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## Policy Brief

# UKRAINE-BELARUS RELATIONS: GOING BEYOND THE WAR

April 27, 2022

**#StandWithUkraine**

**#StandWithBelarus**



## Ukraine-Belarus relations: Going Beyond the War

### Contributors:

[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.

[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.

[GCRF COMPASS Project](#) (ES/P010849/1, 2017-21) is an ambitious UK government capacity-building funding initiative, aiming to extend UK research globally and to address the challenges of growth and sustainability in developing countries. Notably, the COMPASS project, led by the University of Kent, in partnership with the University of Cambridge, seeks to establish the ‘hubs of excellence’ at the top-level Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to enable them to become the centres for knowledge-sharing and transfer for *research integration, impact governance, and sustainable communities*. In 2021, the COMPASS project was HIGHLY COMMENDED under the category of the best international collaboration of the year, by the Times Higher Education, widely known to be ‘[The OSCARS of Higher Education in the UK](#)’.

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# Ukraine-Belarus relations: Going Beyond the War

## Executive Summary

This policy brief captures the discussion held on 10 March 2022, at the webinar jointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) and the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST), with the support of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) COMPASS project. The discussion focused on Ukraine-Belarus relations, not only at the inter-state level but also in terms of societal interactions. The participants shared views on how sides perceive each other on the ground and what the EU can do to help build a European future in both countries. The panelists highlighted key policy recommendations as to how the war could end and what could be done to improve bilateral ties in the future between Ukraine and Belarus.

## Background

In the context of growing military tensions and Russia's rapidly evolving war on Ukraine, Belarus is presented to the international audience essentially as Russia's compliant satellite and an extension of the terrain on which Russian military forces are situated. Amidst the emerging chaos, Lukashenka's government has conducted a constitutional referendum in Belarus (February 27, 2022), which not only threatens institutional changes blurring the separation of powers but also rescinds Belarus's long-standing commitment to military neutrality and non-nuclear status. Meanwhile, the Belarusian people themselves, appear to be left on their own, living with severe repressions and limitations on their basic civil and political rights. But, at the same time, the Belarusian Democratic Forces continue their efforts to push the plight of Belarus onto the international agenda and to provide Belarusians with perspectives and scenarios of a brighter, more democratic future for their country. Against this background, certain questions stand out: *what are the possible directions for Belarusian social, economic, domestic and foreign policies? What are the prospects for civil society? How can the real situation of Belarus be brought into sharper focus for the international community? What are the main risks and challenges for the country over the coming months and what can different national and international actors and stakeholders do to support democratic Belarus and promote positive change?*

These questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office](#) (OST Research Centre) and the [Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) (OBO), with the support of the [GCRF COMPASS project](#).

The event was moderated by Prof. **Elena Korosteleva** and the speakers of the event included **Valery Kavaleuski**, Head of the Cabinet, Representative of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on Foreign Affairs; **Baroness Suttie**, House of Lords; **Professor Timothy Garton Ash**, European Studies, University of Oxford; **Dr Asya Kudlenko** postdoctoral Associate, GCRF COMPASS, University of Kent; **Kanstantsin Dzehtsiarou**, Professor of Law, Liverpool University.

## Analysis of the Issue

On 24 February Belarusians woke up to a very different state of affairs with regards to their country, its international reputation and perception in the world. Belarus *de facto* turned into an aggressor state, not because Belarusian people willed it, but because Lukashenka decided on it. This decision is in no way connected to the national interests of Belarus and it also does not rest on the will of the people of Belarus. According to recent surveys<sup>1</sup> less than 10 percent of Belarusians support the war in Ukraine. The war also violates the Constitutional provision on neutrality of the Republic of Belarus and The Treaty on Friendship with Ukraine (1995), which prohibits acts such as providing territory for aggression to third parties. In essence, Lukashenka not only violated this Treaty but also created an existential threat for Belarus.

On the same day, democratic leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya declared that she is taking on the responsibility to preserve and defend the independence and sovereignty of Belarus, which is now the primary objective to pursue in the near future. Even though Lukashenka decided to transform Belarusian territory into a launching pad for aggression against Ukraine, the democratic leadership and civic activists in Belarus side with Ukraine. For instance, inside the country, serious subversive operations by Belarusians took place to slow down the advancement of Russian troops, essentially targeting civil infrastructure, such as railways. Also, Belarusians are actively monitoring and reporting to Ukrainians information about the movement of Russian troops on Belarusian territory – especially air strikes and flights from airfields in Belarus flying to Ukraine and missiles launched from Belarus into Ukraine.

In parallel these developments demonstrate that, even though the Belarusian democratic leadership and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, since 2020 were seeking to avoid active geopolitical choices, in the event, those geopolitical choices came to them. This leads to a dilemma: *what to do when the situation changes and the war ends? How can bilateral relations with Russia, in particular, be rebuilt?* Russia has been a close ally of Belarus (but in

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<sup>1</sup> Chatham House, Eighth Survey wave  
[https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-8?utm\\_source=Chatham%20House&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=13091709\\_REP%20-%20content%20update%202024.03.2022&utm\\_content=CTA&dm\\_i=1S3M.7SLML.NUSXLY.VSLBH.1](https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-8?utm_source=Chatham%20House&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=13091709_REP%20-%20content%20update%202024.03.2022&utm_content=CTA&dm_i=1S3M.7SLML.NUSXLY.VSLBH.1)

reality of Lukashenka) for political reasons as well as economic factors. But *should Russia remain a close ally when the war ends, given that Russia has proven itself to be a hostile power that does not respect the independence and sovereignty of Belarus?* Simultaneously, Belarus has to consider how to work with the EU. Until now, this has been a story of missed opportunities and Belarusian relations with the EU remain at the most basic level. This shows how important it is to think about *new modalities of relations between Belarus and the EU – or the West more generally*, for that matter.

### **How Belarusians or Belarus might be perceived on the ground?**

In Ukraine, Belarus is seen as an enabler of Russian aggression. Mostly, because it allowed the passage of Russian troops into Ukraine, but also because it provided its airports and transport routes to be used by Russians to target Ukraine from the air and send in supplies and fuel to the Russian troops there. At the same time, it is critical to note that there is a difference between the regime and the Belarusian population, who by and large do not support the war. This is essential as the Ukrainians are growing increasingly resentful of the Russian population, and not just of the government of Russia, the primary aggressor state. In a recent poll,<sup>2</sup> 66 percent of Ukrainians thought that ordinary Russians hold some responsibility for the invasion. There is no comparable data on the Belarusians but social media feeds suggest the sentiment is quite similar. For that reason, more attention should be given to the attempts of the Belarusian activists supporting Ukraine through their actions. For example, recently it has been reported that nearly 200 Belarusians joined Ukrainian forces in the war. Moreover, Ukraine has been receiving support from the so-called "railway war", a partisan movement on Belarusian railways that helps to delay Russian military equipment and fuel. To preserve the friendly relations between Ukrainians and Belarusians throughout the war but also afterwards, it is therefore necessary to keep distinguishing between the regime and the population as well as to pay closer attention to the actions of the Belarusian anti-war movement.

### **What could be done looking beyond the war? European Perspective**

There is another important dimension of the issue relating to international organizations. Putin's aggression has no basis in international law. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is also changing Moscow's relations with certain international institutions e.g Russia's exclusion from the Council of Europe. As a result, it will not be possible to bring complaints to the European Court of Human Rights against Russia. On the other hand, it does not make much difference for Belarus because it has never been part of the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights. Given the fact that suspension and withdrawal of a particular country is the ultimate sanction of the Council of Europe, it is difficult to see what else the Council of Europe can do in relation to this conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> Gazeta.ua

[https://gazeta.ua/articles/life/\\_bilshist-ukrayinciv-proti-prijnyattya-umov-rf-i-zvinuvachuye-rosiyan-u-zbr-ohnij-agresiyi-opituvannya/1074790](https://gazeta.ua/articles/life/_bilshist-ukrayinciv-proti-prijnyattya-umov-rf-i-zvinuvachuye-rosiyan-u-zbr-ohnij-agresiyi-opituvannya/1074790)

Even before the situation in Belarus unfolded in 2020, the international legal order had significant limitations on its actions when faced with a state that is unwilling to participate. The Council of Europe is a successful organization, but it only works when the contracting parties want to participate, when they're willing or at least acquiescent to the whole situation of human rights protection. When they sabotage the order, there are effectively no ways to force them to collaborate. Given that Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power, the options at the UN-level also remain limited.

It is extremely difficult to analyze going beyond the war because so much depends on how it ends and what kind of role international institutions can play. Ukrainian president Zelensky asks three things of European leaders: weapons, sanctions and accepted candidacy for the EU. The response of European leaders takes the form of “yes, but...” in each case: weapons yes, but not up to planes or no-fly zone; sanctions yes, but not up to gas and oil because of Germany and Italy and others. There is also an institutional dimension of the issue, which is related to Belarus too, in so far as European leaders now actively discuss the possibility of extending candidacy status to Ukraine. If (as we would support) Ukraine is accepted as a candidate country – not even as a member – that would have enormous implications for Belarus, as well as for Moldova. In this context, a great danger for Belarus, as for Ukraine, is that the response from EU leaders, in particular Macron and Scholz, is to use this extraordinary challenge in order to consolidate the EU, give it a stronger security and defense identity, altogether make it *L'Europe puissance*, as Macron puts it, but consolidate it within its existing frontiers without any clarity about what the perspective is for Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. These countries would risk becoming a kind of, to use a German term, *zwischen europa*, insecure lands between. This risk is something to watch and to alert European public opinion as well as European leaders' opinion too so that it doesn't come about. There's arguably quite a significant part of the EU leadership and European public opinion which would settle for that, and it would be very bad news for Belarus, for Ukraine and for Belarusian-Ukrainian relations.

### **How could the war end?**

In the early 1990s, there was optimism about the future of the international order. However, “the end of history” rhetoric, which was popular at the time, did not materialise. The international community refused to see what was going on in Putin's Russia and made certain mistakes regarding the policies towards Russia as well as the whole of the former Soviet Union (FSU). It is important not to repeat the same mistakes this time, when the war ends.

*Five possible conclusions* could be made about post-war Ukraine. The *first* one is to concentrate on Belarus, Ukraine and even Russia to enhance exchanges at the intellectual and academic level. For instance, the UK needs to scale up considerably the opportunities for young people to do exchanges with British universities, like in the case of Chevening Scholarships that requires people to go back to the countries for a set period of time so that lessons learnt can be actively integrated. The *second* represents a wider global point. The UK needs to take development aid back up to 0.7 percent of its GDP because there

is great resentment in the African subcontinent and in the Middle East and North Africa of the differential treatment of refugees and indeed the whole approach. It would be a tragedy if the UK's development assistance was diverted from Africa, Middle East, and North Africa in order to help Ukraine. This can only be done if development aid is increased back to 0.7 percent. *Third*, it is important to improve linguistic skills in the UK to better understand the region, especially in the post-Brexit world. *Fourth*, in the early 1990s, the concentration was very much on an economic model - the so-called Washington Consensus, that focused on privatization, liberalization and stabilization in ways that - arguably - paved the way for the oligarchs to emerge in the FSU region. If there is an opportunity to engage effectively with the societies in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine after the war, it is crucial to learn the lessons from this period and concentrate much more on the rule of law, media freedom, investment in human capital and the development of enduring institutions. *Fifth*, as highlighted in the previous section, providing candidacy to the EU for Ukraine is an important step in making good past errors.

### **Conclusion: Lessons Learnt**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine also triggered a series of debates about what went wrong and what kind of lessons we have learnt and can learn. To start with, it became apparent that Western actors acted slowly after 2014. A number of steps could have been taken – such as reducing energy dependence, more sanctions, more military support for Ukraine – which would have rendered Russian invasion less likely, by increasing the cost of it.

We maintain that it was the *right* decision to enlarge NATO and the EU. This, we know, is the precise opposite of the lesson that is so often drawn, suggesting that it was the mistake of the West to enlarge NATO. If NATO enlargement did not take place, the West would have had the situation between the two world wars, where Western Locarno and Eastern Locarno emerged and all the countries between Germany and Russia were in a zone of insecurity. Hence, it is even possible to suggest the West should have gone further – that is especially the case with the EU, rather than NATO. In this sense, NATO's 2008 Bucharest decision<sup>3</sup> was a mistake because the Western actors declared their commitment to Ukraine and Georgia that it was not going to deliver NATO enlargement to them.

When it comes to the status of Belarus, until now, the position was to develop the relations with the EU within the Eastern Partnership framework, the potential of which has not been fully exploited. In the pre-war context, the argument was framed briefly as follows: “let us not bring any divisions in Belarus, we do not want to split public opinion on whether we should apply for candidacy in the EU or we should remain close to Russia.” Many of the Belarusian people who voted for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya supported good relations with Russia *before* the war. Therefore, the idea was to avoid this geopolitical component in order to unify rather than divide. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the context has changed considerably. The West has to think about geopolitical choices as it no longer seems to be an option to go back to seeking relations with Russia the way they used to be. In this sense,

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2008/04-april/e0403h.html>

building a closer relationship with the EU matters a lot for Belarus's future in terms of the opportunity it provides for developing robust political institutions, promoting economic development, and securing a recognised collective identity.

When it comes to the role of international organizations, it is important that the Council of Europe draws certain red lines. States that use unprovoked military force against other member states of the Council of Europe should not be members of this institution. The Council of Europe is based on three fundamental values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. And if none of these values are possible to be found in a particular member state, it is a symbolic yet important gesture that these countries are expelled from the European family of states.

### **Policy recommendations**

1. It is critical to ensure that the world differentiates between the current Belarusian government and the majority of Belarusian society and, arguably, also between the Russian government and much of Russian society. Several anti-war protests have taken place both in Belarus and Russia, despite all the oppressive counter-measures - and in Belarus, citizens have been active in sabotaging the Russian war effort.
2. In this context, every inch of information space matters. As far as the Ukrainian side is concerned, it is important for them to realize that Belarusians are essentially allies of Ukrainians in the current war. It is also critical to point out that many Belarusians are engaging in these activities in a material way, joining the fight against the invasion with weapons, and risking their lives.
3. It is crucial to underline that collective responsibility is not the answer to any crisis. When conflict ends, a period of reflection on what happened should take place. That is what was missing in the 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed. We must learn the lessons of the recent, as well as more distant, past.
4. For clear reasons, Ukrainian people are frustrated and they value actions more than words. There are certain measures that can be taken by the Western powers to support Ukraine, such as expanding sanctions against Russia, providing further military support, humanitarian aid, and opening up the prospect of EU membership to Ukraine. This will help to mobilise the resolve of peoples in Belarus and Ukraine to stand together against the dictatorships and for change in the post-Soviet space.

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