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Belarusian citizens ambivalent about Russian aggression against Ukraine

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Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several independent opinion polls have been conducted. The Andrei Vardomatski Analytical Laboratory has carried some out by telephone and the British think tank Chatham House has done so online. These have consistently shown a negative attitude among the vast majority of Belarusians toward the possible participation of their country's army in the war. In surveys by both centres in May and June, between 5% and 8% of respondents were in favour of sending Belarusian troops to the front, down several percentage points from the previous polls. The public's view of the war itself, on the other hand, is no longer so clear-cut, although supporters of the Russian narrative are still in the minority. Support for the Russian army's actions in Ukraine is expressed by 33% to 39% of the respondents, while 43-51% are critical of them. At the same time, according to the Vardomatski survey, 41% of respondents spoke approvingly of the presence of Russian troops on Belarusian territory. In contrast, 24% of the respondents in the Chatham House poll spoke positively about the possible installation of Russian military bases in Belarus.

Both polls showed a slight increase in scepticism toward Russia. Between 48% and 52% of the respondents favour a neutral, non-affiliated status for Belarus, while 27-42% approve of the country's membership in the Moscow-controlled Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In contrast, the idea of applying for NATO membership has traditionally failed to gain the support of more than a few percent.

Commentary

- The negative attitude of the vast majority of Belarusians to the involvement of their own armed forces in hostile operations in Ukraine expresses the fear of war which is traditional for the Belarusian mentality. Citizens of this small country, which has experienced many armed conflicts and is located between Russia and the West, are mostly focused on survival. Hence, security and stability are absolute priorities in their hierarchy of values. The deep-rooted pacifist attitude in society is further reinforced by the Minsk regime's propaganda – still credible to many citizens – which creates an image of a peaceful Belarus, focused on stabilisation rather than an escalation of tensions in the Eastern European region. Alexander Lukashenka, promising that the Belarusian army will not be sent to Ukraine, subscribes to the mood of the majority of the public, which fears war, and thus makes himself credible in the eyes of citizens. This seems to allow him to partially maintain his electorate, estimated as recently as last year's polls at more than 30%, while it forces the Belarusian opposition to define a clearer

standing towards Russia and the ongoing war.

- While the direct involvement of the Belarusian army in the fighting in Ukraine is viewed negatively, being a threat to the lives of soldiers and indirectly to the livelihoods of their families as well, Belarusians are sharply divided on the issue of attitudes toward the war. The support expressed by more than a third of citizens for Russian aggression is not only the result of the traditionally positive perception in Belarus of a "brotherly" Russia which is similar in cultural terms, but also stems from the strong influence exerted by the Russian and Belarusian regimes' media. In particular, Russian television is still treated by a significant portion of the Belarusian population as a source of reliable information about the world and an attractive source of entertainment. The narrative of Belarusian state media in recent months has largely shared Russia's point of view. As a result, viewers who are not interested in the independent media's message are provided with a positive image of Russian military actions in Ukraine, while feeding on purely negative information about the defending side.
- The relatively high support for Moscow's narrative is also due to the low-level of knowledge which Belarusians have about Ukraine and Ukrainians. Since the dawn of their state's independence, Ukrainian topics have not been popular in the media, and Ukrainians have also reciprocated this similar lack of interest. Contact between representatives of the two countries' elites (both political and intellectual) was also sparse, and the Ukrainian thread appeared mainly in the regime's propaganda messages presenting the country's successive revolutions, its turbulent political processes, and now the war, which have been presented as a negative example of a post-Soviet state being degraded and totally different from Belarus with its internal stability.
- The slight decline in the percentage of pro-Russian respondents noted in recent surveys may indicate a depleting potential for the further expansion of Russian and Belarusian state media coverage. Chatham House surveys have shown an increase in the number of respondents convinced of the futility of continuing the war (from 33% in April to 40% in June), which may indicate growing fatigue which Belarusians feel about the protracted conflict, also related to the situation in Belarus (primarily in economic terms, due to Western sanctions). At the same time, the decline in support for CSTO membership and the intensification of the traditionally entrenched tendency toward neutrality in Belarusian society can be interpreted as a sign of moderate scepticism toward Russia itself.