



Policy Brief

Belarusian democratic forces reshaped: Assessing the outcomes

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Contributors:

Oxford Belarus Observatory: The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policymaking, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

OST Research Centre: OST Research Centre is a department of the [Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya \(OST\)](#). The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

IGSD, University of Warwick: Institute for Global Sustainable Development (IGSD) is a world-leading research institute with a focus on resilience and sustainable governance. IGSD supports the work of OBO by providing expertise, networks and advocacy for this initiative. It also complements the OBO expertise through its own projects which focus on **Resilience in Ukraine** from a comparative perspective (led Dr Asya Kudlenko, 2022-23); the **GCRF COMPASS+** project on Central Eurasia (led by Prof. Elena Korosteleva, 2022-23), the EU Horizon project **SHAPEDEM** focusing on the eastern neighbourhood (2022-25), and DFF **AGMOW** project led by Southern Denmark University (2023-26) focusing on Russia vs global orders. IGSD has expertise from life science, humanities and social sciences and champions transdisciplinary research for transformative change.

Visit us / Contact us:

W: <https://obo.web.ox.ac.uk/> E: obo@area.ox.ac.uk T: @OxfordBelarus

W: <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/> E: researchcenter@tsikhanouskaya.org T: @Tsikhanouskaya

W: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/sc/hoolforcross-facultystudies/igsd/> E: igsd@warwick.ac.uk T: @IGSD_UoW

Belarusian democratic forces reshaped: Assessing the outcomes

Executive Summary

This policy brief focuses on the institutional changes Belarusian Democratic Forces went through in 2022. Last year, the United Transitional Cabinet was established. Also, the structure of the Coordination Council was changed. This policy brief focuses on the following three issues. First, it examines the main aspects of institutional reforms for the United Democratic Forces (UDF). Second, it explores the scope of the EU support to the democratic forces in 2022 to enable their agility. Third, it assesses major challenges that the UDF face in going forward. The analysis is followed by three policy recommendations.

Background

Since mid-2022, Belarusian United Democratic Forces (UDF) have been reshaping themselves to better respond to the challenges within the country and the wider region. Some previous institutions, e.g. the Coordination Council, have changed their structure, and a new collective body - the United Transitional Cabinet - has been created, under the continued leadership of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, with representatives in Brussels, Vilnius and Warsaw, to promote the Belarusian agenda. Alongside these initiatives, new ways are continuously sought by the international community to keep the international spotlight on Belarus and its core challenges, including deposing the illegitimate regime of Lukashenka, supporting democratic voices and all those imprisoned within the country, and assisting Belarusian volunteers in the war against Russian aggression.

How can the United Democratic Forces promote their agenda internationally and what support do they have? What else could be done to make their struggle more effective? What additional resources are required to support Belarusians inside and outside the country? How does the international community deal with Belarus's different international representation and presence - the democratic forces led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Lukashenka's regime, within Belarus? How does 'dvoevlastie' (dual power) impact the regime, and the country's development?

These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office](#) (OST Research Centre), the [Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) and [IGSD University of Warwick](#) (Institute for Global Sustainable Development). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by **Professor Elena Korosteleva**, Professor of Politics and Global Sustainable Development at the University of Warwick and co-founder of Oxford Belarus Observatory, and the speakers of the event included **Nigel Gould-Davies**, Senior Fellow for Russia & Eurasia, IISS & former UK Ambassador to Belarus; **Dirk Schuebel**, EEAS Special Envoy for the Eastern Partnership; and **Valery Kavaleuski**, Deputy Head of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus; Representative on Foreign Affairs, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

Analysis of the issue

The year of 2022 was an important and challenging one for the Belarusian United Democratic Forces (UDF). In addition to the ongoing political crisis in Belarus, the country became embroiled in Russia's war against Ukraine. The start of the war deservedly shifted the global policy attention from Belarus towards Ukraine. This however, left many Belarusians, both within the country and also exiled, in a significant predicament - of being associated with the actions of a government they do not support. Belarusian pro-Democratic Forces thus needed to rethink and reformulate some political messages and narratives they had to project to gain international support, as well as to consider institutional reforms within their own ranks to address this new challenge. This policy brief looks into what has been done, and what has worked for the Belarusian United Democratic Forces (UDF) in 2022, and what key challenges still lie ahead.

Following the fraudulent elections of 9 August 2020, Belarus was plunged into crisis. The Belarusian UDF stood up against the dictatorship, which lost its legitimacy, and sought to put the country onto a track of democratic transformation. However, the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine back in February 2022 doubled the challenge for the UDF as democratic change in Belarus has arguably become even more dependent on broader regional developments. Furthermore, the use of the Belarusian territory for Russia's war, consented to by Lukashenka's government, elevated concerns about Belarus's independence and sovereignty.

Confronting the aggravating domestic situation and the war, the Belarusian UDF had to introduce a number of reforms and to adapt their strategy accordingly. Institutionally, on 24 February 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya declared herself the National Leader of Belarus¹ and first announced the creation of the United Transitional Cabinet.² This idea came to fruition during the New Belarus Conference, which took place on 9 August 2022 in Vilnius, Lithuania. The Conference came as a response to growing tensions inside the opposition forces. It brought together representatives of different political forces and activists to jointly come up with a revised approach to address the Belarusian crisis in a new context of the ongoing war.

The newly created UDF Cabinet as a collective executive body has a mandate of six months. Its first members included Pavel Latushka, Representative for the Transition of Power; Aliaksandr Azarau, Representative for the Restoration of Law and Order; Valery Kavaleuski, Representative for Foreign Affairs; and Valery Sakhaschyk, Representative for Defense and

¹ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya declared herself as the national leader of Belarus, 24 February, Official Website of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/ca51ca6ec0f8686.html>

² Joint statement by the Operational Headquarters of the democratic forces, 24 February, Official Website of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/cd83ad998fa02e0.html>

National Security.³ To ensure a system of checks and balances, it was agreed that nominees to the Cabinet would need to be approved by the reformed Coordination Council, the body created in 2020. As the work of the Coordination Council had stalled in exile, these new functions entrusted to it, including approval of Cabinet members and oversight of their activities, were expected to reinvigorate its work.

Although the creation of the Cabinet brought about new dynamics, the opposition still needed to elaborate on its strategy and ways to achieve tangible outcomes. In particular, as the composition of the Cabinet grows, its members need to clearly delineate their responsibilities and ways of cooperation. Moreover, institutional reforms have not yet resulted in the development of a comprehensive strategy towards Belarus addressing a number of controversial issues, including Belarus's geopolitical preferences and the country's (future) policy towards Russia or ways of engaging with the Belarusian people inside the country.

Internationally, Belarusian Democratic Forces remained active working towards further delegitimization of the Lukashenka regime and calling on the international community to provide assistance to the Belarusian people. For example, in 2022, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) together with EU's European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) of the European Commission conducted a needs assessment exercise for Belarusian civil society. In another unprecedented case, in September 2022, the Council of Europe decided to establish a Contact Group for cooperation with Belarusian society.⁴ The Contact Group is expected to work for the benefit of and in the interests of the Belarusian people, despite suspension of relations with the Lukashenka regime. It is clear that sustaining international visibility despite the shift of focus towards Ukraine is one of the main challenges but also achievements of the United Democratic Forces.

International visibility and relations with the EU in 2022

If some Western stakeholders doubted the prospects for re-engagement and negotiation with the Belarusian regime before 24 February 2022, Lukashenka's involvement in and support for Russia's war against Ukraine dispelled any such hesitations. In this context, however, the Belarusian opposition could capitalise on this change, and remain internationally visible to continue to advocate for the democratic course. The United Democratic Forces remain the voice of the Belarusian people at multiple international fora and during bilateral visits. In 2022, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya continued meeting foreign politicians (among others,

³Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya announced the United Transitional Cabinet and named its first members, 9 August, Official Website of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/e1e57cee6d4a3a9.html>

⁴ Belarusians will have a voice at the Council of Europe: a Contact Group was formed, September 8, 2022, People's Embassies of Belarus, <https://belarusabroad.org/en/2022/09/belarusians-will-have-a-voice-at-the-council-of-europe-a-contact-group-was-formed/>

Foreign Minister of Lithuania Ingrida Šimonytė⁵ and Polish President Andrzej Duda⁶) as well as representatives of international organisations (including OSCE).⁷

The European Union (EU) has extended its support for the Belarusian people and their fight for democracy. In mid-November 2022, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya visited Brussels, where she met with the EU foreign ministers in the margins of the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting.

In December 2022, the European Commission announced a new 25 million euro package of support for the Belarusian opposition and civil society.⁸ Altogether, the EU has funded an amount of over 100 million Euros. None of this funding goes to the government; all funds go to civil society. The EU also continued to provide support for civil society and independent media in the form of legal advice, psychological assistance, rehabilitation, physical and digital security, and support for relocation in the aftermath of the falsified elections. The Mobility Scheme for Targeted People-to-People Contacts (MOST) programme was restarted. The EU already financed 160 full-cycle scholarships and 52 online courses for Belarusian students and professionals.⁹ The EU supports the cultural sector, namely through grants and mobility schemes for individuals to carry out their activities in international events, circuits, festivals, fairs, and cross-sector initiatives.

Challenges ahead

Even though the Belarusian pro-democracy forces managed to maintain international visibility and undertook some steps to adapt to the new context of Russia's full-scale war, there are a number of significant challenges that remain, both domestic and international.

Internationally, perhaps the biggest challenge and goal is to build closer relations between democratic Belarus and Ukraine. So far, the Ukrainian government has retained a rather pragmatic approach towards the Belarusian regime, trying to minimise the risks of Belarus's full entry into the war. Although Ukraine does not recognize the legitimacy of Lukashenka, it restrains itself from engaging with the Belarusian opposition either. Several representatives of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, including Valery Kavaleuski, Alina Koushyk, and Anatol Liabedzka, visited Ukraine engaging with its political circles. However, the level of contact

⁵ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya met with Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, 30 August 2022, Official Website of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/c070a1712f02488.html>

⁶ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya met with Polish President Andrzej Duda, 5 October 2022, Official Website of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/b0fc4834e4e91c4.html>

⁷ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya met with President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Margareta Cederfelt, 21 September 2022, Official Website of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/fb88b3e24995c3a.html>

⁸ €25 million to support democratic aspirations in Belarus, 7 December 2022, the Official Website of the European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7376

⁹ For details, see webinar recording available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfF600bQMzg>

remains low, and a potential meeting between President Zelensky and Belarus's opposition leader Tsikhanouskaya is not yet on the agenda. Thus, Belarus-Ukraine relations, both at the official level and also on an individual basis, will require a lot of work on the part of the opposition, as well as the Belarusian Diaspora and civil society.

Furthermore, as the war continues, it will remain a challenge to keep Belarus on the agenda. Russia's creeping intrusion into Belarus and its military presence in the country jeopardises Belarus's sovereignty. The democratic forces would need to find ways to draw the attention of the international community to these developments and call for more concrete steps in this regard.

Domestically, a major challenge remains the retention of contacts on the ground and the provision of any possible assistance to the persecuted. Given the repressive nature of the regime, this could prove difficult. As the crisis continues, people's tiredness and fatigue are likely to further increase. Belarusian pro-democracy forces will need to remain visible on the ground as the credible, legitimate, and effective alternative, a government in waiting.

Conclusions

The year of 2022 has been a critical year for the United Democratic Forces of Belarus with a number of achievements, but also considerable challenges. First, major organisational reforms took place. Some previous institutions, such as the Coordination Council, changed their structure, and the United Transitional Cabinet was created. The Coordination Council remains autonomous and is undertaking its own reforms. Second, civil society in Belarus continues to be active despite difficult circumstances and many activists going into exile. The EU, in this context, extends different forms of support to the UDF in the country and has announced new funding opportunities.

Last year was also challenging due to domestic and international developments. A major and remaining challenge for the Democratic Forces was engaging with audiences within Belarus and burnishing a clear and compelling reputation for being authoritative, effective, and credible. At the international level, it is important for international actors to continue supporting Belarusian Democratic Forces. Finally, the necessity of generating strategies that target elites came to the fore. This is because authoritarian regimes generally only change when a critical mass of the elite defects or at least refuses to support the regime. As long as the elites remain, however unhappily compliant with the will of the dictator, then it might prove difficult for even a large majority of the people to bring about change. While it is difficult, it nevertheless remains important to persevere and engage with audiences at all levels, within and outside the country..

Policy recommendations

1. While continuing international engagement, the UDF need to maintain and even increase their contacts and ways of engaging with the people in Belarus. This includes expanding media outreach to retain visibility on the ground and provision of different forms of assistance to the persecuted and their families.
 2. In addition to institutional restructuring, the Belarusian UDF need to continue their consolidation towards greater unity and cohesion, as well as their work on the delineation of responsibilities between and within different structures (the Coordination Council, the United Transitional Cabinet, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya).
 3. The Belarusian UDF should adhere to a forward-looking approach and continue calling for support of the Belarusian people including in vital spheres of education, cultures, etc.
 4. International actors should distinguish between the Lukashenka regime and the Belarusian people, on the one hand, and between Belarus and Russia, on the other. A tailor-made and separate approaches towards Belarus and the Belarusian people is required for the international community to be able to contribute to future positive transformations in the country.
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Contacts

Oxford Belarus Observatory, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies

Email: obo@area.ox.ac.uk

Twitter: [@OxfordBelarus](https://twitter.com/OxfordBelarus)

Research Center of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST Research Center)

Email: researchcenter@tsikhanouskaya.org

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyEEXOn_QtIrmPfCHaajsdQ/videos

Institute for Global Sustainable Development, University of Warwick (IGSD)

E-mail: igsd@warwick.ac.uk

Twitter: [@IGSD_UoW](https://twitter.com/IGSD_UoW)