

Lukashenka's political manoeuvres: Belarus and the war

Kamil Kłysiński

On 1 March, Alyaksandr Lukashenka firmly denied reports, based on Western and Ukrainian intelligence sources, that Moscow had forced Minsk to use Belarusian airborne units – the divisions which are most deeply integrated with the Russian army – to invade Ukraine. As he explained, the Kremlin does not expect the active involvement of the Belarusian army, whose main task is to defend the entire southern border of the Republic of Belarus against “radicals”. At the same time, there is confirmed evidence that 180 operational and tactical missiles have so far been launched from this country, and Russian strategic bombers are stationed at Belarusian military airfields. During a session of the Republic of Belarus's Security Council on 1 March, TV reports showed a map which displayed the directions from which the Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarusian territory had been launched.

On 28 February, Ukrainian-Russian peace talks were held in the Homel region, to which President Volodymyr Zelensky agreed after a telephone conversation with Lukashenka. Since the beginning of the Russian aggression, Minsk has offered Kyiv its services in organising negotiations. This has been accompanied by Lukashenka's narrative about the ‘peaceful’ attitude of his country towards Ukraine, which he states is demonstrated by the non-participation of Belarusian units in the hostilities. He presented the access granted Russia to Belarusian territory to launch ballistic missiles at Ukraine as a necessity, connected with the “irresponsible and provocative” policy of the government in Kyiv.

Referring to Zelensky's appeal to the Belarusian people to oppose the Russian and Belarusian attacks, Lukashenka warned Kyiv against provoking Minsk into conducting a “special operation” to “rescue citizens of Belarus remaining in Ukraine” allegedly being harassed by the Ukrainian authorities. He also announced that, together with Moscow, he would prepare a retaliation which was “painful for the West” in response to the sanctions imposed on both countries by the US and the EU on 24 and 25 February respectively (the restrictions cover the banking and armaments sectors, and include entry bans for a number of representatives of the regime, including the minister of defence).

Commenting on a telephone conversation he had held with French president Emmanuel Macron, who was probing Minsk's readiness to deploy Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus, Lukashenka did not rule out such a possibility, in response to what he said was the likely relocation of similar weapons to Poland and Lithuania. In this context, he made yet another reference to the “growing threat” posed by the countries of NATO's eastern flank.

Commentary

- The position Lukashenka presented shows that he is carrying out a policy which is fully in line with the interests of the Kremlin. This is indicated by the shelling of Ukraine from Belarus, which has been going on since 24 February, as well as the entry into Ukraine of Russian units which had been stationed there. The Belarusian troops' failure so far to participate directly in the invasion so far has resulted not so much from Minsk's negotiating position as from Moscow's lack of a clear interest in demanding this. Lukashenka's declarations about Belarus's non-involvement in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict are not in line with reality. Even without sending troops to Ukraine, Minsk is *de facto* a co-aggressor, which confirms its complete loss of independence to Moscow.
- Despite lacking all credibility, Lukashenka is still trying to play the role of an intermediary, which is part of the Russian game against Kyiv. The aim is to convince Belarusian society that Belarus is not participating in the war, although it has little chance of succeeding. The successive Western sanctions imposed on Minsk for its participation in the aggression against Ukraine prove that Lukashenka's calculation that he can exploit the Russian-Ukrainian war by means of diplomacy will end in failure, and the effects for Belarus will be the opposite to those desired.