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BELARUS'S ASYMMETRIC RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA: THE CASE OF STRATEGIC HEDGING?

Yauheni Preiherman

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ABSTRACT

Belarus is a country with a commonly misunderstood foreign policy, which cannot be grasped by the classic bandwagoning-balancing dichotomy. The paper argues that under the conditions of deeply embedded geostrategic asymmetries and with a view to bypassing structural restrictions of its foreign policy, Belarus pursues strategic hedging, in particular in its relations with Russia.

Keywords: Belarus' foreign policy; Belarus-Russia relations; small state; strategic hedging

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About the author

Yauheni Preiherman is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick. His research interests include: small states in international relations, EU's and Russia's policies and competing region-building projects in the shared neighbourhood. His doctoral thesis focuses on the foreign policy strategies of Belarus and Armenia.

Contact: y.preiherman@warwick.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

Belarus is a country with a foreign policy widely misunderstood by external actors, both in the West and in the East. A quarter century after it gained national sovereignty, Minsk is still struggling with shaping its own foreign policy narrative and getting it across to partners around the world. Normally, external actors interpret Belarus's foreign policy actions either through the lenses of their own narratives or by applying dichotomous academic concepts, such as band-wagoning and balancing. However, these concepts and others' narratives are mostly exogenous to the thinking inside the Belarusian government. They only distort the understanding of the rationale, objectives, possibilities, and limitations on the ground and, thus, further complicate it for Belarus to pursue strategic goals and national interests in international relations.

Besides being a problem and challenge for Minsk, this established misunderstanding inhibits external actors' ability to interpret Belarus's behaviour in foreign affairs and correctly identify the limits of the possible in dealing with Belarus. Against the backdrop of the present-day geopolitical tensions in and around Eastern Europe, the problem looks particularly relevant.

Officially, Belarus has always declared multi-vector foreign policy as its conceptual cornerstone (like the majority of other post-Soviet states). However, in reality the country finds itself amid tough geostrategic asymmetries that turn the idea of a balanced multi-vector policy into a figure of speech rather than a practical strategy. Its heavy multi-level dependence on Russia pre-programmes and structurally restricts its manoeuvring space. However, even a shallow observation of Belarus's foreign policy behaviour suggests that Minsk does not restrict itself to what conventional theoretical approaches would expect.

This paper argues that under the conditions of deeply embedded geostrategic asymmetries and with a view to bypassing structural restrictions of its foreign policy, Belarus pursues strategic hedging. In particular, Minsk chooses to hedge in order to minimise its political and economic risks in relations with Russia, shape Moscow's options and decisions, and broaden its strategic manoeuvrability (which, as Dong (2015) argues, are typical objectives of a hedging state in international relations). In this, Belarus's thinking and decision-making is structured by the logic of a small state in international relations.

In what follows, the paper first conceptualises the small state in international relations. It then discusses conventional ideas about small states' foreign policy

behaviour and looks separately at strategic hedging as a distinctive strategic option in foreign policy. The final section examines Belarus's policy towards Russia, primarily in the context of the Ukraine crisis.

SMALL STATE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The starting point of the discussion about the small state in International Relations is its definition and conceptual relation to other types of states. Most often, IR theory operates three relative concepts to deal with states' size and influence – great, middle and small powers/states. The literature has no universally accepted definition of a small state. Moreover, the line between small and medium states is often blurred and depends on the context. In certain contexts, as Baehr observed (1975: 466), even the otherwise explicit dichotomy between a small and a large state does not look sharp, for example, when they both face a global hegemonic superpower.

As most of the literature emerged during the Cold War and in the context of systemic confrontation between hegemonic superpowers, it is not surprising that security-based definitions of small states were used widely. For example, according to Rothstein (1968: 29):

'A Small Power is a state which recognises that it can not obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities, and that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states, institutions, processes, or developments to do so; the Small Power's belief in its inability to rely on its own means must also be recognised by the other states involved in international politics'.

However, this and similar definitions fail to pass the 'sharpness test' as they need additional explanations attuned to every case under consideration. Therefore, some scholars prefer quantifiable measurements of state smallness. For example, Prasad (2009: 44) names four key indicators: population size, GDP, land area, and level of trade. Vital (1967: 8–9) was among the first to suggest 'a frankly subjective, if not arbitrary' quantitative threshold for countries to be categorised as small: a population of up to 10–15 million in economically developed countries and 20–30 million in economically non-advanced countries.

From a security standpoint, material power capabilities reveal a state's size more than anything else. That is why, besides such proxies as GDP and population numbers, the level of military expenditures and other military indicators are often taken into account (Wivel et al. 2014: 6).

Thus, the core question here is whether small states should be 'categorised along geographic, demographic or economic lines', or whether institutions, resources, and power hold the key' (Smith et al., 2005). In any way, as Baldacchino (2009: 26) points out, small states are always contrasted with big states:

'[...] small states are assumed to be price takers in a largely inhospitable global market, while big states are deemed more likely to be price makers. Small states are deemed to be more vulnerable to such external shocks as invasions, externally directed coups and mercenary attacks, unlike larger states'.

Descriptively, most writers agree on the overall behavioural trait of small states in IR: they naturally tend to adapt to the external world, rather than to seek domination over it (Panke, 2010: 15; Wivel et al., 2014: 5–6). It is along these lines that Keohane (1969: 295) suggested focusing on states' systemic role and singled out four types of states based on this criterion: 'system-determining', 'system-influencing', 'system-affecting' and 'system-ineffectual'. The latter would be a category for small states:

'[...] some states [...] can do little to influence the system-wide forces that affect them, except in groups which are so large that each state has minimal influence and which may themselves be dominated by larger powers. For these "system-ineffectual" states foreign policy is adjustment to reality, not rearrangement of it' (Keohane, 1969: 296).

Keohane also emphasised the importance of the psychological and perceptual dimensions. In other words, how the systemic role of states is seen by their own statesmen and diplomats.

A growing number of scholars prefer to operate interpretative understanding of the small state concept. For example, Wivel et al. (2014: 8–9) suggest using it as a reference to highlight 'the characteristic security problems and foreign policy dilemmas of the weaker actors in asymmetric power relationships'. In their

definition, a small state represents 'the weaker part in an asymmetric relationship, which is unable to change the nature or functioning of the relationship on its own' (Wivel et al., 2014: 9). In accordance with this definition, small states 'are stuck with the power configuration and its institutional expression, no matter what their specific relation to it is' (Mouritzen and Wivel, 2005: 4).

In this respect, Belarus corresponds to the definition of a small state. An asymmetric relationship of structural weakness is clearly observable in Belarus's relations with Russia. A similar, even though less explicit, relationship exists between Belarus and the other immediate great power (geopolitical pole) – the European Union, where Minsk lacks any effective leverage.

SMALL STATE'S FOREIGN POLICY BEHAVIOUR: HOW NEOREALISM AND DOMESTIC-LEVEL THEORIES MISS THE MARK ON BELARUS

After several decades of initial debates about the meaning of size in IR, neorealism opened a new chapter in the scholarship about weak powers. Its idea that 'international politics can be thought of as a system with a precisely defined structure' (Waltz, 2008: 74) carried with it serious analytical implications for the research on small states. Neorealism's analytical rigour introduced an ambitious theory to understand small states' behaviour.

Most importantly, neorealists see small states' agency as nonessential. In their worldview, the specific internal characteristics of a small state and the ideas and intentions of its leadership are not central to studying its behaviour in international affairs.

The neorealist scholarship discusses two most typical strategies of small states when they face a strong and potentially threatening external power: *balancing* against the power or *bandwagoning* with it. In the former case, a state aims to counter-check the external threat either by entering into an alliance with another power or group of states (external balancing) or by increasing its own capabilities (internal balancing), for example, in the security realm (Waltz, 2010). When bandwagoning, a small state opts to 'crouch under – rather than contain against – a fast emerging power' (Cheng-Chwee, 2008: 160). In other words, a bandwagoning state chooses to follow a bigger power's line of action and stay in a subordinate role with a view to ensuring security or economic benefits (Schweller,

1994). In Walt's terminology, 'balancing and bandwagoning are the alliance equivalents of deterring and appeasing' (Walt, 1987: 28).

Levy concludes that 'weaker states in the proximity of stronger states do what is necessary to survive, which often involves bandwagoning with the strong instead of balancing against them' (1989: 231). In some cases, bandwagoning can be seen as a way for a small state to acquire 'voluntary or semi-voluntary shelter from a larger state' (Bailes et al., 2014: 26). Thus, neorealists see bandwagoning as a more likely foreign policy outcome of small states. According to Labs (1992: 385), when small states are not pressured into becoming part of a great power conflict they will actually prefer to stay nonaligned, but if forced to take a side they will in all probability bandwagon. Fox (1959: 186–187) suggests that small states generally seek neutrality against the background of conflicts between great powers. However, given their limited resources and capabilities, they will inevitably tilt towards the great power winning in the conflict.

Walt (1987) discussed a more nuanced context by analyzing the origins and logic of interstate alliances. He specifically combined three factors – geographic proximity, offensive power and aggressive intentions – with the factor of a state's aggregate power and, based on that, suggested a balance-of-threat framework instead of the more abstract balance-of-power one. Like other neorealists, Walt sees bandwagoning as the most probable possibility for weak states. He also suggests a set of hypotheses on the conditions that favour the choice of balancing or bandwagoning:

1. *The stronger the state, the greater its tendency to balance. Weak states will balance against other weak states but may bandwagon when threatened by great powers.*
2. *The greater the probability of allied support, the greater the tendency to balance. When adequate allied support is certain, however, the tendency for free-riding and buck-passing increases.*
3. *The more unalterably aggressive a state is perceived to be, the greater the tendency for others to balance against it.*
4. *In wartime, the closer one side is to victory, the greater the tendency for others to bandwagon with it (1987: 33).*

However, while claiming theoretical rigour, neorealism fails to explain specific developments on the ground. Examples most relevant for this paper include the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 – the Georgian government's behaviour before, during

and after the war. Whereas, neorealism would unequivocally expect Georgia to bandwagon with the increasingly assertive and aggressive Russia, in fact, it pursued a form of balancing (both internal and external). Even more revealing Belarus-related examples are refusals by Minsk to side with Russia's policies in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2013 (the annexation of the Crimea and the the Donbas crisis), even after Moscow exerted direct pressure on its ally. In both cases, as the author's interviews with high-ranking Belarusian policy-makers imply, Moscow demanded that Belarus bandwagon with its decisions: to recognise the breakaway entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to officially recognise the Crimea as part of Russia, and to advance military cooperation with Russia in the face of growing geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe (Anonymous interviews, 2015–2016). Moreover, Belarus's reactions to Russian pressure and accompanying foreign policy challenges revealed that the other option expected by neorealism – balancing – was neither activated.

Domestic-level theories argue that small states' agency does matter. These theoretical approaches are often coined as *Innenpolitik* theories because of their stress on internal factors as sources of foreign policies. Depending on a specific approach's focus, they prioritise such factors as national culture and mentality, ideology, political and socio-economic systems, institutional interactions, party competition, and leaders' perceptions, etc. (Gvalia et al., 2013). Thus, to understand a country's foreign policy behaviour, primary attention should be paid, they argue, 'inside the black box' in order to 'examine the preferences and configurations of key domestic actors' (Rose, 1998: 148).

In the words of Cooper and Shaw (2009: 4), 'small states in the twenty-first century cannot be seen simply as structurally weak Lilliputians in a system controlled by the big and strong'. Vulnerability is replaced by the notion of 'resilience' as a dominating characteristic of the small state (Briguglio, 2007: 105). Instead of just 'system-takers', they appear to be fully-fledged actors with a 'range of activity options' that allow 'structural factors to be resisted and reshaped' (Cooper and Shaw, 2009: 4).

However, applying the *Innenpolitik* logic to the Belarusian case, it is also easy to note that it does not provide a satisfactory analytical framework to explain Minsk's foreign policy decisions. While focusing on specific domestic-level factors, these theories fail to account for variances in decisions on the same or similar foreign policy matters, which are particularly typical of Belarus. Minsk's line on the

Crimean case can again serve as an example. It seems impossible to explain the contradictory steps – e.g. voting in Russia’s favour at the UN General Assembly and simultaneously making political statements in support of Ukraine’s position. The same regular contradictions are observed in relation to the Donbas crisis. Also, interviews with Belarusian policy-makers reveal the significance of structural factors in shaping their thinking and decision-making (Anonymous interviews, 2015–2016).

NEOCLASSICAL REALISM AND STRATEGIC HEDGING

Given the various shortcomings of both the domestic-level and neorealist approaches in explaining foreign policy choices of small states, and even in embracing a satisfactory bundle of factors to be accounted for in an analysis of a small state’s external relations, alternative middle-ground theories started to enter the scene. Perhaps, the most ambitious and overwhelming such theoretical alternative, which aims at overcoming the structure-agency problem, is neo-classical realism. Unlike several ‘smaller’ theories (such as, for instance, omnibalancing (David, 1991) or Putnam’s (1988) two-level games theory), it offers a sort of grand approach for understanding international relations. The neoclassical realist framework started to gain academic weight at the end of the 1990s, when Rose (1998) offered the term itself.

Being part of the realist school of thought, neoclassical realists concur with neorealists’ vision of systemic shaping forces in the IR. However, they seek to ‘explain variation in the foreign policies of the state over time or across different states facing similar external constraints’ (Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman, 2009: 17). Thus, neoclassical realism presents an attempt to bridge the structure-agent problem, while staying with the broad realist tradition, where they, *inter alia*, agree that size should be seen as a systemic indicator and that it matters.

Generally, this implies that a country’s foreign policy is not completely and narrowly pre-programmed and that deviations from lines of behaviour and strategies expected by neorealists should not be treated as single exceptions that only re-emphasise the rule. On the contrary, neoclassical realists contend, the rule is that national elites inevitably make differing choices in similar situations because of their own perceptions, ideas, ambitions or even rationally unclear calculations and beliefs. Furthermore, elites and concrete political leaders are not always

entirely free to use the national capabilities as they see right or beneficial, as various country- and situation-specific circumstances dictate all the time certain lines of behaviour (Ibid.). This explains why similar decision situations lead to sometimes contrastingly different policy outcomes and why the lack of strict foreign policy continuity even under the same national leadership is a logically normal phenomenon.

As Chafer and Cumming (2011: 9) point out, neoclassical realism has mainly been used to deal with great/strong powers. However, it does bring a similar level of added analytical value to the research on small states, which is increasingly reflected in the literature. Olsen (2011: 94), for instance, demonstrates this by analysing Scandinavian states' Africa policies. By using neoclassical realism, his study reveals that small states often can find ways to 'punch above their weight'. This can be done by pursuing active coalition policies, taking a proactive stance and initiative in international organisations and occupying specific niches, such as that of a 'norm entrepreneur'. Yet, the study also concludes that 'small states only temporarily can punch above their weight as they ultimately are bound by their relative lack of material and security power' (ibid.).

Being a more pluralistic theoretical framework than neorealism or domestic-level theories, neoclassical realism does not narrow down small states' foreign policy options to just a few strategies. It allows space for a variety of theoretical possibilities and actually requires further conceptualisation in order to fill the overall grand framework with concrete meaning.

In the case of Belarus, one promising concept to be used as an organic part of the neoclassical set of instruments is *strategic hedging*. The concept is borrowed from the world of finance and is relatively new, even though increasingly popular, to the IR literature. Dong defines strategic hedging as:

[...] an insurance strategy that aims at reducing or minimising risks arising from the uncertainties in the system, increasing freedom of manoeuvre, diversifying strategic options, and shaping the preferences of adversaries. It is a portfolio or mixed strategy that consists of both cooperative and competitive strategic instruments ranging from engagement and enmeshment, all the way up to balancing. Any hedging portfolio will be a combination of both cooperative and competitive strategic instruments (2015: 64).

Tessman operationalises a similar definition but contextualises it by making a reference to systemic conditions that should be conducive to a small state opting for a hedging type of foreign policy behaviour. According to him, strategic hedging 'can be identified as part of a coherent long-term plan that is designed to maximise opportunities and minimise threats for a second-tier state in a unipolar system with a leading state that is clearly in relative decline' (Tessman, 2012: 209). As an analytical toolkit, this set of characteristics (a long-term plan, a second-tier state, a leading state in relative decline) can be applied on different scales. On the global scale, it can be a useful approach to almost any power's relations with the system hegemon (perhaps, in the state of relative decline). On a regional or sub-regional level, it can shed light on small states' strategies towards regional powers or it can promote understanding of how countries' relations with the global system leader/leaders shape their regional policies and bilateral constellations with neighbours.

Tessman (2012: 193) also characterises strategic hedging as 'behaviour that is simultaneously less confrontational than traditional balancing, less cooperative than bandwagoning, and more proactive than buck-passing'. Given the somewhat abstract nature of such definitions, how can a state's foreign policy strategy be practically identified as an instance of hedging? Tessman argues that a state's line 'must be intended to develop or expand the means for achieving [identifiable military or public goods objectives]' (ibid.). He presents an identification mechanism which consists of three filters.

UNIVERSE OF STATE BEHAVIOUR



FILTER ONE

Does behaviour improve the competitive ability of the actor should it enter into a militarised dispute with the system leader?

OR

Does behaviour improve the ability of the actor to cope without specific public goods or subsidies that are currently being provided to it by the system leader?



FILTER TWO

Does behaviour avoid direct confrontation of the system leader via the formation of an explicit military alliance aimed at the system leader (external balancing), or via a significant arms build-up that is meant to challenge the system leader (internal balancing)?



FILTER THREE

Is behaviour strategic in the sense that it is developed, funded and coordinated at the highest levels of government? Does it involve an issue area that has been explicitly recognised as a major national security interest by the highest levels of government in the relevant state?



BEHAVIOUR IS AN EXAMPLE OF STRATEGIC HEDGING

Figure 1. A Mechanism for Identifying Strategic Hedging Behaviour (Tessman, 2012: 2010)

One important implication of this mechanism (in particular, Filter 3) is that Tessman invites more systemic and long-term analysis of a country's foreign policy, rather than a focus on separate events and foreign policy choices.

BELARUS'S STRATEGIC HEDGING TOWARDS RUSSIA: THE UKRAINE CRISIS

This paper argues that the foreign policy of Belarus, in particular towards Russia, in contrast to its popular depiction in international media, can be seen as an instance of strategic hedging. Minsk's behaviour increasingly resembles that of small East Asian nations, which, 'unsure of China's intentions and reluctant to choose sides between Beijing and Washington', employ hedging strategies between the two (Dong, 2015:64). A generally similar logic (of course, with multiple differing nuances) is applied to the specific geostrategic asymmetries in which Belarus finds itself.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union and the inception of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991 Belarus has been an avant-garde participant of the numerous projects of post-Soviet integration. One of them – the Union State of Belarus and Russia – saw the evolution from a loose commonwealth to a union state with close cooperation in a number of vital domains, including the military realm.

The very creation of such a union state caused many analysts and diplomats to consider Belarus a 'vassal state' of Russia (Janeliunas, 2007: 155). However, as the last 15 years demonstrated, it could rather be called an 'awkward ally' (Trenin, 2005) than a 'vassal'. On numerous occasions, did the authorities in Minsk demonstrate that there is a difference between signing union treaties and calling Belarus Russia's brotherly nation, on the one hand, and making foreign policy decisions that are not typical of an ally.

Belarus became particularly interesting for analysis when it opted to join the Eurasian integration. Initially, Minsk acceded to the Customs Union (CU) in 2010, then the Single Economic Space (SEE) was launched in 2012 and, finally, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) became reality on 1 January 2015. Importantly, the first two stages – the CU and SES – coincided with a protracted crisis in Belarus's relations with the EU. At the time, this fact led many analysts to conclude that Belarus finally lost its foreign policy manoeuvrability. In the words of Moshes,

The possibility for Minsk to conduct a more balanced foreign policy has been eliminated. Even hypothetical preconditions for this are emerging very slowly, if at all. (2014: 56)

However, Belarus's behaviour during the crisis in Ukraine raises doubts about the validity of this conclusion. The Belarusian authorities demonstrated a great deal of geopolitical manoeuvre and flexibility in their reaction to the tensions between Russia and Ukraine, despite the country's alliance commitments (in the Union State of Belarus and Russia, the EEU and CSTO) and its asymmetrical dependence on Moscow. Belarus's actual behaviour went completely against the conventional expectations for a small state under similar structural conditions, which would be bandwagoning with the stronger neighbour. It also went against Russia's publicly expressed interests. Perhaps, the most obvious example being Minsk's refusal to host a Russian airbase (Preiherman, 2015).

Also, amidst numerous contradictory and blurry position statements of the Belarusian government on the Ukraine crisis three elements of the Belarusian position became salient and actually opposite to that of Russia:

1. Belarus will cooperate with any Ukrainian government;
2. Belarus supports Ukraine's territorial integrity;
3. Any federalisation will create chaos in Ukraine (Preiherman, 2014).

The mixture of what might seem as inconsistent and contradictory decisions/actions in relation to the Ukraine crisis and in the bilateral relations with Russia also reveals the hedging logic, where Minsk pursues two aims simultaneously. On the one hand, it tries to avoid becoming a bandwagoning subject of Russian policies. And at the very same time it makes sure that its foreign policy moves do not cross what Moscow might see as a 'red line'. This explains Belarus's decision to vote in Russia's favour at the UN General Assembly vote on the Crimea in March 2014. Importantly, having sided with Russia on that vote, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed the national Cartography Service to keep the Crimea as part of Ukraine on their maps (Shraibman, 2015).

Another manifestation of Belarus's independent line on the crisis in Ukraine is the so-called 'Minsk negotiations platform', e.g. the status of the neutral ground where the Minsk-I and Minsk-II accords were negotiated and where the OSCE Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine regularly convenes. The platform itself

became a hedging instrument against a possibility of being involuntarily involved in the military-political escalation between Russia and the West.

Finally, we can check this foreign policy line against Tessman's mechanism for identifying strategic hedging behaviour.

Filter One. Belarus faces a highly complicated challenge of having to diversify its economic relations and, thus, improve its ability to cope without the public goods and subsidies normally provided by Russia. Three things seem crucial here: discounted gas and oil, access to the Russian market, and access to financial credits from Russia. Given the structure of Belarus's economy and the country's unstable relations with the West, this is a particularly complicated task. Nonetheless, the government has proclaimed the 30-30-30 strategy with a view to diversifying its economic relations: a third of the exports should go to Russia, another third to the EU and yet another 30% to the rest of the world (Naviny.by, 2016). It also conducts negotiations with the IMF and China in order to get loans from them rather than from Russia or Russian-led institutions. Energy resources are more difficult to diversify, even though Minsk makes attempts to try deliveries from other countries, for example, Azerbaijan (Sputnik.by, 2017).

Military preparations are even more difficult to track. However, according to the author's interviews, contingency planning in case of Russia's military aggression has become a common, even though hidden, practice in the Belarusian army (Anonymous interviews, 2015–2016).

Filter Two. According to most analysts and insiders, the military realm is the 'sacred cow' of Belarus-Russia relations (Ibid). In other words, this is where Russia's 'red lines' are most clearly visible. Therefore, Belarus has never even spoken about a possibility of a security alliance with partners other than Russia (which would be an example of external balancing). On the contrary, Belarus has always exercised enmeshment (entangling Russia in integration projects, including the CSTO, which is another typical element of strategic hedging, in order to increase its leverage over Moscow's security thinking and getting access to some elements of its defence planning).

Filter Three. Given the nature of the Belarusian political regime, any repetitive foreign policy decisions are funded and coordinated at the highest level of government. In a recent press-conference President Alyaksandr Lukashenka explicitly articulated this point (Lukashenka, 2017).

Thus, Belarus's Russia policy does pass Tessman's strategic hedging test and presents an interesting case for further research.

CONCLUSIONS

Discussions about Belarus's foreign and domestic politics usually see more simplifications than discussions about any other country in the 'shared neighbourhood' between the EU and Russia. Presumably, this results from the exaggerated reference to the popular notion of the 'last dictatorship of Europe' that is typical of policy and even academic discussions. For this reason, it is worth studying the case of Belarus in more detail.

Neoclassical realism as an analytical framework allows combining system- and actor-level variables, a combination of which normally misses from the analysis of the foreign policies of small states that sit between geopolitical powerful centres, while the application of the concept of strategic hedging offers a new research avenue that can highlight the fundamental thinking of policy-makers that other approaches fail to grasp.

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