

Saving face abroad: the Belarusian opposition in exile on the war in Ukraine

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In the light of the Lukashenka regime's de facto complicity in the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Belarusian political circles in exile have undertaken a number of actions on the international stage. At the UN forum on 17 March, the opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya called for Belarus to be recognised as a 'temporarily occupied' country, arguing that the regime was completely in thrall to Moscow, and that international recognition of this fact would invalidate any decisions concerning Belarus taken by Vladimir Putin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka. On 24 February, the day of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Tsikhanouskaya proclaimed the creation of a provisional government in exile, and declared that she would take responsibility for Belarus as the nation's leader. She also announced the creation of the Anti-War Movement, whose aims are to prevent Belarusian forces from joining the war and remove Lukashenka from power. She also called on her country's citizens to act in solidarity with Ukraine, to engage in anti-war information activities both online and in direct contacts, and to paralyse the functioning of Belarusian industry and the transport infrastructure used by the Russian army.

In reference to this appeal, on 21 March, Franak Vyachorka, Tsikhanouskaya's international affairs adviser, posted a report on alleged acts of sabotage carried out by citizens opposed to the regime on the Belarusian railways (destroying the infrastructure) with the support of railway workers. The aim was to block or slow down Russian military transports to Ukraine. There have also been reports on social media that leaflets have been scattered around cities calling on the Belarusian people to engage in passive resistance if their army enters Ukraine. In addition, a group of up to 200 volunteers from Belarus is currently fighting in defence of the Ukrainian state as part of the Kastus Kalinouski Battalion.

Commentary

- The statements by Tsikhanouskaya and other opposition leaders are intended to demonstrate the support of the Belarusian people for Ukraine as it fights the Russian aggressor, and their dissociation from the regime's actions. Lukashenka's opponents hope that in this way they will not only keep the issue of Belarus on the international agenda, but also reduce the aversion to Belarusians which has been rising in recent weeks in the West as a result of Lukashenka's support for Putin's policy. In this context, the most obvious symbol of their pro-Ukrainian attitude is the Kalinouski volunteer battalion, which the opposition has strongly promoted on social media.

- The opposition leaders are attempting to use the war in Ukraine to activate their own citizens, who have been avoiding active opposition for many months as a result of the post-election repression in 2020. The fear of Minsk entering the war is considered an important factor that could potentially mobilise the traditionally pacifist Belarusian people. According to an independent opinion poll among Belarusian internet users commissioned by Chatham House at the beginning of February, 79% of respondents were categorically opposed to the Belarusian army's participation in the aggression against Ukraine. According to data from the latest research in March, this figure has now risen to 97%.
- At present, there are no signs that Belarusians are yet ready to actively participate in street anti-war demonstrations. In response to Tsikhanouskaya's appeals, public appearances only took place on 27 February, during the previously scheduled referendum on changes to the constitution. At that time, a total of several thousand people demonstrated in the streets of Belarusian cities, more than 800 of whom were arrested by law enforcement. Staging public protests in Belarus is still associated with great personal risk, and so the most common public attitude is passive resistance. It is therefore possible that there will be cyber-attacks on the Belarusian transport infrastructure critical for Russia's armed forces. The biggest attack by such 'cyber-guerrillas' took place in January this year, when the main servers of the railway network were hacked. Meanwhile, in early March, hackers temporarily paralysed the traffic control system. Information on recent incidents (destroying the rail infrastructure) has mainly come from Kyiv and the Belarusian opposition, and as such is difficult to verify. We therefore cannot rule out the possibility that the scale of this phenomenon is being deliberately exaggerated for propaganda purposes.