Although the political crisis in Belarus dominated global media headlines for much of 2020 and continued to attract international attention intermittently in 2021, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has pushed Belarus further down the priority list of Western policymakers, including those in the United Kingdom. Certainly, Belarus’ authoritarian leader Aleksandr Lukashenko has been condemned as a co-aggressor for allowing his country’s territory to become a launch pad for the invasion, and Minsk’s continued complicity has led to an expansion of sanctions. But the full import of Belarus’ participation in the war and its roots in the 2020 anti-Lukashenko protests remains underappreciated. This is a mistake, and UK policymakers need to think differently, and more proactively, about Belarus as a critical factor in Russia’s war on Ukraine.

Instead of viewing the resolution of Belarus’ domestic crisis as a passive corollary to Russia’s defeat in the war, they should consider how it could help bring that defeat about and adjust their approach accordingly.

There is a recent precedent in British foreign policy of seeing the importance of Belarus for regional security. The UK watched closely Minsk’s efforts at peace-making in 2014 and 2015, when Belarus hosted the Minsk Process, which was aimed at brokering a ceasefire in the earlier Russian-Ukrainian clashes. As the EU lifted some of its restrictions on Belarus in 2016, the UK reassessed its approach towards Belarus, and in 2017 the UK Minister for Europe and the Americas Sir Alan Duncan became the first British minister to visit Belarus since its independence.1 This was reciprocated in March 2018 when Uladzimir Makei, the Belarusian foreign minister, visited the UK, another “first” in nearly a quarter of a century. Security in the region was among the key topics for discussion on both occasions.

We now live in a very different world because the (as yet) unfinished Belarusian revolution of 2020 altered the geopolitical situation dramatically and rendered any meaningful diplomatic relations with the Lukashenko regime unsustainable and unacceptable. Moreover, the outcomes of the 2020 protests in Belarus did much to determine the timing of the Russian full-on assault on Ukraine. Prior to 2020, the Kremlin could not have relied on its Belarusian ally’s full cooperation. Although Lukashenko had reaped much political and economic benefit from his decades-long rhetoric of closer integration with Russia, in practice he was careful to keep the options for Belarusian foreign policy open.2 Especially in the last decade before the war, Minsk pursued what some scholars have described as foreign-policy hedging.3 This strategy involved manoeuvring between the two major players, Russia and the West, and it framed the warming of the Belarus-UK relations mentioned

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above. This strategy received a further boost from the Russian annexation of the Crimea, which unnerved Lukashenko so much that he avoided recognizing its legitimacy until November 2021. If anything, by 2020 Belarus seemed to be inching away from Russia: the union project between the two states had stalled, and on the eve of the August presidential elections Minsk-Moscow relations were at an all-time low.

The unprecedented mass protests that followed the elections, and the uncharacteristically swift international reaction to their violent suppression, drove Lukashenko into a corner. Any relations with the West were now conditional on negotiating with the protesters, something that his regime was not prepared to contemplate. This meant that the multi-vector foreign policy option evaporated, leaving Lukashenko dependent on the Kremlin for his survival. With no room left for maneuver, he granted the Russian army access to Belarusian territory and its 665-mile stretch of border with Ukraine that lay only 140 miles away from Kyiv, giving Russia a strategic advantage it would not otherwise have had. It is across this border that Russia struck Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

But having Belarus on its side is also of great symbolic and psychological significance to Russia. The Russian view of Belarusians as, at best, a brotherly but junior Slavic folk sharing common lineage with Russia and Ukraine, or, at worst, a part of the Russian people, has a long and persistent history in Russia, dating back to the nineteenth century. During Soviet times Belarusian ethnic distinctiveness was formally acknowledged, but Moscow could still view Belarus as one of its most loyal republics, the site of the largest Soviet partisan movement during the Second World War and a flagship of the Kremlin’s economic modernization in the post-war decades. This reputation of loyalty spilled into the post-socialist space: Belarus has been typically viewed, with good reasons, as the former Soviet republic with the closest economic, political, and cultural ties to Russia. The linguistic similarities—many Belarusians speak Russian as their first language—and the absence of border controls between the two states made tourism and personal contacts easier, with Belarus becoming a popular destination for holidays or weekend breaks for middle-class Muscovites and Petersburgers.

Russia’s unprovoked attack on one of its two “brotherly Slavic nations” in 2022 raised the stakes for Moscow retaining Belarus as a friend. The military advantage aside, pro-Kremlin propaganda would have had a tougher job of getting so many ordinary Russians on board with its so-called “Special Operation” had Belarus declared its opposition. This would have been hard to explain because to most Russians any notion of Belarusian nationalism is an oxymoron. But however dismissive they might be of Belarusians as a separate nation (just as they are of Ukrainians), Belarus’ support for the war apparently matters a good deal to the Russians. The results of a national survey conducted in August 2022 by the pro-government Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VTsIOM) show the significant difference the war made to how the Russians see Belarus. When asked to list five countries that are most friendly to their own, nearly half of the respondents

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(49 percent) named Belarus. Only one in five Russians (20 percent) did so in a similar survey in 2018.\textsuperscript{9} Whether such statistics convey popular sentiments or state propaganda (or both), they clearly indicate the symbolic import of Belarusian support for the war.

This might suit Lukashenko. The war made his regime indispensable to Moscow and thus secured his position at home. But it also entails a huge risk, since all his political eggs are now in the Russian basket. Lukashenko’s murky role in helping Putin defuse the abortive coup attempt by the leader of the Wagner mercenary group Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023 should not obscure the fact that Lukashenko is far more dependent on Putin for survival than Putin is on him. Lukashenko’s overtures to China and, more recently, to the global south, especially Africa, cannot be seen as a meaningful diversification of foreign policy. For China, Belarus’ isolation from Europe has made it a less attractive partner. In Africa, Belarus cannot compete with Russia, whose influence has been steadily growing since the end of the Cold War. While Russia has been criticised over its war in Ukraine by some African states and leaders, its isolation by the West has not been replicated on the continent, where it remains an important player.\textsuperscript{10}

Russia’s war in Ukraine also carries risks for Lukashenko because his support for the war does not match the majority view of the Belarusian people. Their silence should not be taken as acquiescence: voicing opposition to the war extracts a heavy price in a society that has already been decimated by ruthless repression since 2020. Tens of thousands of ordinary Belarusians suffered arrest or imprisonment for their political views; many were tortured. Several political prisoners died in custody, and the deliberately inhumane conditions in which they are held threaten the lives of hundreds more.\textsuperscript{11} Tens of thousands left the country in fear for their safety and that of their families.\textsuperscript{12} Belarus recently stepped up its laws on extremism and terrorism, which are widely used to punish anti-war opposition.\textsuperscript{13} A 2023 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights notes that such practices “have made any protest activity virtually impossible in Belarus, whether in-person or online.”\textsuperscript{14} In the past year, the situation has only deteriorated further, and the most recent report published by the UN Human Rights Council on 9 May 2024 observes that “those expressing disapproval of the Government’s domestic and foreign policy have been labelled as ‘extremists’ and prosecuted.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{9} China remained the most popular choice: 55 percent of respondents included it in 2022. The war also improved India’s status as Russia’s perceived “friend” with 22 percent naming it in the 2022 survey, as opposed to 10 percent in 2019 when Kazakhstan was seen as more friendly. See “Friends and Ill-Wishers amidst the Special Operation,” Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, 31 August 2022, \url{https://wciom.com/press-release/friends-and-ill-wishers-amidst-the-special-operation}.

\textsuperscript{10} On Russian influence, see Samuel Ramani, \textit{Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?} (London: Hurst & Company, 2023); on the continent’s response to the war in Ukraine, see 294-298.


\textsuperscript{12} For regular reports on repression and human rights violation in Belarus, see the website of the Human Rights Centre \textit{Viasna} \url{https://spring96.org/en}. \textit{Viasna’s} founder and chairman, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, and several of his activists are currently serving lengthy prison terms in Belarus for their reporting. On persecution for anti-war protests in Belarus, see \textit{Viasna’s} report, “Shot in Knees and Jailed: What Belarusians Risk for Their Anti-War Stance,” 19 October 2023, \url{https://spring96.org/en/news/110533}.


\textsuperscript{14} “Situation of Human Rights in Belarus: Note by the UN Secretary-General (Transmitting the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, Anaïs Marin, Submitted in accordance with Human Rights Council Resolution 50/20),” 5.

These draconian measures also obviously point to the regime’s lack of confidence in popular support for the war. Indeed, most Belarusians do not support it, and only two percent think that Belarus should send its troops to fight against Ukraine, according to a Chatham House survey taken in November 2023. For a society that has been ripped apart by the festering political crisis and endless repression, Belarusians are remarkably united on this issue.

What are we to make of all this? In the first days of the war, a Ukrainian man, a stranger on a train in London, said to me: “Don’t worry, we’ll kick the Russian invaders out and then we will liberate Belarus for you guys [from Lukashenka].” This is a noble sentiment and undoubtedly was offered in the best spirit, but it is also indicative of a broadly accepted view that Ukraine’s victory in the war would fatally weaken not only Putin’s regime but also that of Lukashenko, who will be automatically toppled once he is deprived of the Kremlin’s support. While Lukashenko’s regime would indeed be under serious threat should Russia lose the war, its collapse would not, of course, be automatic, and the UK and its Western partners need to work out a clear plan of action and swift, effective support for the Belarusian democratic forces in such circumstances.

But it is also worthwhile to approach the problem from the opposite end and to consider what damage, if any, would be done to Russia’s ability to continue the war if it were deprived of its sole ally in Europe. The challenges of supporting a democratic regime change in a country where Russian troops are stationed are obvious, but the idea should not be dismissed out of hand. Despite the heroic efforts of Ukrainian soldiers, the fighting in Ukraine has become a war of attrition with little immediate prospect for a breakthrough, and negotiated peace seems impossible because territorial concessions are unacceptable to the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians. In such circumstances any other factors that might impact the course of the war or tip the balance of forces in Ukraine’s favour must be carefully explored. That is why Belarus should move from the backburner to the forefront of Western policymakers’ thinking and strategy on Ukraine.

Developing a bolder strategy on Belarus should not be seen as a substitute for stepping up arms deliveries to Ukraine, but rather as a supplement to it. Now is not the time for scaling down military aid, especially amidst concerns about the growing war-weariness of Western politicians and the public (one wonders if those expressing such sentiments spare a thought for people in Ukraine or ask whether they feel “war-weary”?). We can be sure the Kremlin is watching closely for signs of a weakening of Western resolve, be it in the upcoming US presidential elections, where the issue of arms to Ukraine has become a political football, or in Poland’s fears that the lifting of the EU ban on Ukrainian grain in 2023 would disadvantage Polish farmers.

The response of the US and UK governments to the eruption of violence in the Middle East also sent a dangerous signal to Russia that Western resources might be redirected, leaving Ukraine exposed because it is not as great a priority. The US was quick to beef up its military presence in the region days after the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October. It took President Joe Biden eleven days after the massacre to come to Israel, but almost a year passed after the launch of the Russian invasion before he visited Ukraine. While the much-stalled military aid package to Ukraine was finally approved by an overwhelming bipartisan majority in the US

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Congress on 23 April 2024, it had to be paired up with military aid to Israel to ensure its smoother passage. Meanwhile, the delay gave Russia the battlefield advantage to push on to Kharkiv. The initially unqualified US support of Israel’s mass bombing of civilian areas in Gaza as an acceptable response to Hamas’ bloody attack on Israeli civilians gave grist to the mill of Russian propaganda’s well-worn cries of US double standards, which resonate with many in parts of the global south. As the UN debates in the months following the attack have shown, much has been made by Russia of how the same Western governments that decried the Russian bombing of civilian targets in Ukraine were inclined to prioritize their Middle Eastern ally’s “right to defend itself” over the duty to observe international law and protect civilian lives in Gaza. In short, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has done to Ukraine what the Russian 2022 invasion did to Belarus—pushed it to the backburner—and this could not have come at a worse time.

Understandably, Kyiv was quick to grasp and warn against the danger that the Middle East would absorb the attention and military resources of the Western allies. The G7 leaders at the Tokyo summit in November 2023 were right to issue reassurances. The US renewal of military aid and a more flexible stance on how Ukraine uses those weapons is also a hopeful sign. It is essential that the allies’ strength of commitment to Ukraine is declared clearly, repeatedly, and very publicly, and that it is backed with military support. It is also important that Belarus is returned to the forefront of the allies’ strategic thinking on the region as a potential factor in helping bring defeat to Russia and peace to Ukraine. The UK once led on this, when it saw Belarus as key to regional security and reoriented its foreign policy accordingly in 2016–2017. It could lead again now in devising and pursuing a bolder and more effective policy of supporting the Belarusian democratic opposition at home and abroad.

Natalya Chernyshova, PhD, is Lecturer in Modern European History at Queen Mary University of London. Her research and publications focus on Belarusian history, Soviet nationalities politics, and everyday life during late socialism, including a recent chapter on the Soviet legacy in the 2020 Belarusian protests in E. Korosteleva et al, eds., Belarus in the Twenty-First Century: Between Dictatorship and Democracy (Routledge, 2023). She is currently writing her second monograph, a history of Soviet Belarus in the long 1970s told through the prism of life and career of its popular communist leader, Petr Mashearu (the project funded by the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship in 2020–2022). She has commented on history and current affairs in the region for the BBC, The Sunday Times, History & Policy, France 24 Online, The Conversation and other media in the UK and internationally.


