



Policy Brief

THE BARGAINING POWER OF A DIALOGUE: WHAT IS POSSIBLE FOR BELARUS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE?

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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 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.

GLOBSEC is a global think-tank based in Bratislava, Slovakia committed to enhancing security, prosperity, and sustainability in Europe and throughout the world. This independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation helps to provide a better understanding of global trends and their consequences for society, economy, and security. GLOBSEC builds on the successful work done by the Slovak Atlantic Commission and its main goal is to shape the global debate through conducting research activities and connecting key experts on foreign and security policy. GLOBSEC also annually organizes GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum, one of the leading conferences on global security in the world, as well as GLOBSEC Tatra Summit, a conference that provides the opportunity for experts to have fruitful political discussions on the future of Europe.

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Executive Summary

This policy brief offers a recap of the discussion held on 30 June 2022, at the webinar conjointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO), the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) and GLOBSEC. The discussion focused on whether there is space for dialogue between the West and Belarus. Based on the analysis of experts, the policy brief suggested, in the current context, the space for dialogue remains very limited. Even though Lukashenka controls (at least to some extent) domestic policy in Belarus, he is completely dependent on Russia in external affairs. Given the circumstances, for the foreseeable future there might be some dialogue on low-level technical issues, but it is unlikely to see the resurrection of the high-level conversations on the future of Belarus in the immediate future.

Background

Russia's war against Ukraine poses numerous political, security, and economic threats to the region and globally. Against the background of these big threats, the ongoing political crisis in Belarus often gets overlooked. Consequently, Belarus is only mentioned in the context of its government support for the Russian aggression; however the fact that this support goes against the will of its own people is rarely discussed. In reality, the political crisis in Belarus continues, with more than 1,200 people held as political prisoners, while the economic situation remains challenging. Western countries have been and remain keen to influence the situation in Belarus in a positive way, but find themselves with a limited toolkit, comprising of various sanctions, support for civil society activities, media and education. In parallel to this, we see increasing counter-attempts by the Russian and Belarusian authorities to gain bargaining advantages over the West through their threats of world hunger (for instance, via disruptions of the global grain supply chain).

Against this background, we ask: Is there space for dialogue between the West and authorities in Belarus? If so, what are the areas for compromise and agreement and who holds the bargaining advantage? What economic impact is Russia's war in Ukraine having on Belarus, the wider region and more globally? What can the Belarusian Democratic Forces and the West do to mitigate these economic, political and security concerns?

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](#) (OBO) and [GLOBSEC think tank](#). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Professor Elena Korosteleva, Professor of Global Sustainable Development, and Jean Monnet Chair of European Politics, University of Warwick and the speakers of the event included **Alena Kudzko**, Director of GLOBSEC Policy Institute (Bratislava); **Valery Kavaleuski**, Head of the Cabinet, Representative on Foreign Affairs, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; **Alesia Rudnik**, PhD Cand. in Political Science (Karlstad University, Sweden), Research Fellow at Centre for New Ideas; **Katia Glod**, CEPA, analyst and consultant, Fellow at Center for European Policy Analysis.

Analysis of the issue

This policy brief discusses the bargaining power of a dialogue —that is, what is possible for Belarus in the context of the war in Ukraine? In any political context, dialogue constitutes the cornerstone of diplomacy. It proved effective on many occasions in the past. Yet, what we see today, in Ukraine, is perhaps one of the few occasions when dialogue with Russia may not at all be constructive, because Putin's regime has coressed so many red lines. Also, looking even broader, this could potentially be harmful and even unwanted by the people of Ukraine. Where does Belarus fall in all these developments? The Lukashenka's regime is not only an accomplice in Russia's war in Ukraine, it is also an aggressor targeting the Belarusian people. Since 2020, the situation in Belarus from the point of view of human rights continues as it is, if not getting worse, as people are sent to prisons, harassed, tortured, victimized and even murdered. In terms of bargaining power between the Lukashenka's regime and the Democratic Forces, Russia's war in Ukraine should be taken as an important threshold.

Before the war, in terms of bargaining advantage, the regime in Belarus was controlling the space and the people in the country —especially political prisoners. Lukashenka remained an effective repressor as he instilled fear. However, at the same time, the Democratic Forces managed to win international space. They have insisted on the introduction of significant sanctions and as it appears these sanctions cannot be removed by Lukashenka himself, they can be removed with the signal from the Democratic Forces and Sviatlana Tsichanouskaya, in particular.

Russia's war in Ukraine inevitably had repercussions in Belarus in terms of bargaining advantage between the Lukashenka regime and the Democratic Forces. Since the advent of the war, the regime has faced more sanctions and pressure, as Lukashenka overstepped all boundaries that he seemed careful not to overstep for decades in international affairs. In this respect, Russia's war in Ukraine has brought the Democratic Forces additional bargaining

advantage, because Lukashenka has undermined all remnants of his legitimacy. There have been several attempts from the regime to signal the willingness to normalise relations with the West and gain some leverage as seen in the recent grain deal, but it was turned down by the West.¹

On the other hand, Lukashenka's dependence on Russia —Putin in particular— increased with the war. In fact, what is happening in the current context is an increasing threat to the statehood of Belarus. Lukashenka has exposed himself significantly and became more dependent on Putin. Lukashenka has shown that he does not actually have effective control over Belarus, when the Russian air forces entered the Belarusian airspace to fire missiles at Ukrainian cities. This resulted in the sovereignty of Belarus being badly damaged and led to the shrinking diplomatic space for the country even further.

The state of economy in Belarus

The delicacy of the situation is not limited to the diplomatic front. The Belarusian economy is also in a difficult position, which is already facing significant challenges before 2020. From 2012 until 2020, the annual average growth in Belarus was slightly above a half percentage point, making it the worst performing country in the region. Adding the Covid-19, international political crisis and the sanctions, Belarus is projected to have the worst economic performance in 2022 and 2023, according to the IMF forecasts —the third worst performance among 193 countries in the world, after Ukraine and Russia. In addition to exogenous shocks such as Covid-19 and effects of sanctions, the inefficient state-owned enterprise sector, lack of rule of law and massive repressions further deteriorated the economic situation and decimated economic growth in Belarus. Also, strong recession in Russia, which accounts for over 40 percent of Belarusian exports of goods and loss of the Ukrainian market that accounted for almost 14 percent of exports of Belarusian goods as well as widening economic sanctions against the Belarusian economy and decreasing oil subsidies from Russia contributed to the economic difficulties. For instance, in real terms, Belarus's exports decreased by 40 percent in April and May (year-on-year basis); GDP also decreased by over 8.5 percent in May.² It is hard to see whether Russia will be able to financially support the Lukashenka regime given the fact that the Russian economy is also under heavy sanctions. Therefore, the economic situation is likely to bring social unrest in due course.

What can the Democratic Forces do?

Given this background, two questions arise: what can the Democratic Forces potentially do in order to support change in Belarus? What kind of dialogue could be initiated? First, it would be possible to suggest the Belarusian image abroad plays a strong role in how the potential

¹ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/06/04/ukraine-crisis-grains-belarus>

² <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/07/26/world-economic-outlook-update-july-2022>

dialogue with the regime can be played out. When thousands of Belarusians left the country following August 2020, they brought something with them: a desire to fight for democratic Belarus. One of the important consequences of repression after 2020 is *de facto* immigration of many representatives of Belarusian civil society sector that includes both institutionalised and non institutionalised groups. Groups of Belarusians residing abroad and engaged in activism made a series of impact on deliveries of the image abroad and this has paid off with a relatively positive image of Belarus within the international community, clearly distinguishing between Belarusians and the oppressive Belarusian regime. However, with the beginning of the war, Belarus started to be seen as a whole again, so the difference between Belarusians and the regime is not so visible anymore on the international arena.³ This leads to the outcome that people living abroad who have been doing the job in constructing the positive image of Belarus two years ago are currently the most suffering group from that worsening image. Also, Lukashenka tries to use this as a leverage to increase his legitimacy as an actor involved in international security issues, rather than standing out as a dictator suppressing people inside the country. In this context, it is important for the EU to include Belarusian opposition (Democratic Forces) in the dialogue to serve as a guarantee for the stable future in the region. It will also mean the policy stance that is not contradictory to the position taken against Lukashenka or in relation to Belarus and Lukashenka in 2020. On the other hand, in order to resume any sort of dialogue, the Lukashenka's regime, first, must meet the conditions set out in the October 2020 conclusions of the European Council such as starting a dialogue with Belarusian civil society and releasing of all political prisoners.

Conclusions

This policy brief discussed whether there is space for dialogue between the West and Belarus. Based on the analysis of experts, the policy brief suggested, in the current context, the space for dialogue remains very limited. Even though Lukashenka controls domestic policy in Belarus, he is completely dependent on Russia in external affairs. The Lukashenka's regime continues all sorts of political repression at home and closely follows Putin's policy path in foreign affairs. The policy brief also pointed out that it is at the same time important to preserve Belarusian *de jure* independence, which is also crucial for civil society in Belarus. As long as Belarus has not lost its independent status (*de jure*), in theory, there would be room for dialogue and discussion. That being said, given the circumstances, for the foreseeable future there might be some dialogue on low-level technical issues, but it is unlikely to see the resurrection of the high-level conversations with Belarusian authorities in the immediate future.

³ For instance, in international media, it is common to see statements like 'Belarus attacks' or 'Belarus launches another attack' on Ukraine.

Policy recommendations

1. It is important for the Belarusian Democratic Forces to continue talking about the European perspective for the Belarusian people, especially given that Moldova and Ukraine received prospective membership status. It would be high time for the Belarusian opposition to outline their agenda as pro-European and make it clear once again.
2. Any form of dialogue with the Lukashenka regime should be based on the following conditions: the participation of civil society in Belarus, the release of political prisoners, very wide dialogue and the possibility for Belarusian people to express their views, and free elections.

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