



Policy Brief

WHAT DO BELARUSIANS AND UKRAINIANS THINK ABOUT THE WAR AND THE BROADER ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT ACROSS THE REGION?

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What do Belarusians and Ukrainians think about the war and the broader anti-war movement across the region?

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.

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- 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.

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Executive Summary

This policy brief offers a recap of the discussion held on 11 April 2022, at the webinar jointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO), the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) and the GLOBSEC Policy Institute. The discussion focused on attitudes to Russia's war in Ukraine among the Belarusians and the nature of the broader anti-war movement across the regions, including the activities of cyber partisans. The policy brief points to five directions that the Belarusians seem to choose for themselves in support of the anti-war movement in Belarus. Based on the analysis, four specific policy recommendations are offered in the final part of the brief.

Background

With Russia's war against Ukraine in its second month at the time of writing, there are growing indications that Belarusians are deeply opposed to their country's involvement in it. Belarusians are concerned about the current developments in Ukraine, they are seeking information about the situation and there is currently a high level of interest in politics among the general public, comparable with the period of active protests in 2020. Although Alexander Lukashenka has allowed Russia to use Belarus as a platform for Russia's war, Belarusian people are against the engagement of Belarusian troops in the war on the side of Russia. They do not support the presence of Russian troops on Belarusian territory either. At the same time, just 1% consider that Belarus should take part in the war on Ukraine's side according to the Chatham House online survey, conducted in February-March 2022.¹ This demonstrates that people are against the war in general and see Belarus mostly as a state with a neutral military status. Indeed, even at a time of increased state propaganda justifying Russia's 'special operation' in Ukraine, anti-war attitudes are quite popular in Belarus. Opinion polls also demonstrate a clear connection between the views of Belarusians on the war and the sources of information they consume.

What Belarusians think about the war and the anti-war movement in Belarus was discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office](#) (OST Research Centre) and the [Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) (OBO) and [GLOBSEC](#) think tank. The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Dr Anastasiia Kudlenko, OBO Research Fellow and the speakers of the event included **Alexandra Logvinova**, Head of Public Outreach, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, **Dr Ryhor Astapenia**, Director of the Belarus Initiative, Chatham House, **Dr Aliaksei Kazharski**, Comenius University Bratislava, Institute of European Studies and International Relations, **Prof. Olexiy Haran**, Professor of Comparative Politics at National University of

¹ <https://en.belaruspolls.org/>

Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and Research Director at Democratic Initiatives Foundation, **Dr Anna Osypchuk** Director for Research, School for Policy Analysis and Associate Professor, Department of Sociology at National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.

Analysis of the issue

This policy brief discusses what Belarusians and Ukrainians think about the war in Ukraine and the broader anti-war movement in Belarus. Although limitations associated with opinion polls in authoritarian regimes (e.g. Belarus) are well known and acknowledged, this instrument (conducted online) is still useful in providing an indication of public opinion trends in the country. It is also important to highlight at the outset that the media environment is highly distorted in Belarus: it has been reduced after the recent government purge, leaving state-controlled outlets only, and consequently many Belarusians receive their information through state news channels and Russian media.² This policy brief will provide an overview of the anti-war movement in Belarus based on expert opinions and qualitative analysis of the situation on the ground.

What Belarussians think about the war

According to available online surveys, there is a discrepancy between Belarus and Russia, as only 3% of Belarusians support their country's participation in the war³. This suggests there is a deep societal transformation in Belarus, despite the heavily controlled media space, and even if some of the protest-minded people were pro-Russian or sympathetic to Moscow, not only are they still against the war, it is clear that they are exposed to alternative sources of information and are still actively consuming multiple narratives. Some of them are probably even likely to grow disenchanted with Russia after Putin's support for Lukashenka.

Lukashenka's propaganda is aligned with Russia's narrative on Ukraine. Yet, the results of the abovementioned Chatham House opinion poll demonstrate that it seems that there are certain limits to Lukashenka's propaganda. It is true that Lukashenka has exploited the pro-Russian Soviet nostalgia both at home - to rally support - and in his relations with Putin's Russia but, in terms of the perception of the shared past, it was always somewhat different in Russia and Belarus. For Belarusians, this narrative was more about social stability, economic growth, modernization, in parallel with the fear and suspicion of the West, but it was not

² Chatham House (2022) Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine (poll conducted 5-14 March 2022)

³ Chatham House (2022) Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine (poll conducted 5-14 March 2022)

https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-8?utm_source=Chatham%20House&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=13091709_REP%20-%20content%20update%202024.03.2022&dm_i=1S3M,7SLML,NUSXLY,VSLBH,1

about territorial expansionism or imperialism. In that sense, there is a difference between pro-war attitudes of Russia's citizens and those in Belarus: for instance, whether they agree with their relatives being sent to Ukraine to fight the war. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the attitude toward war is more pragmatic and less ideological in Belarus than it is in Russia.

The position of the Ukrainians

It appears that Belarussians are divided in their attitude towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but they are united in the belief that Belarus should not take part in the military action. How do the Ukrainians interpret this situation? There is not much data available on the perspectives of the Ukrainians about the political elites and ordinary people in Russia and Ukraine regarding their roles in the war. The Rating Group⁴ conducted a survey on the 1st of March, that is, one week after the start of the full-blown invasion. According to this survey, 55% of Ukrainians blame only Putin and elites for the war and 38% name both ordinary Russian people and Putin. For Belarus there is a much bigger difference — for example, 70% of Ukrainians blame only Lukashenko and 24% of them blame ordinary Belarussians. On the other hand, according to a more recent Rating Group survey, for Ukrainians: Belarus and Russia remain together in the “foe” category — it is 98% for Russia with no regional difference and 80% for Belarus, also with no regional difference. This poll does not distinguish between Lukashenka and ordinary people in Belarus. A more recent survey suggests that Ukrainians' attitudes to ordinary Russians has changed significantly as more people started to blame ordinary Russians for the invasion — which is up to 70% now.

Overall, the available data indicates a complex situation. On the one hand, Belarussians do not want war in Ukraine. On the other hand, the fact that Russian troops remain on the Belarussian territory means that Belarus is a part of this conflict — even though many Belarussians do not think that this counts as participation. The anti-war movement in Belarus aims to influence the perceptions of as many Belarussians as possible to change this equilibrium.

The anti-war movement in Belarus

Belarussians launched a nationwide anti-war movement, supported by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the country's leader of the democratic opposition. On February 27th, 2022, thousands of people in Belarus took to the streets demanding a stop to the military action in Ukraine. More than 800 people were arrested on the first day of the anti-war protests. People with different social, political and professional backgrounds openly spoke up against the outbreak of war. In total, about 1,500 people in Belarus have been arrested since the start of the war.⁵ The Movement aims at opposing the participation of Belarus in Russia's war against

⁴ https://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_ua_1000_ideological_markers_ua_042022_press.pdf

⁵ <https://spring96.org/be/news/107275> <https://spring96.org/be/news/107591>

Ukraine and distinguishing between Lukashenka's regime and the people of Belarus who are against the aggression.

While current priorities of the anti-war movement are bound by military context, its ultimate mission is to restore independence and freedom in Belarus, endangered by Lukashenka. The Manifesto of the anti-war movement states that "We are the people of Belarus, we oppose this war, we want to stop it, and also bring back independence and sovereignty to Belarus". The anti-war movement has united Belarusians around the world, inside and outside of Belarus. It is inclusive and not hierarchical. Every person and/or organisation could become a part of the movement by aligning their current activities with its aims.

The anti-war movement in Belarus offers different tracks for people to mobilise against the war in Ukraine. There are essentially **five directions** of action/work that people can choose for themselves if they support the mission of the movement. The **first** is countering the regime's propaganda in Belarus through blocking propaganda channels, spreading true and fair information, and reaching out to very diverse audiences. In the first week of the war huge numbers of people did not know what actually had happened or did not realise the role of Belarus in the conflict.⁶ Some of them were ideologically in favour of war — perhaps they were not active supporters, but did not see any problems with what was happening. In due course the situation has changed to some extent — the majority of the population is more or less informed about the real situation but this remains a very important line of work to keep true information flowing, explaining to people what they can do. For instance, this initiative does a lot of work with soldiers and non-military personnel in the army in terms of explaining to them why they should not go to Ukraine, also helping them figure out how they should behave in order to not support this aggression if they are deployed.

The **second** line of work within the anti-war movement concerns putting pressure on the local authorities in Belarus. The members of the anti-war movement reach out to the local authorities including military chiefs. One relevant example is the Union of Mothers initiative. This movement is not limited to Belarus; it also includes mothers in Ukraine and Russia. In Belarus, the initiative started to reach out to all the local military stations: calling them, writing letters and paying visits demanding that their sons, relatives, nephews, or husbands are not sent to Ukraine. They also demand reports about where soldiers are stationed. The initiative involves the wider public — asking people what they are doing, contacting local governors to get a sense of how they assess the situation, what they think about the fact that the Russian army resides in Belarussian territory and to explore whether something could be done.

The **third** line of work concerns obstructing infrastructure. In Belarus, several factories, enterprises, and business actors support the war. It is known that at least 35 state factories

⁶ As recent opinion polls in Belarus demonstrate, it is difficult for many Belarusians to understand the role of the country in the war. For more see Chatham House poll conducted on April 8-18, 2022 <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-9>

produce equipment for Russian soldiers. There are factories that produce medicine packages which are sent to Russia. The sabotage activities aim to hinder the work of these structures in Belarus. This is a more risky, sabotage-like line of work, targeting the efficacy of the production environment. For example, rail partisans as they call themselves, supported by ByPOL (a Poland-based group of former security officers who left Belarusian law enforcement agencies after the 2020 elections), specifically target the railways. Trains going from Russia, delivering food and equipment are getting delayed as a result. This has been very successful so far. According to some figures there were at least 80 successful operations over the past few months.⁷

The **fourth** line of work is economic resistance and pressure by draining state resources, to ensure that the regime does not have the power to sustain this machinery. This is mainly for those who are not ready for active anti-war protest, they instead can withdraw their deposits or strike, or sabotage production, to reduce the state's ability, including its financial resources, to be part of this war.

The **final** line of work is all about supporting the Ukrainians directly by joining the armed forces, providing logistical and medical support to the front line, or accommodating Ukrainian refugees. This also includes the voluntary battle units; for instance, there is Kastus Kalinovsky's battle unit which is entirely composed of Belarussians who decided to join forces with Ukraine and fight side by side with Ukrainians.

Overall, the five lines of work mentioned above offer alternatives for people to support the anti-war movement. People can choose their line of activity independently, and it proves rather effective for fighting the war in both active and tacit ways.

Conclusion

This policy brief analysed the attitudes to Russia's war against Ukraine among Belarusians and Ukrainians. Based on public opinion surveys, it is highlighted that only a small segment of the population in Belarus supports the war. It is also highlighted that Lukashenka's propaganda has certain limits despite the restricted media environment and heavy control of the regime over national media outlets. The policy brief also analysed the emergence and expansion of the anti-war movement in Belarus, which was launched by the Belarusians and supported by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office.

Based on public opinion surveys and expert judgement, the following recommendations are provided.

⁷ Kasmach, E. (2022) Anti-war resistance in Belarus: Rail partisans slow Russian troops
<https://belarusdigest.com/story/anti-war-resistance-in-belarus-rail-partisans-slow-russian-troops/>

Policy recommendations

1. It is critical to talk about the anti-war movement and promote this idea in different platforms to give much more space and visibility to the people in Belarus who are against the war.
2. It would be useful to create a global Anti-War Movement including people from Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. This would give the Movement new momentum and international coverage. Supporting independent media in Belarus, fighting against Russian misinformation campaigns, and amplifying the voices of journalists working for the Belarusian audience would be critical in this regard.
3. It is necessary to keep a nuanced perspective about the Anti-War movement when it comes to Ukraine, though. Being against the war should not shadow the fact that the terms of stopping the war, in any case, should be set in a way that is acceptable for Ukraine and Ukrainians.
4. To this end, stronger and tighter sanctions — including in the oil and gas sector — should be implemented against Russia to help stop Russian aggression in the region.

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