

# Belarus and Nuclear Weapons

February 2022

## Nuclear Weapons Today

Today, there are roughly [13,000 nuclear weapons](#) in the world held by nine countries. The risk of nuclear weapons use is as high today as any point during the Cold War. The detonation of just one nuclear weapon over a major city would kill or injure hundreds of thousands if not millions of people – and there is [no adequate health response capacity](#). The [catastrophic consequences](#) of nuclear weapons cannot be adequately addressed, transcend national borders, pose grave implications for human survival, the environment, socioeconomic development, the global economy, food security and the health of current and future generations, and have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation.

## Belarus' Nuclear Weapon Free Status

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, there were [thousands](#) of former Soviet nuclear warheads, as well as hundreds of intercontinental ballistic missiles and bombers, left on Belarus', Ukraine's and Kazakhstan's territories, which all three countries decided to transfer to Russia and dismantle. Belarus never had an independent nuclear weapons arsenal, [or control](#) over these weapons, [but agreed](#) to remove former Soviet weapons stationed on its territory.

In 1992, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan signed the Lisbon Protocol, agreeing to accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as non-nuclear-weapon states as soon as possible. Belarus subsequently joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapon state in 1994.

In 1994, Belarus' Constitution was adopted, including Article 18 enshrining its nuclear-weapon-free status: “The Republic of Belarus aims at making its territory a nuclear-free zone, and the state neutral.”

## Proposal to Revoke Nuclear Weapon Free Status

In November 2021, NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg [suggested](#) when the new German coalition government was considering removing U.S. nuclear weapons from its territory, that these weapons could be based instead further east. Belarussian President Lukashenko responded [in an interview](#) in late November that he would invite Russian nuclear weapons to be stationed in Belarus should U.S. nuclear weapons be deployed in Eastern Europe.

Now Lukashenko may be working to put his words into action. On [February 27](#), Belarus will vote in a referendum on sweeping changes to the Constitution, which include a removal of the country's commitment as a neutral, nuclear-weapon-free zone, potentially opening up the possibility of hosting Russian nuclear weapons in the future. Specifically, [the amendment](#) would alter [Article 18](#) of the Constitution to replace the sentence: “The Republic of Belarus aims at making its territory a nuclear-free zone, and the state neutral” with “The Republic of Belarus excludes military aggression from its territory against other states.”

## Nuclear Weapons Under International Law

A number of regional agreements and one international treaty prohibit the deployment of nuclear weapons in most countries in the world outside of Europe. The [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (TPNW) is the first international agreement to prohibit deployment of nuclear weapons in countries that have joined it. Article 1(g) prohibits adherents to “Allow any stationing, installation or deployment of any nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices in its territory or at any place under its jurisdiction or control.” It complements and builds on the [six regional nuclear-weapon-free-zone agreements](#) that ban stationing nuclear weapons in adherents' territories.

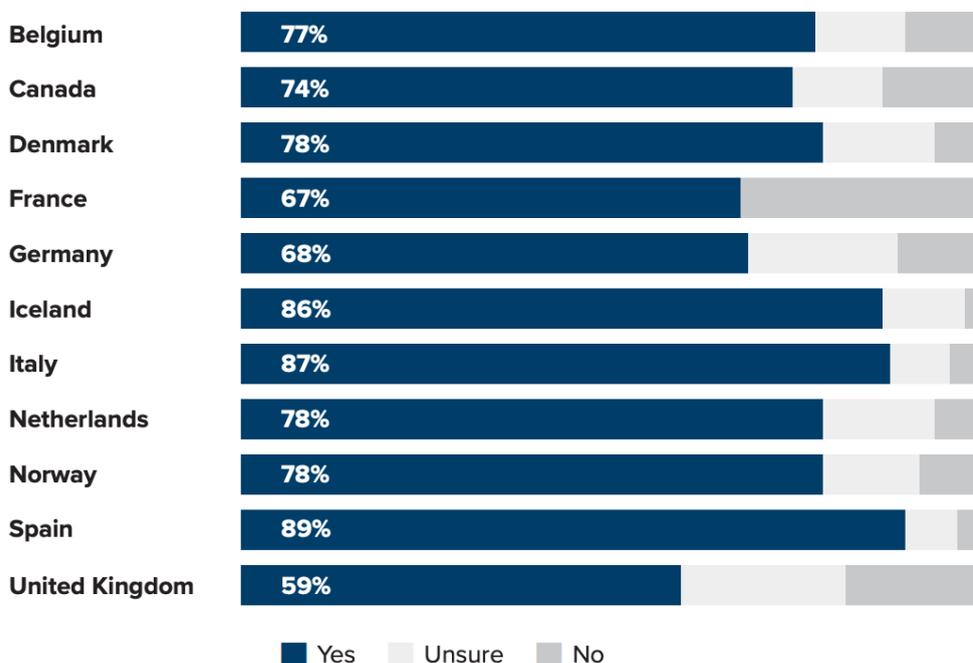
Kazakhstan, where Soviet nuclear weapons were deployed during the Cold War alongside Belarus, cannot consider their re-deployment because it is party to the TPNW and the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone. Belarus, however, is not party to a regional nuclear-weapon-free zone treaty or the TPNW.

## Nuclear Weapons and Public Opinion

And yet, support for nuclear disarmament is high across Europe. Opinion polls conducted in [11 NATO states](#) – Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom – have shown overwhelming public support for joining the TPNW, with few people opposed to the idea. [European capitals](#) from Paris to Berlin endorse their countries joining the TPNW.

### Opinion Polling

*Should your country join the TPNW?*



Deploying nuclear weapons is unpopular. Majorities in four states hosting U.S. nuclear weapons – Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands – [want them removed](#). Some NATO states (Denmark, Norway and Spain) [prohibit the stationing](#) of nuclear weapons in their territory in peacetime, while others (Iceland and Lithuania) outlaw their stationing at any time. In Belarus in particular, opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya [criticized](#) Lukashenko’s comments welcoming Russian nuclear weapons last November, noting that it went against public opinion, which is in favour of neutrality. Any decision to increase the deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe contradicts public opinion and democratic values.