



## Policy Brief

# RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE, AND THE REFERENDUM IN BELARUS: WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

April 11, 2022

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## Contributors:

[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.

[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 analysis of social, economic, political, cultural, public health (COVID-19) and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus;
- engagement, wherever possible, with Belarus's democratic 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, has established 'hubs of excellence' at top-level Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to enable them to become centres for knowledge-sharing and transfer for *research integration, impact governance, and sustainable communities*. In 2021, the COMPASS project was HIGHLY COMMENDED under the category of the best international collaboration of the year, by the Times Higher Education, widely known to be '[The OSCARS of Higher Education in the UK](#)'.

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## Executive Summary

This policy brief summarises the outcomes of a Webinar held on 3 March 2022, jointly convened 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 Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the recent political developments in Belarus – particularly the referendum held on 27 February, 2022 and its likely consequences. The policy brief concludes that the removal of the clause on military neutrality and nuclear-free status from the Belarusian Constitution is one of the key results of the referendum, held without even minimum adherence to electoral law, and which will have long-term consequences for the stability of the region. The vote opens the door for Putin not only to place nuclear warheads in Belarus, but also to formalise Belarus' loss of sovereignty. The brief draws attention to the lack of legitimacy of the Lukashenka regime and calls on the international community to treat the presence of Russian troops in the country as an occupation and an invasion of Belarus. At the same time, Belarus's regime is also an accomplice in Russia's aggression against Ukraine. In the current context it is essential that the international community imposes further sanctions on Lukashenka and his entourage, including in the security sector, stops all diplomatic relations with it, and redirects all official communication regarding Belarus to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the Belarusian Democratic Forces.

## Background

Just a few days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Belarusian authorities proceeded with a so-called 'referendum' in which, *they say*, more than half of the country's voters approved constitutional reforms. These would enable Lukashenka to stay in power until 2035, open the way for stronger military cooperation with Russia and bring an end to Belarus's non-nuclear status. Despite the threat of persecution by the Belarus regime, the claimed results prompted an upsurge in protests, with at least 900 protestors arrested.

In the context of these distressing and rapidly evolving dynamics, this webinar sought to understand recent developments in Belarus. How do ordinary Belarusians feel about relinquishing their neutral, non-nuclear status? What is their reaction to aggressive military cooperation with Russia, against Ukraine? Can the fight for democracy and independence gain new momentum from the related anti-war movement? How can the international community and the democratic forces sustain the message of fighting repression and authoritarianism in Belarus, while the world is focused on the war in Ukraine and sanctions for Russia?

The event was moderated by Prof **Elena Korosteleva** and the speakers of the event included **Franak Viachorka** Senior Advisor to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Head of the Foreign Policy Department; **Aliaksandr Shlyk**, Special Representative on Elections, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; **Lord Teverson**, House of Lords; **Margarita Balmaceda**, Professor of Diplomacy and International Relations.

## Constitutional referendum in Belarus: its meaning and consequences

The constitutional referendum in Belarus conducted on February 27, 2022 was presented by the Belarusian authorities both internally and externally as a game changing factor in the Belarusian situation, which allegedly would resolve the current political crisis. Belarusian authorities promoted the idea that they were taking control of the domestic situation, that protesters and the pro-democratic public had given up and that Lukashenka's government was the only viable option for ruling the country. State propaganda supported this narrative by showing numerous stories, reminiscent of the Soviet times, depicting people's support of the referendum. However, in reality, the referendum turned out to be one of the least interesting campaigns in Belarus's recent political history: even some of Lukashenka's supporters could not explain properly what the referendum was all about and why it was needed.<sup>1</sup>

In reality of course, it was simply impossible to conduct a democratic referendum or any other democratic procedures under the current circumstances in Belarus. There are more than one thousand political prisoners in the country, and the most basic of civil rights and freedoms that underpin any democracy (including the right for public assemblies, freedom of speech and other) are violated. Even before the referendum had formally started, it was clear that there would be nothing 'normal' or democratic about it. Additionally, Russia's military troops were already stationed in Belarus during the referendum. The referendum was conducted a few days after Russia launched a war against Ukraine. This not only made the referendum illegitimate, but also violated basic rules of conducting electoral campaigns. Furthermore, there were numerous demonstrable violations of international standards and national laws on how to hold the referendum. For example, the refusal of the Central Election Commission to publish the names of the people serving on the election commissions.

Before the referendum, the Venice Commission had analysed the proposed amendments to the Constitution.<sup>2</sup> It concluded that not only has the process of bringing forward the proposed amendments' lacked the transparency necessary to claim legitimacy, but that they also fail to correct the existing strong power asymmetry and, in reality, would even aggravate it. Meanwhile, one of the most important outcomes of the referendum was the exclusion or removal of military neutrality and nuclear-free status from the Belarus Constitution. It opens the door for Putin to place nuclear warheads in Belarus, but also to formalise Belarus' loss of sovereignty. **It is precisely these geopolitical consequences of the referendum that are the most important.** Indeed, as soon as the new Constitution comes into force, nuclear weapons could be placed somewhere in Homel<sup>3</sup> or nearby.

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<sup>1</sup> Chatham House, *A referendum in Belarus: What will happen and what should the West do?*  
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/referendum-belarus-what-will-happen-and-what-west-should-do>

<sup>2</sup> Venice Commission, *Belarus: Urgent Interim Opinion on the Constitutional Reform.*  
[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI\(2022\)002-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI(2022)002-e)

<sup>3</sup> A regional centre in Southern Belarus.

## Actions and reactions of the democratic leadership and the Belarusians towards the war and referendum

The Belarusian democratic leadership intended to use the momentum of the referendum and especially its predicted results, for mass mobilisation. They called on the people to come to the referendum and deliberately vote with invalid ballots. That strategy was developed even before the referendum was announced. However, when Russia's war against Ukraine started on February 24, the United Democratic Forces of Belarus asked people not just to come to the polling stations and to invalidate the ballot papers but also to assemble around the polling stations to see how many there were and to proclaim their opposition to the regime and the war. Indeed, on the referendum day there were the largest protests since the mass protests of late autumn 2020 in Belarus, when people came to the streets not only in Minsk, but in the regional centres and smaller cities. As a result, around 800 people were detained.<sup>4</sup>

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the United Democratic Forces have announced an Anti-war movement which mobilised Belarusians for protests against the war and the involvement of Lukashenka's Belarus' participation in it. The main aim of the democratic leadership now is to support the people in effectively standing up against the aggression that is now conducted by Russia and to self-organise in all possible forms. Currently, there is a lot happening already in this respect and Belarusian people are feeling the responsibility for the fate of Belarus as a nation.

## The vision of Belarus by the West in the context of the war in Ukraine and the referendum

Because of the tragic developments in Ukraine, Belarus comes back to the centre of international attention too. Although for a while the country has been neglected, in the context of war, it becomes obvious that this fight is not just for Ukraine's future, it is the fight against dictatorships in the region. **By abandoning Belarus' neutrality status and allowing Russian troops onto the territory, Lukashenko has fundamentally threatened European security.** This central point must remain in the forefront for policymakers in Brussels and Washington.

The current situation in Belarus is going to lead to the demise of the Lukashenka regime sooner rather than later, because there is a strong opposition towards it in Belarus. This situation really shows the interconnection between domestic and foreign politics in the country: the game that Lukashenka somewhat successfully played between 1996 and 2015 trying to balance the West with Russia, almost clearly came to an end with the massive repression that accompanied the 2020 election and created a situation where Lukashenka is increasingly dependent on Russia, and has largely sacrificed his own agency as a leader of Belarus. Even if he wanted to return to the approach of 'balance', he now has no choice but to accept the basic control of the Belarusian armed forces by Russia. Thus, the idea of any balancing between the East and the West is no longer viable.

There is a discussion that increased sanctions against Belarus may throw the country closer into the Russian embrace. However, this is a non-argument as it is very hard to see how the

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<sup>4</sup> Voice of Belarus

<https://www.voiceofbelarus.org/belarus-news/large-anti-war-protests-took-place-in-belarus/>

Belarusian regime could get any closer into an embrace of the Russian regime. For Lukashenko, the point of no return has passed. It is important now for the international community to understand better the role Belarus is playing in this conflict, and in certain economic games played by Russia, for example, having to do with fossil fuels. Some of the latest sanctions, for example, potash exports from Belarus are very important, but they need to go further. There needs to be action in the sphere of oil refining, a key source of economic support for the Lukashenka regime.

It is crucial to understand that it is through the issue of oil refining, that Belarus plays a very complex role vis-a-vis Ukraine. Ukraine drastically reduced its imports of Russian crude oil in the last few years because it was actually able to import refined products from Belarus. This being so, how can this now be part of the delicate puzzle of sanctions? Ukraine needs those refined products because it doesn't have any functioning refineries. At the same time, it is also on the side of sanctions against Belarus to send a clear signal. These are all parts of a very complex situation and **it is essential that US and EU policymakers understand the seriousness of the situation in Belarus:** of the referendum and of the Belarusian regime's renunciation of nuclear-free status. In this situation it is essential to emphasise the lack of legitimacy of the Lukashenka regime. The invitation of Russian troops with the lack of approval by the legitimate Government of Belarus equates to an occupation and an invasion of Belarus. All these issues must be brought into the discussion at the international level.

## Putin, Lukashenka and the Western reactions towards Ukraine and Belarus

The events happening right now in Europe and in Ukraine reflect a failure to learn the lessons of the Second World War by all stakeholders. Based on the logic that interdependence would lead to political convergence with Western actors, the 'west' made economic deals with Putin and Lukashenka, and dragged them into the international organisations. All these efforts have done nothing to prevent Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022, or the part played in it by Belarus.

The current situation also reflects Western politicians' tendency towards deliberation and dialogue rather than directly addressing and resolving problematic issues. This is what happened in 2020 in Belarus when many Western politicians declared that they were issuing new sanctions, which were half-hearted and did not work due to loopholes. Lukashenka quickly got a feeling of total impunity, mirroring that which Putin has regularly felt and does now in the context of the war on Ukraine. Examples of such wayward, guilt-free behaviour of Lukashenka were on display during the migrant crisis or the Ryanair flight hijacking orchestrated by Belarusian authorities. This is an outcome of a fundamental misconception and misunderstanding of what dictatorships are like, and what kind of leaders Lukashenka and Putin are, and what damage they could cause if their actions are not called to account.

It is obvious now (and perhaps should have been before) that Putin was preparing for the assault on Ukraine. He does not believe that either Ukraine, or Belarus, deserve to be sovereign countries. Putin did not appreciate that Ukraine was developing closer ties with the European Union and the United States, and this caused panic in the Kremlin, giving rise to the tragic developments in Ukraine from February 2022. **The same future - bombing and military attacks - might be awaiting Belarus if it were to choose to be free and democratic.**



## Conclusions

To conclude, both **Ukraine now and a democratic Belarus in future are targets for Putin**. However, Belarusian authorities should be treated as Russia's collaborationist regime right now. They collaborate with the aggressor, with the occupant, and that makes it different from Ukraine. In Ukraine, the government fights for and together with its people; in Belarus the government gave up sovereignty in order to get political guarantees from Russia. On the other hand, Belarusian people's role is crucial: if Belarus' resistance and anti-war movement is strong, if Belarusian society is resilient enough then the regime in Minsk is much more insecure. Such popular resistance may help Ukraine to close the northern military front.

**The work needs to be done on the ground to prepare Belarus for closer relations with the EU once the Lukashenka regime is gone.** It is important to be ready with the answers to the following questions: what happens if the result on the ground is different? What kind of security architecture can the international community expect? It is going to be calling for very serious controls and limits on relations, strengthening of the EU border. If Ukraine succeeds in remaining an independent state and Belarus remains under Lukashenka, there will have to be a much stronger position of the Western countries vis-a-vis Belarus.

## Recommendations

1. In the current context it is essential that **non-recognition of the new Constitution of Belarus** must be emphasised and stressed by international organisations and major stakeholders. The process of non-recognition of Lukashenka's regime by the international community must be continued. After Lukashenka *de facto* joined the military assault on Ukraine alongside Putin, it is evident that he must be fully 'de-recognised'. All contacts and diplomatic relations with him must be stopped as soon as possible.
2. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the Belarusian Democratic Forces, the real representatives of Belarusian people, must be included in all international communication regarding Belarus, instead of Lukashenka's regime. **It is important not just to sanction the Belarusian regime and to send a negative message to the people, but also to propose a positive alternative and a positive signal as a recognition of people's will, of alternative bodies of power, providing assistance to initiatives, media, and civil society groups in Belarus.** This support will give energy and hope to Belarusian people who are still resisting on the ground.
3. It is important that while focusing on Ukraine mostly now, the Western governments and organisations do not forget about Belarus. There is a close interconnection between the two countries: **without a free and independent Ukraine, there will not be a free and democratic Belarus and vice versa.**
4. Different opinion polls and reactions of Belarusians demonstrate that they are against the war and **the majority of the population does not support Lukashenka's government.** This message should be better promoted, delivered and shown to the Ukrainians and international community.
5. Lukashenka must bear the full responsibility along with his cronies, for what's happening in Ukraine. **It is legitimate to sanction state banks which serve oil**

**refineries, which serve the potash industry while all these industries are in personal control of Lukashenka, his family and his closest team.**

6. The key loophole in the Western sanctions towards Belarus has always been energy, while the main source of income for the Belarusian regime is oil refined products. That needs to be taken out of the list of taboo subjects and needs to be discussed by the Western countries. **The EU needs to look deeper into sanctioning Belarusian refined oil products, mazut, diesel, etc. because that is most likely to impact the Belarusian authorities.**
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