

The reluctant co-aggressor. Minsk's complicity in the war against Ukraine

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Since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Republic of Belarus (RB) has made its territory and its military, transport and logistical infrastructure available to the Russian army. However, the Belarusian army is not taking part in the hostilities. Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime is reluctant to become directly involved in the war, which results from anti-war sentiment among the country's elite and the majority of the population, and out of fear of the domestic destabilisation which would most likely occur should the Belarusian army enter Ukraine. Therefore, Lukashenka is making attempts to avoid such a scenario: he regularly denies rumours that the Kremlin is putting pressure on him, and has stressed that the main threats to Belarus include alleged acts of provocation and aggressive behaviour from NATO. At present, there are no indications that the Kremlin intends to send Belarusian troops to take part in the war; it seems satisfied with the current format of cooperation between the two countries. Russia's main task for Belarus, as part of the Regional Group of Forces, is to provide cover for its own forces, while the Belarusian army itself is unprepared to launch offensive actions. The most likely short-term scenario involves Minsk continuing to provide multifaceted support to the Russian army without directly dispatching its own troops to Ukraine.

The rear of the Russian attacks against Ukraine

Since 24 February 2022, Belarusian units have been providing comprehensive security to Russian military operations in Ukraine. Their participation in these activities has mainly been visible in the spheres of logistics, signalling, reconnaissance and radio-electronic warfare, as well as in the land component of air defence. In the early stages of the war, attacks on Kyiv and other offensive operations were launched from Belarusian territory, and Belarusian logistical units were operating in Ukraine in March 2022. From the military point of view and in line with international law, this makes Minsk a direct participant in the so-called special military operation. It should be assumed that in the event of a renewed strike on Ukraine from the north, the Belarusian army will join it. However, this does not mean that it will be deployed to take part in genuine combat operations on Ukrainian territory, but rather that it will be used to provide security for the operations carried out by Russian troops.

Over the more than two decades of its cooperation and subsequent gradual integration with the Russian Armed Forces, the Belarusian army has become subordinated to its dominant ally. This has



been reflected in its structure: its land forces and special operation forces, which can participate in offensive combat operations alongside the Russian troops, make up a mere third of the army's total headcount (16,000 out of 48,000 troops). Its combat aviation is sparse, and could at best be the equivalent of one tactical association of the Russian Aerospace Forces. Therefore in practice, without a general call-up, the Belarusian army could only deploy around 5000 troops to combat operations in Ukraine on a one-off basis. This indicates that should it be used in direct combat against the Ukrainian army, it would be of little military significance.

The pacifism of the Belarusian ruling elite...

Since February 2022, Lukashenka has repeatedly denied that the Belarusian Armed Forces would take part in the hostilities on Ukrainian territory. As an explanation he has cited the need to defend the western borders of the Union State against NATO's 'aggression'. Alongside this, he emphasised Belarus's importance in protecting the Russian troops' rear. He has also stated that the Russian army's potential alone is 'sufficient' to defeat the Ukrainian defenders, and effectively admitted that the Belarusian forces are not prepared to launch offensive actions. Moreover, he has repeatedly stressed that the RB is pursuing a peaceful policy, and the only situation in which it is prepared to use its military would be to defend the country's territory.¹ His subordinates, including pro-Russian supporters of a hard line in domestic policy such as General Mikalay Karpiankou, the commander of the internal troops and deputy interior minister, have also spoken in a similar vein. Minsk's stance primarily results from the Belarusian elite's fear of getting the country directly involved in the war. Unlike in Russia, the Belarusian power apparatus has been formed in a non-imperialist spirit, and would most likely be critical of Belarus's involvement in the war. In the worst-case scenario this could undermine Lukashenka's authority within the elite and provoke splits within the ruling camp. Moreover, neither the Belarusian state apparatus nor the Belarusian army have ever been trained to take part in a 'war of aggression', which undeniably discourages Minsk from becoming directly involved in the war.

Moreover, since the beginning of his almost 30-year rule, Lukashenka's unique understanding of Belarusian 'neutrality' has been one

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of the permanent elements of his state's rhetoric. This 'neutrality' involves a combination of Belarus's military alliance with Russia and its membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, together with a clearly reserved attitude to Russia's aggressive actions in the post-Soviet area.² Although the amended constitution of the RB (adopted in a rigged constitutional referendum held on 27 February 2022) removed the provisions regarding the policy of neutrality and the maintenance of its status of a state free of nuclear weapons, it explicitly ruled out the possibility of launching armed aggression against any country. In this way, Lukashenka is sending a signal that Belarus's full-scale military involvement would not be justified. Minsk's restrained response to the incident when an S-300-type missile launched from Ukraine landed on Belarusian territory on 29 December 2022 is further corroboration of Lukashenka's reluctance to get involved in any such scenario. In its response to this incident, Minsk limited itself to accusing Kyiv of "attempting to provoke a regional conflict",³ but chose not to launch any retaliatory measures; Lukashenka himself offered no comment on the incident. Instead, during a meeting with the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, in Minsk on 19 January 2023, he stated

¹ 'Лукашенко подтвердил участие Беларуси в СВО в Украине, но есть важные нюансы', *Белта*, 4 October 2022, belta.by.

² See K. Kłysiński, '(Un)realistic neutrality. Attempts to redefine Belarus' foreign policy', *OSW Commentary*, no. 276, 2 July 2018, osw.waw.pl.

³ Н. Анисимова, 'Совбез Белоруссии допустил падение ракеты в стране «по чьему-то замыслу»', *РБК*, 30 December 2022, rbc.ru.

that while Belarus is enabling Russian troops to operate from its territory, Kyiv's decision to avoid acts of provocations aimed at Belarus "comes as a nice surprise to him".

...and the Belarusian public

The pacifist views of the vast majority of Belarusian society are an important factor preventing Minsk from deploying its troops to Ukraine. All independent opinion polls conducted since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have shown that the proportion of supporters of the Belarusian army's direct involvement in the hostilities does not exceed 10%.⁴ This attitude is an expression of a fear of war which is typical of Belarusian public sentiment. The citizens of Belarus – a small state situated between Russia and the West, which suffered greatly during the Second World War, are mainly focused on their everyday life, and security and stability are the top priorities in their hierarchy of values. A decision to send Belarusian soldiers to the front would potentially involve the risk of families losing their loved ones. This is why Belarusians are strongly opposed to such a plan, even though a significant proportion of them (between 30% and 40%) support the Russian aggression and the presence of Russian armed forces on the territory of Belarus.⁵

A Chatham House poll conducted in November 2022 showed that as many as 42% of the respondents support mobilisation in Russia, although a similar initiative at home

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would instil fear in most Belarusians.⁶ Influenced by Russian and Belarusian propaganda (which is modelled on that of Russia), a significant proportion of them have accepted the Kremlin's narrative while at the same time remaining sceptical about it whenever a direct threat to the lives of Belarusian soldiers emerges, for example if they were to be sent to the front. Both Lukashenka and his closest collaborators are well aware of this anti-war sentiment. The aim of the regime, then, is to prevent panic breaking out in society. This was evident in Lukashenka's New Year speech, which he largely devoted to highlighting the country's stability against the backdrop of war-torn Ukraine. Lukashenka is also attempting to use this pacific rhetoric to regain (or at least maintain) his popular support, which has been weakened by the election fraud and violent repression unleashed following the events of 2020.

Russia is drawing Belarus into war

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has viewed Belarusian territory as an area of strategic importance from the point of view of combat operations. In the political aspect, the pressure on Minsk is intended to guarantee Lukashenka's loyalty in supporting the Russian military operation. For many months now Moscow has been forcing Minsk to maintain the Belarusian army in a state of significant training activity. This is linked not only to the preparation of a potential scenario to launch another offensive against Ukraine, but also, most importantly, to maintaining the tension on NATO's eastern flank. Russia's failures and the losses it has suffered in the war with Ukraine have inspired the Kremlin to highlight Minsk's role in the military activity, and to present Belarus as being ready to become actively involved in the war. At this point, these actions are mainly intended as psychological and disinformation operations aimed at convincing both the West and Kyiv that the option of using Belarusian forces in Ukraine is still on the table.

⁴ 'За участие в войне — 3%: что белорусы думают о нападении России на Украину', Еврорадио, 9 September 2022, euroradio.fm.

⁵ K. Kłysiński, 'Belarusian citizens ambivalent about Russian aggression against Ukraine', OSW, 1 August 2022, osw.waw.pl.

⁶ *What Belarusians think? Thirteenth Survey Wave*, November 2022, en.belaruspolls.org.

A qualitative change in the formula for cooperation occurred in October 2022, when the Regional Group of Forces of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus was expanded. The Group's main component consists of the Belarusian army and a Russian contingent which according to various estimates numbers between 9000 and 12,000. Belarusian propaganda presents the domestic military activity as a preventive measure intended to prevent acts of provocation by NATO states and Ukraine, which are allegedly inspired by Western intelligence services.⁷ It stresses that terrorist attacks may target the rail and military infrastructure being used by Russian and Belarusian troops.⁸ Alongside this, an 'audit' of mobilisation potential has been launched (it will last many months), which involves calling up reservists for military training lasting one month. However, the government has not announced a general mobilisation.

The meeting held on 3 December 2022 in Minsk between the two countries' defence ministers confirmed that Lukashenka is coming under pressure to make Belarusian

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resources as freely available as possible for the needs of the Russian attack against Ukraine. At that meeting a *de jure* protocol was signed legitimising the Russian military presence in Belarus in the form of the Regional Group of Forces and granting the Russian troops the right to use the local military infrastructure. Prior to this, Lukashenka had instructed the defence ministry to conclude an agreement to formally regulate the rules of operation of the two existing Russian-Belarusian military training facilities. The Russian army is also interested in using Belarusian training grounds to carry out training for soldiers mobilised at home, with the participation of local instructors. Once they complete their training, they are sent directly to the front. In addition, Minsk has made its stockpile of artillery ammunition and military equipment available to the Russians.

As a consequence, the presence of Russian troops in Belarus has become permanent, and the local military infrastructure is effectively serving as Russian military bases. Lukashenka's use of the term 'a common army' confirms the view that the Russian General Staff has the last word in military planning.⁹ The tactic Moscow has chosen indicates that the Belarusian-Russian forces are expected to continue to tie down the Ukrainian army in northern Ukraine, although this does not rule out the possible involvement of Belarusian troops in acts of sabotage in the border region. Furthermore, it should be expected that Belarusian armaments companies will increase production (including artillery ammunition) for the needs of the Russian army.¹⁰

Ukraine and the 'Belarusian front'

The Ukrainian army and intelligence services have been closely monitoring the Russian-Belarusian cooperation. In forecasting the progress of the war, Kyiv makes regular estimates of how likely Russia is to launch offensives in the directions of Volyn and Kyiv. Although the Ukrainian General Staff believes that Minsk is making plans for involvement in the war, at the same time it stresses that at present the risk of such an attack is minor.¹¹ The military activity on the territory of Belarus, including the rotation of five or six Belarusian battalion groups near the border, bears the hallmarks of a psychological operation intended to force the Ukrainian side to maintain sufficient forces capable

⁷ 'Макей поясніў неабходнасць прыняцця контртерорыстычных мер у Беларусі', Белта, 14 October 2022, belta.by.

⁸ 'Термель: С тэрорыстамі лічыцца ніхто не сабіраецца', 12 October 2022, tvr.by.

⁹ 'Лукашэнка: военныя РФ і Беларусі гатовяцца "як адна армія"', Радио Свобода, 3 December 2022, svoboda.org.

¹⁰ 'В Беларусі плануюць наладзіць вытворчасць снарадаў для ствольнай артылерыі і РСЗО', 17 November 2022, delo.ua.

¹¹ М. Кучерявец, 'Наёв ацініў абстаноўку на кордоні з Беларуссю: ці ёсць загроза сухопутных дзейнасцяў ворага', РБК, 12 January 2023, rbc.ua.

of repelling a potential attack. According to Kyiv, the risk of a renewed offensive will only become realistic when around 30,000 Russian troops equipped with armoured and artillery equipment are stationed in Belarus.

However, the Ukrainian forces do not underestimate the situation on the 'Belarusian front'. As early as spring 2022 they began to build defensive lines along Ukraine's

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border with Belarus in an attempt to prevent the launch of a new offensive from the north. On 15 January 2023, the Ukrainian government revealed that the border strip had been mined. Engineering structures and fortifications (such as anti-tank ditches) to prevent the expansion of a possible offensive from Belarusian territory are also being constructed. The State Border Guard Service of Ukraine has drawn particular attention to the presence of radio-electronic warfare units on the Belarusian side of the border, the main purpose of which is to prevent Ukrainian forces from carrying out reconnaissance activities in the cross-border area. Ukraine does this to coordinate its defence activities.

The purpose of Kyiv's media reporting on possible Belarusian involvement in the war is to warn the Belarusian public and provoke their concern about the prospect of Russia using the Belarusian army for offensive action. Ukrainian military intelligence argues that a decision to attack Ukraine would be suicidal to the Lukashenka regime, given the low motivation of Belarusian soldiers, and predicts that they would surrender *en masse*.¹²

From the political point of view, Kyiv's attitude towards Belarus is ambivalent. On the one hand, it does not want to make it easier for Moscow to draw Minsk into a full-scale conflict: this is why at the beginning of the war Ukrainian forces decided not to launch an attack on Russian troops stationed in Belarus or on the Belarusian logistical infrastructure. The Ukrainian ambassador to Belarus continues to work in Minsk (while the Belarusian ambassador left Kyiv back at the beginning of March 2022). This indicates that Ukraine wants to maintain the diplomatic channel of cooperation. By criticising the Lukashenka regime's complicity in the Russian invasion, Kyiv seeks to reinforce the belief among Belarusians that their participation in the war in Ukraine would be pointless and would cause irreparable human losses and physical damage.

On the other hand, Kyiv has been avoiding contact with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's cabinet, which may be interpreted as an indirect gesture towards the Lukashenka regime. However, it should be remembered that Ukraine's reluctance to legitimise the Belarusian opposition dates back to 2020.¹³ At the same time, Ukraine recognises the Belarusian people's aspirations to freedom. The most important manifestation of this attitude is Kyiv's support for the expansion of the Kastus Kalinouski and Pahonia regiments, units of Belarusian volunteers which are components of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. This suggests that Kyiv is considering organising an alternative Belarusian opposition to Tsikhanouskaya's team, one made up of individuals with a pro-Ukrainian orientation, as their participation in the fight against the Russian army would confirm.

¹² Н. Медведева, 'Вторжение в Украину для Лукашенко самоубийственно, и он понимает, почему – ГУР', Ліга.Новини, 20 December 2022, news.liga.net.

¹³ See K. Kłysiński, K. Nieczyppor, 'Distrust and reticence. Kyiv on Tsikhanouskaya's offer of an alliance', OSW, 20 October 2022, osw.waw.pl.

Possible consequences of Belarus's aggression against Ukraine

It seems that by making the territory of Belarus and all the infrastructure that can be used for military purposes available to the Russian Armed Forces, Lukashenka is currently meeting Russia's expectations to a sufficient degree. Contrary to popular opinion, any decision to send Belarusian units (which are small and lack motivation) into the fight against Ukraine would be the least significant element of support that Minsk could provide to Moscow in this war. Although it cannot be ruled out that some of the best prepared Belarusian units (such as airborne troops) could be sent to fight in Ukraine, their participation in military activity there would mainly be of political significance. Ultimately, this would equate to Lukashenka being viewed as an aggressor, while the military significance of such a decision would be minor.

However, in the worst-case scenario the Kremlin may force Lukashenka to decide to deploy Belarusian troops to the hostilities on a larger scale, which in turn would require him to announce general mobilisation. If this happens, there will be a serious risk of internal destabilisation in Belarus. A certain group of conscription-age men, the size of which is difficult to estimate, may attempt to use all available means to flee the country *en masse*, which will pose a particular challenge to neighbouring EU member states such as Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Alongside this, tension may arise in the ruling elite between the few officials who have advocated Belarus's full involvement in the war and the majority of political figures who view the country's stability as their priority.

Should the regime lose control of a portion of the state apparatus (one that fears major war losses) and of the general public, Russia may take the risky and precarious decision to replace Lukashenka with a more loyal leader who would be willing to submit unconditionally to the Kremlin's interests. This could escalate tension within the Belarusian elite and society more broadly, and raise the level of anti-Russian sentiment. For its part the Belarusian army, upon receiving a potential order to attack, will tend to seek to minimise the losses and to avoid storming the robust Ukrainian positions. This may come as an embarrassment to the Belarusian authorities, and that in turn may translate into a crisis of confidence between the allies. It therefore seems that the most favourable approach for both Minsk and Moscow is to maintain the present status quo, in which both sides derive maximum benefit from the current situation and choose not to make risky moves that could trigger unnecessary tension and weaken their relations.

APPENDIX

The Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus

The Armed Forces of the RB number almost 48,000 personnel. They include the following elements: Land Forces (11,700 troops), Air and Air Defence Forces (11,300 troops), Special Operations Forces (6100 troops), and units of various branches of armed forces and services in the central chain of command (18,800 troops: these include the Transport Troops, which are particularly important regarding cooperation with the Russian army). Apart from that, the other uniformed forces supervised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs include 110,000 soldiers and civilian employees. The total number of reservists for all branches of the armed forces and services is estimated at almost 290,000.

The Land Forces consist of two Operational Commands (OC) which are the only structures of this echelon in the Belarusian army as a whole. Their top command competence is exercised by the Russian-Belarusian Regional Group of Forces. Nominally, the Operational Commands alongside the units they supervise are the equivalents of the Russian Army Corps, and *de facto* of incomplete mechanised

divisions (each Command supervises two mechanised brigades and one artillery brigade, as well as support units and independent sub-units). The Operational Commands are made up of the following tactical units:

- the North-Western OC (Barysau): the 19th MB (Zaslonoŭo), the 120th MB (Minsk), and the 231st AB (Borovka);
- the Western OC (Hrodna): the 6th MB (Hrodna), the 11th MB (Slonim), and the 111th AB (Brest).

In addition, the central chain of command includes the 51st Mixed Artillery Group, the 336th Rocket Artillery Brigade and the 465th Rocket Brigade (all of which are located in the vicinity of Asipovichy).

The Land Forces' equipment includes 497 tanks (including 20 T-72B3 tanks which have been modernised in Russia), 1058 infantry fighting vehicles, 93 wheeled armoured personnel carriers (Russian-made BTR-82As) and 58 tracked carriers, 369 self-propelled howitzers (125 pieces of 122-mm calibre and 244 of 152-mm calibre, including at least 18 2S3M Akatsiya howitzers which have been modernised in Russia), 108 towed howitzers of 152-mm calibre, 206 multiple rocket launchers (128 of 122-mm calibre, 36 of 220-mm calibre, 36 of 300-mm calibre and 6 of 301-mm calibre) and 14 mortars of 120-mm calibre. The Belarusian army is also believed to have 36 Tochka-U short-range ballistic missile launchers. In addition, Russia has provided Minsk with an undisclosed number of Iskander systems (up to a division).

The Air and Air Defence Forces include three air bases, two anti-aircraft missile brigades and six anti-aircraft missile regiments, two radio engineering brigades, and support units & independent sub-units. Combat aviation includes a total of five squadrons: two fighter squadrons (38 jets, including 4 Russian-made Su-30SM jets), two assault squadrons (22 jets) and one combat helicopter squadron (12 jets), and is organised as follows:

- the 61st Fighter Air Base (Baranavichy);
- the 116th Guards Assault Air Base (Lida); and
- the 50th Composite Air Base (Machulishchy).

From the point of view of their potential deployment to attack land targets, it is important to note that the Belarusian Air Defence Forces are equipped with the S-300 systems, which are operated by one anti-aircraft missile brigade, and three anti-aircraft missile regiments (a total of up to 144 launchers in 15 divisions, according to various sources). It is also believed that Russia has provided the Belarusian army with an undisclosed number of S-400 systems, although it should be noted that this report is unconfirmed.

The Special Operations Forces are a conglomerate of special-purpose units and units which are *de facto* motorised and trained to carry out assault operations (the Russian Airborne Troops are their training partner on the Russian side). The core component of these Forces consists of:

- the 38th Air Assault Brigade (Brest);
- the 103rd Airborne Brigade (Vitebsk); and
- the 5th Spetsnaz Brigade (Mariyna Horka).

They are equipped with 217 wheeled armoured personnel carriers, 18 120-mm mortars and (according to various sources) between 24 and 48 122-mm towed howitzers.

The Russian military presence in Belarus

Since October 2022, a Russian contingent has been officially stationed in Belarus as part of the Regional Group of Forces, made up of soldiers from the Western Military District (WMD) of the Armed Forces

of the Russian Federation. The contingent's headcount, as declared by Moscow, is 9000 troops with standard weapons and military equipment, although in reality 11,000–12,000 soldiers are stationed there. Some of them do not have any heavy equipment and are in Belarus only temporarily, because they are using the local training base to train Russian sub-units conscripted under the so-called partial mobilisation; these are then sent to combat zones in Ukraine. Media reports indicate that in autumn 2022 soldiers of the 1st Guards Tank Army underwent training there, and at the beginning of 2023 they were replaced by soldiers from the 3rd Army Corps of the WMD.

Aside from the troops specified above, a total of more than 2300 Russian soldiers are permanently present in Belarus. They operate two military facilities Moscow is leasing from Minsk:

- the Vileyka 43rd Naval Communications Centre (the RZH69 Antey radio station);
- the Hantsavichy 474th Independent RadioTechnical Unit of the Russian Aerospace Forces (the 70M6 Volga ballistic missile early-warning radar station).