

The Impact of the Russian War Against Ukraine on the EaP Region: BELARUS

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In 2014, Crimea's annexation by Russia gave a powerful impetus to the Belarusian authorities to rethink their foreign policy approach. In the conflict between its two neighbors, Belarus took a pragmatic and relatively neutral position. It reaffirmed its allied relations with Russia, supported Ukrainian territorial integrity and offered itself as a negotiating platform for the warring parties. The "Minsk process" opened a window for the Belarusian government to establish a dialogue with the West. Against the backdrop of a hot war in Ukraine, domestic political problems in Belarus seemed to many Western politicians a mere trifle, and Lukashenka became welcome in the West.

Lukashenka's desire to improve relations with the EU and the US, decrease his dependence on Moscow and lift western sanctions imposed on Belarus made him release political prisoners and significantly limit repression. As a result, NGOs breathed easier and emerged all over Belarus, and independent media grew muscles and challenged propaganda lies. The government introduced a visa-free regime, welcomed western investment and even allowed two opposition candidates to the Parliament.

However, this honeymoon predictably ended with the Belarusian presidential elections in 2020. Those 7 relatively liberal years gave people hope that they could change the country for the better. Hundreds of thousands of them went to the streets after the stolen elections and in response, Lukashenka uncovered his old weapon – brutal and total repression. This broke his relations with the West and he again turned to Russia which saved his regime in the most critical days of the uprising.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 could have become a springboard for unfreezing relations with the EU and the US if Belarus had taken a neutral stance like in 2014. However, Lukashenka, who earlier trapped himself in a deep dependence from Moscow made the opposite choice. Instead, he fully supported Russia, provided the country's territory for the attack on Ukraine, and [boasted](#) that "the war will last a maximum 3-4 days" and "while they (NATO) turn around, we will already be standing at the English Channel".

Complicity in the aggression against Ukraine led Belarus to have the [toughest international sanctions](#) imposed on it in its history. The most profitable sectors of the economy, such as oil refinery, the potash sector, logistics, woodworking, and others, now have fallen under restrictions. This affected the GDP of Belarus, which decreased by [4.7%](#) compared to 2021, and further increased the already enormous role of Russia for the Belarusian economy. It is Russia that has become a lifeline for an export-oriented Belarusian economy isolated from European markets. Moscow eases the bypassing sanctions and [significantly compensates](#) Minsk's financial losses from them. Under current restrictions, the Belarusian potash export can reach the world market only through Russian seaports and railways. Belarusian banks that were disconnected from SWIFT use the Russian SPFS system instead. Sanctioned enterprises partially reoriented their exports to the Russian market. Earlier the share of Russia in the total volume of Belarusian exports was 35-40%. Now it makes almost [60%](#), and by the end of the year it can reach the level of 65-70%.

Lukashenka's future has become closely linked to the outcome of the war. Without Russia his regime has few chances of survival. In order to keep the Kremlin's support, Lukashenka embarked Belarus on

the path of de-sovereignization. Since the beginning of the war Belarus has transferred a number of military objects, including some airfields, to Russian control. They are used to shell Ukrainian cities and store military aircrafts. In recent months Belarus increased the supply of its military equipment to Russia. In October alone, 98 T-72A tanks, 60 BMP-2, and 53 Ural trucks [were sent](#) to Russia. More than 65,000 tons of ammunition have been [delivered](#) since February. The newly mobilized Russian soldiers are [being trained](#) in Belarus due to the lack of resources in Russia. Belarusian hospitals [provide](#) medical care to wounded Russian soldiers. Some of them were completely [booked](#) for this purpose.

In fact, Belarus has lost military control over a part of its territories. Russian troops can enter Belarus, go back to Russia and return to Belarus again. Lukashenka no longer has the right to veto such maneuvers by the Russian army. He is well aware that Moscow has an extensive set of tools to force him into obedience and loyalty. If Russia really wants to achieve something, it knows how to get it from him.

The Lukashenka regime unconditionally supports Moscow in all voting in international organizations, be it in the [condemnation](#) of the illegal annexations of Ukrainian territories or the demand to [compensate](#) Ukraine for the damage from Russian aggression. Belarusian propaganda repeats and spreads propaganda fakes about the “staging in Bucha”, “Nazis” and the “dirty bomb”, demonizing the Ukrainian people and justifying Russian war crimes.

Belarus has made neighboring states defend themselves against the flows of illegal migrants orchestrated by the Lukashenka regime and other hybrid and conventional forms of aggression. [Lithuania](#) and [Latvia](#) have literally fenced themselves off from Belarus. [Poland](#) built a wall. [Ukraine](#), apart from a building a wall, dug ditches, blew up bridges and mined roads and fields. The geopolitical alignment in the region assigns Belarus the role of a “leper”, from whom the neighbors instinctively try to stay as far away as possible. The toxicity and non-negotiability of the Belarusian authorities create no prerequisites for any dialogue.

The tragedy of the Belarusian society is that it turned out to be too weak in its fight against the despotic regimes of Lukashenka supported by Russian president Putin and failed to defend its choice, freedom and desire for democracy in 2020. Now, contrary to the people's will, but on its fake behalf, the illegitimate government has unleashed the war against Ukraine, introduced Stalin-style repressions against “enemies of the people” and threatened to allow the placing of Russia's nuclear weapons in Belarus. Because of this the international image of Belarus and Belarusians has undergone a horrible transformation too. Now the whole of Belarus, and not just Lukashenka's regime, is perceived in the world as an aggressor. Before February 24 Belarus was treated as a dual international actor with a clear division into “regime” and “people”. Now it is mostly a thing of the past. Belarus seems to be equated with Lukashenka's regime, despite Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya being welcomed in NATO states.

At the same time, Belarusians have a very negative attitude towards the war in Ukraine. [Only 3%](#) would support the participation of the Belarusian army in the war on the side of Russia. Since February more than [1,500](#) people have been arrested for anti-war actions. Even a railway partisan movement arose in the first days of the war, with activists blocking the movement of Russian military equipment by rail. Hundreds of Belarusian volunteers went to fight on the side of Ukraine. Belarusians have created military and combat training centers in Poland and Lithuania. They are open for those who want to fight for Ukraine or prepare for forceful resistance to the Lukashenka regime. Secret informants in Belarus track the movement of Russian troops, air sorties and missile launches and record suspicious processes within their organizations. They pass this information on to

Belarusian monitoring projects like "Belarusian Hajun" or to Ukrainian intelligence. The total number of such informers in Belarus [exceeds](#) several tens of thousands of people. The risks for these people are prohibitively high. Lukashenka's security forces opened fire on the railway partisans. Informants are sent to prison for decades, where they are tortured. Volunteers are blackmailed with violence against relatives remaining in Belarus.

The democratic movement of Belarus looks to Ukrainians with admiration, wishes them victory and hopes that the defeat of Russia will give them a second chance in their fight against the dictatorship. However, the future for Belarusians looks rather bleak. They have no legitimate government to protect their rights. They do not have weapons and military equipment to fight for the freedom of Belarus. Belarusian independent media and NGOs are all in exile and are alive only thanks to the EU financial support. As long as Russia remains stable from the inside and supports Lukashenka, and as long as there are no deep splits within the Belarusian nomenklatura, the chances for change are slim. At this time, the sovereignty of Belarus continues to slowly melt, bringing closer the prospect of losing independence.

In these tough conditions the best approach the EU can take is to keep a clear division between the people of Belarus and the regime that rules the country. While the regime deserves pressure, the people of Belarus deserve unconditional support. Such approach should not change even if Lukashenka sends his army to Ukraine. It should not change even if he chooses to sell Belarusian independence to Russia down the line. This support should remain until Belarus becomes democratic and free, no matter how long it takes. The Baltic States were occupied by the USSR for more than 50 years and now they are part of the EU family. Belarusians deserve the same opportunity.