



Belarus  
Research  
Network  
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Policy

# **Belarus against the post-Soviet empire and dictatorship: Was there a better scenario for us after 2020**

**Interview with Siarhei Mazol  
by Belarus Research Network on Neighborhood Policy**



**Analytical Article  
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The Belarus Research Network on Neighborhood Policy talked with Dr. Siarhei Mazol, a Belarusian economist who was residing in Irpin, Ukraine at the time when the full-scale Russian war on Ukraine broke out in February 2022. Dr. Mazol is a coordinator of the project “Corporate Governance in Belarus”. He holds a PhD in economics and has worked as an associate professor. His field of professional interest is corporate governance and investment analysis. We asked Dr. Mazol some questions of critical importance for the security in the region.

**N:** How would you characterize the political situation in Belarus before and after the start of Russia’s war on Ukraine in February 2022?

**SM:** Before the war, there was a rise of a nationally oriented civil society, after the elections and after the state violence in 2020. There was a period of repression by the regime, which is controlled by the Russian special services. To date, the political situation is dominated by the position of the security forces. When we speak about their attitude to the war, it is rather “neutral” – “this is not our war”, they say.

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*In Belarusian society at large, there is huge support for Ukraine, while Russia is perceived as an aggressor, and Lukashenka's regime is perceived as a co-aggressor. The situation in Belarus is a hybrid aggression of Russia against a sovereign state with the option of the hybrid occupation and subordination of state institutions to the power bloc of the occupying state.*

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**N:** This leads us to the next question, namely, how do you assess the role of the Belarusian state in the Russian-Ukrainian war?

**SM:** Belarus was drawn into the war by Lukashenka’s regime. Lukashenka wanted the Belarusian military to fight side-by-side with the Russian military. I think that the Russians were expecting support from the Belarusian military when a large column advanced to Kyiv. The column of the Russian military stood as if waiting for something.<sup>1</sup> Then this column – a “gesture of goodwill”, as they said – had to be re-sited, they had to return. While I was still in Irpin, I understood that it would be

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<sup>1</sup> Под Киевом до сих пор стоит огромная российская колонна — Пентагон // <https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/pod-kievom-do-sikh-por-stoit-ohromnaja-rossijskaja-kolonna-pentahon.html>

difficult for the Russians to advance further without a bridge, so in general, I understand, they simply waited for the Belarusian troops. Lukashenka spoke about that situation [Belarus's military didn't want to join the Russian army directly in Ukraine] to his security council sometime in March 2022. He told the military that "with someone like you, NATO will eat us soon"<sup>2</sup>. In his ambiguous manner, on another occasion, he also said about the possible direct participation of Belarus' armed forces in war against Ukraine that "They [NATO, Western countries] just want to push us into the war in Ukraine on purpose. To make us expose the rest of our borders. And then they will deal with us quickly, we won't even have time to return from Ukraine to protect you. This is a tactic. And their strategy is to deal with Russia and with us at the same time, so that later they don't start again, as in August 2020. We figured out their plans, and not just figured [them] out: we have enough information for this ... We are ready for this. We will fight and die for you in our land. Of this you can be sure"<sup>3</sup>. These are the thoughts he had at that moment.

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*In my opinion, it was the Belarusian society that stopped the entry of the Belarusian military into the war: the protests that had taken place [are what] made their contribution in the first place.*

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After all, in 2020, society had clearly said that we have our own country, and that the Belarusians are not "Russians with a mark of quality", as Lukashenka once said<sup>4</sup>. The army apparently understood all this and answered that the war started by Putin is not

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<sup>2</sup> In March 2022, Lukashenka sent ideologists to assess the military's readiness to fight in Ukraine. He also had a meeting with the military in March 2022, where he spoke about this particular situation. Regarding the work of ideologists in the army of Belarus and the results, see:

1. Белорусские солдаты и офицеры массово отказываются воевать против Украины // <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2022/3/5/457699/>

2. Белорусские военные не хотят воевать в Украине – данные Генштаба ВСУ // <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2022/03/9/7329866/>

<sup>3</sup> «Я искренне горд за каждого из вас». Лукашенко вручил госнаграды // <https://ont.by/news/prezident-vo-vremya-ceremonii-vrucheniya-gosnagrada-belarus-esli-i-budet-borotsya-za-mir-to-tolko-na-svoej-zemle>

<sup>4</sup> Lukashenka: "A Belarusian is a Russian with a sign of quality." 100 years of the diplomatic service of Belarus <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5HqUfOIQr8>

“our war”, and they did not want to take direct participation in the war, although they provided some support. The rear support for this aggression is obvious.

**N:**In your opinion, what did Lukashenka anticipate in the event of Russia’s victory in the war with Ukraine?

**SM:** Lukashenka expected to participate in a “victory” parade together with Putin (“victory” for them both) on Khryshchatyk [the center of Kyiv]. From the point of view of the political future of Lukashenka himself, he wanted to preserve a kind of caste-feudal system in Belarus, with the transfer of his powers to inheritance. Well, the election is a mock election anyway, and it is not certain whether it will be held or not in the future. The basis of the regime’s state governance (called by Lukashenka a “power vertical”) had to be formed by representatives of different power agencies, because even today in Belarus, belonging to various power structures is the main social elevator. Directly or indirectly, financial flows in Belarus are controlled by various power agencies; they collect compromising materials on directors who are controlled by another competing power structure and try to replace these directors with theirs and thus further control these enterprises and financial flows. We can compare the ambitions of Lukashenka with the ambitions of, for example, Putin. Talking about victory in the war, in case of Russia’s victory, in my opinion, it is unlikely that Lukashenka would have any territorial claims and ambitions regarding Ukraine. He is primarily interested in the preservation of his clan in power within a governing structure in Belarus. And Putin clearly promised him this. That was the main motivation. That is why Lukashenka needs his military to stay in Belarus. That is also why he did not get involved directly – because he was afraid that the Belarusian society would rise up, and then he would not be provided with the possibility of support at all, and he does not know how to oppose the society in this way<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The Belarusian society does not want direct participation in the war with Ukraine, and therefore, support for Lukashenka in case of direct complicity in the war will fall even amongst the so-called “yabatski”, i.e. active supporters of Lukashenka. The regime would not know how to cope with such an additional loss of support from the side of the Belarusian society and the relatives of military men who would be sent to fight in Ukraine.

**N:** In your opinion, what are the economic and/or political prerequisites for the Lukashenka regime's participation in the war?

**SM:** Lukashenka has the opportunity to receive revenues from the trade in oil products made from Russian oil and gas, let's say, inside [Belarus]. He gets cheap gas, then he sends this gas to his enterprises and sells the products of these enterprises, made using the cheap Russian gas, and he receives his revenue. But, first of all, there are economic prerequisites – it is an opportunity for him to maintain control over this very oil and gas revenue. I read somewhere that the Belarusian regime receives and transfers overseas about 3-4 billion<sup>6</sup> dollars from this trade.

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*The main pro-Russian lobby in Belarus today is represented by those who participate in the turnover of Russian oil products and the sale and resale of Russian gas.*

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The regime understands that after 2020, Western markets will be closed to it, so its survival depends on market access and the ability to supply goods to China via Russia.<sup>7</sup> Regarding the political prerequisites, I understand that the regime was hanging by a thread at that time, and therefore, without participation one way or another in the war, Lukashenka would have had no prospects. How serious is the situation for Lukashenka? Here is the example of Makei, who, as I understand it, was

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<sup>6</sup> According to independent Belarusian sources.

<sup>7</sup> The main outcome of the visit, in my opinion, was the demonstration of China's role as the new "patron" of Lukashenka's regime. In my opinion, the main document following the results of this visit is a joint statement on the basic principles for the development of exemplary relations for an all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership between Belarus and China. (<https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-si-tszinpin-prinjali-zajavlenie-ob-osnovnyh-printsipah-razvitija-obraztsovyh-otnoshenij-553126-2023>). This is a clear demonstration that China is ready to take the place of Russia in Belarus and reduce the economic and political influence of the Putin regime on Belarus. In addition, according to available information, a free trade zone between Belarus and China will be created by 2023 (<https://economy.gov.by/ru/news-ru/view/belarus-i-kitaj-sozdadut-zonu-svobodnoj-torgovli-i-osuschestvlenija-investitsij-uzhe-v-tekuschem-godu-47354-2023/>). At the same time, Moscow does not take part in this process, although it should in accordance with article 17 of the agreement on the creation of a union state: "The exclusive jurisdiction of the union state includes: ... a unified trade and customs tariff policy in relation to third countries, international organizations and associations". Such a short deadline – 2023 – means that the Lukashenka regime seeks to minimize the impact of 28 "union programs" (<https://belrus.ru/info/soyuznye-programmy-s-rossiej-/>), the completion of which will mean the economic and political annexation of Belarus.



poisoned by the Russian special services, with a probability of 95%. It was done to show that this could be the end of everything for him and his “feints”, especially at the beginning of the aggression.<sup>8</sup> The Putin regime carried out an act of intimidation (according to some sources, Makei tried to resume dialogue with the West) to show that any threats to the position of Russian troops in “their” rear – Belarus was definitely considered by Putin as a relatively safe rear for the Russian occupying troops – will be suppressed. This once again shows the essence of the Putin regime as the heir to the worst repressive practices of the Soviet empire. The Putin regime really wanted to draw Belarusian troops into direct participation in the war against Ukraine. There are 15-20 thousand combat-ready Belarusian troops. I believe that the 15-20 thousand who did not go to Kyiv in February of 2022 could have had a significant impact on the situation near Kyiv. If they had left and entered to help the Russians, it could have become critical in general for the fate of Kyiv and Zelensky’s government at that time. Well, they didn’t go, and that’s why. That’s also why, to date, relations with the Lukashenko regime are a little better on the part of Ukraine.

**N:** Therefore, the next question, which you started answering already: why did the government of Ukraine maintain relations with Lukashenka after the elections in Belarus in 2020 and before the start of the war?

**SM:** At the very beginning, if we look at the situation in Belarus in this way, the elections were an attempt to overthrow Lukashenka’s regime and replace it with a more pro-Russian one with greater dependence on Russia. I am almost 100% sure that those who took part, Babaryka, Tsikhanovsky, Tsapkala, they may have not heard about Russia’s plans to start a war against Ukraine – they did not know about it. They simply took part in the political process, so to speak, in which Russia tried to inspire to replace the Belarusian regime with [one that was] more pro-Russian and more dependent on Russia. But these forces that tried to come to power in Belarus didn’t know what would happen next. After the violence perpetrated by the regime, another

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<sup>8</sup> This refers to his non-involvement in the direct war against Ukraine (“we will cover the rear of the Russian army”), as well as, for example, the fact that in one of his speeches he showed a map of Russia’s offensive against Ukraine, including from Transnistria (<https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-s-chlenami-soveta-bezopasnosti-i-rukovodstvom-soveta-ministrov>).

part of the society came out to say that we will not tolerate such violence – this is the first thing. And the fact that they came out bearing white-red-white national flags sent the message that we have our own country, we are not Russians “with a mark of quality”, as Lukashenka used to say. The way it turned out made the Russians fear that Lukashenka’s regime would not be replaced by a pro-Russian government, but by a nationally oriented government with pro-Western roots under a nationally oriented white-red-white flag. Therefore, Putin’s regime began to save Lukashenka’s regime. Judging by how the situation developed further, the most likely scenario for Belarus was a direct occupation by Russia. Russian troops in August 2020 moved to the border with Belarus<sup>9</sup>. After the start of the war with Ukraine, it became clear that if the protesters had moved on and Lukashenka had fled Belarus, as Yanukovych did in his time in Ukraine, the Putin regime would have carried out an operation to directly occupy Belarus in 2020. On the part of Ukraine, a dilemma had already appeared here. If the protest was supported, then even more pro-Russian forces may come to power in Belarus – this was the first option for Ukraine. The second option was to support Lukashenka, which meant trying to preserve at least the status quo, which would be less threatening to Ukraine at that time.

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*In principle, it seems to me that the Ukrainians and Europe looked at all this as Belarus being given to the slaughter – let Putin’s regime go to Belarus and forget for a while about Ukraine, and Ukraine will have a chance to jump into this window and join NATO, the European Union, and so on.*

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It seems to me that they simply expected that if Putin was dealing with Belarus, Ukraine would be able to get off the train and jump to Europe, possibly join NATO, and then there might be no war. When I was in Ukraine, I heard several times that “we are building an independent country, and Belarus will be there under Putin”.

**N:** In your opinion, what are the reasons that explain the diplomatic relations of the government of Ukraine with the official government of Belarus and the refusal to

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<sup>9</sup> Минобороны Белоруссии объяснило появление техники на дорогах страны // <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5f3a83069a794753e3240099>

**establish relations with democratic forces in the context of the war, in particular with Sviatlana Cikhanouskaya's office?**

**SM:** Let me express my opinion. First, this is due to the fact that the office continues to be perceived as pro-Russian. There is almost no personal criticism of Putin – that is, Putin personally. There is criticism of the war and Lukashenka's regime, but I don't remember an emphasis on criticism of Putin himself and his imperial ambitions and so on. Therefore, for now, the office is perceived as pro-Russian in Kyiv. In principle, at the moment, the office performs representative functions well and sufficiently; let's put it this way, if we perceive the office as the office of the president, then it fulfills its main task – the same representative functions as the president performs to some extent in any country. Unfortunately, there is no defined pro-European position, there is no politically nationally oriented government. Until there is a clear nationally oriented pro-European position, in my opinion, Ukraine's position will not change.

**N: The last question for you, what factors will affect relations between Belarus and Ukraine during the war and after its end?**

**SM:** The main factor is, of course, the degree of participation in the war: if there is no offensive from Belarus, then you can count on the prospects of cooperation with Ukraine and the liberation of Belarus from Russian occupation, but I think that Ukraine will not forget [the Lukashenka regime's] participation in the co-aggression [...] so they'll just leave it "for later". If they deal with the "sponsor" of the regime, then the matter will come to Lukashenka's regime. Ukraine, the Baltic countries and Poland understand that Belarus as an occupied country is a threat to their security, so this factor will be, in my opinion, the most significant factor that will affect the relations between Belarus and Ukraine, especially after the end of the war. And another factor is the ability of uniting the national agendas of Belarus, Ukraine, Poland and maybe Lithuania – then we will have good prospects as an independent country. Belarus can be considered as a Baltic Sea region state, with a common history and a European cultural, political agenda and system of values. The main impact that was inflicted by the Lukashenka regime with its support of Putin's occupation regime was a destruction to civil society and social capital, i.e. the destruction of horizontal ties in society. But



Belarusians remain committed to European values, as evidenced, among other things, by their rejection of supporting Russian aggression against a neighboring country. Belarusians resist Russia's aggression and occupation policy, which seeks to erase the common history and culture with Europe. Belarusian society needs support and assistance in restoring these horizontal ties, which will make it possible to put up resistance to the Russian occupation. The creation and support of various initiatives that contribute to the integration of Belarusians is needed. These initiatives should be significant for Belarusians, who find themselves under Russian occupation. This will help preserve the ability of the Belarusian society to resist annexation by Putin's regime.

