolve to keep Belarus suppressed. Speculations continue about the viability of Belarusian independence, particularly when Lukashenka departs the stage. And yet, as this book will show it is remarkable how vigorously, and often very successfully, the Belarusian strongman has preserved manoeuvrability or reduced the Russian grip. By all accounts Putin and Lukashenka are not fond of each other and looking at their years of interaction it is not difficult to understand why. Their regimes are both fully deserving of condemnation—and yet, sometimes an observer can only laugh at the

brazenness emanating from Minsk or the frustration clearly visible in Moscow.

It seems implicit in the above, and in most accounts of the bilateral relationship, that Belarus is an asset for Russia. Indeed, in many ways that is the case. As I mentioned, use of Belarusian territory and resources have enabled Russia to assault Ukraine. Belarus also offers credibility to Russian threats towards other neighbouring states. Furthermore, Minsk is offering Russia political support in international fora both for the invasion but also for attempts to keep the post-Soviet region close together. And while Belarus is much smaller and less wealthy than Russia it still has industrial assets and natural resources which Russian elites covet.

Yet there is also an argument to be made that Belarus is a threat to Russia—and that is an argument running through the narrative of this book. Gaining significant influence in, or even control over Belarusian territory also means that Russia has more territory to protect. In a wartime situation when Russian resources are stretched this could be a problem. In addition, while public protests have largely been removed from Belarusian public life there remains a widespread current of distaste or even anger directed towards the local leadership and that in Moscow. More insidious, however, is the presence of the uncanny in relations between Russia and Belarus.

The Uncanny

The idea of the uncanny arrives in psychology largely through the efforts of Sigmund Freud. By its German word “*unheimlich*”, which can with some justification be translated as “un-homely”, we see something clearly distinct from the personal and sacredly private sphere of the individual, yet still something in a relationship with that sphere.¹ Later, Jean Lacan builds on Freud’s theory to develop his own understanding of “anxiety”, which plays on the condition within human psychology that sees the individual torn

1 For a deeper engagement with the concept, see also Freud, 2003

between desires to move forward and to move back. Or, perhaps, torn between desires of freedom and of closure.²

Away from psychoanalysis, the uncanny also enters modernity through the arts. Arguably, this happens long before Freud. A straightforward example in literature is that of Mary Shelley's "modern Prometheus", better known as "Frankenstein", engaging with the interface between the possible and the permissible in an age when humanity overcomes what had seemed implacable natural obstacles.³ Much older examples can be found of the uncanny in human productions (are grotesques on churches and in religious imagery there to remind us of what we are not or of what we can become?) yet there is something inherently transgressive in modernity which brings the uncanny into public consciousness.⁴

The uncanny, certainly, had always been present in human interaction if not necessarily been identified as so. Look to anthropologists such as Mary Douglas for the idea of that which is "taboo", by its nature unsuitable for society yet still holding a central role therein.⁵ Or to religious historians such as Mircea Eliade who could view the "shaman" as an actor capable of straddling mutual untouchables, past and present, the material and the spiritual world, in order to assist the ordinary community's contact with that idealised past from which humans had strayed.⁶

Within interwar Europe Eliade had questionable inspirations. It does not take much effort to see links between his thoughts and palingenetic fascism. Still, the idealised state of nature and

2 Apart from going directly to Lacan's seminars on the topic of anxiety, a useful outline of his approach and its relationship with that of Freud can also be gleaned from Diatkine, 2006

3 And, of course, engaging with the interface of a young Mary Shelley between childhood and adulthood, between the premature death of several children and the birth of a celebrated literary monster (whether that monster is Adam, or Victor Frankenstein, or both is debatable). See also the extended quote in the excellent Moore, 2023: 41-42

4 The works of Friedrich Nietzsche would often be found in this landscape, notably viewing nihilism as inherently uncanny. On that, see also Nietzsche, 2017: book 1

5 Apart from Douglas' own works, there is a very clever approach to the interplay between taboo, disgust and morality by Giner-Sorolla and Sabo, 2016

6 For Eliade's thoughts on this, see Eliade, 2024

humanity's potential rebirth into it are central parts of allegedly progressive modernity and the Enlightenment. This is why Jean-Jacques Rousseau's understanding of democracy is, inherently, uncanny.⁷ And it is why the Soviet Union, arguably one of the purest examples of putting (perceived) Enlightenment ideals into practice, could not avoid imparting premodern practices and thinking into the way in which the future was pursued. Be that, say, in the religious worship of Lenin or the fetishization of the personal, non-automatised interpersonal contact.⁸

From that Soviet heritage emerged Russia and Belarus and the identities through which their states are governed today. However, when I in this book refer to the "uncanny" I refer not simply to domestic affairs but to international relations, as well. To the assumption that perceptions and identities fundamentally matter for how states interact.⁹ And to the assumption of social identity theory as transported to the international realm. Implying, therefore, that the interaction between those groups which we call states can be meaningfully analysed at a level beyond that of the individuals ruling or otherwise present in those states.¹⁰

That leads me back to the question of what, I will argue, is "uncanny" about the relationship between Russia and Belarus. Based on the above, I claim that what is uncanny for the subject, be that an individual or a state, is a conceivable alternate state, which is currently unrealised, yet which can be realised without the agency of the subject. This means that when I talk about an uncanny relationship between Russia and Belarus I am talking about a

-
- 7 In its relationship between general will and individual freedom, neither of which—in essence—can tolerate the other yet neither of which can be understood without its counterpart. On this point, I take note of the excellent counterargument by Thompson, 2017: 267, which argues for harmony between communitarianism and individualism in Rousseau's thinking, yet I would disagree that the individuals he describes can be called meaningfully "free."
- 8 In this context, the 1903 creation of the Bolshevik movement with its belief in revolution fundamentally independent from measurable, data-dependent socio-economic development seems to me pivotal. See also Janos, 1996: 3
- 9 Which is common for constructivist thinking in the discipline of International Relations, as discussed in a classic example by Guzzini, 2000
- 10 For a very helpful primer on the link between constructivism and social identity theory, see also Larson, 2012

relationship in which Belarus is viewed in Russia as the same “in essence” yet possessing a free will which can take it in a direction over which Russia does not have control. Now, the instinctive reaction of Russia to that danger is to dominate Belarus as far as possible. However, since Belarus is believed to essentially be the same as Russia the latter cannot put up a defence against anything in the former of which it disapproves. If there is not a clear distinction between subject and object in the Russian-Belarusian relationship there also cannot be a clear hierarchy between them.

This, in turn, points to a fundamental vulnerability in the nature of civilisation as understood within Russian policy thinking. The fact that the “Russian world” as interpreted under Vladimir Putin can be seen as potentially borderless, as arguably reaching into anything which has been deemed “Russian” by the leadership in Moscow, has been named as a threat to other groups everywhere. If anybody and any state can be a target for the Kremlin, then no one can feel safe. Perhaps, but that effect goes the other way, too. If Russia is to be potentially everything, then it is also potentially nothing. A state has a clearly defined structure (which may work more or less well in practice). Its constitution, or equivalent, sets out that structure and, even for those actors in the state who choose not to obey the constitution, it remains as a point of reference. There is no equivalent point of reference for the “Russian World”. And if, say, Putin claims that reverence for the Soviet Union and its victory over Nazi Germany is essential to “Russianness”, then he has a fundamental problem of status when a leader such as Lukashenka manages to commemorate those historic events at a time when Putin himself does not (as happened in 2020). If there is a public belief among those claimed by the “Russian World” that social welfare is a moral imperative, and if the Russian leadership cannot fulfil that imperative for its population as well as the Belarusian leadership can for the population under its daily administration then the Russian leadership risks suffering a fall in status incompatible with its understanding of Self. And if Russian elites outside the Kremlin begin to praise and even take lessons from the Belarusian regime then the masculine power around which Putin has constructed his mask is crumbling.

My claim, therefore, is that Belarus has the potential to be the doppelganger of Russia, and Lukashenka that of Putin. Whether it has achieved that aim is less important than the fact the risk exists, since the existence of that risk imbues the Russo-Belarusian relationship with a fundamental tension that cannot be overcome. Unless, perhaps, if one of the parties is utterly destroyed. However, as we saw in the analogous case of Yevgeny Prigozhin, even his untimely death could not turn attention away from the weakness which his rebellion had already exposed within the fabric of totalising Russianness.

The Method

My research for this book has been focused on the aim of understanding, rather than explaining. That distinction is fundamental to the social sciences and, ultimately, relates to the perceived nature of academic scholarship. It relates to the question of whether analysis of social affairs can, meaningfully, be compared to that of natural sciences.¹¹ When seeking to explain a social relation, such as that between states, a scholar begins deductively from theories the validity of which is then tested against empirical evidence. Conversely, when seeking to understand a social relation, the focus is on inductively beginning from the empirical material at hand to formulate analytical categories and conclusions.¹²

I seek to understand Russian relations with Belarus largely through textual analysis. The approach is discourse analysis, meaning that my research will be interpretative in nature. In practice, the individual messages and, occasionally, specific phrasings of texts, be those written or spoken will be analysed within the context of a

11 A foundational work on the differences between explanation and understanding, particularly in relation to international affairs, remains Hollis and Smith, 1990

12 While my analysis in this book does have constructivist assumptions (as noted above) those are not theories in the sense discussed here as they do not present predictions about cause and effect. In that sense the premises of this book align with the criticism of Alexander Wendt's positivism as presented by Kratochwil, 2000

broader political frame.¹³ That context consists of material developments between the two countries. It also, however, considers global developments and, conversely, developments within each individual country. While the main focus here is on state behaviour that behaviour cannot be meaningfully understood without periodic involvement of domestic and wider international contexts.¹⁴

I have therefore consulted a wide array of secondary and primary texts. The first two main chapters are mostly based on secondary sources. Since an important function of these chapters is to provide support for what follows I have often built my findings here on existing scholarship, albeit reinterpreting and combining anew such prior analysis. The latter two chapters engage in-depth with the period between 2012 and 2024 and are therefore largely based on primary sources, chosen from a systematic search through the period covered of Russian and Belarusian nationwide media, governmental statements and the like as well as primary sources from other countries on a few occasions. Employing resources such as East View I searched Russian and Belarusian sources for relevant material, then sifting through the material found to include specific texts relevant for my topic and argument. Secondary research was here used for context and to assist efforts to ensure that no relevant texts or topics were omitted.

As I assembled and engaged with the sources used for the book I took inspiration from the approach of Ted Hopf. As outlined by Hopf, the aim was to categorise and, where this was deemed appropriate, re-categorise primary and secondary sources as my study progressed. Ultimately seeking to understand Russian and Belarusian identities as these developed separately and through constitutive interaction, my work aimed to define and distinguish tendencies within such identities only as the study progressed and always with the acceptance that such definitions and distinctions remained open to the interpretation, based on the sources used, of myself and of others.¹⁵

13 For textual analysis, see also Halperin and Heath, 2017: chapter 14

14 On levels of analysis in international relations, see also the engaging Temby, 2015

15 For the outline of Hopf's approach, see also Hopf, 2002: 23-38

To stress, such an approach does leave my findings open to challenge by those who either interpret the sources, which I used, in a different way, or decide that sources, which I left out, were relevant and necessary for the analysis at hand. The claim which I make to the validity of my findings, however, is based on the transparency with which I consult my sources and their meaning. That, I believe, is essential not only for interpretivist scholarship as such but also in an age where the impact of Artificial Intelligence on scholarship may be increasingly felt. To put it bluntly, when you, the reader, pay for this book with your money and your time you are not paying for access to one, unassailable truth about the topics at hand. You are paying to see into my mind as I grapple systematically with those topics. If you disagree with my findings, you will know the basis on which I made them and can challenge them accordingly. That, I would argue, brings an honesty and a meaning-central to the scholarly ethos—which texts written with input from Artificial Intelligence can never match.¹⁶

The Additional Literature

Beyond the works referenced in this book, the interested reader has a wide choice of English-language literature. Above, I have shown brief examples from existing scholarship on the uncanny and on social identity theory. In addition to works quoted there a reader interested further in topics of the uncanny might find interest in the chapters of *The Monster Theory Reader*, which does a fine job of showing the impact of the uncanny on social and cultural production through time.¹⁷ Otherwise, anyone seeking to get “under the skin” of the uncanny would be well advised to consult literary giants such as Mary Shelley,¹⁸ Edgar Allan Poe,¹⁹ M.R. James,²⁰ Bram

16 Just as Artificial Intelligence cannot see the meaning in that eternal moment of Antonius Block and his strawberries with milk. For an excellent analysis of what Artificial Intelligence is, and is not, see Alang, 2024

17 On that work, see *The Monster*, 2020

18 Shelley, 2021

19 Poe, 2004

20 James, 2013

Stoker²¹ or, indeed, a plethora of horror fiction from across the world.²² As for social identity theory, Deborah Larson's above-mentioned chapter is a fine starting point. However, for an example of such theory linked to Russia the reader could also find much of use in Gulnaz Sharafutdinova's recent work²³ and, for a more international angle, Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko's investigation of the Russo-Chinese relationship.²⁴

Academic scholarship on Russia is enormous in quantity. As my book engages with questions of Russian identity—and presents historical background to understand the use and relevance of certain tropes used by elite actors today—a reader seeking to know more may consult Geoffrey Hosking's monograph on Russian history, still central of the field.²⁵ On the development of Russian identity, particularly under conditions of modernity, Vera Tolz offers a helpful guide.²⁶ A highly approachable comparative study of the Russian Empire is offered by Dominic Lieven,²⁷ while Nancy Kollmann specifically covers the empire's construction.²⁸ For the Soviet Union, an author who places that period in useful historical context is Robert Service.²⁹ Anyone seeking to understand the motives of the early Bolshevik elites could read Yuri Slezkine's epochal narrative.³⁰ And to understand where the Soviet Union headed, maybe consult Ronald Suny, who is also strong on how Soviet republics transformed into post-Soviet entities.³¹

In terms of Russian foreign policy, the English language work which still offers the broadest coverage is the overview produced by Robert Donaldson and Vidya Nadkarni.³² There are also some useful insights about Russian foreign policy thinking to be gleaned

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- 21 Stoker, 2021
 - 22 A starting point may be *Horror*, 2012
 - 23 Sharafutdinova, 2020
 - 24 Larson and Shevchenko, 2019
 - 25 Hosking, 2012
 - 26 Tolz, 2001
 - 27 Lieven, 2000
 - 28 Kollmann, 2017
 - 29 Service, 2020
 - 30 Slezkine, 2017
 - 31 Suny, 2010
 - 32 Donaldson and Nadkarni, 2023

from the Routledge handbook on Russian international relations studies.³³ When it comes to Russian engagement with the post-Soviet region, the authors used in this book could well be complemented by those such as Johannes Socher³⁴ and Moritz Pieper,³⁵ as well as Kevork Oskanian and his unusual but quite thought-provoking conceptualisation of Russia's relationship to its surroundings.³⁶

Belarus has increasingly become the focus of foreign academic attention in recent years. Apart from sources used in this book, a relatively new volume edited by Elena Korosteleva, Irina Petrova and Anastasiia Kudlenko offers fresh, varied perspectives.³⁷ Going back a few years, David Marples's work on Belarus and memory politics surrounding the Second World War remains relevant.³⁸ For Marples, it may also be worth the reader consulting his memoir on working with Belarus and Ukraine, which is a breezy, informative read.³⁹ As for Russian-Belarusian relations, such have mostly been covered by individual articles, although some important monographs by authors like Margarita Balmaceda are used in my work. For the reader who wants to understand the background of the more recent developments in the relationship, which I cover here, it might pay off to look at works by Ruth Deyermond⁴⁰ or by Alex Danilovich.⁴¹

The Structure

Apart from this introduction and the conclusion the book consists of four main chapters. These chapters are chronologically arranged. Chapter 1 takes the story of Russian-Belarusian relations, or relations between those territories part of Russia and Belarus today,

33 The Routledge, 2023

34 Socher, 2021

35 Pieper, 2021

36 Oskanian, 2021

37 Belarus, 2023a

38 Marples, 2014

39 Marples, 2020

40 Deyermond, 2007

41 Danilovich, 2006

from Medieval Kyivan Rus to the end of the Soviet Union. This background offered by the first part of this chapter shows how Russia developed relationships along its western borders with people living in modern-day Belarus but also in Poland. In fact, one significant take-away from this chapter is the role that Poland has historically played for Russia, particularly in and around the area where Belarus today can be found. Then, when the chapter moves to the Soviet era the reader can witness the development of a socialist Belarusian polity created partly by Russia-based Bolsheviks but also by local actors and developments which at times placed the interests and identities of Belarusian lands in conflict with those of the Soviet centre.

In chapter 2, the book then moves to the post-Soviet era as this developed until 2011. This is the chapter in which we see the arrival of Lukashenka as Belarusian president and the gradual rebuilding of Russia as a consistently significant foreign policy actor in the post-Soviet space and beyond. Whereas chapter 1 showed underlying themes on which contemporary Russian-Belarusian relations are built, this chapter very much brings the underlying importance of specific actors to the fore. In addition, there is an attempt in this chapter to engage with the question of why and how the potential for collaboration, even synchronicity between Russia and Belarus was often scuppered by domestic developments in the countries and diverging interests of the elites involved. In chapter 2 a subplot is also linked to the question of Western influence, or lack thereof, on the trajectory of Russia and Belarus and their international engagements. Particularly as we get to the latter part of Putin's presidency, and the interregnum under Dmitry Medvedev the question begins to be asked whether the West should have handled the two countries differently.

Chapters 3 and 4 then engage in-depth with the period, which is under particular scrutiny in this book. Here, the analysis gets quite detailed as it investigates how the Russo-Belarusian relationship moved through some of the most turbulent and violent years of modern European history. In chapter 3 we meet a Russia in a hurry. Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 begins the chapter and sees the Russian leader offer the West and the world a

challenge from an assertive Russia. Since such assertion for Putin also involves sped-up integration in the post-Soviet space, Lukashenka is wary of how his power and Belarusian sovereignty may be undermined. At the same time, however, chapter 3 demonstrates the Belarusian regime's manoeuvrability in face of Russian pressure with Lukashenka and his supporters showing aptitude for the receipt of benefits from Russia often without offering much in return. However, as the chapter progresses and as Russian foreign relations grow tense on the background of the invasion of Ukraine, Belarus appears to become increasingly constrained.

That development is even more evident after 2020 which is the year in which chapter 4 begins. This is the year during which Lukashenka faces widespread domestic protest following his presidential re-election and mishandling of the Covid-crisis. To survive, the Belarusian leader—with few other options for political survival—looks to Russia for help. Such help arrives, in economic and political terms and with a promise of military aid if need be. Locked in by Russia's influence in this way the Belarusian elite has little opportunity for deviation from Russia in 2022 when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine begins. Lukashenka's position as an accessory to the war is placed in even starker relief by the outspoken anti-war messages broadcast by his detractors, mostly from exile. However, chapter 4 also demonstrates how the Belarusian regime is keenly aware of broader public dissatisfaction in the country with the war in Ukraine and how the regime therefore frequently speaks for peace, albeit with little detail added. In mid-2024, when the narrative ends, Russia and Belarus remain aligned, yet it is clear that such alignment is based on immediate interest rather than deep-seated affinity between the regimes. The question of whether societies of Russia and Belarus still feel such affinity for each other is uncertain at time of writing.