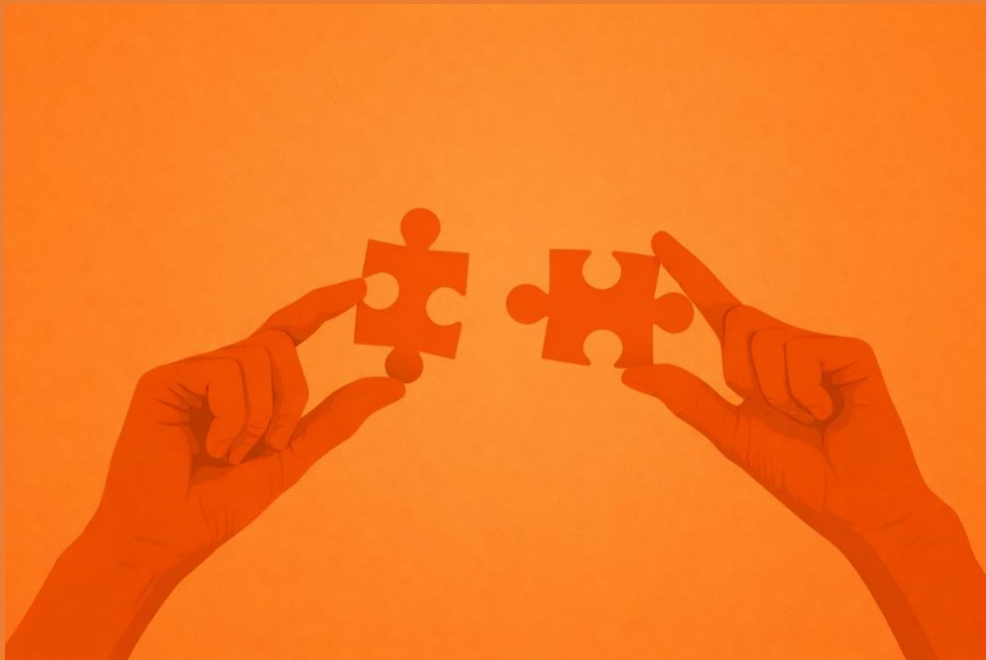




Institute for Development and Social Market in
Belarus and Eastern Europe



POLICY BRIEF

BELARUS AND RUSSIA UNDER WAR AND SANCTIONS: SOCIAL ATTITUDES AND POLICY OPTIONS FOR THE EU AND DEMOCRATIC FORCES

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Executive summary

Belarusian and Russian societies are in a phase of adaptation to a protracted crisis, rather than political mobilisation. In both countries, citizens seek to minimise risks, preserve their private lives, adjust to worsening conditions and avoid direct confrontation with the state. However, the logic of this adaptation differs. In Belarus, it is shaped by fatigue from repression, persistent rejection of direct participation in the war, fear of military escalation, economic uncertainty and a demand to preserve sovereignty. In Russia, it is combined with inertial support for the war, a low willingness to acknowledge personal moral responsibility for the aggression and growing irritation over the everyday costs of the war.

For political actors, the main practical conclusion is as follows: neither in Belarus nor in Russia can a strategy be built on the expectation of a rapid mass awakening. Discontent, fatigue and anxiety do exist, but for now they are being processed primarily through private survival strategies rather than collective political action. This does not mean that there is no potential for change, but it requires a different language, a different agenda and different tools for working with society.

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Introduction

This policy brief has been prepared on the basis of materials from the expert discussion “Russian and Belarusian Society through the Eyes of Sociologists”, held on 24 April 2026 with the participation of Belarusian and Russian experts under the Chatham House Rule. The discussion addressed public attitudes in Belarus and Russia, citizens’ views on the war in Ukraine, perceptions of the economic situation, future horizons, geopolitical orientation, and attitudes towards democratic forces inside the countries and abroad.

The original analytical material was reworked into the format of a policy brief, with an emphasis on applied conclusions and recommendations for the democratic forces of Belarus, the European Union, international partners, research and donor organisations.

1. Overall framework of the two countries: societies of adaptation, not mobilisation

Belarusian and Russian societies demonstrate different political attitudes, but a similar type of social response to a protracted crisis. In both cases, adaptation dominates. People are becoming accustomed to worsening conditions, redistributing risks, retreating into private life, lowering expectations and trying to preserve a minimum degree of control over their everyday lives.

In the Belarusian case, this adaptation is often combined with an internal rejection of the political status quo, fatigue from repression and fear of war. In the Russian case, it is combined with support for the official military framing, but also with anxiety, fatigue and irritation over the fact that the war is intruding ever more deeply into private life.

2. Belarus: fatigue, anti-war consensus and apathetic adaptation

Belarusian society entered Russia’s war against Ukraine after the severe internal crisis of 2020 and the subsequent wave of repression. The war became a new layer of the crisis. It overlapped with the trauma of the suppressed protest, the destruction of public politics, mass emigration, fear of the state and a sense of losing control over the future.

In the first months after February 2022, anxiety about a catastrophic scenario was strong in Belarusian society: Belarus’s direct entry into the war, mobilisation, the transfer of hostilities onto Belarusian territory, or a sharp economic collapse. The worst-case scenario did not materialise, and part of society moved into a state of relative relief. Later, this phase was replaced by a more sober perception: the war continues, repression does not stop, the economic situation is deteriorating, and the future still remains unclear.

The anti-war consensus in Belarus remains one of the most significant factors shaping public attitudes. It is not always expressed as direct support for Ukraine or as an active political position, but it manifests itself in a persistent unwillingness to see the Belarusian army take part in the war, fear of mobilisation, rejection of Belarus being turned into a territory of hostilities, and a demand to keep the country out of direct military confrontation.

The economic agenda in Belarus has become stronger. The war has come to be perceived through its everyday consequences: prices, wages, pensions, employment, children's prospects, security and a general sense of stagnation. In some sectors of the Belarusian economy, there have been economic benefits from the war: new orders, growing demand from Russia, an increase in the flow of Russian tourists, and additional pressure on the services sector, the hotel industry and the housing rental market. However, these benefits do not create sustained public optimism. They are distributed unevenly, do not generate a sense of long-term stability, and coexist with inflation, labour shortages, low incomes and growing macroeconomic imbalances.

The Belarusian situation is more accurately described as apathetic adaptation. The protest energy of 2020 has not disappeared completely, but it has been suppressed by repression, fear, emigration, institutional destruction and fatigue. The demand for change remains, but it is not being converted into mass action.

Sovereignty remains an important value for Belarusians, often broader than a choice between Russia and the West. Even pro-Russian citizens do not necessarily want Belarus to be absorbed by Russia or to lose its independence. The forced drift towards Russia is linked not only to propaganda, but also to the narrowing of alternatives: sanctions, restrictions on mobility, border closures, difficulties with legalisation and the sense that Europe has become less accessible for ordinary Belarusians.

This makes EU policy particularly sensitive, as measures aimed against the regime may unintentionally strengthen the social perception that there is no alternative to the Russian direction.

3. Russia: inertial support for the war and growing fatigue with its cost

Russian society demonstrates a fundamentally different type of attitude towards the war. Support for the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine remains high, although its nature is changing. According to data discussed by the experts, in January 2026 the Levada Centre recorded support for the actions of the Russian armed forces at 76%, while VCIOM gave a lower but still high figure of 63%. At the same time, a significant share of Russians supported a transition to peace negotiations.

In Russian society, there is inertial and symbolic support for the war alongside growing fatigue with its cost. For many citizens, support for the war does not mean readiness to take part personally, acceptance of moral responsibility or a considered political position, but rather adherence to the dominant state framework, an unwillingness to enter into conflict with the authorities and a desire to preserve the image of an invincible Russia. At the same time, the desire for negotiations often does not mean recognition that the war is wrong or readiness for a just peace for Ukraine. Rather, it reflects a desire to end the war on terms acceptable to the Kremlin and not requiring citizens to revise their own position.

An important element of Russian dynamics is the changing perception of the economic benefits of the war. In 2023 and the first half of 2024, military-budgetary injections, rising expenditure on the defence sector, contract payments and employment in war-related

industries created among part of the population a sense that the war could bring material opportunities and even perform the function of a social lift. For poor regions and socially vulnerable groups, the contract economy of the war became a way to obtain incomes unavailable in the civilian economy. This created the illusion that participation in the war or work for the military economy could compensate for previous inequality.

From autumn 2024, according to expert assessments, this model began to malfunction. The economic costs of the war became more visible: the tax burden grew, signs of stagnation intensified, consumer expectations deteriorated, digital services were restricted, drone attacks became more frequent, and the war increasingly intruded into the space of private life. Participation in the war was ceasing to be perceived as a guaranteed profitable economic strategy.

However, disappointment in the economic benefits of the war does not mean an automatic anti-war turn. Russian society has a long-standing habit of passive adjustment, distancing itself from politics and transferring responsibility to the authorities. Even if citizens believe that Russia is paying too high a price for the war, this does not necessarily lead to recognition of responsibility for the destruction in Ukraine or to a demand to stop the aggression on just terms.

The war distributes risks, losses and material incentives extremely unevenly. Poor regions, national republics and small peoples bear disproportionately high human losses, while residents of Moscow and St Petersburg have greater opportunities to avoid direct participation. At the same time, Moscow may show high absolute figures for sending people to war due to the size of its population, high payments and the recruitment of people from other regions, but the relative burden on the capital is significantly lower than on many peripheral territories.

For Russian democratic forces, this creates a serious problem. There is still no visible mass demand for a democratic transition. Discontent is growing, but more often it is directed not against the war as a criminal policy, but against its side effects: prices, taxes, inconveniences, threats to personal security, internet restrictions and uncertainty about the future. Therefore, anti-war and democratic communication built solely on the moral accusation of society has limited effect.

4. Geopolitical orientations in Belarus and Russia: asymmetry of perception

The Belarusian and Russian cases differ fundamentally in how societies perceive each other and their own geopolitical choices. For Belarusians, Russia is a close, important but dangerously dominant neighbour. For a significant share of Russians, Belarus remains an almost “one’s own” space, not fully perceived as a separate foreign country. This asymmetry creates a serious political risk, as the Russian social imagination often leaves little room for Belarusian subjectivity.

In Belarusian society, the turn towards Russia after 2020 and 2022 should not automatically be interpreted as a value-based rapprochement with the Russian imperial model. In many

cases, this is a forced pragmatic orientation: export markets, work, energy resources, loans, logistics, educational and family ties, and ease of travel. Russia is becoming more significant not because Belarusians massively want to become part of the Russian political space, but because alternative channels of connection with Europe are narrowing.

This is especially important for EU policy. If Belarusians face visa barriers, closed borders, restrictions on banking services, legalisation problems, educational obstacles and a sense of collective punishment, then the Western vector loses not only its practical accessibility but also its symbolic appeal. In such a situation, even citizens who do not sympathise with Russia may perceive it as the only direction where mobility, work and everyday predictability remain possible.

At the same time, the Belarusian consensus on independence is broader than support for any integration project. The image of a desired Belarus is often closer to that of a neutral, safe, economically stable country maintaining relations with both East and West. Most Belarusians do not want the country to become a territory of war, an object of absorption or an appendage of someone else's geopolitical project.

The Russian understanding of sovereignty is different. It is often connected not with respect for the borders of neighbours, but with the idea of Russia as a self-sufficient space entitled to a special zone of influence. For part of Russian society, geopolitical self-determination takes place through conflict with the West, the appropriation of "one's own" territories and the perception of Russia as a great power. In this context, Belarus risks being perceived not as an independent subject, but as a natural part of the Russian periphery.

5. Future horizon and democratic alternatives

In Belarus and Russia, the horizon of the future is narrowing, but the political significance of this process differs. In Belarus, many citizens do not see a realistic future within a one-to-three-year horizon. This is linked to repression, the uncertainty of the war, economic stagnation, the absence of legal politics and the feeling that any changes depend on factors that an ordinary person cannot influence. At the same time, however, the idea of a democratic transition itself is not perceived as alien. It may seem distant, unrealistic or postponed.

In Russian society, the demand for a democratic transition is expressed much more weakly. A change of power is often associated not with liberation, but with chaos, collapse, instability or a repetition of the traumatic experience of the 1990s. Even disappointment with the war and worsening economic expectations do not necessarily transform into support for a democratic alternative. In the experts' view, the more likely scenario of change is not a mass democratic movement, but possible cracks within the elites or a managed transformation from above.

For Belarusian democratic forces, this means that opportunities exist. Abroad, there are institutionalised structures, symbolic leadership, international recognition and experience of horizontal self-organisation by civil society. However, this resource is still not being sufficiently converted into an agenda for the immediate future that would be understandable

to people inside the country. Abstract promises of “democracy”, a “European choice” or a “new country” are not enough. People need a concrete, grounded and safe picture of change.

For the Russian democratic opposition, the problem is even deeper. The opposition abroad has extremely limited connection with the mass audience inside the country, a low level of trust and weak capacity to act as an agent of change. At the same time, Russian society often does not perceive a democratic alternative as a practical answer to the war, poverty, inequality and fear of the future. Work with Russian society requires abandoning the illusion of a rapid political breakthrough and moving towards long-term work with the language of responsibility, the cost of the war, people’s rights, regional inequality and the destruction of the future..

Recommendations and policy proposals

At the level of EU institutions and international partners

- Develop a separate policy on Belarus, without reducing it to the Russian track. Belarus should be regarded as a country with its own social dynamics, anti-war consensus, demand for sovereignty and distinct risks of Russian absorption.
- Assess sanctions and migration policy for unintended consequences for Belarusian society. Measures against the regime must not turn into the isolation of citizens, restrictions on educational and labour mobility, banking discrimination or the symbolic isolation of Belarusians from Europe.
- Support the visa, educational, cultural, professional and transport connectivity of Belarusians with Europe. This is a strategic instrument for preserving an alternative to the Russian space.
- Strengthen support for independent research into public attitudes in Belarus and Russia. Qualitative studies, panel observations, analysis of regional differences, and research on young people, emigration, public-sector employees, military families and groups most affected by the war are particularly important.
- Support Belarusian civic and democratic structures as infrastructure for a future transition period. Programmes are needed on local self-government, legal reform, social policy, economic stabilisation, communication with society inside the country and personnel training.
- In the Russian direction, do not replace analysis with moral judgement. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine requires a clear political and legal assessment, but work with Russian society must take into account the complexity of mass attitudes: loyalty, fear, conformism, fatigue, economic interests and low subjectivity..

At the level of programmes supporting civil society and democratic actors and research institutions

- Support not only public campaigns, but also analytical infrastructure: regular monitoring of public attitudes, focus groups, expert panels, regional studies, analysis of propaganda frames and comparative research on Belarus and Russia.
- Invest in translating complex analytical conclusions into the language of practical communication. Political and civic actors need ready-made communication frames,

arguments, short formats, visual materials and recommendations for different audiences.

- Separate Belarusian and Russian audiences in support programmes. A general post-Soviet or “Russian-speaking” frame often distorts reality. Belarusian society has its own traumas, political experience, anti-war dynamics and demand for sovereignty.
- Support work with “silent” and apathetic audiences. They are the majority in authoritarian societies. Strategies aimed only at activists, already convinced supporters or politicised emigration do not create a broad base for future change.
- Fund the development of transition-period scenarios for Belarus. Society needs not only criticism of the regime, but also a clear architecture of the future: security, the economy, social guarantees, justice, local governance, relations with Russia and the EU, the restoration of trust and the prevention of chaos.

At the level of Belarusian democratic actors

- Shift the emphasis from abstract transition to a concrete agenda of safely normalising life. People need to be told not only why the regime is illegitimate, but also how jobs, pensions, schools, healthcare, local governance, family security and legal order will be protected after change.
- Make sovereignty a central theme of communication. For Belarusian society, this is a broader and potentially more unifying frame than a direct choice between Russia and the EU. Sovereignty should be presented not as a slogan, but as a guarantee that Belarusians will not be dragged into someone else's war, will not lose their statehood and will be able to determine the country's future themselves.
- Speak about the war through the Belarusian experience of security. Anti-war communication should be based on understandable fears: mobilisation, the deaths of Belarusian citizens, the transfer of war onto the country's territory, loss of independence, military dependence on Russia, and risks to children and families.
- Develop a socio-economic programme for the transition period. Short, clear and repeatable answers are needed to questions about prices, employment, social protection, budget stability, relations with enterprises, local authorities, security structures and Russia.
- Reduce the distance between the political agenda of the emigration and the experience of people inside Belarus. Communication should speak less in the language of international forums and more in the language of everyday problems, legal protection, survival, security and dignity.
- Do not overestimate society's readiness for immediate action. Repression, fear and fatigue are real constraints. The strategy should be built not on calls for immediate mobilisation, but on preserving ties, trust, horizontal networks, mutual assistance and readiness for windows of opportunity.



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