



# EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

## CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

### Belarus

29 September 2022

#### Highlights:

- A speaker from Belarus emphasised that the prosperity of the country requires maximum cooperation with the outside world and its neighbours. Correspondingly, it was said, any conflict in the neighbourhood inevitably brings big economic losses.
- Belarus has traditionally sought some balance in its relations with Russia and Europe, but it has become clear since the disputed election of 2020 that Russia is “the only game in town”.
- Belarusians do not want to be a direct party to the war in Ukraine and do not believe their country is playing this role. Prior to the outbreak of war, Minsk sought to have a neutral status between Russia and Ukraine, acting as a facilitator of talks. Participants disagreed as to whether it could recapture such a role in future.
- It is unlikely that Lukashenka would want to send Belarusian troops into Ukraine given that such a move would be deeply contentious for him domestically. A participant suggested that he may be hyping up the risks of a direct attack from NATO in order to make the case that the Belarusian army needs to stay on its home turf.
- Lukashenka’s recent visit to Abkhazia, and his meeting with the self-styled “president” of the Georgian territory, had caught many in Belarus by surprise. The local press had been cautious in its reporting and did not describe him as meeting with a “president” on the visit.
- The Belarusian opposition is seeking recognition from Kyiv but so far the Ukrainian government is keeping its options open as any such recognition would close the door to potentially more positive relations with the Belarusian government in future.

#### Summary:

The Contact Group convened this month to discuss Belarus, with speakers from Minsk providing their assessment of the country’s positioning in Russia’s war with Ukraine and in the broader confrontation between Russia and the West. Belarus has traditionally sought to strike a balance between its relations with Russia and those with the EU, but this has changed since the

disputed election and protests of 2020, the subsequent crackdown on opposition, and the consequent imposition of Western sanctions. Today Belarus is close to the epicentre of Russia's military operations in Ukraine and of the wider Russia-West confrontation. Its geographical position is militarily sensitive and it is important for energy and trade flows between Russia and the West. A recent [poll](#) of some 800 Belarusians commissioned by Chatham House found that "Belarusian society wants to distance itself from the war in Ukraine – there is a growing demand for Belarus to express neutrality in this conflict."

### **Belarus's traditional balancing act**

A participant from Minsk emphasised that the prosperity of the country requires maximum cooperation with the outside world and its neighbours. Correspondingly, it was said, any conflict in the neighbourhood inevitably brings big economic losses. Along with developing comprehensive relations with its ally Russia, Belarus has therefore also been working over the years with the US and with EU countries. Although a small country, it has sought to make a significant contribution to regional and European security.

As examples, this speaker highlighted the voluntary withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Belarusian territory, its peaceful settlement of border disputes, and its role as an effective barrier against illegal migration and even sometimes smuggling of fissile material. In terms of its relations with Ukraine, it had played a constructive role in organising the Minsk contact group.

Belarus sincerely aspires to peace and security across the continent, it was said. Most importantly, the speaker emphasised, the country poses no threats to any of its neighbours. The country seeks only one role: to create the so-called "belt of good neighbourhood". Importantly, it was said, in Belarus people do not agree that their country is a direct party to the conflict in Ukraine.

Another speaker said there has been an unwelcome transformation of a country that was previously branding itself as "European Switzerland". Only two and a half years previously, officials had used that language publicly, and it manifested itself in practicalities, including neutrality in the situation between Russia and Ukraine and becoming the venue for peace talks. Belarus was actively using advanced confidence and security-building measures until 2020 and a number of states had been quite pleased with the results. The speaker recommended reading Ian Anthony's recent [policy brief for the ELN](#) on this topic.

But since 2020, this had all changed. Western sanctions came and Russia became the only game in town. "It was probably always the only game in town," the speaker noted, but as it became clear that Russia was the only foreign partner, Belarus had less room for manoeuvre and found it more difficult to do some of the practical things it was doing before, notably on the Russia Ukraine conflict. Moreover, anything that becomes a protracted political problem for Belarus automatically becomes the business of the security establishment.

### **A low point in relations with Europe**

Historically, relations with the West have seen ups and downs and “the present moment is definitely a down”.

Among the reasons for the deterioration in relations are:

- The observance of democratic standards. This was a complex issue about which the participants clearly had different views. One of the speakers said that in their personal opinion, Belarus’s US and European partners do not take sufficient account of the fact that the democracy-building process in Belarus will be much harder than in Central European countries and will have specific features because of specific historical and cultural background and a different mentality. The desire of western countries to speed up the process and impose their methods is considered by the Belarusian authorities as direct interference in internal affairs and will always be categorically rejected, they said. Some participants questioned this narrative and noted other relatively young nation-states had chosen a more democratic path.
- Sanctions make the whole story more toxic, it was said. They can certainly bring some damage but will not be able to change the political course of the government. On the contrary, they entail reciprocal Belarusian measures and increase the risks of conflicts of a different nature. However, it seems that the US and Europe saw democracy as more important than stability and security, in the view of this speaker.
- Minsk had viewed the US and NATO’s rejection of Russia’s proposals for security last December with extreme regret. This was taken in Minsk as a complete disregard for the national security of Russia and Belarus.

### **Belarus’s positioning on the war in Ukraine**

So where does Belarus stand on Ukraine? Before 2020 the relationship with Ukraine had been very good. The two countries had a very strong and mutually beneficial economic relationship, based on trade in fuel and food products.

But after the disputed election of 2020, Ukraine started implementing partial sanctions on Belarus for human rights reasons. This speaker portrayed the move as unhelpful on the security front - “it seemed Ukraine wanted to destroy the possible peace value that Belarus could have”. One problem between the two countries is that Ukrainian officials were frustrated with the Minsk agreements. However, from Minsk, it seemed obvious that if Belarus was deprived of its status as a facilitator and venue for peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, it would also lose its argument for remaining neutral and would come under more pressure from Russia to be involved on the Russian side.

Ukraine now faced a choice in its relations with Belarus, it was said. Officially Ukraine labels Belarus a co-aggressor and said measures have to be taken against it. However, the speaker noted, some back-channel discussions have explored different possibilities. In the early stages of the war, Belarus had hosted three rounds of talks between Russia and Ukraine, and this had also provided occasions for private discussions between Ukrainian delegates and Belarusian

officials. Meanwhile, the Belarusian opposition is seeking to persuade the Ukrainian government to give it official recognition, but so far Ukraine has abstained. Recognising the opposition would be incompatible with normalising ties with the Lukashenka government, it was noted.

It was argued that Lukashenka had a practical reason for persuading Russia that Belarus faces a direct threat of attack from NATO. He can use this threat to argue that the Belarusian army needs to defend the western flank of its own country instead of joining the fight in Ukraine. One observer suggested this was probably the primary reason to hype up a hypothetical threat from NATO.

A second motive was judged to be Lukashenka's interest in reaching out to the most hawkish elements in Russian society, elites, and military circles. These are traditionally his supporters in Russia, and he seeks to sustain their support when his domestic position remains precarious, it was argued.

Thirdly, the government of Belarus may want to emphasise the threat of attack to strengthen its case for "mirroring what NATO does with nuclear sharing". The speaker said that many people in Belarus thought this was legitimate - but that it was questionable whether Putin really believed in nuclear sharing, while Lukashenka is unlikely to want to "rise up the list of NATO targets". In June it was announced that in response to heightened activity by NATO, Russia would send nuclear-capable short-range (500km) [Iskander missiles](#) to Belarus, and that Belarus would [convert Su-25 planes](#) to carry nuclear weapons. In August Lukashenka said the conversion of the planes had taken place. However, the speaker said it was not altogether clear how many planes had been converted, or whether the missiles had definitely arrived in Belarus.

A Polish participant said that Belarus's previous positioning as a quasi-neutral active bridge was simply a nostalgic reminder of the past, with no bearing on the future. In their view, Belarus's involvement in the Ukraine war, as a staging ground for the invasion and for air strikes, meant it has little or no further room for manoeuvre. Belarus is wholly dependent on a Russia that is becoming weaker. Its main patron will have fewer incentives and resources to support Belarus, including with military supplies "and some of the latest generation toys that the presidents talk about". Another participant noted Russia could hold sway over Belarus not only through its association with Lukashenka but through its ability to have a stranglehold on the Belarusian economy. The relationship was not only driven by personal factors.

The large number of political prisoners, including some from the Polish-speaking minority [and a [journalist for Polish broadcaster](#) Belsat] is also a barrier to mending relations with European neighbours, said this speaker. Lukashenka's statements seem to portray not only NATO but specifically Poland as the arch-enemy and he had tried to complicate his neighbours' lives by weaponising irregular migration.

Participants asked how the speakers and Belarusian people more generally viewed the Russian mobilisation and the annexation of oblasts of Ukraine [which took place the day after this meeting was held]. What would annexation change for Belarus?

One speaker emphasised that there is extreme uncertainty. The situation has been unstable for nearly half a year now and it is still uncertain whether Russia would win or lose. It would be decided on the battlefield. However, Lukashenka has said clearly there will be no mobilisation in Belarus. The speaker also noted that Belarus's participation would not be decisive from a military point of view. The army of Belarus is about 67,000 people and the country would not be able to send all of them. If it sent 15-20,000 people, this would not be a game changer for the conflict. It was better for Belarus not to participate on the battlefield.

Another question raised was the purpose of Lukashenka's recent [visit](#) to Abkhazia. [He visited on 28<sup>th</sup> September and met with the self-styled "president" Aslan Bzhania. Lukashenka reportedly also stopped in Sochi to meet Putin beforehand.] Was this done at the request of Moscow? Was it a precursor to recognising the "independence" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia? Both speakers agreed this was a very new development and had been unexpected for many people in Belarus. In general, the relations with Georgia and its government are good. One speaker noted that the local press in Belarus "did everything possible to emphasise this wasn't an official visit", reporting that Lukashenka had visited some historical sites. They reported that he had met Bzhania but did not describe him as "president". It was unclear how Tbilisi would respond. A participant asked whether Lukashenka might in fact want to reassure Abkhazia that he supports it against any attempted annexation by Russia.

Finally, participants asked how speakers thought the war would end. Did Belarus think that Ukrainian neutrality was still a central demand for Moscow? Or did Russia want to make Ukraine part of a fully-fledged Russian sphere of influence, in terms of culture and civilisation as well as a military power? What were the consequences for Belarus? Could the Minsk process ever have succeeded, and was its utility more as a process than a real guide to a mutually acceptable political settlement?

A speaker said some felt Minsk had been more of a venue for talks than anything else. It was better to have Belarus playing a role as a venue for peace than to have no process at all. Belarus had not necessarily shared Russia's initial confidence about this war. The way Minsk sees the events on the battlefield is different from the way Moscow sees them.

"Obviously no one here is happy about the referendums, but Belarus is basically cornered because of the sanctions and pressure from the west over democracy and human rights. You cannot get both at the same time." The opposition did not have the capacity to dethrone the president, so the net result had been internal turmoil which undermined the country's ability to manoeuvre internationally.

There have been some attempts to start some sort of substantial dialogue with the west, not public. There is a permanent daily evaluation of the risks and benefits of relations with all

partners. It's not just that they want to run from Russia - Russia is also a big opportunity for them. But it is good to ensure this country can take some steps away from this conflict and from Russia without becoming even more vulnerable to Russian pressure, the speaker concluded.

***Feedback? Questions? Please reach out to Jane Kinninmont –  
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