

Ukraine war: Russia's threat to station nuclear warheads in Belarus—what you need to know

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The threat of Russia using nuclear weapons in Ukraine is ["real" and "absolutely irresponsible"](#), according to the US president, Joe Biden. He was reacting to questioning from journalists as to whether he believed Belarus had been taking delivery of Russian tactical nuclear weapons.

If true, it's the first time Russia has deployed nuclear warheads outside its borders since the end of the cold war. This does not immediately mean a nuclear escalation with Nato, since Russian nuclear missiles [stationed in the Kaliningrad region](#) already put Poland and the Baltic states within range. Experts are [skeptical](#) about Russia's intentions to use these weapons in Ukraine.

But the presence of tactical nuclear arms in Belarus has, nevertheless, important implications for European security.

It would change the nature of the relationship between Russia and Belarus and bring Belarus deeper under Russian control. The two countries are already in what is known as a ["union state"](#) after longtime Belarus leader Alexander Lukashenko and Boris Yeltsin signed a series of treaties in the mid-1990s. These made for "deeper economic integration" and the "formation of a single economic space" as well as the coordination of foreign policy and military activities between the two countries.

The "union" was relatively loose until the 2020 [mass protests](#) in Belarus pushed the desperate Lukashenko to agree to a much closer economic and military integration with Russia.

The real target

Noting that this is "not an escalation from Putin's prior [nuclear weapons](#) rhetoric", the [Institute for the Study of War](#) says this is more about [increasing Moscow's military grip](#) over Belarus: "The Kremlin likely

intends to use these requirements to further subordinate the Belarusian security sphere under Russia."

The warheads will be under Russian control. Storage facilities are [reported to be under construction](#) for completion in early July. This will require a significant Russian military presence and permanent military bases in Belarus.

Belarusians do not want to have Russian nuclear weapons on their soil. Researchers from Chatham House who regularly conduct surveys in Belarus [have found](#) that 74% of respondents in their March 2023 survey objected to deployment. The rejection of nukes is even more dramatic when analyzed by which media the respondents are consuming. Belarus state media beats a relentlessly pro-Moscow drum. Among those who do not consume state media between 97% and 98% are opposed.

The prospect of Russian military bases is hardly more popular, with only 24% of respondents supporting it in an earlier Chatham House survey in [June 2022](#). The idea of a single foreign policy and army with Russia was backed by a mere 9% in the March 2023 survey.

This is yet another indicator of the chasm between the regime and the people, which was made evident by the 2020 protests, the largest in recent Belarusian history.

Belarusians are traditionally wary of having to choose sides when it comes to political alliances. And, despite a "vote" ratifying an [amendment to the country's constitution](#) to allow Russia to station nuclear weapons on its soil, the country is [increasingly divided](#) between those who look to Russia and those who are in favor of [closer relations with western Europe](#). After Russia went into Ukraine, a [Chatham House survey](#) found that 47% were against the invasion, while only 33% were in favor. Another poll found [93% would not support Belarus](#) entering the

war.

Fallout from Chornobyl

And Belarusians also have a good reason to be strongly opposed to nuclear weapons. The memory of the Chornobyl disaster in 1986. About 70% of the [radioactive fallout landed on its territory](#), and there is evidence that Moscow [deliberately seeded clouds](#) so that radioactive rain fell over Belarus rather than drift towards Moscow.

The political fallout was slower but no less significant: over the years, Chornobyl commemorations have become an [annual rallying point](#) for anti-Lukashenko opposition. It also helped ensure that independent Belarus was the [first among post-Soviet nations](#) to abandon its Soviet nuclear arsenal.

These points seem lost on Lukashenko, who has [publicly declared](#) that he will not consider the opinion of the Belarusian people about using nuclear weapons.

Opposition opinions are dangerous in Belarus, and state terror against all criticism of the regime has only intensified since Russia invaded Ukraine. The number of those arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms has been steadily growing. As of June 21, Belarus had 1,492 [political prisoners](#).

This is just the tip of the iceberg of repression. Not only opposition activists, NGO workers, and independent journalists, but anyone who can be linked to the 2020 protests or who ever spoke out against the regime on social media is at risk of arrest. The recent [UN Human Rights Office report](#) decried "the unacceptable picture of impunity and the near-total destruction of civic space and fundamental freedoms in Belarus", including the systematic use of unlawful detention, violence and torture.

Consequences for Belarus and beyond

Lukashenko is playing a dangerous game. Belarus's economic dependence on Moscow, already heavy, has been [deepened further](#) by western sanctions and the war in Ukraine. Russia's share in Belarus' trade grew from [49% in 2021 to 60% in late 2022](#). Recently, a joint tax agreement with Russia, previously resisted by Minsk, [reduced Belarusian control](#) over taxation.

According to the independent Belarusian monitoring organization, [the Hajun Project](#), there is no evidence that any warheads have arrived. But deploying Russian nuclear warheads would lead to Moscow's permanent military presence. It would mean further loss of authority for Lukashenko and his generals. And worse, if Putin did decide to use tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine, it would be an easier decision to launch them from Belarus and let them reap the whirlwind of retaliation.

Consolidating his control over Belarus would be a significant strategic victory for Putin's imperial ambitions. Preoccupied with fighting in Ukraine and lacking a clear and decisive policy on Belarus, the west has no obvious immediate response. But if Moscow follows through with its threat it would be a dangerous moment—not just for Belarus but for Europe as a whole.

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