

Sanctions against Lukashenka. A shift in Ukraine's policy towards Belarus

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On 18 February, Ukraine imposed sanctions on Alyaksandr Lukashenka owing to Belarus's growing involvement in supporting Russia's war effort and circumventing the sanctions regime. The government in Kyiv also justified its decision by citing the deployment of a network of relay stations used to control attack drones on Belarusian territory (enabling Russia to intensify its attacks on northern Ukraine) and the involvement of more than 3,000 Belarusian companies in supporting Russia's defence-industrial complex, including through supplies of artillery shells and unmanned systems. The Ukrainian government stressed that Lukashenka poses a threat to all of Europe by participating in Russia's nuclear blackmail through preparations to deploy the Oreshnik missile system in Belarus.

So far, Belarusian officials have not commented on these sanctions. However, state propaganda has responded with fierce criticism aimed primarily at President Volodymyr Zelensky. It compared him to Adolf Hitler and accused him of 'provoking' other countries into joining the war, while blaming him for the 'annihilation of the Ukrainian nation'. It also questioned his legitimacy to hold presidential office. Meanwhile, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of Belarusian opposition forces, expressed her support for Ukraine's decision on the same day, calling the Belarusian authoritarian leader a 'war criminal and usurper'.

Despite Belarus's significant role in Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Kyiv has only now imposed sanctions on Lukashenka. These measures signal a hardening of its stance towards Belarus and align with the principles of a new *modus operandi* established by Zelensky's first meeting with Tsikhanouskaya in January this year. The primary reason for this policy shift is a thaw in relations between the US and Belarus, raising fears that Belarus could succeed in breaking out of its international isolation.

Commentary

- **Despite their symbolic nature, the sanctions against Lukashenka confirm a reorientation of Ukraine's policy towards Belarus.** They are a logical consequence of Zelensky's first talks with Tsikhanouskaya during commemorations marking the anniversary of the outbreak of the January Uprising in Vilnius. Zelensky invited her to visit Kyiv, effectively signalling Ukraine's recognition of Tsikhanouskaya as the leader of democratic Belarus. This marks the end of Ukraine's previous approach of disregarding Belarusian pro-democracy forces while maintaining a channel of communication with Minsk to facilitate prisoner-of-war exchanges and the transit of Ukrainian citizens from the occupied territories. The sanctions against Lukashenka will most likely preclude any future

dialogue with him.

- **Ukraine is seeking to counter any moves that could help Belarus end its international isolation.** The shift in Ukraine's policy towards the Lukashenko regime stems from a thaw in relations between Belarus and the United States, reflected in the selective lifting of US sanctions in exchange for the 'release' of political prisoners (see '[Eased sanctions for the release of 123 prisoners as US–Belarus relations continue to thaw](#)') and in Belarus's invitation to join the Board of Peace. Donald Trump's policy has raised concerns in Kyiv, as it breaks the previous Western consensus on sanctions against Belarus and the isolation of Lukashenko. It is also likely to encourage calls in Europe for a resumption of dialogue with Belarus. Moreover, this precedent could pave the way for similar steps vis-à-vis the Kremlin.
- **Ukraine believes that easing sanctions against Belarus would prove ineffective, as it would not weaken the Belarusian regime's dependence on Russia.** In the longer term, Ukraine views both increasing pressure on Lukashenko and promoting democratisation in Belarus as desirable processes that enhance Ukraine's security.
- **The domestic factors behind Ukraine's policy shift include personnel changes in the Presidential Office.** The appointment of Kyrylo Budanov as its head, replacing Andriy Yermak (see '[Ukraine: a New Year's reset of the state security management system](#)') who had favoured a cautious line towards Belarus, has translated into a greater readiness to take more decisive action against the Lukashenko regime and an increased openness to cooperation with the opposition. Tsikhanouskaya's forthcoming visit to Kyiv is one element of this new approach.
- **The sanctions against Lukashenko present an opportunity for Belarusian democratic forces to deepen cooperation with Ukraine.** Exiled opponents of the regime have long sought to raise the level of contacts with the Ukrainian government, notably by securing a meeting between Tsikhanouskaya and Zelensky [in order to](#) strengthen the opposition leader's international legitimacy. Ukraine's announcement that it would appoint a representative for Belarusian affairs could translate into greater engagement in Belarus-related issues. At the same time, the latest developments call into question Belarus's role as a corridor for evacuating Ukrainian citizens and facilitating prisoner exchanges.