



Policy Brief

BELARUS AND THE US: DIPLOMACY AND PRAGMATICS

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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.

[IGSD, University of Warwick](#): Institute for Global Sustainable Development is a world-leading research institute with a focus on resilience, and sustainable governance, including [Agenda 2030](#) and the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). IGSD led by Professor Elena Korosteleva, supports the work of the OBO by providing expertise, networks and co-leadership of this initiative. Additionally, it support OBO expertise through additional new projects: focusing on Resilience in Ukraine: a comparative perspective (led Dr Asya Kudlenko, 2022-23); and EU Horizon project SHAPEDEM focusing on the eastern neighbourhood, including Belarus (1/10/22-30/09/25), and AGMOW DFF with Southern Denmark University (01/01/23-31/12/26) focusing on the role of Russia and resilient regional and global orders. IGSD has expertise from life science, humanities and social sciences and believes in transdisciplinary research for transformative change.

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Belarus and the US: Diplomacy and pragmatics

Executive Summary

This policy brief focuses on Belarus-US relations offering both retrospective and prospective accounts of their development to understand what could be learned from the past and how these relations are likely to develop, especially in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The bilateral relations have been rather difficult and unstable. They acquired a new dynamic post-2020 Belarusian elections. With the sanctions imposed on Lukashenka's regime, including in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, it becomes critical to assess how Western countries, especially the US, might help to stop the war—as well as to stop Lukashenka's involvement in the war—and support the transition of Belarus onto a more democratic path. The analysis gives rise to three policy recommendations.

Background

Bilateral relations between the United States (US) and Belarus had been complex and uneven before the 2020 Belarusian election. A breakthrough in relations, which took place in 2019, associated with an agreement on the exchange of ambassadors between the countries, has been wiped out by Lukashenka's refusal to resign after the de facto loss of the presidential election, which gave rise to the protests and subsequent repressions across the country. Further developments in US-Belarusian relations included intensive contacts with the Belarusian democratic political leadership in exile and increased support for civil society. In parallel, broad sanctions against representatives of the Belarusian regime, state-owned enterprises and some businesses have been implemented. The Belarusian authoritarian government has always been very sensitive to US economic sanctions and its foreign policy.

What is the mode of US-Belarus relations now? What changes can be expected? How is US diplomacy going to deal with Belarusian democratic forces and the current government? These and other 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](#). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by **Elena Korosteleva**, Professor of Politics and Global Sustainable Development at the University of Warwick, and co-Director of the Oxford Belarus Observatory, and the speakers of the event included **Valery Kavaleuski**, Deputy Head of the Cabinet; Representative on Foreign Affairs, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; **David Kramer**, Former United States Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour; Bradford M. Freeman Managing Director of Global Policy, George W. Bush Institute; **Alla Leukavets**, Research Fellow at the Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies; and **Alexander Cooley**, formerly Director of the Harriman Institute, Columbia University, New York, and Claire Tow Professor of Political Science at Barnard College.

Analysis of the issue: The Belarus-US relations in context

This policy brief focuses on Belarus-US relations with reference to two periods. The first period covers the period prior to Russia's war in Ukraine (24 February 2022). The second period covers more recent developments and major factors that might influence the future trajectory of these relations.

The history of Belarus-US relations, since the breakup of the Soviet Union has had a cyclical character. The turns in this cycle have been influenced by two major factors — (1) the degree of the Belarusian regime's human rights violations, and (2) the geopolitical environment, involving developments in Ukraine and Russia. For a short period in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, lasting from 1991 until about 1995-96, bilateral relations were on a friendly course. The US recognised the independence of Belarus right after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and in 1992, the US Embassy was officially opened in Minsk. In 1994, US President Clinton visited Belarus. At the time, one of the central themes in Belarus-US relations was the safe disposal of nuclear weapons. The US provided assistance to the Belarusian government towards nuclear disarmament.¹

The positive nature of bilateral relations took a different turn after Aliaksandar Lukashenka came to power in 1994. He began consolidation of his authoritarian control over Belarus through repeated repressions and violations of human rights. As a result, the US scaled down its relations with the Belarusian leadership. In 1997, for instance, the Clinton Administration announced American transition to a policy of selective engagement.² According to this new approach, cooperation with Belarus was limited to areas of direct interest for the US and focused on supporting democratic forces, independent media, and NGOs in Belarus. The peak in this phase of strained relations occurred in 2008, after the US introduced sanctions against a state-owned petrochemical conglomerate in Belarus, Belneftkhim. This move resulted in a large-scale diplomatic crisis in which both ambassadors were recalled, and the US Embassy staff in Minsk was reduced from 35 to 5 people.³

The tensions between the US and Belarus started to decrease only in 2015, once the role that official Minsk was to play in settling the 2014 crisis in Ukraine became clear. The position of Minsk as a mediator and peacemaker made Washington consider that Belarusian interests can be distinct from Russia's and that normalising relations with Minsk can be part of

¹ <https://by.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/u-s-assistance-to-belarus/>

² Steven Woehrel, "Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns", Congressional Research Archive, February 12, 2013, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL32534.pdf>, p. 6. For more on the strategy of "selective engagement" in American foreign policy on a broader scale, see: Robert J. Art, "Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement", *International Security* Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter, 1998-1999), pp. 79-113.

³ See, Reuters, "Belarus Wants U.S. Embassy Staff Cut to Seven", <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL02592513>. Also see Steven Woehrel, "Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns", Congressional Research Archive, February 12, 2013, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL32534.pdf>, p. 7.

Washington's containment policy vis-à-vis the Kremlin.⁴ The Belarusian leadership also saw this rapprochement with the US as an opportunity to resist Russia's attempts to strengthen the integration within the Union State [of Russia and Belarus]. As a result, diplomatic contacts between Belarus and the US intensified. In 2019, National Security Adviser John Bolton visited Minsk and met with Lukashenka. A year later, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Belarus.⁵ The goal of his visit was to offer American aid for Belarus when Russia decided to cut off energy supplies.

This phase of rapprochement lasted only until the 2020 Presidential elections in Belarus. The harsh repressions with which the Belarusian regime responded to the post-electoral protests quickly led to a severing of the ties with the US. The policy of the US towards Belarus since then has been twofold. It has been based on the Belarus Democracy Act which was adopted in December 2020.⁶ The first goal of US policy has been to increase support to civil society and Belarusian opposition in exile, while the second goal has been to pursue comprehensive sanctions against Lukashenka's regime.

The Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and relations with the US

Over the last two years, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) has mobilised the international community to adopt policies concerning the non-recognition of Lukashenka as a legitimate leader of the country. In the current context, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya underlined that independence of Belarus is in danger, as Lukashenka has essentially yielded significant sectors of Belarusian sovereignty to Russians. The use of the territory of Belarus as a base without any regard to national interests of the country is detrimental to the national security of Belarus and the region.⁷

Even though defending the independence of Belarus is primarily the responsibility of Belarusian citizens and their legitimate political representatives, the US and other democratic countries should also pursue policies — going beyond declarations — to support the Belarusian democratic movement in preserving the independence of Belarus. This is in the interests of all democratic nations, and as long as Belarus is under the control of Lukashenka, who is, in his turn, controlled by Putin, there will be a constant threat to Ukraine and to other countries in the region.

⁴ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/role-belarus-ukrainian-crisis>

⁵ For a detailed chronology of events and relations, see: <https://by.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/>. Also see, Andrei Makhovsky, "Pompeo visits Belarus as Minsk's ties with Moscow fray," Reuters, February 1, 2020.

⁶ To reauthorize the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004, US Senate passed 2020 Belarus Democracy Act: <https://belsat.eu/en/news/us-senate-passes-2020-belarus-democracy-act/> Also, see the details of the bill: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/8438/text>

⁷ <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-fate-intertwined-ukraine-tsikhanouskaya/32049095.html>

Lukashenka's regime clearly poses a direct threat to Ukraine allowing for the use of its territory in Russia's war against Ukraine, offering training, and weaponry to the Russian forces. There is also a growing threat that extends beyond the region affecting the security of the entire continent —such as the Ryanair hi-jacking in May 2021,⁸ weaponisation of migrants and refugees,⁹ and the war in Ukraine. Lukashenka's regime, therefore, represents an explicit danger to the countries around him and the world, and requires a joined-up strategy from the US, the EU and other stakeholders in dealing with him as co-aggressor.

The challenges ahead in Belarus-US relations

Looking to the longer term, the future of Lukashenka's regime depends on the resilience of Putin's regime in Russia, and the fate of democratic Belarus is interconnected with the fate of Ukraine and its victory in the war. Stated differently, America's long-term policy towards Belarus is closely interlinked with its policy vis-à-vis Ukraine. Especially since 2020, Lukashenka, supported by Putin, has taken a concrete policy decision to expand and reach extraterritorial positions, doing so in a way that clashes with the security interests and the ordering structures that the West has traditionally supported.

There are several factors that might influence the future direction of this policy. Two of them stand out in particular:

- First, the possible decision of the Belarusian authorities to get more directly involved in the war in Ukraine on Russia's side. The Ukrainian war continues to loom large and to provide therefore the principal prism through which the US views Belarus. So, if Lukashenka were to escalate Belarusian involvement, this move would most likely lead to increased Western sanctions and result in further deterioration of already strained relations between Belarus and the US.
- The other factor concerns domestic politics in the US, namely, the outcome of mid-term elections in November this year. If (as looks likely at the time of writing) the Republicans take control of the House of Representatives after the mid-term elections, the flow of US support, in the form of weapons and security aid to Ukraine, may decrease. Republicans have questioned the necessity of providing such massive support and called for the need to have greater oversight and to focus more on domestic priorities inside the US.¹⁰

⁸ Jules Darmanin and Sergei Kuznetsov, "Belarus' fake bomb threat to divert Ryanair flight was 'unlawful,'" says UN agency," *Politico*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/belarus-bomb-threat-to-divert-ryanair-flight-was-unlawful-un-says/>.

⁹ Gustav Gressel, Joanna Hosa and Pavel Slunkin, "No quiet on the eastern front: The migration crisis engineered by Belarus," *ECFR Commentary*, 9 November 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/no-quiet-on-the-eastern-front-the-migration-crisis-engineered-by-belarus/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-republicans-aim-ukraine-aid-unlikely-block-it-2022-10-21/>

In case of decreased support from the US, the chances of Russia to advance on the battlefield will once again extend and the potential prolongation of Putin's war and Lukashenka's stay in power will, in turn, increase in likelihood too. Whatever the scenario, it would be difficult for Lukashenka to improve his relations with the US again —something that he did back in 2015. In other words, by siding with Russia in the war against Ukraine he has significantly increased his dependence on the Kremlin, and has locked himself into Russia's control for the foreseeable future.

Conclusions

This policy brief focused on Belarus-US relations, which have not been easy and stable. Bilateral relations have acquired a new dynamic post-2020 Belarusian elections. Lukashenka, while suppressing democratic opposition and civic activism in the domestic arena, has produced a growing dependence on Putin's Russia in the foreign policy realm. In the current context, the Ukrainian war is the factor on the ground and this will predominantly shape the US views on Belarus. This policy brief suggested a multi-pronged approach to assess relations between Belarus and the US, and how the West could support democratic transition in Belarus.

Based on the discussion, three policy recommendations stand out.

Policy recommendations

1. The goal of the Belarusian democratic forces in the current configuration should be to continue supporting Ukraine's resistance against Russian aggression and also, to be ready to seize the moment and to use the window of opportunity that the victory in Ukraine can create for the democratic transition in Belarus.
2. The US and other democratic countries can provide practical support to Belarus' democratic forces by recognizing that Belarus is occupied by an illegal regime represented by Russian forces. Derecognition of Lukashenka, who has surrendered sovereignty to Russians, is another step in this direction and at the same time, recognition of and official relations with the United Transition Cabinet (UTC), which is a representative of the interests of Belarusians in the country and abroad, would further support a future path of democracy in Belarus.
3. There needs to be systematic documentation of the transnational repression and the abuses of the Lukashenka regime abroad. It is also important to present these as security challenges, not just human rights challenges, because of the coercion, the undermining of order, and the rule of law that they have. Also, all extraditions to Belarus should be halted during this time.

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