

POLICY BRIEF

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# BELARUS IN UKRAINE'S FOREIGN POLICY

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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 (2022-23); the **GCRF COMPASS+** project on Central Eurasia (2022-23), the EU Horizon project **SHAPEDEM** focusing on the eastern neighbourhood and Belarus in particular (2022-25), and DFF **AGMOW** project (SDU, 2023-26) focusing on Russia. IGSD has expertise from life science, humanities and social sciences and champions transdisciplinary research for transformative change.





## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This policy brief focuses on the place for Belarus in Ukraine's foreign policy. The policy brief examines the treatment of Belarus and Belarusians by the Ukrainians and their government, especially whether the latter distinguishes between Belarusians (including the diaspora) and the regime. It also examines how the Lukashenka regime approaches Ukraine as well as the policy stance of the democratic forces in Belarus. This brief suggests that bilateral relations between Belarus and Ukraine operate on two distinct levels. On the one hand, the Lukashenka regime has adopted an explicitly anti-Ukrainian position. On the other hand, democratic forces in Belarus have condemned the regime's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and actively oppose the war. The Ukrainian authorities have so far used "strategic uncertainty" as their main policy stance towards Belarusian democratic forces. This policy brief concludes with a set of policy recommendations.

## **BACKGROUND**

What is the Ukrainian government's policy towards Belarus and Belarusians? Since February 2022, the Belarusian regime has supported Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, while public opinion polls show that Belarusian society is overwhelmingly against the country's involvement in the war. In this complex context, while Ukraine, to some extent, halted its contacts with Belarusian authorities after the 2020 fraudulent presidential elections, it nevertheless did not cut diplomatic ties with Lukashenka's regime and economic relations between the two continue even now. While official Kyiv expresses support for the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people and acknowledges the anti-military attitude and actions of many Belarusians, the Ukrainian leadership has been rather reluctant to engage with the Belarusian democratic forces.

What are Belarus-Ukraine relations like today, and what are the main factors which determine them? How can connections between Ukraine and democratic Belarus be built? What can domestic and international actors do to help build an alliance between the two nations? How might relations between the two countries evolve in the future?

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 for Global Sustainable Development) on the 28th of February 2023. The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Elena Korosteleva, Professor of Politics and Global Sustainable Development at the University of Warwick; and Co-founder of the Oxford Belarus Observatory. Speakers at the event included Oleksiy Goncharenko, Ukrainian Parliament Member, Vice President of the PACE Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons; Valery Kavaleuski, Deputy Head at the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus and Representative on Foreign Affairs, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; Yevhen Mahda, Director of the Institute of World Policy, Ukraine; and Andrei Kazakevich, Director of the "Political Sphere" Political Studies Institute, Belarus.

### ***BELARUS-UKRAINE RELATIONS: BETWEEN PRAGMATIC COOPERATION AND WAR***

The relationship between Belarus and Ukraine is complex and multifaceted. The two countries share a border that stretches over 1,000 km. This geographic proximity alone has significant implications for their relationship and mutual importance. Since the 1990s, Belarus and Ukraine have taken divergent paths. While Belarus quickly slid into authoritarianism, Ukraine experienced a series of uprisings that brought about a change, and changes of power. Despite differences in political regimes and geopolitical aspirations of the two countries, pragmatism remained at the core of official policies towards each other. While Lukashenka's regime opposed Western integration, he continued to have dynamic political and economic relations with Ukraine. Similarly, while Ukraine proclaimed aspirations to join the EU, it also maintained relationships with its neighbouring dictatorial regime.

The Revolution of Dignity and the start of Russia's aggression in the east of Ukraine in 2014 posed a challenge for Belarus-Ukraine relations. While the Lukashenka regime strove for balance in its Russia – Ukraine relations and did not recognise the annexation of Crimea, it continued to maintain good relations with Russia and supported some of its claims. This balancing act made it possible for Belarus to become a host of the Minsk process, a series of negotiations about the war in Donbas. This process also provided an additional tool for Lukashenka's regime to emerge from the international isolation in which it had found itself after the brutal crackdown on mass protests following the 2010 fraudulent elections.

In 2020, a critical turning point was reached in Belarus-Ukraine relations, following significant changes in Belarusian domestic politics. Despite Ukraine's non-recognition of Lukashenka's regime and expression of support for Belarusian peaceful protest, official Kyiv maintains strong economic ties with its neighbour. However, the Lukashenka regime has become increasingly critical of Ukraine since 2020, in particular due to its non-recognition of the Belarus government and criticism of gross violations of human rights. This has strained bilateral relations between the two countries, which had previously been characterised by pragmatic coexistence.

Bilateral relations between Ukraine and Belarus underwent a dramatic shift following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Russian army used Belarusian territory and military infrastructure to launch its attack on Ukraine, significantly altering the nature of the relationship between the two countries. While the Lukashenka regime aligned with Russia as a co-aggressor against Ukraine, a significant proportion of the Belarusian population expressed support for Ukraine. According to a Chatham House opinion poll conducted in August 2022, approximately 30% of the Belarusian population support Russia, while around 45% do not support it and express sympathy for Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. This suggests that despite the Lukashenka regime's pro-Russian stance, a significant proportion of Belarusians do not share the regime's views on the war in Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. This pro-Ukrainian sentiment among the Belarusian population is reflected in a number of initiatives and acts of resistance in support of Ukraine.

### ***BELARUSIANS AND ACTS OF RESISTANCE IN SUPPORT OF UKRAINE***

The people of Belarus, in a decentralised and self-organising manner, have done several things to express their support for the Ukrainian people, along with taking certain practical steps to put their support into action.

One example of bold resistance in Belarus is the activities of the railway partisans, who have been active since the beginning of the full-scale war<sup>2</sup>. These partisans are a group of activists who have been sabotaging the transportation of Russian military equipment through Belarus<sup>3</sup>. They have been using various tactics, including cutting railway tracks, to disrupt the movement of Russia's forces through Belarus. In February 2023, for example, Belarusian partisans reportedly used drones to severely damage a Russian reconnaissance plane, incurring significant costs for the Russians<sup>4</sup>.

Another example of resistance against the Lukashenka regime's pro-Russian stance and support for Russia's aggression in Ukraine is the work of the Belarusian Hajun<sup>5</sup>. This group has provided invaluable information about the movements of Russian troops in Belarus, particularly those that are relevant to the ongoing war in Ukraine. The Belarusian Hajun has been instrumental in helping Ukrainians better understand the situation on the ground and make informed decisions in their military operations.

Third, Belarusian volunteers, the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment, and others support the Ukrainian forces in their fight against the Russian army. According to various estimates, at least 500 Belarusians are now fighting against Russian aggression in Ukraine<sup>6</sup>. The group of Belarusian hackers, Cyberpartisans, also proved instrumental by targeting official sources in Belarus and Russia.

### LINKS AND INFORMATION

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1. How Belarusians' views on the war have changed over six months, Chatham House, August 2022, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. "The Belarusian railway workers who helped thwart Russia's attack on Kyiv", Washington Post, 23 April 2022, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
3. Unfortunately, the partisans who have been arrested in Belarus are faced with severe repression not only against themselves but also against their family members. For instance, a brother of one of the railway activists was de facto taken hostage by the secret services with the demand that he stop his activities.  
[read article](#),  
[read article](#)
4. Belarus partisans say they blew up Russian plane near Minsk, The Guardian, 27 February 2023, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
5. Belarusian Hajun project, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
6. How Belarusian Fighters in Ukraine Evolved Into Prominent Force Against Russian Invasion, VOA News, 2 April 2022, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

### ***BELARUSIAN PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT AND UKRAINE***

Despite not recognising Lukashenka's legitimacy after the 2020 elections, official Kyiv maintained a cautious approach towards the Belarusian pro-democracy movement led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, the Belarusian Democratic Forces took a principled stance condemning Russian aggression and showing support for Ukraine. Belarus' National Leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, accused Lukashenka of treason for dragging the country into the war against Ukraine<sup>1</sup>.

Since then, the pro-democracy movement in Belarus has taken several actions to align with Ukraine and provide support. The Belarusian democratic forces have been vocal in expressing their support for Ukraine both during their visits abroad and in their public statements. They have also called on the international community to stand in solidarity with Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression. Furthermore, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team developed closer relations with several line ministers in the Ukrainian Government –the Minister of Culture and Information Policy, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Migration Service, and the National Bank of Ukraine. A Representation Office was opened in Kyiv in May 2022 to coordinate joint action on the political field and maintain contacts with experts, media, civil society, politicians, and government officials.

In response, the Ukrainian government has maintained a cautious approach towards the Belarusian Democratic Forces using “strategic uncertainty” as its main policy principle. For example, Ukraine still has its Embassy in Belarus leaving open the option for a possible dialogue with Lukashenka's regime<sup>2</sup>.

### LINKS AND INFORMATION

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1. Tsikhanouskaya Accuses Lukashenka Of 'Treason' Over Belarus's Role In Ukraine, Radio Free Liberty, 26 February 2022, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. Recently, Belarus ordered the closure of Ukraine's Consulate in Brest in the south-west of Belarus and required several diplomatic staff from Ukraine's Embassy in Minsk to leave, which strained relations between the two countries even further. [SEE HERE](#)





### CONCLUSIONS

Bilateral relations between Belarus and Ukraine operate on two distinct levels. On the one hand, the Lukashenka regime has adopted an explicitly anti-Ukrainian position. On the other hand, the Belarusian Democratic Forces have condemned the regime's complicity in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and have taken an active stance in the war. The key issue is that the lack of democracy in Belarus poses a threat not only to its citizens who aspire to a better future, but also to neighbouring countries during a time of significant geopolitical change in the region.

Although it may not be possible to solve existing trust issues once and for all, a closer cooperation between parties would be instrumental in countering Russian propaganda that suggests "Russia is equal to Belarus and Belarus is equal to Lukashenka." Even small steps can gradually culminate into a more substantive rapprochement. All in all, both peoples, Belarusians and Ukrainians, need to ensure that dialogue will happen. And then it will be possible to know how each side actually supports each other towards a more democratic and secure region.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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- 1** The Ukrainian government should have more cooperation with the Belarusian Democratic Forces, including the United Transitional Cabinet and the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The Ukrainian parliament should also work in closer cooperation with the United Transitional Cabinet and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to further isolate Lukashenka.
- 2** The degree of mutual suspicion and lack of understanding between Belarusian and Ukrainian societies is quite high. It is clear that some tension exists in different parts of Belarusian society concerning Ukraine –and vice versa. Both Ukrainian officials and the Belarusian Democratic Forces should work more closely to mitigate existing suspicion and overwhelming levels of disinformation, and better articulate the difference between Lukashenka's regime, the Belarusian Democratic Forces, and the Belarusian people when it comes to the war in Ukraine.
- 3** It is important for the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian experts and media to put more emphasis on the Belarusian diaspora and seek closer ties with the Belarusian democratic forces that are outside of the country.
- 4** There is a need to bring greater attention to the Ukrainian audience of the various acts of resistance taking place in Belarus. For example, Ukrainian people can remember Meriem Gerasimenko, a singer who sang the song of the Ukrainian singer Vakarchuk and was sentenced to forced labour for three years. Ukrainian musical TV channels can broadcast Belarusian music as a sign of support. In a similar vein, more information about the Belarusian railway partisans could be made available to Ukrainian citizens.



# CONTACTS

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