

# Rethinking Western policy towards Belarus

## Summary

- Since early 2022, Russia's use of Belarusian territory and military infrastructure has been a key element in its aggression against Ukraine. As Russia's only formal ally in Europe, Belarus has long occupied a strategically important position, and its significance in terms of European security is greater than ever. Western policymakers should address their historic inattention towards Belarus and strive towards removing the country from Russia's zone of influence and achieving democratization.
- While the new regional context has not fundamentally altered Belarus's political environment, it has consolidated the reality that emerged after the 2020 presidential election. Through repression and rapprochement with Russia Aliaksandr Lukashenka has been able to hold on to power despite Western sanctions and endorsement of the Belarusian pro-democracy movement.
- The West has proved unable to build a results-oriented policy towards the Lukashenka regime, sending ambiguous signals about Western credibility. Following the renewed onset of combat in Ukraine, certain broad-spectrum objectives have disappeared from the West's agenda on Belarus.
- Given the turbulence in the region, which poses great threats but also creates opportunities for change, the policy adopted by the West should allow it to apply the requisite pressure for democratization and offer viable incentives. This policy should also enhance the West's image in Belarusian society, including among middle-ranking government officials, and maintain vigorous support for democratic actors.

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## Introduction

Belarus's current political environment has been shaped by two events: the 2020 political crisis and the initiation by Russia of a fully fledged war against Ukraine in February 2022.

In 2020, following the fraudulent presidential election in Belarus, large-scale peaceful protests and the subsequent mass repressions,<sup>1</sup> the West refused to recognize Aliaksandr Lukashenka's claims of victory. To hold his regime accountable for its egregious human rights violations, the EU, the US, the UK, Canada and other countries (whose policymakers are perceived in Belarus as constituting 'the West') gradually imposed multiple packages of sanctions.<sup>2</sup> Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the presumed winner of the presidential election, was received in many Western capitals and participated in a number of high-level meetings. Furthermore, the West has allocated significant (and sufficient) financial resources to supporting Belarusian civil society, the independent media and other pro-democracy actors. The focus of Western action should now shift to building aid programmes that can be leveraged by the actors most capable of effecting change in Belarus.

Despite this powerful show of Western solidarity with Belarusian pro-democracy actors in the three years since the events of 2020, the Lukashenka regime has managed to cement its position even further over the same period. However, it has simultaneously placed not only Belarus but also its neighbours in a situation of jeopardy. Because of Russian pressure and Lukashenka's perceived acceptance of 'vassal state' status, Belarus has relinquished its sovereignty in the political, economic and military spheres, having become a launching-point in February 2022 for Russian rocket attacks and a land invasion of Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> On 25 March 2023, as this paper was being prepared for publication, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced that Russia was to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, without specifying the time frame.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from being forced to permit its territory to be used in this way, the Belarusian government under Lukashenka has also helped the Russian military by providing logistical support, training troops, providing weapons, treating wounded soldiers and repairing equipment. One of the reasons for Russia's military presence in Belarus is to force Ukraine to devote more resources to the northern border, drawing troops away from the southern and eastern fronts. Rumours about Belarus's possible direct involvement in the war serve a similar purpose. The West's imposition of additional sanctions on Belarus is a logical response to the Lukashenka regime's increasing involvement in the conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> See United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2021), *A/HRC/47/49: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, Anais Marin*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc4749-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-belarus-anais>.

<sup>2</sup> For a timeline of the EU's sanctions against Belarus, see Council of the European Union (2022), 'Timeline – EU restrictive measures against Belarus', <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-belarus/belarus-timeline> (accessed 18 Jan. 2023). The sanctions applied by other Western countries are fairly similar.

<sup>3</sup> Astapenia, R. and Matsukevich, P. (2021), 'Погружение в Россию' [Diving into Russia], Puls Lenina, 10 December 2021, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina31>.

<sup>4</sup> Ljunggren, D. (2023), 'Putin says Moscow to place nuclear weapons in Belarus, US reacts cautiously', Reuters, 25 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-moscow-has-deal-with-belarus-station-nuclear-weapons-there-tass-2023-03-25>.

The number of tools at the West's disposal for influencing Belarus has diminished, and the pro-democracy movement is suffering considerable setbacks, with its leaders either in jail or abroad. As of early 2023, the number of political prisoners comprised roughly 1,600 people,<sup>5</sup> and independent Belarusian media outlets were losing their audience; obstruction and repressions have been partially responsible for this. Under current conditions, almost no-one expects real change to begin in Belarus until the current Russian government has been replaced by a more liberal regime. In the meantime, the Lukashenka regime is entering a period of transition of power. During this period the 68-year-old authoritarian leader will seek to nominate a successor through whom he can exercise effective control. He is very likely to do this as the head of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, a newly constituting Belarusian state institution that will become operational in 2024.

## **No matter how sweeping the repercussions of the war in Ukraine may seem, the fate of Belarus does not necessarily depend on its result.**

This briefing paper does not lay all the blame for the events unfolding in Belarus on the West. Rather, responsibility principally lies with Lukashenka and the Russian government, which oscillates between helping Lukashenka and trying to control him. While Belarusian society remains the main catalyst for democratic change in the country, the West still has a chance to influence the government. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how Western policymakers are utilizing their resources *vis-à-vis* Belarus and to propose concrete ideas for pursuing a more active, broad and effective Belarus policy that will eventually lead to the weakening of Russia's expansionist ambitions in the region. To do this, the paper will draw on existing literature, opinion polls, interviews and meetings with policymakers and experts from the West and Belarus.

This paper begins by setting out the problems that have arisen with Western policies towards Belarus in 2020–23. Next, it outlines potential improvements that the West can bring to its policymaking on Belarus. The paper then concludes with some remarks on the role that the West could play in the country's future.

No matter how sweeping the repercussions of the war in Ukraine may seem, the fate of Belarus does not necessarily depend on its result, especially since there is no knowing how and at what point warfare will stop. Furthermore, this study aims to lead readers away from thinking of Belarus through a single, temporarily relevant, lens: be that Western relations with Lukashenka, support for the democratic movement, or the role played by Belarus in the conflict. Such a narrow approach will inevitably give rise to policy difficulties. To succeed, Western policymaking needs a robust framework within which a whole spectrum of Belarusian actors can be influenced. These include Lukashenka, his officials, Belarusian society and pro-democracy interests.

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<sup>5</sup> Belarusian human rights organizations use slightly different criteria for determining whether a person is being held as a political prisoner. According to the Politzek initiative there were 1,730 political prisoners in Belarus as of 28 March 2023 (<https://politzek.me/en>); according to the Viasna Human Rights Centre there were 1,465 as of the same date (see <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en#list>).

## Problems with Western policies towards Belarus in 2020–23

Since the beginning of the domestic political crisis in 2020, the Belarus question has become a controversy for Western governments. Although Lithuania has attempted to lead Western action towards Belarus, it lacks the diplomatic heft to coordinate policy across the entire West. While the Biden administration in the US has been conducting a more active policy towards Belarus in this period, it has been unwilling to take the lead; meanwhile, policymaking in the EU proceeds slowly, relying on consensus. Individual European countries become less enthusiastic about assuming a leadership role *vis-à-vis* Belarus once they begin to understand the complexity of the situation. One example is Austria, which tried to create a platform for dialogue for all stakeholders but was ignored by both the Belarusian and Russian governments.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the Belarus question has become a problem for everyone – and for no-one. For the West, there is nothing particularly unusual about such cacophony; however, this has not resulted from a constructive mix of policy ideas, but rather from a combination of passivity and sporadic decision-making. Hence, Western foreign policy towards Belarus has quickly come to consist of half measures.

Three particular examples of actions exhibiting a fundamental ambivalence towards Belarus stand out:

- First, the goal of realizing both the complete isolation and the diplomatic non-recognition of the Lukashenka regime has turned out to be unattainable. Time and time again, Western leaders have felt compelled to reach out to Lukashenka to discuss regional security or the release of specific individuals.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while the French ambassador left Belarus, as he did not wish to legitimize the regime by presenting his credentials to Lukashenka, the ambassadors of the EU, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland were advised by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to leave the country, and the appointed ambassador of the US was not allowed to enter Belarus, the ambassador of Switzerland presented her credentials in February 2022. Later the same month, the Belarusian authorities released the political prisoner Natallia Hersche, a Swiss and Belarusian national.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Matsukevich, P. (2021), 'Венский конгресс 2.0. Белорусский выпуск' [Congress of Vienna 2.0. Belarusian edition], Puls Lenina, 12 November 2021, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina28>.

<sup>7</sup> After US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called Lukashenka in October 2020, the Belarusian regime released political consultant Vitali Shklyarov (the husband of a US diplomat); following a call from German chancellor Angela Merkel in November 2021, the migration crisis on Belarus's borders with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia began to resolve itself (aided by the imposition of stringent measures by the governments of the countries affected); and the Israeli lawyer Maya Reiten-Stoll, who had been detained in October 2021 at Minsk airport for the possession of medical marijuana, was freed in late December following a call by Israeli president Isaac Herzog. It is difficult to assess the usefulness of the conversation (on Belarus's role in Russia's war against Ukraine) between Lukashenka and French president Emmanuel Macron that occurred in February 2022 due to insufficient information.

<sup>8</sup> MOST media (2022), 'Як быццам з Асвенцыму выйшла. Брат Наталлі Хершэ — пра яе вызваленне і першыя ўражанні ад сустрэчы' [As if she had come out of Auschwitz: Natalia Hersche's brother talks about her release and the first impressions from the meeting], 18 February 2022, <https://mostmedia.io/2022/02/18/natallia-hershe>.

- Second, although Western politicians have stated their refusal to recognize the Lukashenka regime in the strongest terms, the sanctions imposed by the West before May 2021 were inadequate, weak and overdue,<sup>9</sup> giving the regime cause to believe that the West’s ability to support the protest movement was limited. During 2021, Belarus steadily increased its exports to EU countries,<sup>10</sup> which made it hard to understand whether the West wanted to weaken the regime, or strengthen it.
- Third, Western policy towards Belarus failed to secure the support of certain partners, which reinforced perceptions within the Lukashenka regime that the West’s intentions were not serious: for example, the economic and diplomatic relations between Belarus and countries as diverse as Hungary, Israel, Japan, Moldova and Türkiye changed little after the mass repressions of 2020.

Western policymakers and business interests often justified the West’s prudence before May 2021 by claiming that they did not see the point of sanctions that would make life more difficult for ordinary Belarusians. Experts also named other reasons, for example: ‘the West did not want to raise the stakes in a crisis unfolding in a country that it considered to be part of Russia’s sphere of influence’; ‘avoiding sending Belarus deeper into Russia’s embrace’; ‘the West was waiting for Lukashenka to come to his senses before initiating dialogue with him’; or simply ‘the West did not wish to act against its own economic interests by imposing sanctions on Belarus’.<sup>11</sup>

In any case, the argument about needing to avoid negative ramifications for Belarusian society became less salient when the actions of Lukashenka’s government began directly to affect the interests of the West. In May 2021, as a Ryanair plane flew through Belarusian airspace on its way from Athens to Vilnius, the Belarusian authorities ordered it to be grounded – under false pretences – in order that two Belarusian activists on board could be arrested.<sup>12</sup> From July, the Belarusian regime orchestrated a crisis on the EU border by manipulating migrants from the Middle East by way of the deceptive promise of easy entry to Poland, Lithuania and Latvia from Belarus, as well as helping migrants to cross the border illegally.<sup>13</sup> In February 2022, Lukashenka allowed – or at least did not object to – Russia’s use of Belarusian territory and military infrastructure in its invasion of Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> After each of these episodes, the

<sup>9</sup> Prior to the grounding, while in Belarusian airspace, of a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius under a false pretext in May 2021 – that is, almost a year after the start of mass repressions in Belarus in June 2020 – all that Western actors had been able to do was to place some 100 people deemed to be responsible for the repressions to sanctions lists. People whose names appeared on these lists were forbidden from travelling to the EU, and their assets were frozen; however, in the case of members of the Belarusian security, control, military or similar structures this was hardly punitive, since they rarely travelled to the EU even before the imposition of sanctions and did not have assets there. Slightly earlier, in April 2021, the US had resumed sanctions against a limited number of Belarusian enterprises.

<sup>10</sup> National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (2022), ‘Commodity exports from the Republic of Belarus by non-CIS countries (.xlsx)’, [https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-excel/Oficial\\_statistika/2021/export\\_tovarov-2021-en.xlsx](https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-excel/Oficial_statistika/2021/export_tovarov-2021-en.xlsx) (accessed 18 Jan. 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Research interviews with Belarusian and Western experts, via Zoom app, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Giles, K. (2021), ‘Belarus plane action eases Russian military restraints’, Chatham House Expert Comment, 26 May 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/belarus-plane-action-eases-russian-military-restraints>.

<sup>13</sup> de Biedern, S. (2021), ‘Belarus is new weapon in Putin’s hybrid warfare arsenal’, Chatham House Expert Comment, 18 August 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/08/belarus-new-weapon-putins-hybrid-warfare-arsenal>.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion, see Chatham House (2022), ‘How the Russian invasion of Ukraine changes Belarus’, research event webinar video recording, 29 March 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/how-russian-invasion-ukraine-changes-belarus>.

West imposed sanctions in response to Lukashenka’s actions; notably, however, it stopped closely assessing the impact of those actions on events within Belarus. As one Belarusian pro-democracy figure said: ‘Whereas before May 2021 it was difficult to convince the West to impose sanctions on the businesspeople closest to Lukashenka, after 24 February 2022 the West began sanctioning even those businesspeople who weren’t doing anything wrong.’<sup>15</sup> Belarus is now one of the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world<sup>16</sup> and the West has exhausted most of its capacities in this regard.

Through their sanctions, which formed a large part of Western policy towards the Lukashenka regime (and which were supported by the Belarusian pro-democracy movement), Western states could not achieve the difficult task of punishing the regime without inflicting collateral damage on the Belarusian people. As one expert has pointed out, one of the most flagrant examples of this was a ban on the overflight of EU airspace and on access to EU airports by Belarusian carriers: ‘They deprived Belarusians of the opportunity to fly to the West, but there is no indication that they did anything to damage the stability of the regime.’<sup>17</sup> Concurrently, the sanctions that were supposed to be the most painful for the regime – those focused on specific sectors of the Belarusian economy – have not dealt out significant damage, as Lukashenka has been able to reorient these sectors towards new markets and to solve many of the problems associated with the transit of sanctioned goods.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 1.** Attitudes of urban Belarusians towards Western sanctions

**Question:** In your opinion, with regard to Belarus, the West should...

Impose severe sanctions	8%
Impose soft sanctions	18%
Remove some sanctions	23%
Completely lift sanctions	51%

Source: What Belarusians Think (2022), ‘Belarusians’ perception of the West and Russia: the results of a public opinion poll conducted between 15 and 31 August 2022’, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-12>, slide 13.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many Belarusians – including those who were fleeing the repressions of the Lukashenka regime in Belarus – experienced difficulties obtaining visas for travel into Europe. They also faced discrimination when opening bank accounts, receiving residency permits, renting apartments, enrolling in university, moving businesses abroad, participating in conferences, using services such as Airbnb and Paysera, and more. Although these are all individual cases, when taken together they give the impression that certain

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Belarusian pro-democracy politician, via Zoom app, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Miadzvetskaya, Y. (2022), *Designing Sanctions: Lessons from EU Restrictive Measures against Belarus*, Policy Paper, German Marshall Fund of the United States, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Designing%20Sanctions%20Lessons%20from%20EU%20Restrictive%20Measures%20against%20Belarus.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Belarusian expert, via Zoom app, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Slunkin, P. et al. (2022), ‘Belarus change tracker: June-August 2022’, Briefing, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19563.pdf>.

countries and companies in the West equate the Lukashenka regime not only with its supporters, but also with the Belarusian people who have rejected it. As a result, within Belarusian society there has been an undermining of the West's image as an actor capable of helping the country and its citizens, although arguably this image was never very strong in the first place.<sup>19</sup> There is a risk that Western restrictions could reinforce Russia's propaganda narrative about the West as an enemy; furthermore, the lack of far-reaching communication about the West's motivation could destroy its soft power in Belarus.

## **Western policy on Belarus has become narrow in its scope. As a consequence, the West has become less salient for Belarusian society.**

Western policy on Belarus has become narrow in its scope. As a consequence, the West has become less salient for Belarusian society. To some degree, this is an understandable position given Western governments' focus on the war in Ukraine and Belarus's status as a client state of Russia. Any reduction in attention on the part of the West, however, leaves more space for attention from Russia and reinforces the messages of that regime. Even representatives of EU institutions worry that, although they are launching many programmes aimed at Belarusians, they are not managing to convey sufficient information to their target audiences on these programmes' existence and how to make use of them.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, ties between the West and the Belarusian bureaucratic class have been reduced to a minimum; for example, Belarus has frozen its participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership. Although some observers have pointed out that cooperation with bureaucrats has resulted in far less progress in the modernization of Belarus than could be expected, such ties have nevertheless given the West a better understanding of the Belarusian political system and created the preconditions for a subsequent fragmentation of the regime. A significant portion of those bureaucrats who left Belarusian government networks in 2020 had contacts among Western government officials earlier in their careers.

## **How the West can improve its policymaking on Belarus**

Prior to 2020, Belarusian–Western relations alternated between phases when Belarus would ease repressions and the West would lift sanctions, and times when Belarus would tighten restrictions and the West would penalize it again. Today, Western actors, the Lukashenka regime and the Belarusian democratic movement alike speak negatively – and publicly – about these relationship U-turns of the

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<sup>19</sup> The announcement that the EU is prepared to assist financially in the modernization of Belarus had only reached a limited number of people by August 2021: see *What Belarusians Think (2022)*, 'Belarusians' views on the political crisis: Results of a public opinion poll conducted between 23 July and 3 August 2021', <https://en.belaruspolls.org/waves1-5, slide 26>.

<sup>20</sup> Research interview with a representative of an EU institution, via Signal app, 2022.

past. But in practice, periods of non-hostility between the Lukashenka regime and the West allowed Belarusian civil society to develop, Lukashenka to manoeuvre away from Russia, and the West to conclude that no mass repressions were occurring inside Belarus. Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from this era is that such reversals in relations should be perceived only as short-term phenomena that allow certain problems to be addressed at specific points in time. Since 2020 this fluctuating pattern of relations has been broken, meaning that the architecture of the West's Belarus policy must also change. Western policy will always contain elements of pressure, and rightly so. But the uncomfortable truth is that, in order to achieve certain short-term results such as stopping repression and securing the release of political prisoners, Western policy towards Belarus should offer both incentives and disincentives to parts of the Belarusian regime.

The following six recommendations are aimed at making Western policy more effective and coherent – both in the short term, in order to better take advantage of opportunities that emerge, and in the long term, in order to increase and render more durable the influence of the West in Belarus.

- Above all, **Western policymakers need to assign a higher priority to Belarus.** The country is an important component of regional security, and its democratization is important for the West as a tool to reduce Russia's influence and bolster regional security. Without explicitly prioritizing policy towards Belarus, Western governments will be in a weaker position in relation to the Lukashenka regime in spite of the considerable mismatch of geopolitical and economic power, simply because the Belarusian government is able to exploit the current inattention.

Western policymaking needs a robust framework aimed at removing Belarus (along with all other countries in the region) from Russia's zone of influence and at democratizing the Belarusian political system. Both are medium-term goals and both should be broken down into short phases that involve the development of specific tools conducive to attaining increasingly ambitious policy goals.

Thus, in the first instance, Western governments should focus on policy measures that would ameliorate the domestic situation in Belarus. These might include measures aimed at achieving the release of political prisoners, the cessation of all politically motivated court cases, and an end to repression. Such actions would not only constitute a significant humanitarian victory for the West; they would also improve the chances for the political success of the democratic movement within the country. In terms of foreign policy, Western governments should strive to stop Russia's absorption of Belarus and to distance the country from Russian aggression against Ukraine. This aligns with the position of the Ukrainian government, which in early 2023 reportedly requested Western governments not to sanction Belarus along with Russia in the context of one of the EU sanctions packages.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Jozwiak, R. (@RikardJozwiak) via Twitter (2023), 'one of the reasons why #Belarus hasn't been sanctioned together with #Russia in the EU's last sanctions packages is that #Ukraine has requested that Minsk is to be kept out', 12 January 2023, <https://twitter.com/RikardJozwiak/status/1613466506993565698>.



- **Western governments should be ready to increase both pressure and incentives.** The West cannot and should not abandon its policy of pressure, considering the repressions that have taken place in Belarus since 2020 and the government’s perceived status as a ‘collaborator’ in Russia’s war in Ukraine. However, sanctions must be acknowledged for what they are: an inevitable and necessary measure, partly effective but also accompanied by side effects, and not capable in isolation of altering Lukashenka’s conduct. It would make sense to shift the focus of sanctions and prioritize a reduction of Russia’s influence on Belarus, for example by imposing sanctions on Russian companies that own assets in Belarus or that cooperate with Belarusian enterprises, and by ensuring effective control over the execution of such sanctions. In addition, Western policymakers and public opinion can exert influence in other areas of reputational importance for the Lukashenka regime where sanctions have not yet been imposed. For example, international sports federations could take the step of banning pro-regime Belarusian athletes from international competitions. Imposing such bans could enable their eventual revocation to be used as a bargaining tool in negotiations with the regime on the release of political prisoners.

**In order for sanctions to be at their most effective, the West must show that it is prepared to maintain escalation, but it must also have other policy options in reserve.**

In order for sanctions to be at their most effective and to present a convincing message to the Lukashenka government, the West must show that it is prepared to maintain escalation, but it must also have other policy options in reserve. It should be showing that it is prepared to revoke certain sanctions if the regime makes concessions. In particular, this could apply to those sanctions that push Lukashenka closer to Russia and harm Belarusian citizens (such as the ban on overflights and on access to EU airports for Belarusian carriers mentioned earlier, which blighted travel opportunities for Belarusian individuals). On the other hand, there should be no softening of sanctions in sectors where Belarus depends economically on Russia, such as the processing of Russian crude oil by Belarusian refineries. As one Belarusian expert has suggested, the West should create and deliver to the Lukashenka regime a confidential ‘roadmap’ detailing the concessions that the regime could make and how the West and its partners would react to their implementation.<sup>22</sup> In other words, there is a need for a clear mechanism of deconfliction.

To take full advantage of opportunities as they appear, Western policy must be swift and responsive, and must be coordinated with a wide range of partners. If Western-aligned states fail to coordinate their Belarus policymaking with Western governments, this sends a signal to the regime that the West itself does not take its policy towards Belarus seriously. Western governments

<sup>22</sup> Remarks made at Belarus Taskforce meeting held under the Chatham House Rule, June 2022.

should also coordinate their strategy with Belarusian stakeholders. One way of strengthening the Belarusian pro-democracy movement in the eyes of both the regime and society, and to increase its bargaining power, would be to include pro-democracy leaders in discussions on both the imposition and the eventual revocation of Western sanctions against Belarus.

- **The West’s policymakers should establish a direct channel of communication with Lukashenka.** Many Western actors continue to maintain contacts with the regime at foreign minister level or attempt to reach out to officials whom they believe to have more influence. However, decision-making in the Belarusian government ultimately rests with the country’s authoritarian leader, and it is preferable that Western governments engage directly with him in order to understand what he wants to achieve and what he is willing (and able) to do. Any form of contact with Lukashenka in an effort to bring more clarity to the relationship could prove toxic for Western political leaders and, conversely, might increase his legitimacy in the eyes of the West; this idea would be hard to sell in Western capitals. Yet any decision to stop the repressions or change Belarus’s role in Russia’s war against Ukraine will ultimately be taken by Lukashenka, which could mean that holding conversations aiming to address the human rights violations and Russia’s war with more easily accessible representatives of the regime could be futile. Unfortunately, in the near future the only available route to easing repressions in Belarus and to stop Belarus’s incorporation into Russia includes negotiating with the person responsible for both.

Lukashenka is looking for a way to emphasize to the West that he still considers himself the independent ruler of Belarus. For example, he is reported to have written certain ceremonial letters as greetings on independence days to Western leaders, even though these have not been reciprocated (at least not publicly).<sup>23</sup> In April 2022, Vladimir Makei, the late Belarusian minister of foreign affairs, wrote to EU diplomats proposing to ‘avail ourselves of the diplomatic toolbox to re-establish dialogue which is the only means for finding a way forward under any circumstances’.<sup>24</sup> Representatives of the Belarusian government also continue to participate in ‘humanitarian dialogue’ between the government and certain civil society activists. These talks are held quasi-confidentially under the auspices of international mediators.<sup>25</sup>

Maintaining a channel of communication with Lukashenka in the security sphere could also prove important – not least for the security of Ukraine – should Belarus’s authoritarian leader seek to distance himself from Russia in the aftermath of potential military defeats.

<sup>23</sup> Matsukevich, P. (2022), ‘Легимные услуги’ [Legitimate services], Puls Lenina, 4 February 2022, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina38>.

<sup>24</sup> Jozwiak, R. (@RikardJozwiak) via Twitter (2022), ‘quite a letter from the foreign minister of #Belarus to some counterparts in the EU complaining about a “witch hunt” against Belarus, a new “ice age” & “Berlin wall” in EU–Belarus relations & rejection that Belarus “somehow being involved in the hostilities in #Ukraine”. #Russia’, 14 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/RikardJozwiak/status/1514621612724793351>.

<sup>25</sup> Research interview with Belarusian expert, Warsaw, 2022.

- **Policymakers should send a clear message to the middle and lower echelons of the Belarusian bureaucracy that the West’s position towards them is impartial.** Western governments should study the workings of the Belarusian political system and attempt to fragment the middle levels of the regime’s bureaucracy, either by conducting negotiations with individual bureaucrats and representatives of regime-adjacent large businesses or by providing practical incentives (in the form of protection and monetary rewards) for reporting various crimes, including repressions inside Belarus, specific actions supporting Russia’s war in Ukraine and the circumvention of sanctions. Some participants in the governmental system – unlike others in its upper, ruling echelons – are not complicit in the regime’s crimes and may want to move the country forward.<sup>26</sup> The extent to which such officials are favourably inclined towards the West and the Belarusian pro-democracy movement may have significant implications for democratization within the country when such an opportunity arises. It is in the interests of the regime that the West (or the pro-democracy movement) perceives all civic or security officials as complicit in the repressions, since this strengthens mutual responsibility within the regime. In practice, it is necessary to separate those who are guilty of crimes from those who are not complicit in them, and to use that separation to divide the regime in the future.

## **Policymakers should send a clear message to the middle and lower echelons of the Belarusian bureaucracy that the West’s position towards them is impartial.**

Experts and policymakers have made varying assessments of Western institutions’ previous attempts to work directly with the lower echelons of the Belarusian bureaucracy (for example, by liaising with local governments on regional development programmes). Negative assessments are most common, although in the end this does not make much difference, as it is impossible under the current regime to return to previous modes of cooperation. Nevertheless, the West needs to find new ways of identifying and communicating with government officials at this level, perhaps making use of social media and organizing an information campaign that directly targets them. NGOs and media outlets might also contribute to this work. Making direct contact with such officials could help to debunk myths and disinformation promulgated by the Belarusian regime, for example about the progress of the war in Ukraine.

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<sup>26</sup> It is considered that the officials most likely to be ‘pro-change’ include representatives of the National Bank, the parts of the government responsible for the economy (the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Finance), the Belarus Hi-Tech Park, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and certain individuals across other state institutions.

Box 1, below, gives a snapshot of the political structure of Belarus under Lukashenka's leadership.

### Box 1. Belarus's political system in brief

After he came to power in Belarus's first presidential election in 1994, Aliaksandr Lukashenka rejected democratic norms and led an authoritarian government, subordinating Belarus's institutions to his political will. Currently, Belarus's political system is built on Lukashenka's wide-ranging executive powers and includes several actors:

- A small but influential presidential administration, which realistically cannot cover its entire remit in depth, but which is perceived as the political nucleus of Belarus. As the most privileged institution of state, in that it benefits from the closest access to Lukashenka, it is able to exert influence on other parts of the political system.
- A large government, which oversees less important matters but which has responsibility for the majority of policy proposals in the economic sphere. In public, Lukashenka maintains a distance from the government; it is frequently scapegoated when official policy fails.
- The *siloviki*<sup>27</sup> – members of the security, control, military or similar structures – who remain under the strict control of the ruler and have acted as agents of repression, including within the system of government as a whole.
- The bicameral National Assembly (parliament), which in practice does not exercise its legislative power and which thus appears to play a marginal role in the political system. However, the speaker of the upper chamber, Natallia Kachanova, has reliable access to Lukashenka: she holds regular discussions with him, which is seen more as a reflection of the similarity of their views than of her official position within the parliament.
- The All-Belarusian People's Assembly, a new constitutional institution which will begin operations in 2024.<sup>28</sup> This body will be endowed with wide-ranging powers: for example, it will be empowered to overturn the decisions of other state bodies; to remove the country's president from office; and to consider the question of election legitimacy. It is unclear how the creation of the assembly will affect the functioning of the broader political system, but it has been suggested, and seems likely, that Lukashenka intends to take charge of it after stepping down from the leadership of the country (or that he would first combine both roles before appointing a successor to the presidency).
- Regional authorities, which implement central government policy across the country and have a localized sphere of influence.

<sup>27</sup> *Siloviki* is a Russian term meaning 'persons who have worked in the institutions of force'.

<sup>28</sup> Astapenia, R. (2022), 'Belarus' new dubious constitution', *International Politics and Society*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/belarus-new-dubious-constitution-5760>.

— **Policymakers must work to improve perceptions of the EU and other Western actors within Belarusian society.** State-sponsored disinformation on the part of both Russia and Belarus has blamed the West for the war in Ukraine, and discrimination practices implemented against Belarusians in some EU countries have exacerbated this negative perception. Through its actions, the West must demonstrate that it values ordinary Belarusians. It is therefore important that Western governments (a) grant Belarusian citizens visas, allowing them to study and work freely in the EU and to foster interpersonal contacts; and (b) refrain from preventing Belarusian businesses wishing to relocate to the West. The more interpersonal contacts there are between Belarusians and the West, the stronger pro-Western sentiments will be in Belarus. According to a Chatham House Belarus Initiative survey in August 2022 (see Table 2), more than half of respondents expressed positive perceptions of the ‘Western lifestyle’.<sup>29</sup>

**Table 2.** Urban Belarusians’ identification with Western culture and perceptions of the Western lifestyle

**Question:** In general, how do you feel about the ‘Western lifestyle’ – negatively or positively?

	All respondents	Respondents who have visited the EU in the last five years	Respondents who have not visited the EU in the last five years
Extremely positive	11%	24%	7%
Somewhat positive	42%	46%	41%
Not sure	24%	20%	26%
Somewhat negative	16%	7%	18%
Extremely negative	7%	3%	8%

Source: What Belarusians Think (2022), ‘Belarusians’ perception of the West and Russia: The results of a public opinion poll conducted between 15 and 31 August 2022’, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-12>, slide 9.

The West needs a larger-scale – and more easily understood – communication strategy regarding its policy goals *vis-à-vis* Belarus. First and foremost, Western governments must clarify what they are already doing for Belarusians, especially if some of the West’s support activities have gone unnoticed. Such measures need to be communicated through Belarusian sources (for example, via interviews in the media) as well as independently – namely, through targeted advertising in social media and search engines, which can reach almost any internet user in Belarus.

<sup>29</sup> What Belarusians Think (2022), ‘Belarusians’ perception of the West and Russia: The results of a public opinion poll conducted between 15 and 31 August 2022’, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-12>, slide 9.

A more positive agenda should be offered to the country, focusing on, for example, economic transformation.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, discriminative practices against Belarusians in the West should stop. Such a policy only serves the regime that Belarusians rejected in the 2020 presidential election. Discourse like this also plays into the hands of the Russian state, whose actions in Ukraine are supported by only a minority of Belarusians, despite dissemination of a significant volume of Russian and Belarusian state propaganda and the stifling of independent media organizations in Belarus. According to a Chatham House Belarus Initiative survey in August 2022, 45 per cent of urban interviewees stated that they did not support the Russian military operation, with a further 24 per cent stating they were ‘not sure’.<sup>31</sup>

- **The West should continue with its vigorous support of civil society, the independent media and the pro-democracy movement.** Even if a more proactive Western policy towards the Belarusian government fails, effective social outreach in Belarus on the part of Western actors, along with investments in multiple new media initiatives, will enhance the West’s long-term influence within the country. The key to long-term positive change in Belarus lies in influencing Belarusian society – by supporting civic initiatives, independent media and private businesses, and nurturing changes in education and political thinking.<sup>32</sup> For example, the likelihood that a Belarusian citizen does not support Russia’s actions in its war against Ukraine increases significantly if they rely predominantly on non-state media to receive news (see Figure 1, below). Since 2020, despite generally higher levels of Western financial support,<sup>33</sup> opportunities to provide this kind of assistance inside Belarus have become rarer and are riskier. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure long-term institutional support for Belarusian democratic actors, allowing them to retain their influence in the face of repression and other obstacles. Western governments and foundations, as well as the international financial institutions which have scaled down their programmes in Belarus, should allocate resources for this purpose, as well as for supporting Belarusian businesses relocating to the EU.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Belarus Taskforce Recommendations (2021), ‘What economic reforms does Belarus need and how can the West help?’, research event, 23 June 2021, <https://chathamhouse.soutron.net/Portal/Public/en-GB/RecordView/Index/189949>.

<sup>31</sup> What Belarusians Think (2022), ‘How Belarusians’ views on the war have changed over six months: The results of a public opinion poll conducted between 4 and 21 August 2022, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-11>, slide 5.

<sup>32</sup> Silitski, V. (2011), ‘Реквием по диалогу, или Незаконченная пьеса для механического Брюсселя’ [Requiem for Dialogue, or Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Brussels], Our Opinion, 6 January 2011, <https://nmn.media/articles/7131>.

<sup>33</sup> Znatkevich, A. (2022), ‘Предстаўніца Эўракамісіі пра Беларусь: «Ад 2020 году не было іншай краіны, дзе мы б так падтрымлівалі грамадзянскую супольнасць»’ [The representative of the European Commission about Belarus: “Since 2020, there was no other country where we would support civil society so much”], Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 November 2022, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32145745.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Remarks made at Belarus Taskforce meeting held under the Chatham House Rule, June 2022.

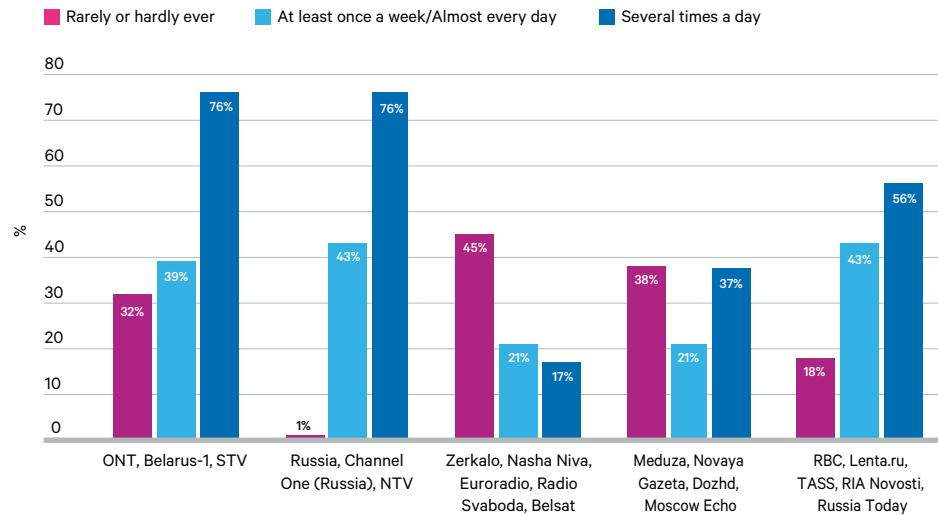
**Figure 1.** Support for Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, broken down by media consumption

**Questions:**

(1) Do you or do you not support Russia’s military operation in Ukraine?

(See note below figure.)

(2) How often do you receive news about what is happening/events in the country and the world from the following media?



Source: What Belarusians Think (2022), ‘How Belarusians’ views on the war have changed over six months: The results of a public opinion poll conducted between 4 and 21 August 2022’, <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-11>, slides 5 and 19.

Note: Graphic relates to the total of those responding ‘I somewhat support it’ or ‘I definitely support it’ to question (1).

## Conclusion

The political situation and external relations of Belarus have not developed – and do not exist – in a vacuum. The destiny of Belarus may not be contingent on the outcome of Russia’s war against Ukraine, yet it could have an impact on Belarus’s future. If Russia wins, then positive changes in Belarus should not be expected, while a Ukrainian victory would provide certain opportunities for a more successful transformation of Belarus (and of Western policy towards it).<sup>35</sup> The war will be superimposed on the country’s internal dynamics – a slow transition of power from the ageing authoritarian leader, Lukashenka, to a successor who has not yet been publicly identified. Broadly, the outcome could be anything from a complete loss of independence to democratization. If the West can expand its range of tools for influencing the Lukashenka regime, and Belarusian democratic actors can be equipped with resources and incentivized to act in coordination with Western stakeholders, then a chance could soon emerge for Belarus to change course.

<sup>35</sup> Chatham House (2022), ‘The future for Belarus’, video, 20 December 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/12/future-belarus>.

With the Belarusian issue being much bigger than Belarus itself, the role to be played by the West in the future of Belarus has expanded correspondingly. As Lukashenka's regime continues to suppress active (and pro-Western) parts of Belarusian society and as Russia continues to embroil Belarus in its war against Ukraine, Belarusian civil society is not capable to act alone to change that situation; it needs high-level support from the West. At the same time, Western policy should not limit itself to engagement with the Belarusian pro-democracy forces nor with the current regime under Lukashenka: it must be both broader and more active. This will make it sufficiently dynamic to mitigate negative impacts while leveraging new opportunities, which could prove crucial not only for Belarusian society, but for global security.

For the West to help Belarus, it must regain the sense that Belarus is manageable. Over the past three years, Western attention has been lacking, in part because the situation in the country has only worsened since the disputed election of 2020. Therefore, the West needs to achieve some intermediate victory – be this in the form of Lukashenka deciding to distance himself from Russia; the release of at least a few hundred political prisoners; the weakening of repression; or a change in sentiment within the regime against the backdrop of a transition of power. Any of these could serve not only as a short-term achievement, but also as an impetus for the West to become more active in its policymaking on Belarus.



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Cover image: Police guard an exit of the Minsk metro following Belarus's presidential election, 11 August 2020.

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