



GCRF COMPASS Policy Brief

NUCLEAR-FREE BELARUS: IS IT IN DANGER?

18 March, 2022



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Executive Summary	3
Background	3
Analysis of the issue	4
Conclusions	7
Policy recommendations	8

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[OST Research Center](#): OST Research Centre is a research 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.

[Oxford Belarus Observatory](#): The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) is set 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 policy-making, 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.

[GCRF COMPASS Project](#) (ES/P010849/1, 2017-21) is an ambitious UK government capacity-building funding initiative, aiming to extend UK research globally and to address the challenges of growth and sustainability in developing countries. Notably, the COMPASS project led by the University of Kent, in partnership with the University of Cambridge, seeks to establish the ‘hubs of excellence’ at the top-level Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to enable them to become the centres for knowledge-sharing and transfer for *research integration, impact governance, and sustainable communities*.

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Nuclear-free Belarus: is it in danger?

Executive Summary

This policy brief offers a recap of the expert discussion held on February 17, 2022 at the webinar conjointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) and the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST), with the support of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) COMPASS project. The discussion focused on nuclear-free Belarus in the light of recent political developments and Lukashenko's position on the country's nuclear status. This policy brief argues that Belarus, as an independent state, must hold its promise not to have nuclear weapons on its territories. The policy brief also reiterates that Lukashenko's proposed amendments to the Constitution endanger the nuclear-free status of Belarus, and thus, like his leadership, must be recognised as illegitimate.

Background

When Belarus gained independence, it declared its intention to make the territory of the country nuclear-free. Belarus transferred all of its nuclear weapons to Russia, completing the process by November 1996. Russia, UK and USA offered their security assurances as part of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum¹ (with France and China offering similar guarantees) as part of an effort to convince Belarus (as well as Ukraine and Kazakhstan) to sign the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to become a nuclear-free state². Since then, Belarus signed several important agreements, including the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA)³ with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). It also began advocating for a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Europe. However, it stopped short of ratifying its Additional Protocol,⁴ which would have granted the IAEA additional authority to verify that a state is complying with its obligations in the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities. Also, Belarus has not signed or ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons⁵ (TPNW). At the end of 2021 officials in Minsk and Moscow made numerous critical statements concerning the deployment of nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus. While for now, these treaties are used as geopolitical blackmail to rebalance the status-quo, in the future, as the present official narratives of Moscow and Minsk demonstrate,⁶ they may turn into a real military confrontation with the West. The constitutional

¹ <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb>

² <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/>

³ <https://www.iaea.org/publications/documents/infcircs/agreement-14-april-1995-between-republic-belarus-and-international-atomic-energy-agency-application-safeguards-connection-treaty-non-proliferation-nuclear-weapons>

⁴ <https://www.iaea.org/topics/additional-protocol>

⁵ <https://www.icanw.org/belarus>

⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/02/17/belarus-ready-to-host-nuclear-weapons-in-case-of-western-threat-says-lukashenko>

“referendum” held in the country on 27 February has formally abolished the ‘nuclear-free’ status of Belarus by allowing the stationing of Russian nuclear forces on its territory.⁷

How to evaluate these provocative statements and actions of Belarusian and Russian officials regarding nuclear weapons in Belarus? Why does Lukashenka accept and promote pro-nuclear rhetoric in the country that experienced in full the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster? How should the international community react towards such rhetoric, and what else should be done to dissuade Belarus from changing its nuclear-free status? These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office](#) (OST Research Centre) and the [Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) (OBO), with the support of the [GCRF COMPASS project](#).

The event was moderated by **Prof. Elena Korosteleva** and the speakers of the event included **Uladzimir Astapenka**, Responsible for multilateral diplomacy, National Anti-Crisis Management; **Dr Alicia Sanders-Zakre**, Research and Policy Coordinator, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons; **Alena Kudzko**, Director of the GLOBSEC Policy Institute in Bratislava and **Prof. William Alberque**, Director of Strategy, Technology, and Arms Control, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

What follows below is a recap of the discussion, including the analysis of the key issues, and recommendations on how to deal with the situation around nuclear-free Belarus.

Analysis of the issue

Nuclear status of Belarus

When Belarus gained independence in December 1991, there were 81 road-mobile SS-25s on its territory stationed at 3 missile bases, and an unknown number of tactical nuclear weapons.⁸ Belarus declared its intention to make its territory nuclear-free in 1990 in the Declaration on State Sovereignty.

Following Minsk's ratification of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) in February 1993 and accession to the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as a non-nuclear weapon state in July 1993, Belarus transferred all of its nuclear weapons to Russia, a process completed by November 1996. Thus, it joined Ukraine and Kazakhstan as former Soviet republics giving up all their nuclear arms. Welcoming the accession of Belarus to the NPT as a non-nuclear

⁷<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/launchpad-russias-assault-ukraine-belarus-holds-referendum-renounce-non-nuclear-2022-02-27/>

⁸ During the 1980s, a number of units equipped with intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) were also stationed in the Belarusian SSR; however, all of these weapons were eliminated under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty by 1991.

weapon state - Russia, UK and USA provided security assurances to Belarus and signed the Budapest Memorandum on 5 December 1994.

No nuclear forces have been stationed in Belarus since that time, although the possibility of stationing Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus was broached by a number of Belarusian officials in the late 1990s.

Belarus has signed several other important agreements including International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) agreement, but it didn't ratify its additional protocol (INFCIRC) which grants the IAEA additional authority to verify that a State is complying with its safeguarding obligations. The absence of this ratified protocol is assessed as a 'lack of control' indicator in the sphere of nuclear security. Belarus does participate in the voluntary agreements, including the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism but has not signed or ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

Belarus has a civilian nuclear research program under the aegis of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (NAS). Previously in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Energy, as part of the Global Threat Reduction Initiative (GTRI) they intended to convert a booster subcritical assembly, housed at the Sosny facility near Minsk, from highly enriched uranium (HEU) to low enriched uranium (LEU) fuel.⁹ The U.S. government pledged to provide both financial and technical assistance to expedite the process of returning the HEU to Russia. Although 85 kg of HEU was removed under the GTRI in November 2010, Belarus suspended cooperation in August 2011 after the US imposed economic sanctions.

Presently Belarus has one nuclear power plant in Astravyets District. The plant was built by the Russian nuclear power firm Atomstroyexport with Russian financing and has already experienced a series of incidents which caused the plant to be shut down on several occasions.¹⁰

Chernobyl catastrophe and non-nuclear status of Belarus in early 1990

The catastrophe of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station that occurred on 26 April 1986, resulted in more than two thirds of radioactive elements from exposure falling over a quarter of the territory of Belarus.¹¹ At that time there was no official information from the Soviet authorities about the potential danger, precautionary or preventive measures, or safety recommendations. The implications of the catastrophe were hidden by state media, and the Belarussians, essentially, were left alone to cope with this disaster. At the same time, a lot of speculations and rumours were circulating in the country about the level of pollution, and various measures to avoid and to protect

⁹ At the time of Belarus' December 2010 commitment to return its HEU to Russia, Belarus possessed an estimated 230 kg of HEU. The material was provided by the Soviet government for use in Sosny's IRT nuclear research reactor (shut down in 1989).

¹⁰ <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-nuclear-plant-taken-offline-after-protection-system-activated-/31049225.html>

¹¹ <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/04/17/belarus-border-town-chernobyl-30th-anniversary/82888796/>

oneself from exposure to radiation. There were no scientifically substantiated recommendations on this subject at that time.

Only later it became clear that the Chernobyl accident had such a large scale and unprecedented consequences that it would require collective efforts of the entire world community to overcome them. Therefore, in 1990, four years later, on the initiative of Belarus and Ukraine the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 45/190¹² which laid the foundations for international cooperation in this area for the next few years. In July 1990, the Belarusian Parliament adopted its Declaration on State Sovereignty which, among other things, stated that the Republic of Belarus would demand from the USSR government unconditional and urgent compensation for the damage caused by the Chernobyl Disaster (Article 8 Constitution). The Republic of Belarus was aspiring to make its territory a nuclear-free zone and to convert the Republic into a neutral state (Article 10 Constitution). These positions were justified and natural because this provision met both public demand and national interests. The subsequent steps of the government of independent Belarus to withdraw nuclear weapons from its territory, to assume obligations on non-proliferation and maintenance of a nuclear-free status also logically fitted into this concept. In the early 1990s Belarus even put forward an official proposal to create a nuclear-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe.¹³

Recent political developments in Belarus and nuclear status

After Aliaksander Lukashenka came to power in 1994, this position drastically changed. Committed to closer integration with Russia and active participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) Lukashenka repeatedly stated that he was forced to fulfil earlier obligations to withdraw nuclear weapons from the territory of Belarus and expressed regrets that such decisions had ever been taken.

When Lukashenka lost the presidential election in 2020, his public rhetoric began to include more and more statements that Belarus was surrounded by a ring of enemies which today include all neighbouring countries of Belarus – Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and the collective West in general.¹⁴ At the end of 2021, official Minsk and Moscow made several important statements about moving nuclear weapons to Belarus.¹⁵ Firstly, in November 2021 Lukashenka raised the prospect of Russian nuclear weapons being stationed in Belarus. It was a quick reaction to the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg's, suggestion to move US nuclear weapons stationed in Germany to the Eastern part of Europe. Echoing Lukashenka, Uladzimir Makei has publicly raised the issue of having nuclear weapons in Belarus once again on December 18. Russian officials endorsed the idea. On December 20, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said the

¹²

<https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FRES%2F45%2F190&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

¹³ <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-oct8-1.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/a486b2b9-f7ac-42fd-9d43-e7dea9c8e28c>

¹⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/belarus-russia-ukraine-lukashenko-says-could-host-putin-nuclear-weapons/>

potential deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus was very much on the table. On December 21, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko confirmed that "all options", including placing nuclear weapons in Belarus, would be considered if Ukraine were granted NATO membership or if the alliance deployed additional forces or weapons to the Baltic states.¹⁶

The new version of the Constitution, which was approved by referendum on February 27, no longer has provision for a nuclear-free zone in Belarus. It was omitted without any public debate, without any discussion, without asking Belarusians for their feelings on this crucial matter. Instead, the illegitimate referendum called by the illegitimate President, abolished Belarus' 'nuclear-free' status and allowed the stationing of Russian nuclear forces on its territory.¹⁷ It is important to note, Belarus is not party to a regional nuclear-weapon-free zone treaty; and there is no European regional Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty. It is also not party to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which means that the change to the Constitution is all the more threatening.

Lukashenka's position on the nuclear status

In his official statements Lukashenka always speaks to several audiences at the same time. First, he has a domestic audience, in which he needs to bolster the remaining share of his electorate. In this context his narrative is very predictable, rehearsing his traditional argument that, *enemies are everywhere*, and *we need to defend ourselves against the enemies*. He actually tries to convince his supporters that he is very powerful and "if he wants nukes, he gets the nukes, if he wants super-nukes – whatever that is, today was announced – he will get super-nukes".¹⁸

For the Western audiences, the message is a bit more nuanced. On the one hand, Lukashenka is trying to show, as he has done before, that he is unbreakable and invincible. This is his strategy and response to the sanctions - that he is not giving in, but rather stepping up his pressure with retaliations. He used these tactics against civil society and the media, and lately against the migrants. This time he takes it to an entirely new level by threatening the West with a nuclear threat. He shares the same logic with Vladimir Putin who claims that only the people who have nuclear weapons are in the position to negotiate their way through and get what they want. The main audience in this case is actually the Kremlin: he needs to prove to Putin that he is the key and loyal to the regime; and that is he is willing to go far in his commitments and is worthy of the Kremlin's support.

Putin's position on the nuclear status of Belarus

Promoting a nuclear status for Belarus is part of Putin's broader strategy of escalating the situation with Ukraine. In principle it is enough for Putin just to talk about nuclear weapons in Belarus and to show that this is a possibility, and by doing so he can achieve deterrence even without physically

¹⁶ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/putins-nuclear-blackmail-in-belarus/>

¹⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/27/belarus-holds-referendum-to-renounce-non-nuclear-status>

¹⁸ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/02/17/belarus-says-could-host-super-nuclear-weapons-russia-feels-threatened/>

moving the weapons there. Putin's subgoal is to have further encroachment into Belarus and effectively take control of Belarusian sovereignty. However, as much as Putin likes the idea of securing Belarus within his incontestable sphere of influence, he does not trust Lukashenka enough to give him full control of nuclear weapons, especially the warheads that might be stationed in Belarus. As a matter of fact, Putin does not need to entrust nuclear weapons to Lukashenka to take full control of Belarusian sovereignty, he can achieve the same goals by stationing more conventional types of troops on its territory. Putin is well aware that Lukashenka always tries to wriggle out of his unquestionable dependency on Russia: he might decide to station the nuclear-capable systems in Belarus – the Iskander systems, for example - without actually moving the warheads to Belarus. In this way, the stakes will be raised, while still barring Lukashenka from full control.

Position of the Western countries on the nuclear status of Belarus and possible changes

Firstly, the West is doing the information deterrence of their own with the main message formulated in a way, that if Russia moves the nuclear weapons to the territory of Belarus, that will mean moving the Western nuclear weapons closer to its borders. Secondly, the West is increasing the cost of action which applies together with the increasing cost of action for the potential permanent positioning of other Russian weapons and troops in Belarus. The message for Belarus is simple: if it chooses to participate in Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, it would cost her a new wave of broad and smart sanctions closing the existing loopholes which would severely cripple the Belarus economy. The West is preparing different scenarios and different plans of action – what happens if the nuclear weapons are indeed moved, because it does change the regional security situation significantly, especially for the Baltic and Central European countries. Taking into account all the recent developments in Belarus which happened even before the war with Ukraine, the West has to re-evaluate and rethink its security, including on the border with Ukraine.

Policy recommendations

To the Western countries:

1. In spite of the fact that Belarus's foreign policy and the security policy choices are increasingly being dictated by Russia, Belarus is still a sovereign state which the West has to deal with. There is the Vienna Document for military transparency in Europe, Belarus is also a full participant in a CFE Treaty, Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, and the West must insist on inspections and observations in Belarus. A lot of places where nuclear weapons may be stored are subject to verification which must be monitored. The West cannot treat Belarus other than as a sovereign nation that is making choices; the Western governments must hold the Belarusian Government to account for their choices and deal with them directly.
2. The West should remain focused and put all efforts on reducing nuclear weapons and, specifically, reducing their deployment in new territories, including Belarus. It might be done via international law and international treaties, e.g. establishing nuclear-weapon-free

zones. In addition, there is a need to support civil society and popular movements in Belarus and abroad, to take nuclear weapons out of use for their total elimination.

3. It is important to avoid concessions to Lukashenka on other issues, just in exchange for the promise not to have nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus. The latter promise should be secured independently.
4. While Lukashenka is an illegitimate leader of the country, there is a legal reason not to recognise any decision which he is taking on behalf of Belarusian people. The amendments to the Constitution must not be recognised by the West.

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