

POLICY BRIEF

**THE EU'S APPROACH TOWARDS
BELARUS IN THE CONTEXT OF
THE WIDER NEIGHBOURHOOD:
IS THERE A STRATEGY?**

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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.

THE EU'S APPROACH TOWARDS BELARUS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WIDER NEIGHBOURHOOD: IS THERE A STRATEGY?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief focuses on the EU's approach towards Belarus which has gone through different stages of engagement. The EU had cooperated relatively well with the Belarusian state institutions prior to 2020. The year of 2020, known for the disputed presidential election and the state-sponsored violence that followed, constituted a turning point for the EU in terms of ceasing its cooperation with dictatorship. Furthermore, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU had to increase pressure on the Lukashenka regime, by way of applying sanctions, and limiting its cooperation and support with the regime. In addition, the EU designed certain support mechanisms, such as financial aid for the Belarusian society, if and when democratic transition takes place. This policy brief suggests that the EU's policy towards Belarus should be based on four complementary pillars to develop and action its comprehensive strategy towards the country: persistence, pressure, accountability and commitment. Finally, this brief suggests it is important for the EU to keep Belarus on the agenda so that it is not forgotten in a wider neighbourhood rife with conflict and instability.

BACKGROUND

The political crisis that unfolded in Belarus since 2020, triggered by the election fraud leading to widespread state violence, has brought the EU-Belarus relations to a critical juncture. Past instances of election fraud and violence in Belarus strained the EU-Belarus relations, occasionally leading to tensions and restrictive measures, which then were resolved when the regime agreed to release political prisoners¹. However, the events of 2020, including the disputed presidential election and subsequent violent crackdown on protesters by the Lukashenka regime, created a sense of urgency and a realisation that a return to the previous state of affairs was no longer viable. Moreover, the regime's hijacking of the RyanAir flight and orchestration of the border crisis in 2021 as well as its active involvement in Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine demonstrated that the Lukashenka regime posed a threat not only for the Belarusians but to broader regional security. In this context, it has become imperative for the EU to reassess its engagement and policies toward Belarus, recognizing the need for a more determined and proactive approach to provide support to the Belarusian people and address the multifaceted challenges posed by the Lukashenka regime.

In both the past and present, the EU's approach towards Belarus has faced criticism for being reactive and slow, particularly when it comes to addressing human rights violations and widespread repression in the country. Despite the EU's commitment to supporting civil society and democratic stakeholders, its ability to exert significant geopolitical and economic pressure on the Lukashenka regime has remained hindered. This limitation stems from the regime's heavy reliance on Russia, both economically and politically, which reduces the potential leverage the EU can effectively employ². However, it is crucial to recognize that a democratic and peaceful

Belarus fully aligns with the interests of the EU. Therefore, notwithstanding Russia's growing influence within the country, the EU should continue supporting the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people.

How should the EU approach Belarus and Belarusians today? What are the lessons learnt from previous periods? What can it tell us about the EU's engagement with autocratic regimes? 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). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Katsiaryna Lozka, Research Fellow at the Oxford Belarus Observatory, and the speakers of the event included Franak Viacorka, Chief Advisor to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; Dirk Schuebel, EEAS Special Envoy for the Eastern Partnership; Olga Dryndova, Editor "Belarus-Analysen", University of Bremen; European Network for Belarus; Ryhor Nizhnikau, Senior Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Miadzvedskaya, Yuliya. 2022. Designing Sanctions: Lessons from EU Restrictive Measures against Belarus, GMF: [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. Leukavets, Alla. 2021. Russia's Game in Belarus: 2020 Presidential Elections as a Check-mate for Lukashenka? *New Perspectives*, 1, pp. 90-101.

ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

Over the past three years, the EU-Belarus relations have been profoundly re-shaped by two significant events: the political crisis of 2020¹ in the country, and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022. Domestically, Belarus has remained caught in a deadlock between the Lukashenka regime's grip on power and use of violence, on the one hand, and continuous resistance and the realisation among the Belarusian people that there is a significant anti-Lukashenka majority in the country. At the international level, the regime's actions have posed a threat to regional security. The hijacking of a Ryanair flight and the ongoing EU-Belarus border crisis since 2021 have further heightened tensions. Since 2022, Belarus has also become a launching pad for Russian aggression. More recently, there have been reports about the potential stationing of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief aims to analyse the evolution of the EU's policy towards Belarus, assess its current state, and explore potential ways forward. By presenting the existing policy framework and exploring new avenues for engagement, this brief seeks to provide recommendations for a more proactive and strategic approach by the EU in its relations with Belarus and Belarusians.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Some would even argue, several crises at once - for more information see Korosteleva, E. and Petrova, I. (2022) Power, People and the Political: understanding the many crises in Belarus', *Nationalities Papers*, part of Special Issue, (8 September) DOI: 10.1017/nps.2022.77: [READ HERE](#)

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF EU-BELARUS RELATIONS: GOING IN CIRCLES?

Belarus has consistently stood out as an outlier in the European Union's Eastern neighbourhood¹. Following the country's descent into authoritarianism in the mid-1990s, the Lukashenka regime has actively defied the EU and fostered an anti-Western stance, despite its participation in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP). In comparison to other countries in the region, Belarus has maintained limited relations with the EU, sporadically seeking engagement during tense periods with Russia.

Previously, a discernible pattern existed in the relationship between the EU and Belarus. Each electoral cycle, accompanied by popular protests and subsequent violence, has resulted in a deterioration of relations and the imposition of sanctions. However, the EU has agreed to return to the status quo ante following the release of political prisoners. An example of this could be seen in the aftermath of the 2010 presidential election, which was also plagued by allegations of fraud and repression. In response, the EU had imposed sanctions on Belarusian officials, which were lifted in 2016 following the release of political prisoners².

However, the events of 2020 and the following events marked a significant departure from this pattern and brought about a new dynamic in EU-Belarus relations. The presidential election in Belarus was marred by widespread allegations of fraud, triggering unprecedented protests and a harsh crackdown by the authorities. The initial domestic crisis spilled over beyond the national borders in May 2021, when the regime ordered the hijacking of the RyanAir flight to arrest Belarusian opposition journalist Raman Pratasevich. In response, the EU took a firmer stance, refusing to recognize the election results and cutting sponsorship to state-related programs. It has imposed comprehensive sanctions against individuals and entities involved in the repression, in total 6 sanction packages, 195 individuals, 35 entities, and 42 military people³. The EU also expressed support for the opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, further emphasising its shift in approach.

Lukashenka's involvement in the war against Ukraine in 2022 marked another significant point of no return in EU-Belarus relations. The mass crimes and transnational threats posed by the Lukashenka regime have shattered the possibility of replicating the previous model where the release of political prisoners led to the lifting of sanctions. However, the EU has encountered difficulties in formulating a new approach to effectively address the current situation.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Nizhnikau, Ryhor. 2022. Catch 2020: explaining the performance of the EU policy towards Belarus, International Politics.
2. Miadzvedskaya, Yuliya. 2022. Designing Sanctions: Lessons from EU Restrictive Measures against Belarus, GMF: [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
3. See the OBO webinar for details, [READ HERE](#)

THE EU-BELARUS RELATIONS IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND WAR

The EU and its member states firmly rejected the results of the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus and refused to recognize Lukashenka's re-election. In response, since August 2020, the EU has allocated over 100 million euros specifically for civil society initiatives, including rehabilitation programs and support for small and medium-sized businesses that relocated from Belarus and re-established themselves in cities like Warsaw, Vilnius, and elsewhere¹.

Furthermore, the EU has actively collaborated with the cultural and human rights sectors, as well as the education system, by offering scholarships to Belarusian students and scholars through programs such as EU4Belarus² and MOST. Additionally, the EU has increased its budgetary support for the European Humanities University³, a Belarusian university in exile based in Vilnius.

Politically, the level of engagement between the EU and Belarus has been limited to sporadic working contacts with lower-level officials, notably the Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus. Back in 2021, the Belarusian regime demanded the departure of EU Ambassador Dirk Schuebel, forcing him to leave the country. Furthermore, diplomatically, the regime has persisted in its attacks on European diplomats. A notable incident occurred in 2022 when EU charge d'affaires Evelina Schunz was detained for several hours in Minsk, further exacerbating tensions between the EU and Belarus⁴.

In contrast, there has been significant engagement and support from the EU towards Belarusian pro-democracy forces. National leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has met with political leaders from numerous European countries as well as EU officials. These engagements have served as a platform to advocate for the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people and distinguish them from the Lukashenka regime.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. EU further steps up its support to the people of Belarus , [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. For more information about the program: [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
3. Strengthening the European Humanities University: EUR 4 million from EC and a newly launched Trust Fund, CPVA, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
4. [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

THE EU STRATEGY TOWARDS BELARUS: WHAT SHOULD IT BE?

Taking into consideration this broader overview of some patterns in EU-Belarus relations and their current state, the question arises as to what the EU strategy towards Belarus could look like?

This policy brief suggests that such a strategy should encompass four main directions: assistance, pressure, accountability, and commitment.

The first pillar of this strategy is assistance. Traditionally, the EU has provided support to Belarusian civil society, but did not extend this assistance

to political actors. Under current unprecedented circumstances, such assistance is crucial for the viability of pro-democracy structures and a number of their activities, such as the rehabilitation of political prisoners and the families affected by repression.

The second component of the strategy is pressure on the Lukashenka regime. Exerting pressure should go beyond sanctions and include economic tools such as freezing assets and blocking accounts of individuals associated with the regime. Additionally, considering the closure of the border for trade of goods passing through Belarus from China to Russia and into the European Union could be an effective measure. Symbolic gestures and statements, including derecognition of Lukashenka, can also contribute to increasing pressure and delegitimizing the regime.

The third element of the strategy is accountability. Although traditional tools for bringing perpetrators to justice may be limited, EU Member States can refer cases of atrocities to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and designate responsible individuals and organisations accountable for crimes against humanity. An example is Lithuania that recently called on the ICC to investigate war crimes and hold Lukashenka's regime accountable¹.

Finally, the EU should demonstrate commitment to a free and democratic Belarus and the integration of Belarusian economy, politics, and culture into the European space. While not requesting immediate EU membership for Belarus, a roadmap outlining the path to future integration and economic cooperation would send a strong message. The commitment should involve concrete steps, such as financial aid and investments, to support the country's transformation and provide a positive alternative to the influence of the "Russian World."

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

CONCLUSIONS

The events of 2020 marked a critical juncture in the EU–Belarus relations. The disputed presidential election, accompanied by allegations of fraud and a harsh crackdown on protests, led to a significant departure from the established pattern of relations between the European Union and Belarus. In light of these developments, it becomes crucial for the EU to reassess its strategy towards Belarus, taking into account the broader overview of past relations and the current state of affairs. And then it will be possible to know how each side actually supports each other towards a more democratic and secure region.

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In formulating a strategy towards Belarus, the European Union should con-

sider four main directions: assistance, pressure, accountability, and commitment. By focusing on providing comprehensive support to civil society, democratic forces, and the victims of repression, the EU can contribute to the resilience and development of a democratic Belarus. Through targeted pressure measures, including economic tools and symbolic gestures, the EU can send a clear message of condemnation towards the Lukashenka regime. Adopting accountability measures, such as referring cases to the ICC, can help bring perpetrators of human rights abuses to justice. Finally, prospects for EU integration should be on the agenda to show an alternative to the Belarusian people.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The EU should develop a clear-cut strategy of engagement with and support for Belarus, premised on the following three points:

- 1** The EU should demonstrate a clear and long-term commitment to a free and democratic Belarus. This can be achieved by offering a roadmap for Belarus' integration into the European economic, political, and cultural areas. The EU should outline specific steps, reforms, and investment plans to support Belarus' transition towards European values and standards..
- 2** The EU can offer a visa-free regime for Belarusian citizens in a possible post-Lukashenka period in order to show in advance that it has a concrete plan for a democratic future of the country. The EU should actively collaborate with international bodies, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), to hold accountable those responsible for human rights abuses and crimes against humanity in Belarus. This can involve providing evidence and supporting investigations into atrocities committed by the regime, which could serve as the basis for a separate Tribunal for Crimes against Belarusians in the future.
- 3** Non-engagement and de-legitimation of the Lukashenka regime should continue to form the core of the European Union's strategy towards Belarus. This approach involves refusing to recognize the legitimacy of Lukashenka's rule, rejecting the results of fraudulent elections, and refraining from engaging in high-level political contacts with the regime.

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