

The European Belarus Forum

February 2025



A EUROPEAN STRATEGY FOR BELARUS'S FUTURE



European Belarus Forum Policy Report

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In late 2024 the European Belarus Forum convened a half-day conference in Brussels to address the security challenges facing Belarusians. With global politics at a watershed with the return of Donald Trump to the United States presidency, this report, based on contributions at the conference, advances fresh policy options for external stakeholders and offers the first steps in a new strategy for western policy on Belarus.

Conference speakers explored security from several angles – the security of both states and citizens, the security of Belarusian citizens inside and outside of Belarus, and the broader implications of the current politics of Belarus for international security. With the Belarusian state under Alyaksandr Lukashenka a co-aggressor in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and employing increasingly totalitarian control over its own citizens, these are high-stakes issues.

This report assesses the security challenge of Belarus and advances five strategic priorities for the next five years.

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1. What are the key security challenges facing Belarusians?

In an everyday sense, being secure means being safe from harm. Much more can and should be done by external stakeholders to enhance the security of Belarusians. Under the country's dictator, who claimed a seventh term in office at the end of January 2025, the situation in Belarus has become ever more repressive.¹ In our globalised and interconnected world, the politics and security of our neighbours matters for our own security and accordingly what happens in Belarus matters for all of us.

Three interlinked kinds of security threats can be identified in relation to Belarus. In the first place, the threat to Belarusian citizens from the Belarus state itself through what some commentators describe as a shift towards totalitarianism.² Secondly, there is the threat to Belarusians coming from Russia, which has supported the incumbent political regime in Minsk in return for seeing its influence grow. Thirdly, there are security concerns stemming from the partnership between Belarus, Russia and other authoritarian states. The security threats from this 'axis of autocracies' affect all Europeans.

1.1. Towards totalitarianism

The first threat to Belarusian citizens comes from their own state, especially if they challenge any aspect of state power. This does not mean that citizens feel unsafe all the time. Undoubtedly there remains an element in society supportive of the political system, whether genuinely or through co-optation, and this can be observed in those who prioritise stability over freedom. These citizens are, by definition, choosing not to be able to do what they could otherwise freely do were they living in a liberal and democratic society.³

In the context of a rigged presidential election in 2020 the state clamped down hard on street protests. The severe repressions that began five years ago have not abated. Tens of thousands of Belarusian citizens were arrested in the aftermath of the election; it is well documented that many were tortured while in detention. Human rights groups have recognised nearly 4,000 individuals as political prisoners in the past five years and many other prisoners do not allow themselves to be added to the list fearing it will lead to harsher penal conditions. Hundreds of thousands of citizens left the country in fear of their safety.

Today political dissent is not allowed inside Belarus. As one of its methods of enforcing obedience, the security services have cowed civil society and private enterprise into submission. Since 2020 the state authorities have liquidated a few thousand civil society organisations (CSOs) while others fled and now operate in exile where they struggle to have an effect in Belarus. About 2,000 CSOs remain registered in Belarus, according to Natallia Rabava, but many of these are inactive and others serve as tools of the state. Those who operate with independence find it difficult to obtain any funding for their activities, as they would need to register in the Ministry of Economy to receive funding from foreign donors while crowdfunding has security implications, making these organisations vulnerable to state

¹ A short summary contextualising the 2025 presidential election in Belarus can be read on the WUB Hub blog. 'How to steal an election' (22 January 2025): https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/schoolforcross-facultystudies/igsd/research/wubhub/blog/how_to_steal (accessed 3 February 2025).

² For example, Kamil Klysinski (15 January 2024), 'Towards a totalitarian state. Belarus cracks down on religious organisations': <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-01-15/towards-a-totalitarian-state-belarus-cracks-down-religious> (accessed 2 February 2025).

³ Ken Booth (1991), 'Security and emancipation,' *Review of International Studies*, 17, 313-326.

repression should they upset the authorities in any way. Access to funding is also the major problem of CSOs outside Belarus, albeit for different reasons. Additional challenges include a challenge of visibility and access to target groups.

Another method by which the authorities have enforced obedience is through preventive policing. The authorities have targeted anyone they think might be disloyal and carried out property searches, property seizures or interviews to intimidate citizens. These methods have been effective and ensured that most citizens do not risk expressions of disapproval of the state. The state meanwhile reaches deeper into citizens' lives through its monolithic control of education, healthcare and media. With huge numbers of Belarusians directly dependent on the state for their incomes, they feel powerless to criticise or take any stand against it.

In this context, there is little to inhibit Belarus's ongoing support for Russia's war in Ukraine should a peace settlement not be forthcoming. Moreover, Rabava stated that around 200 CSOs registered after 2021 to promote the ideas of Belarus being part of the 'Russkiy mir' (Russian world). These 'government organised non-governmental organisations' (GONGOs) freely inculcate the next generation of Belarusians with ideology favourable to the regime through school visits and other activities. Political instruction is back in the school curriculum, whilst ideological and military drills have been incorporated into state-organised summer camps for youths. Activists talking of the state 'brainwashing' citizens in the country are hardly exaggerations in this context.

The tightly controlled information environment of Belarus affords the state an ability to shape citizens' views on culture, politics and economics. The only exception to this is the relatively free reign Russian actors have to disseminate information in Belarus, which constrains the incumbent regime from doing anything that might lead to dissatisfaction in Moscow.

1.2. Russian influence

Indeed, the second major threat to Belarusian citizens comes from Russia's growing influence in society and politics in the country. Russia has always wielded the preponderant external influence on Belarus, and its dominant role in meeting Belarus's energy needs was mentioned during the EBF discussion. But Victoria Leukavets explained how Russia's ability to control Belarus grew considerably after 2020. That year, in response to mass street demonstrations, Russia propped up Lukashenka's regime with economic and political support. Since then, Lukashenka has been even more indebted to Russia than before.

Lukashenka's regime also has fewer options to countervail Russian influence, with western states responding to the Belarusian state's actions by imposing economic sanctions and, in many cases, downgrading the level of diplomatic relations. This severing of ties between Belarus and 'the West' consequently fostered the intensification of Russia's drive for economic and political integration.

The deepening of military integration, said Leukavets, was never really in doubt although it remains a moot point whether Belarus will become a direct combatant in the invasion of Ukraine. The entry of the Belarusian army would be unlikely to change much on the battlefield and one of the main effects could be to raise awareness about the war in Belarusian society (and therefore weaken the informational hegemony of the state – not in Putin or Lukashenka's interest).

Russia's growing economic leverage over Belarus, which began in the early 1990s through bilateral trade, cheap energy, and preferential loans, has only intensified since the war in Ukraine. As a result of Western sanctions, Belarus is more economically dependent on Russia than ever before, with over

70% of its trade now linked to Russia. While this economic relationship has helped Belarus weather some of the effects of sanctions, it has also made the Belarusian economy highly vulnerable to shocks from Russia's own economic instability.

Cultural integration has also stepped up after 2020. Prior to that the Belarusian state allowed some expression of cultural differentiation from Russia. Since 2020, numerous cooperation agreements have been signed between Belarus and various Russian cities in the areas of culture and education, leading to a growing number of Russian artists, performers, and cultural figures working in Belarus. This has resulted in a growing substitution of Belarusian cultural products with Russian ones, contributing to the gradual Russification of the country. The most recent development in this sphere concerns the creation of the media holding of Russia and Belarus within the Union State which is expected to become operational in 2025. The organisation aims to function as a unified editorial office and content commissioner aimed at promoting Union State news including on external TV channels and media platforms.

One patent corollary of this is that the outcome of the war in Ukraine will be highly consequential for what happens in Belarus. A weakened Russia may mean a withering of its control over Belarus, whereas a victorious Russia may incorporate Belarus more fully into its own political system. The most likely outcome of the war lies somewhere between these two ends, with either an armistice or a negotiated settlement: the former can be expected to leave the situation regarding Belarus unchanged, the latter may mean Belarus's future is the object of bargaining between Russia and Ukraine's backers.

1.3. 'Autocracy, Inc.'

A third issue, threatening Belarusians and non-Belarusians alike, is the Lukashenka regime's part in an axis of autocracies. This label has emerged because states such as Belarus, Russia, China, Iran and North Korea have increasingly worked together over recent years. The American historian Anne Applebaum has dubbed this network of corrupt dictators 'Autocracy, Inc.' and sees members of the club as opportunistically helping each other out to augment their own power.⁴

Beata Patasova noted how such cooperation among autocrats undermines the liberal rules-based international order and impedes its functioning. In respect of Belarus, we have seen this in the manipulation of migrant flows and cyberattacks against democracies. Yet, according to Patasova, it is difficult to imagine a future in which Belarus is not a European democracy and this, perhaps, should guide policymakers as they formulate security strategy.

For the present, however, the Belarusian state sees western democracies as adversaries. It has acted unscrupulously to destabilise European Union borders, spread misinformation, evade sanctions, and joined in cyber-attacks against Ukraine. It has sought to portray NATO and the EU as hostile blocs and exploit divisions among their members on issues such as sanctions.

Even without an axis of autocrats, the Belarus state has sought to redefine itself. With any pretence of neutrality gone, Belarus lacked a foreign policy after 2020. In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, argued Artyom Shraibman, the authorities have started to promote the idea that there is a rising tide of anti-westernism which includes the axis of autocrats. The narrative asserts that the 'global majority' is gaining power at the cost of a decaying western hegemony.

⁴ The title of Applebaum's 2024 book. *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World* (Penguin).

Acknowledging the lack of common identity and interests among this 'global majority', Shraibman identified 'pluralism' as a key feature: any state can be counted as a member so long as it rejects the liberal international order. Belarus has organised repeated conferences and events promoting pan-Eurasian security or what it claims to be the global majority's vision. The corollary of this is declining interest of the Belarusian elites in restoring cooperation with western states. That will likely precipitate more unconventional attacks against the edifice of the post-war international order.

2. Strategy and policymaking

It often feels that the debate around strategy on Belarus is a series of recurring ideas, and few ideas at that. Most stakeholders agree that western resolve and long-term commitment have been difficult to muster and yet are a vital backbone of any strategy.

Francesca Cardona underscored the critical importance of sustained Western resolve, especially in relation to providing support to ordinary Belarusian citizens. It's clear that any effective strategy must not only address the political elite but also focus on the welfare and security of everyday people who are most vulnerable to the regime's actions.

Valery Kavaleuski brought attention to how the security concerns of ordinary Belarusians could be alleviated through EU policies that facilitate cross-border mobility. For many Belarusians, the inability to leave the country due to the closure of border crossings and the complicated process of obtaining a Schengen visa represents a profound security risk. Kavaleuski highlighted how these policies do not just restrict physical mobility but also contribute to an overall sense of insecurity, as they prevent people at risk from fleeing the country to safety. Moreover, this approach harms the EU's image in Belarus. While EU states rightly prioritise their own security concerns, the lack of a coherent, unified approach to cross-border movement results in inconsistent and often counterproductive policies. Belarusians trying to cross multiple EU borders encounter starkly different experiences, creating a fragmented, frustrating reality for those seeking refuge within the EU.

In terms of fostering long-term change, Berend de Groot drew attention to a concerning trend within EU support for Belarus: its cyclical nature. This approach, de Groot noted, is the exact opposite of what is needed to foster meaningful, lasting change within Belarus. Short-term or episodic support undermines the potential for real progress, and instead of reinforcing the resolve and commitment necessary to build a more democratic and stable Belarus, these cycles of engagement create a sense of instability and unpredictability. For Belarus to transition toward democracy, EU support must become more consistent, allowing for long-term investments in civil society, education, and democratic institutions that can endure despite political setbacks.

These concerns underline the critical need for a strategy on Belarus that is not only robust in its immediate support but also forward-looking in its long-term commitment. This would require aligning EU policies, particularly regarding mobility, with broader security concerns, and ensuring that Western engagement with Belarus remains consistent, predictable, and focused on the well-being of its citizens. Only with such a comprehensive approach can the EU help create an environment conducive to democratic change and stability in Belarus.

2.1. Goals for external actors

Any strategy for Belarus must have clear and defined goals. The distinction between human security and national security is not always clear cut, as some of the above commentary should indicate – what is done in the name of one state's national security may endanger the lives of citizens either inside or outside that state. Potential goals for western states in respect of Belarus include supporting its future as a sovereign state as well as more obvious concerns for defending human rights.

Tatiana Termacic lays out four key priorities that should guide a strategy for Belarus:

1. **Securing Belarus's future independence and sovereignty**, ensuring it remains free from external domination, particularly from Russia. This means not only protecting the country's territorial integrity but also its ability to make decisions free from foreign coercion.
2. **Securing the release of political prisoners**, whose continued detention serves as a stark reminder of the regime's crackdown on dissent. This goal is central to showing commitment to human rights and ensuring that those who challenge the regime's authoritarian rule are not silenced.
3. **Supporting the Belarusian democratic movement**, which has been working tirelessly to create a more open, transparent, and accountable political system in Belarus. Empowering those pushing for democratic change is crucial for building a foundation for a future democratic society.
4. **Holding the Lukashenka regime accountable** for its human rights abuses, repression, violence, and violations of international law. This includes pushing for accountability through measures like sanctions or legal action within the ICC.

These priorities provide a comprehensive framework for Western policy towards Belarus. They not only address immediate concerns—such as securing the release of political prisoners—but also focus on long-term objectives like supporting democratic development and protecting the country's sovereignty.

2.2. Possible policies and recurring debates

Two familiar debates about strategy arise. One concerns the long-term consequences of policies of engagement versus isolation, both of which have their advocates. Proponents of engagement believe that the Belarusian authorities can be persuaded (or coaxed) into making gradual changes as they learn that western states are not threatening to Belarus. The processes through which this works include building trust and predictability in the relationship. Advocates of isolation, on the other hand, think that economic pressures and diplomatic isolation will eventually compel the Belarusian state into changing its behaviour. Isolation is also important in the signal it sends to third states.

Kavaleuski sparked a lively debate about re-engagement with representatives of the regime. Some people consider that the policy of isolation has reached a natural endpoint and more voices are calling for limited engagement in the form of negotiations. Kavaleuski also argued that international recognition should not be elided with legitimacy: external actors can hold cold-nosed negotiations with regime officials without considering the regime or Lukashenka legitimate in his view. There would nonetheless seem to be a degree of moral hazard in such a position: western officials may feel freer to act in ways that they would not if formal non-recognition persisted.

A second familiar debate concerns sanctions: should they be aligned with or differentiated from sanctions on Russia? Differentiation has historically only meant loopholes to exploit and for this reason it has only reduced the effectiveness of sanctions. For this reason it makes more sense to align sanctions on Belarus and Russia. A related debate concerns whether or not some de-sanctioning should be countenanced as a carrot in negotiations with the regime. Critics point out that Lukashenka's regime has always got more out of sanctions relief than he has given in return, and that he has often reneged on promises even with his ally Russia. Nonetheless in the absence of alternative incentives available to put on the table it may be necessary.

De Groot acknowledged the calls for negotiations with Lukashenka but stressed that it makes no sense unless western states are negotiating from a position of strength. Western states' immediate goals in

negotiations should be to have a say in reforms. In the past the EU has tried to help reforms in Belarus in higher education, the judiciary and local governance. Given the incumbent authorities' reliance on propaganda and informational control, higher education reforms could still be sought by the EU even if they are unlikely to be agreed to anytime soon.

2.3. Five strategic priorities

2.3.1. The Ukraine Peace Process and Belarus's Future Independence

The Ukraine peace process offers an opportunity to ensure Belarus's future as a sovereign state. Western officials should work to prevent Russia from gaining influence over Belarus in exchange for ending the invasion of Ukraine. The survival and independence of Belarus depend on its ability to remain free from external control, particularly Russian interference. Ensuring Belarus's sovereignty in these negotiations will be essential for its long-term stability and security.

2.3.2. Capacity-Building for the Democratic Movement

Supporting Belarus's future as a democratic state requires a focus on capacity-building, particularly through the training of young people. While reforms to higher education are a long-term goal, immediate efforts should be focused on training future bureaucrats, especially Belarusians in exile. Western actors can play a key role by supporting those involved in the democratic movement, which has been working to build institutions over the past five years. NGOs and international organisations can help provide essential training and resources to foster the growth of civil society in Belarus.

Initiatives to foster communication between Belarusians inside the country and those in exile can help strengthen the pro-democracy movement. This could include supporting online platforms for information exchange, offering training programmes for journalists and activists, and creating networks that help the diaspora effectively advocate for Belarus's democratisation. The diaspora's role is a valuable asset in pushing for long-term political transformation in Belarus.

2.3.3. Prioritising the Release of Political Prisoners and Holding the Lukashenka Regime Accountable

A key priority for Western leaders should be securing the release of political prisoners, a central symbol of the regime's repression. While some advocate for an 'all-or-nothing' approach—requiring the release of all political prisoners before making any concessions—this is unrealistic given that Lukashenka is unlikely to release individuals who pose a direct challenge to his rule. Alternative measures, such as offering the return of ambassadors to Minsk in exchange for the release of prisoners, could provide a more flexible and reversible incentive.

International organisations like the United Nations and the OSCE must also be more proactive in addressing the human rights violations in Belarus, holding the regime accountable for its abuses. By supporting civil society and working to free political prisoners, Western governments can directly challenge the regime's efforts to silence dissent and strengthen the broader pro-democracy movement.

2.3.4. Euro-Atlantic Integration as a Long-Term Goal

A long-term strategy for Belarus's sovereignty and democratic development involves facilitating its integration into the broader Euro-Atlantic space. Although full membership in the EU or NATO is not feasible in the immediate future, gradual steps toward alignment with Western institutions can signal strong support for Belarusian democracy. Increased cooperation with the EU's Eastern Partnership programme could offer economic, political, and technical support for reforms in democratic Belarus. NATO could also explore ways to engage Belarusian civil society and independent journalists, promoting a shift away from Russian dependences. These efforts would help preserve Belarus's sovereignty while supporting its gradual move toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

2.3.5. Promoting Economic Support and Reform for Belarus's Transition

A critical component of supporting Belarus's democratic transition involves providing targeted economic assistance to both the democratic government (in the event of a transition) and civil society. The West should offer economic support that incentivises reforms, particularly those focused on economic diversification, anti-corruption measures, and fostering a green and market economy that respects democratic principles. Such support could be channelled through financial aid programmes aimed at strengthening democratic institutions. Additionally, economic cooperation can create incentives for the Belarusian government to prioritise reforms that align with Western standards, helping to strengthen the long-term viability of Belarus's democratic transformation.