



Policy Brief

The United Democratic Forces of Belarus: Strategic agenda for 2023 and international support

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Contributors:

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The United Democratic Forces of Belarus: Strategic agenda for 2023 and international support

Executive Summary

This policy brief focuses on the United Democratic Forces of Belarus, looking into their strategic agenda and the international support needed to bring about much needed political change in Belarus. 2022 was possibly one of the most difficult years in the history of Belarus and Belarusian people. First, Belarusians continue to be jailed, persecuted, abused, displaced, and forced to become international refugees in large numbers. But new challenges emerged too; namely, the issue of how to stay connected with the domestic population while also retaining the attention and support of the international audience. Meanwhile, the ongoing war of Russia against Ukraine and the increasing involvement of the Lukashenka regime in the war changed the context and led to an incremental shift in terms of the priorities of international actors. This policy brief explores the strategic priorities and main challenges for the United Democratic Forces of Belarus in 2023. It also discusses what needs to be done to push for real change and what kind of international support is needed to help deliver positive developments in Belarus in 2023 and beyond.

Background

2022 brought myriad challenges for Belarus and Belarusians. It was also a complex year for the Belarusian United Democratic Forces (UDF). Operating from overseas they must seek to balance their priorities across national and international audiences and agendas, while ensuring simultaneous impact domestically and abroad. These challenges became even more urgent with the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, in which Lukashenka's regime opted to facilitate the attack on its neighbour, turning the Belarusian territory into a staging arena for the Russian army. The UDF and Belarus' National Leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, in particular, continue to do their utmost to promote the Belarus agenda at the international level and to demonstrate that Belarusians do not equate to the illegitimate regime of Lukashenka. International support and advocacy are extremely important for the country to ensure further support for the release of political prisoners, democratisation, and the persecution of the regime's culprits.

What are the strategic priorities for the UDF of Belarus in 2023? How to strike the balance between the UDF's domestic advocacy and international engagement? What support is needed, domestically and internationally? How can the EU, the UK and the US further support the UDF's fight for democracy? Are there any restrictions on and for this support? 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 of Global Sustainable Development) on 10 January 2023. 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 **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya**, National Leader of Belarus, Head of the United Transitional Cabinet; **Urmis Reinsalu**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia; **Stephen Nix**, Senior Regional Director of Eurasia, International Republican Institute; and **David Marples**, Distinguished University Professor of Russian and East European History, University of Alberta.

Summary analysis

The situation in Belarus is worsening. On the one hand, the Lukashenka regime is increasing political repressions against the Belarusian people. On the other hand, Russia's war against Ukraine is creeping further into Belarus. There are currently around 11,000 Russian soldiers deployed in Belarus, and new troops and military hardware arrive and rotate all the time¹. Although there are no direct military clashes in Belarus, its territory is being used for Russian aggression against Ukraine. Meanwhile, it is crucial to distinguish Lukashenka's criminal regime from the Belarusian people. Some surveys show that 86% of the population are against Belarusian participation in the war². If Putin and Lukashenka send Belarusian troops into Ukraine, one should expect to see mass disobedience and perhaps a long-awaited split among their elites. For example, spontaneous protests took place across the country, in the aftermath of February 2022; factions emerged among state apparatus and the military, the railways serving the war effort were sabotaged, hundreds of Belarusians volunteered to fight with the Ukrainian army, and Belarusian battalions have been engaged in frontline combat ever since.

The level of repression in Belarus reflects the scale of resistance. Since 2020, the regime opened about 15,000 politically motivated criminal cases³; many of them for anti-war protests. On average, 15-17 people are detained daily, and most of them have been sentenced to prison terms (5, 10 or even 15 years)⁴. Political prisoners are deprived of family visits, phone calls, medical treatments —as in the case of Maryia Kalesnikava— and the visits of priests. The goal is to destroy people morally and physically, with no exception for women,

¹ “Satellite Images Show A Russian Buildup In Belarus. Experts Say It May Be A Bluff”, Radio Free Europe, <https://www.rferl.org/a/satellite-images-russia-buildup-belarus/32121143.html> Also, see: <https://www.unian.net/world/v-belarusi-proishodit-rotaciya-rossijskih-voennyh-ih-tam-11-tysyach-gpsu-12111618.html>

² “The War in Ukraine: Contradictions in the Mass Consciousness of Belarusians”, Reform. <https://reform.by/310249-vojna-v-ukraine-protivorechija-massovogo-soznaniya-belarusov>

³ “Key information on repressions in Belarus”, People's Embassies of Belarus, <https://belarusabroad.org/en/2022/11/key-information-on-repressions-in-belarus/>

⁴ “Belarus, 2022: a minimum of 17 people per day were detained on a politically motivated basis”, People's Embassies of Belarus, <https://belarusabroad.org/en/2023/01/belarus-2022-a-minimum-of-17-people-per-day-were-detained-on-a-politically-motivated-basis-at-least-6-381-have-been-detained-in-the-course-of-the-year-information-about-repressions-in-the-years-2020/>

minors, and seniors.⁵ The so-called trials became a routine. One of them, against the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Ales Bialiatski (and other human rights defenders) started in January 2023, with no substantive evidence against him being provided. Even Bialiatski's request to conduct his trial in Belarusian language was refused, and no interpreter was provided. The trial against the editors of popular portal TUT.BY is yet another example. The regime's corrupt parliament continues to adopt laws restricting their population. Recently, it approved the use of the death penalty against political opponents. And it is also consented to deny citizenship and seize property of anyone who dares to stand against the regime.

Despite the extent of repression, Belarusians continue their resistance, transforming it to underground, horizontal and decentralised forms. In August 2022, the leader of the Belarusian pro-democracy forces, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, convened the New Belarus Conference in Vilnius, where the creation of the United Transitional Cabinet was announced. The Cabinet brought together major political groups and initiatives, thus becoming the main executive body of the opposition movement. This coalition also includes NGOs, independent trade unions, human rights defence centres, and other organisations.

Main priorities

The UDF have outlined six key priorities for 2023+. The main priority is to prevent Belarus from full participation in Russia's war against Ukraine. The UDF also intend to maintain pressure to release political prisoners and to prepare a democratic transition of power. It also aims to form an international coalition to support Belarus and its people, and to strengthen the resilience of the rest of society in Belarus and across the diaspora.

Priority #1 is to **intensify the UDF's informational work** and activities on the ground in order to prevent Belarusian troops from entering the war and to help Ukraine win it. It is important to maximise the cost for Lukashenka of sending Belarusian troops or allowing further attacks from Belarusian territory. The regime must be made aware of the consequences, including new and harsher sanctions from abroad and popular unrest at home. In turn, this requires the West to articulate these consequences forcefully and directly. Western governments and international organisations should demand from Lukashenka the full and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Belarusian territory. In parallel, they should refrain from official communication with Minsk and keep a policy of non-recognition. Support mechanisms need to be in place to document the regime's war crimes and crimes against Belarusians, and to restore justice. To improve the support of Belarusian civil society, including activists on the ground, independent media, and bloggers, the UDF call for more flexibility and creativity from international partners.

⁵ At least 25 people in Belarusian prisons are now in critical health conditions and need immediate treatment.

Priority #2 is to continue demanding the **unconditional release of political prisoners and to support all those repressed by the regime**. Belarusians who fight the regime must not feel abandoned. For this to happen, the democratic world should do more to force the Lukashenka regime to release political hostages. Demands must be present in every statement and in every resolution. The UDF also propose to establish an International Trust Fund in support of those repressed and their families. This money would be used to pay for lawyers, provide financial support for families of the repressed, and finance rehabilitation programs for released political prisoners and their children.

Priority #3 is to **form a coalition of countries and mobilise international support** for democratic Belarus. Belarusians who oppose the regime must feel the strength and solidarity of international support. The fate of Belarus and Ukraine, as well as the wider European space, are interlinked, but addressing the challenges can be confronted simultaneously. Indeed, a positive change in Belarus will help Ukraine defeat Russia. Free Belarus would be the most effective sanctions against the Kremlin. For this to happen, a proactive strategy towards Belarus, including a two-sided approach is required: maximum pressure on the Lukashenka regime on the one side and support for the Belarusian pro-democracy movement, on the other. The international community should keep the Belarusian issue on the agenda and raise it in international organisations, such as the European Parliament, Council of Europe or OSCE. It should also seek to formalise, if possible, the relations with Belarusian democratic forces as the true representatives of the Belarusian people.

Priority #4 is to **support Belarusians who fled** and continued their work from exile. A number of repressed NGOs, businesses, independent media, which relocated to European Union countries or Ukraine, and continued their activities, need support. They face multiple challenges with visas and legalisation of their status at the precise time when the regime intends to deprive them of their birth right — Belarusian citizenship. In this context, softer and faster visa policies towards Belarusians who refuse to collaborate with the regime, are required. It is important to provide scholarships for students and create opportunities for relocated Belarusian businesses. Urgent solutions are needed for those thousands of people who can be suddenly deprived of Belarusian citizenship.

Priority #5 is to **strengthen the resilience of Belarusian society** and maintain Belarusian national identity. It's a rather crucial question. The UDF promote Belarusian culture and history. Belarusians must know that they are intrinsically and forever linked to Europe and are not a subsumed part of the “Russian world.” And for this to happen, support for cultural and educational initiatives as well as civil society initiatives or youth exchanges, is needed. It is important to show to Belarusians that they could have a European future.

Priority #6 is to continue to **prepare for democratic transition** and its possible scenarios. Democratic Forces have already drafted the new Constitution, which will guarantee that no dictatorship can return in the future. And laws on electoral processes, economic, social and judicial reforms are currently being prepared along with the professional reserves for New

Belarus. The UDF's plan is to have thousands of skilled and trained professionals in public administration and other spheres that will rebuild Belarus. For this, internships, fellowships, scholarships are needed for Belarusian people.

The international dimension

International actors can contribute to the six priorities outlined in the previous section. For this, they need to give clear support to the pro-democracy forces of Belarus. To start with, continuation of the political isolation of the Lukashenka regime is a precondition, such as through blocking the request for a non-permanent UN Security Council seat in 2024. Furthermore, it is important to keep the Belarus question included in all international agendas. For example, Estonia together with the Democratic Forces of Belarus arranged a side event in OSCE for a ministers meeting last December. Similar events include meetings held at the United Nations on the General Assembly level, an area format of meetings in the margins of the Security Council as well as on the EU level.

As the United Transitional Cabinet has been formed, it is important for the West to support this Cabinet — financially, politically, diplomatically, while developing new policies and transmitting and sharing them with the Belarusian people.

International actors should also continue with further sanctioning of Belarus to avoid any kind of gaps in the current sanctioning systems, which would give a certain leverage and oxygen to Lukashenka and power and business circles around him. On the other hand, the harsher sanctions against Putin's regime also impact the future of Lukashenka. When Russia fails in Ukraine, it will act as an accelerator, leading to the rapid fall of the Lukashenka regime.

Current challenges

In spite of many positive developments within the democratically-minded Belarusian community and its leadership, there are also diverse challenges they are facing.⁶

First, it has historically been difficult to coordinate the opposition. The unity of the opposition in Belarus is a fundamental task for the democratic movement to strive for. The relations between the various actors of the opposition, including the United Transitional Cabinet, the Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment in Ukraine and the traditional opposition parties that have been around since the early 1990s, are often complicated.

⁶ For more info see <https://kalinouski.org/en/>

Second, information is critical, even more so in times of war. The Belarusian people are bombarded daily with propaganda from various government sources in Russia and Belarus. A goal and a challenge is to inform the Belarusian people inside the country about the real situation in Ukraine and to fight against any form of propaganda and the information blocks imposed by the Lukashenka regime.

Third, it remains a challenge for the Belarusian pro-democracy forces to formulate a clear strategy towards Russia. On the one hand, the Belarusian opposition unquestionably stands with Ukraine and condemns Russia's brutal war against its neighbour. On the other hand, the start of Russia's full-scale invasion has not fundamentally altered Belarusians' attitudes towards Russia. According to public opinion polls, over 70 per cent of the population have largely benign views of Russia (almost the same percentage as for Ukraine)⁷.

Conclusions

This policy brief outlines the main strategic objectives for the democratic opposition in Belarus in 2023. Prevention of the further dragging of Belarus into Russia's war remains the key priority and a challenge for the pro-democracy forces. They also need to maintain international attention and support as well as retain connections and visibility in the domestic context. Finding an appropriate balance between the two dimensions and ways to engage with the people inside Belarus will remain an important task in the new year.

The role of information has significantly increased in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The situation with the media in Belarus is critical. Access to almost all independent outlets is blocked or limited, dozens of journalists remain 'behind bars' for doing their job. In this context, informing Belarusians about the war and countering the propaganda of Russia and the Lukashenka regime remains an important, but also challenging task for the Belarusian opposition. Giving Belarusians access to information regarding their country and beyond is crucial for maintaining connections with the people on the ground and having a better understanding of the situation inside the, increasingly isolated, country.

Against this backdrop, the policy brief has also sought to shed light on what the international community can do to support the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people. This includes keeping Belarus on the agenda, supporting the Belarusian opposition, increasing diplomatic and financial pressure on the Lukashenka regime, and sustaining support for Belarusian civil society.

In conclusion, while Belarusians continue their struggle against the increasingly brutal dictatorship at home, the message of the international community needs to be clear,

⁷“Eleventh Survey Wave. How Belarusians' views on the war have changed over six months (poll conducted 4-21 August 2022)”, Belarus Initiative, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-11>.

determined, persistent and steadfast - that those people responsible for crimes against the Belarusian people *will* be held accountable. To this end, unity among the West is essential, as it also provides a great example to the opposition forces in Belarus so that they could strive for unity in their long-standing fight against the dictatorship.

Policy recommendations

1. For the six key priorities for the UDF outlined in the analysis section, it is critical to launch a robust information and communication campaign to reach the domestic audience in Belarus and counter the propaganda of Russia and the Lukashenka regime.
2. The international community must not place the Lukashenka regime and Belarusians in the same basket. It is Lukashenka who supports Putin, not the people of Belarus.
3. It is important to refrain from simple, possibly appealing, but definitely deeply harmful solutions, such as visa bans on Belarusians. These actions do not hurt the regime; only those democratic forces bravely trying to oppose it.
4. The provision of practical, technical support and expertise to the UDF in preparing laws and reforms would represent a significant contribution.

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