

POLICY BRIEF

**BELARUS' ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN
MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS:
FEMALE ACTIVISM IN TIMES OF
TERROR AND WAR**

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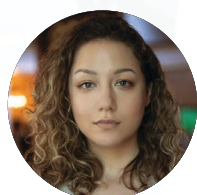
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OXFORD BELARUS OBSERVATORY: The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. 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 women's political activism in Belarus in times of massive repression under the Lukashenka regime. The policy briefing, which is based on a webinar on the same topic, poses and discusses several interrelated questions: What is the current situation with Belarusian female activism and gender equality in the country? How has the female-led resistance evolved, and what forms does it take now, in particular in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine? And also, how does female activism continue to challenge the increasingly repressive authoritarianism in Belarus? In the final part, the briefing offers three policy recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Belarusian women have been at the forefront of the anti-authoritarian movement in Belarus since 2020. According to the Belarusian human rights centre Viasna, there are around 200 women political prisoners, including students, activists, political scientists, and even pensioners¹. Joining in large numbers and acting as visible leaders, women stood together to confront the authoritarian patriarchy, and to continue challenging the existing gender norms expressing their opposition to and disdain of Lukashenka's regime.

The fight for women's rights and equality thus connects with a broader fight against the repressive nature of Belarus' authoritarian political regime, and more widely, with a transition movement for democratic change and women's rights, as highlighted by SDG 5 'Gender Equality' of the United Nations' commitment for a more just and sustainable world. Since the 2020 fraudulent elections, what is the current situation with Belarusian female activism and gender equality demands for justice against violence in Belarus? How has the female-led resistance evolved and what forms does it now take, in particular in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine? And how does female activism continue to challenge the increasingly repressive authoritarianism in Belarus?

These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Oxford Belarus Observatory and IGSD University of Warwick (Institute for Global Sustainable Development) on 16 March 2023. The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Tatsiana Chulitskaya, Research Associate Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO), Fellow Researcher Vilnius University and Manchester Metropolitan University. Speakers included Elena Gapova, Professor at Department of Sociology, Western Michigan University; Founding Director of Centre for Gender Studies at European Humanities University; Anastasia Kostyugova, Co-founder of Stratcomlab, Media Expert, Co-founder of the Women in White Movement; Alena Aharelysheva, Master of Arts in Sociology, Gender Studies; Member of Fem Group Coordination Council Belarus; Veranika Laputka, Co-founder, EAST Centre, Poland.

1. For more information, see Belarus Women's Foundation [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, women in Belarus played an unprecedented and pivotal role in the social mobilisation and protests that swept the country. In response to a disputed presidential election and mass-scale violence, women took to the streets in mass protests, demanding change and a new direction for their country. Their bravery, resilience, and solidarity inspired many around the world and challenged traditional patriarchal gender roles in Belarusian society. However, as the political crisis in Belarus has continued to deepen, with the country now drawn into Russia's war against Ukraine, it is more important than ever to recognize and analyse the vital role that women continue to play in the ongoing struggle against the authoritarian system.

Following the 2020 crackdown on peaceful protests, Belarusian women have faced increasing repression and violence from the Lukashenka regime but continued to mobilise and organise, creating networks of support and solidarity both within Belarus and abroad. As mass protests have been violently suppressed, it is crucial to highlight the ongoing underground activities and small-scale actions of solidarity that continue to demonstrate the resilience and determination of the Belarusian people. The ongoing fight for democracy and transformation of resistance, led in large part by women inside the country and abroad, is a central focus of this policy brief.

WOMEN'S MOBILISATION IN BELARUS: THREE STAGES

The 'post-election' mobilisation of women in Belarus can be broadly divided into three distinct stages.

The first stage began when Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maryia Kalesnikava, and Veranika Tsapkala joined forces in the quest for change¹. Tsikhanouskaya's case is a prime example of this stage. She first came onto the political stage as a technical candidate who acted on behalf of all citizens while having her perspective as a woman in the violent patriarchal order. This moment marked the (re-)emergence of women as citizens, who were able to assert their agency by joining men in the presidential campaign and later in the streets while maintaining their distinct identity. This change happened after two of the main male presidential candidates (Viktar Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski) had been arrested, and one (Valery Tsapkala) had fled the country. The iconic photo of the three women standing together marked a turning point in the protest movement, inspiring thousands of Belarusians to join the cause. The involvement of these three women, in particular, galvanised support for the popular pro-democracy movement, and helped to create a sense of unity and solidarity among (female) activists in the country.

The second stage unfolded just three days after the August 9 'election', when 200 women dressed in white and holding flowers joined hands to form the first solidarity chain in downtown Minsk. This act of defiance was both radical and unexpected. It came in the midst of unprecedented violence

unfolding on the streets, with the internet shutdown, thousands of cases of torture and brutal beatings, and several fatalities reported. The unauthorised and risky nature of the demonstration added to its impact, with the use of common objects like white flowers and apparel adding a symbolic element to the protest.

The third stage of women's mobilisation in Belarus was marked by mass mobilisation and gender performance. After the turning point of the solidarity chain, people turned to the power of gathering. During this period, peaceful forms of civic disagreement, such as regular women's rallies on Saturdays, community festivals, street art, and internet campaigns, were prevalent. Women used gendered messages that reactivated their moral agency and power, often invoking the image of motherhood. For example, one protest placard read: "Rising up for my grandchildren, Tanechka and Sashenka," while another pointedly questioned law enforcement: "You tortured my son. How are you going to stop me, his mother?"

During the third stage of women's mobilisation in Belarus, ethical demands were central. Women and other protestors demanded respect, dignity, and justice, rather than just material gains like higher wages or better work gear. This reflects the deep-seated social anxiety that had been brewing in Belarusian society for some time and a growing divide between the archaic conservative state system and a modernising society that wants change.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. E. Gapova's chapter in E. Korosteleva et al (2023) Belarus in the XXI century: between dictatorship and democracy. Routledge.

FEMALE ACTIVISM IN BELARUS AFTER 2022: BETWEEN REPRESSIONS AND WAR

In the context of repressions continuing since autumn 2020 and the later escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022–2023, the landscape of female activism in Belarus has undergone a significant shift. Fearful for their safety and security, many women activists and initiatives that were once visible and active in Belarus had to flee to neighbouring countries along with thousands of Belarusians seeking refuge. Many female activists appear to be in prison or are followed by the repressive authorities inside the country.

Nevertheless, recent research indicates that between one third and one fourth of female activists (with around 60% of respondents being in Belarus) have been involved in political actions since February 2022¹. Belarusian women have been able to draw on their previous experience of activism in the post-2020 period to more effectively mobilise at the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, given the current situation in Belarus, political activism can be risky, with even minor involvement (for exam-

ple posting in a Telegram chat or having a media presence) potentially leading to arrest. Women's political activism in Belarus is primarily focused on the private sphere and often takes place in the digital realm.

Therefore, in the period after 2022, Belarusian female activism is marked by the contradictory combination of two distinct characteristics. On the one hand, in contrast to 2020, many women in Belarus have experienced some retreat back into their private lives in recent months. While previously, women reported having little time for household duties due to their involvement in political activism, recent research suggests that the majority of women have had to prioritise other duties, such as employment and daily tasks². Since 2021 many civil society and grassroots organisations have been formally liquidated, but they continue to operate on a de facto voluntary basis. As a result, women in Belarus often find themselves torn between their responsibilities and their desire to continue fighting for change. In this context, balancing paid work, household responsibilities, and unpaid political activism can be challenging, leading many women to prioritise certain duties over others due to time constraints and widespread fear.

On the other hand, shrinking public space for engagement does not mean that political activism has ceased altogether. In fact, at the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Belarusian women activists prioritised political engagement (again). They initiated the Mothers Movement, aiming to persuade the military to avoid the war, and to unite mothers who feared for their children. Women still pursue these efforts, both within and outside Belarus. For example, women continue to play an essential role in providing support for political prisoners. We may claim the appearance in Belarus of a new concept of "prison management" which refers to the role of caring for political prisoners, which is predominantly performed by women. At the same time, meetings among active women in Belarus now have become more focused on different business initiatives, psychological support, and various hobby initiatives as activists seek to find ways to support each other and create an encouraging social network and an informal web of solidarity³. Although this connection between women is still maintained by various civil society groups abroad, some of their activities may not be immediately visible to ordinary Belarusians.

Overall, female activism in Belarus is still notable and takes on different forms, both inside and outside the country. Against the backdrop of the current grave situation in Belarus, it remains a crucial challenge to ensure that women activists who played and still play a significant role in the pro-democracy movement are not forgotten and pushed back from the political arena. It is imperative that their voices are heard and that they remain visible and outspoken. Recognition of the role of women in the protests is an essential part of the possible future democratisation of the patriarchal authoritarian system, as women's participation and representation are crucial for the creation of a truly democratic society.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Studie »Formen der politischen Partizipation und des Aktivismus von Frauen« (September / Oktober 2020; Juli 2022), BELARUS-ANALYSEN AUSGABE 65 (31.03.2023), [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. Studie »Formen der politischen Partizipation und des Aktivismus von Frauen« (September / Oktober 2020; Juli 2022), BELARUS-ANALYSEN AUSGABE 65 (31.03.2023), [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
3. "Every second became an activist after August 2020." A study of Belarusian women's activism was presented in Vilnius", Radio Svaboda, 19 January 2023 [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

CONCLUSIONS

This policy brief aimed to offer a concise overview of female activism in Belarus. Despite their significant contributions, women in Belarus remain a vulnerable group, facing not only political suppression but also a significant gender gap that undermines their economic status. The Lukashenka regime is not hesitant to use various suppression policies against politically active women's groups, including their families and children. However, women's political activism, which played a critical role in the initial stages of mass mobilisation in 2020, continues to be organised and alive. Based on the analysis, three policy recommendations emerge as crucial.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** It is important to raise awareness about the situation of women in Belarus and the role they continue to play in the pro-democracy movement both within Belarus and abroad. Providing platforms for Belarusian women to speak out and share their experiences could help amplify their voices and create a wider network of trans-national support. In addition, it is crucial to disseminate the stories and activities of Belarusian women through diverse channels such as media, social media, and international forums, and to support the existing initiatives focusing on the topic.
- 2** It is important to help Belarusian activists and female political prisoners who manage to leave after serving their sentence. These women and their families require various forms of support, ranging from material resources to psychological assistance.
- 3** Enhancing the level of collaboration and connectivity among female activists from various countries is crucial. There is a need to strengthen the ties between feminist activists from Belarus, Ukraine, and neighbouring countries through different initiatives.

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