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EU ambition shows exiled Belarus opposition is out of touch

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Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's EU aspirations could further divide opponents to Alexander Lukashenka

At a conference in Warsaw last month, the Belarusian opposition led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya adopted a ['Declaration of the future membership of Belarus in the European Union'](#). Tsikhanouskaya has now [appointed an adviser](#) to advance this goal, and [affirmed it this week](#) in a speech at the European Parliament.

This latest policy from Tsikhanouskaya's opposition, working in exile since her country's rigged presidential election in 2020, risks increasing the distance between her team and the demands of Belarusians living inside the country.

Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians took to the streets in protest after the blatantly fraudulent 2020 election. Since then, most of the opposition has been either in prison or in exile.

Most alarmingly, the status of several prominent opponents of Alexander Lukashenka is unknown: Viktor Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanousky (Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's husband) and Maria Kalesnikava - three significant actors in the protest movement of 2020 - have been held incommunicado for more than half a year. The regime seems to believe that if they are unseen they will be forgotten about.

The in-country opposition and network of campaign and activist groups known as 'civil society' have both been decimated. Belarus now has more political prisoners relative to its population than China, with [more than 1,500](#) in total, and the regime has continued to crack down ruthlessly and relentlessly on any dissent. The regime suppresses any symbols of Belarusian identity at odds with its own national project (which is tightly bound with Russia and the Soviet past). Even speaking Belarusian in Belarus today is [fraught with danger](#) because it is interpreted as a rejection of the Lukashenka regime's staunchly pro-Russia orientation.

The large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 diverted international attention and resources away from the plight of Belarusians. One response of the exiled opposition to this relative neglect was to express greater support for a 'European path' for Belarus. It was only in 2022 that Tsikhanouskaya publicly criticised Russia. She had not contested the 2020 election with any intention of bringing Belarus closer to the EU. On the contrary, [one of the opposition's first resolutions](#) after the 2020 vote was that Belarus would not reorient away from Russia under her leadership.

Part of Tsikhanouskaya's appeal to Belarusians in 2020 was her neutrality on geopolitical orientation and her inclusivity. Although she adopted the white-red-white symbols associated with the traditional Belarusian opposition after the election (which emphasise difference from Russia and a historical identity linked to modern-day Lithuania and Poland), she had not endorsed these prior to

the vote.

Belarusians have always been torn between pro-Russia and pro-EU positions, with Russia the stronger pull

The remnants of an opposition movement in the country feel those in exile are increasingly detached from their concerns. Perhaps ironically, the EU itself played a 'bridge-building' role encouraging Tsikhanouskaya's office in exile to open communication lines with the in-country opposition, according to forthcoming research I have seen by scholar Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina, which draws on interviews with opposition figures both inside and outside the country. Those crucial bridges could yet be burnt if Tsikhanouskaya pursues the idea of joining the EU.

Belarusians and the EU

The latest declaration is at odds with Belarusian public opinion, and so it is not only the in-country opposition Tsikhanouskaya risks distancing herself from. Belarusians have always been torn between pro-Russia and pro-EU positions, with Russia the stronger pull. Regular [polling by Chatham House](#) between September 2020 and March 2023 averaged 67% of Belarusians wanting their country to be in a union with Russia, against an average of 46% wanting to accede to the EU (both answers were possible).

Polling since February 2022 has found that Belarusians do not support the war but retain generally favourable views of Russia. One might expect that younger generations, less invested in the Soviet past, would be more supportive of EU membership. Recent polling suggests otherwise.

In a [poll of 18- to 34-year-olds](#) conducted in May and June, Chatham House found younger Belarusians intensely divided about foreign policy orientation: 57% of respondents wanted to see Belarus in a union with Russia, while 43% wished to see their country join the EU (more than a quarter desired to see their country stay outside of any unions).

The EU should exercise caution

Since 2020, the opposition-in-exile has had little influence inside Belarus and its supporters have grown [increasingly disillusioned](#) with its prospects. A proliferation of oppositional initiatives - last summer Tsikhanouskaya formed a 'cabinet' - reflects a failure to gain any traction in opposing Lukashenka. Last month's pro-EU declaration is an understandable appeal to European audiences to engage more deeply with the exiled opposition and augment its power, though it does little to assist Belarusian society.

A pro-EU direction also risks exacerbating differences among the opposition that have never been far from the surface. One of the most formidable anti-Lukashenka initiatives, BYPOL, [recently split](#) in two following a cantankerous quarrel over funding and other matters. Another exiled opposition leader, Pavel Latushka, resigned from the Tsikhanouskaya-headed Coordination Council, another of the opposition's initiatives, in February - although he remains in her cabinet - and continues to pursue his own initiatives separately from Tsikhanouskaya's team. The greater the divergence between the opposition's policy and public opinion, the greater the grounds for such disputes and divisions.

The EU will naturally be keen to support an opposition with membership aspirations, but it would be a mistake to engage such ambitions and lose focus on the situation inside the country. The exiled opposition's efforts to increase its influence with the EU should therefore be handled with caution.

The EU should instead encourage the exiled opposition, spread across Lithuania, Poland and

Ukraine, to strive for unity as a pro-democracy movement. And the opposition must be supported in influencing the situation inside Belarus, connecting with ordinary Belarusians and campaigning on issues such as political prisoners.

Lofty future goals of EU membership only distract from supplying political opposition to Lukashenka and could prove counterproductive. If the exiled opposition pulls in one direction and the Belarusian population is dragged in another, then the opposition will become an irrelevance to Belarusians and be ill-prepared for leadership. Lukashenka's fall could then leave Belarus without a viable alternative. That would be a tragedy.

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