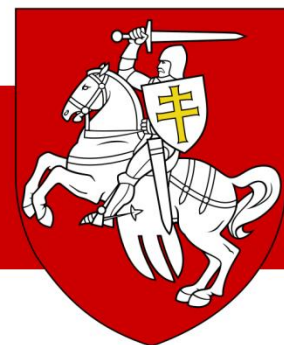




Policy Brief

The power of self-organisation during the war in Ukraine and occupation of Belarus: Examining grassroots initiatives

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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.

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Executive Summary

This policy brief offers a recap of the discussion held on 3 November, at the webinar conjointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) and the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST). The discussion focused on the powerful rise of self-organisation and grassroots solidarity in Ukraine and Belarus following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The wave of solidarity in Ukraine and Belarus is built on the acts of ordinary people. Grassroots activism has become an important aspect of resistance in both countries. This policy brief explores the potential and key challenges experienced by volunteers and activists in both countries and identifies the main areas where self-organisation is utilised. The policy brief also develops three specific policy recommendations to improve cooperation between grassroots activism in Belarus and Ukraine.

Background

Russia's war against Ukraine has brought about a powerful rise of self-organisation and grassroots solidarity in Ukraine and Belarus. Responding to the very challenging situation on the ground, and operating in difficult life-threatening circumstances, volunteers and activists are working to change political equilibrium in favour of democracy and freedoms. Yet challenges persist, including tensions between the volunteer movement and the President's office in Ukraine; between volunteers in Ukraine and those from Belarus, and through underground resistance in Belarus. In the latter, democratically minded activists offer help where possible to the Ukrainians, in their joint fight for freedom and democracy. This includes information support, medical volunteering and participation in military units (Kalinouski regiment). However, due to Lukashenka's support for Putin's war there has been a rise of Belarusophobia, despite the support being at odds with the will of the Belarusian people. In turn, this is stifling the joint fight against repressive dictatorships.

What are the most important developments in the current Ukrainian volunteer movement? What do Belarusians do to support Ukraine? How can they act under the current repressive environment in the country? What problems do Belarusian volunteers face in Ukraine? These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar on November 3rd 2022.

The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by **Dr Anastasiia Kudlenko**, Institute for Global Sustainable Development, the University of Warwick and the speakers of the event included **Anton Motolko**, Head of iSANS Monitoring Unit, Leader of the Belarusian Hajun Project; **Andrej Stryzhak**, Head of BYSOL Fund; Olga Chyzhova, Communication Director for Ukrainian Prism Foreign Policy Council; **Yevhen Mahda**, Director of the Institute of World Politics, Ukraine; **Palina Brodik**, Free Belarus Center Coordinator.

Analysis of the issue

Self-organisation has become an important factor to assess political and social dynamics in Ukraine and Belarus in the recent past. In Ukraine, self-organisation and volunteer movements came to the forefront during the Revolution of Dignity in 2013 and Russia's military aggression against the country in 2014, which led to the annexation of Crimea. In Belarus, it was firstly the lack of an adequate response from the Government towards COVID-19 and then the protests against the rigged presidential elections in 2020 that mobilised people to self-organise. Today, self-organisation and grassroots solidarity matter even more in both countries in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and *de facto* occupation of Belarus. In both cases, volunteers and activists risk their lives for the sake of sovereignty, democracy and freedom. This policy brief explores the potential and key challenges experienced by volunteers and activists in both countries and looks at the main areas where self-organisation is utilised.

Ukraine

Self-organisation is one of the critical elements in building the modern Ukrainian political nation. Its manifestations can be expressed in the form of a famous Ukrainian national saying, "My home is at the edge —so I meet the enemy first." Self-organisation is one of the elements of the Ukrainian national culture and an essential part of traditional life. The Ukrainian community is characterised by the phenomenon of '*toloka*' which means joint actions to fulfil a common goal and stems from the insufficient level of income of Ukrainian peasants, the need for local consolidation of efforts and joint actions to achieve goals.¹

The Revolution of Dignity in 2013 became a scalable example of the self-organisation of Ukrainian society. It is worth noting the change in the nature of this process: it is no longer carried out by peasants but primarily by residents of large cities, financially secure and not indifferent, relying on networking. Due to self-organisation, the volunteer movement, which met the needs of the Revolution of Dignity, turned into a powerful support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the spring of 2014. Volunteer battalions that emerged in 2014 and later became part of the Armed Forces and the National Guard are also examples of self-organisation.

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army generated new manifestations of self-organisation. Among them are protests in the occupied territories, which have become an unprecedented manifestation of civic activity. Facilitating the evacuation of millions of Ukrainian citizens also became possible thanks to the self-organisation of the people. The activities of various foundations (such as "Come Back Alive," "Sprava Hromad," Prytula

¹ Until the 1930s, the Ukrainian economy was predominantly rural based on agriculture. *Toloka* was more common among people in rural areas.

Foundation) have collected hundreds of millions of *hryvnias* as donations to purchase equipment necessary for the defenders of Ukraine. It is important to state that self-organisation in Ukraine is developing due to the inefficiency of state policy in many areas. However, it carries the potential to provide ground for building a more effective state.

Belarus

When military invasion started in February 2022, Belarusian organisations in Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania were among the first ones to organise a sustainable network of assistance to the victims of the war. The findings of a recent survey are important in this context. The survey, supported by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, covered the Belarusian diaspora communities in Lithuania, Poland and Georgia, who had to flee after the start of the political repressions in 2020.² More than 70% participated in volunteering or donated money, or participated in public rallies, or helped in other ways, including the provision of food, accommodation, or clothing for refugees fleeing the war.

There are many different Belarusian grassroots organisations engaged in activities to support Ukrainians, including:

The *Belarusian Hajun* project was launched in January 2022 to follow all military movements on the ground in Belarus in order to provide the Ukrainian Army with important data and thus to save the lives of Ukrainians. This is a grassroots initiative and information about military movements in Belarus comes from ordinary people, who live in Belarus and watch, record and take pictures of all movements and provide this information to the *Belarusian Hajun*. Around 30,000 people in Belarus are involved in this project.

BYSOL Foundation sends medical supplies, bulletproof vests or helmets to the Ukrainian army. *BYSOL* foundation works inside Ukraine and helps Ukrainian medics, warriors, refugees etc.

The Free Belarus Center launched 60 evacuation buses from Kyiv, Kramatorsk, Dnipro and Khmelnytskyi to the Western parts of Ukraine and to the border with Poland. The majority of people who took these buses were Ukrainians.

Problematic areas and blurred boundaries

There are certain problematic areas that undermine the full potential of cooperation between Ukrainians and pro-democratic self-organised groups in Belarus. Most of the people in

² Oleg Alampiyev, Philipp Bikanau, "Belarusians in Poland, Lithuania, Georgia: Attitude to the War, Help to Ukraine, Discrimination," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, August 2022, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19509.pdf>.

Belarus who protested against rigged elections in 2020, also supported democratic movements in Belarus's neighbourhood—in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the pro-democratic grassroots organisations declared full support for the Ukrainian nation, fighting against Putin's Russia.

At later stages, however, certain problematic areas emerged. As the war intensified and the Lukashenka regime allowed Russia to launch the missiles from Belarusian territory and air space, the tensions between Ukraine and Belarus heightened. This is because the boundaries between the Lukashenka regime and Belarusian people—most of whom are against Lukashenka and his complicity in Russia's war in Ukraine—were blurred. At times, the difference between the Lukashenka regime and the pro-democratic Belarusians is also overlooked in Ukraine. Many people who could support Ukrainians are inclined to refrain from doing so because of the frustration. Furthermore, Russian media try to drive a wedge between Ukrainians and pro-democratic Belarusians by communicating the message that 'Belarusians are together with Russians; Belarusians are part of the Russian system.' For instance, when Russian troops entered Chernihiv, the Ukrainians wondered whether Belarusian soldiers joined them. It was proven later that this was not the case, but Russia tried to create this impression. Even some tanks were reported to have Belarusian flags on them as a direct provocation to call for reaction from the Ukrainian side.³

Conclusions

The wave of solidarity in Ukraine and Belarus is built on the actions of ordinary people. Grassroots activism has become an important aspect of resistance in both countries. Ukrainians self-organise to defend their country and pro-democratic Belarusians self-organise to win their democratic future. As the Lukashenka regime became an aggressor by opening Belarus's territory to the Russian soldiers, the bilateral relations between Belarusian and Ukrainian people also entered into a more complicated mode. It is important to establish communication channels between Ukraine and Belarusian grassroots organisations to counter Russian propaganda and to provide better mutual understandings of the people of both countries to each other. On that note, Western partners, supporting democratic movements in Belarus and Ukraine against Russian invasion, need to play their role by creating common platforms for communication and for building bridges between the two countries.

Based on the analysis in this policy briefing, three policy recommendations stand out:

Policy recommendations

³ In October, Lukashenka announced he ordered Belarus soldiers to move towards the Ukrainian border to accompany the Russian army. See Ben Hall, Christopher Miller, and Raphael Minder, "Military briefing: Ukraine frets about a new Belarus front," *Financial Times*, 13 October 2022.

1. It is important to keep emphasising the difference between the Lukashenka regime and pro-democratic forces in Belarus. Fostering communication and trust building mechanisms between Ukrainian and pro-democratic Belarussian grassroots initiatives would help in negating Lukashenka's and Putin's propaganda which tries to equate Lukashenka's regime with the Belarusian people and Belarus with Putin's Russia.
 2. Self-organisation in Ukraine and Belarus has recently proven to be incredibly valuable. The experience, however, also suggests that volunteer efforts should be supported by a certain level of non-volunteer work — be it on organisational, regional or state levels. This would increase the durability and resilience of these grassroots movements.
 3. More awareness is needed of the work done by grassroots movements in both Ukraine and Belarus, as well as opportunities to be explored for common initiatives. On the one hand, this would improve trust between Ukrainian and Belarusian counterparts; while on the other hand, this will allow them to learn from each other and be even more effective in their respective fights for freedom.
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