FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 19.04.2022

# Belarus' half-hearted war participation

While Belarus had promised to support Russia's war effort in Ukraine, sending in Belarusian troops might prove detrimental to Lukashenko's regime

Nearly all analysts had warned that the political crisis in recent years in Belarus would inevitably lead to a collapse in the country's autonomy. By cutting himself off from a Western-oriented foreign policy, Aleksander Lukashenko has become ever more dependent on Moscow.

Pre-February 2022, Belarus itself was considered the primary victim of this process. Entrenchment in the Russian sphere of influence has condemned the country to years of political and economic stagnation. But, in the end, it is Ukraine that has suffered most from Lukashenko's inability to strike a balance.

*Belarusian participation in the war has not only left its relations with Ukraine dead and buried; Minsk has also been subject to new rounds of western sanctions.*

Following unscheduled military exercises, Russia used Belarusian territory to send its troops towards the Ukrainian capital along the shortest possible route and to launch rocket attacks on Central and even Western Ukraine. Evidence suggests that the army units implicated in the mass murder of civilians on the outskirts of Kyiv entered the country through Belarus.

Belarusian participation in the war has not only left its relations with Ukraine dead and buried; Minsk has also been subject to new rounds of Western sanctions. Although on paper they look less extensive than those applied to Russia, the consequences for the Belarusian economy could be even more destructive in relative terms.

Moscow has not stopped exporting its main commodities – gas and oil. Moreover, it has – in theory – the opportunity to redirect a proportion of its exports to the East and the South. Key Belarusian exports (potassium, petrochemicals, tobacco, timber, metal ores) on the other

hand have been banned. The only remaining logistical channel for exports is Russia, which itself produces a surplus of nearly all of those resources.

## The question of Belarusian war contribution

All the same, in spite of the feeling that Lukashenko has nothing more to lose, he still has not crossed the final red line and sent troops into Ukraine, although his rhetoric on this subject was unequivocal before the Russian invasion began. In early February, Lukashenko promised that, if war were to break out in Donbas, the Belarusian army would conduct itself 'exactly like the Russian army'.

Later, when it became clear that the initial lightning strike had failed and the Russian army was stuck on the approach to Kyiv, Lukashenko began to distance himself from the idea of sending in Belarusian soldiers. Primarily, as he affirmed in mid-March, because Moscow didn't need them, and the Russian army could cope by itself. Now, as Russia withdrew its troops from northern Ukraine, having failed to achieve its aims, Lukashenko's explanation appears even a little derisive.

*A month before the war, 12 per cent of respondents supported the idea of sending Belarusian soldiers to aid the Russians. By early March, this figure had shrunk to 3 per cent.*

It's unclear whether Putin has put pressure on Lukashenko to send his army into Ukraine. Ultimately, the number of combat-ready Belarusian units that could assist the Russians is not so large. They have no war experience, and their weapons and hardware are inferior to those of their Russian counterparts. On the other hand, judging by numerous reports of mercenaries being hired from private military companies and Syria and reserves in South Ossetia being called up, Moscow would certainly not be averse to receiving more help from Minsk.

## Power security over war involvement

In any case, the main roadblock to sending Belarusian soldiers into Ukraine is not their military prowess, but the public consensus that this should not be done. While it is difficult to carry out public surveys in Belarus, the British think tank Chatham House does so regularly and publicly using online sampling, which is representative of the country's urban population with internet access – around 80 per cent of

Belarusians.

A month before the war, 12 per cent of respondents supported the idea of sending Belarusian soldiers to aid the Russians. By early March, this figure had shrunk to 3 per cent. Even taking into account the survey's bias towards the more politically active urban parts of society, this data shows that the vast majority of Belarusians are against Belarus entering into the war directly.

These views are not only widespread among opponents of the Belarusian regime. Lukashenko supporters make up a stable 25–30 per cent of those surveyed by Chatham House, while the proportion of those who support Russia's stance on Ukraine or sympathise with Putin is even higher. Yet still a majority of devoted Belarusian viewers of Russian or homegrown propaganda TV channels are speaking out against sending their soldiers to war. Of course, this pacifist consensus applies to the political elite and the military as well. The entirety of the civil service and security apparatus cannot be encompassed by the 3 per cent that is willing to aid Russia with Belarusian troops.

*Lukashenko would be unable to guarantee that special operations forces or interior forces, upon their return from an unpopular, bloody war, would form such a reliable support base as they did during the 2020 protests.*

Critics may protest that Lukashenko is an autocrat who is not obliged to take public opinion into account. But the more existential the issue, the more dangerous it is for Lukashenko to act counter to public consensus.

Sending the army to war against the wishes of nearly the entire country, soldiers' families and most likely soldiers and their commanders themselves does not only present the military risk of mass desertion and surrender. Such a decision also poses a political threat. Lukashenko would be unable to guarantee that special operations forces or interior forces, upon their return from an unpopular, bloody war, would form such a reliable support base as they did during the 2020 protests.

The problems would likely start as soon as troops would be sent to Ukraine. If certain units were to disobey orders or attempt to resist being transported across the border, it is unclear how discipline could be restored or how their ranks could be bolstered by new recruits, given the risk inherent in such a deadly assignment.

## Finding a politically advantageous line

There are many historical and cultural reasons why Belarusians have reacted negatively to the idea of fighting in a foreign country, despite the intense anti-Ukrainian military propaganda that runs on TV screens every day. There are also political reasons: opponents of the regime exist in an information field where Russia's actions are explicitly perceived as aggressive, while Lukashenko supporters appreciate his system precisely for the values of peace and stability that he has championed relentlessly since the first days of his presidency. As a result, the drive to war simply has no social basis in Belarus.

*Despite Minsk's current colossal dependence on Moscow, Lukashenko's undeniable priority is his own political survival.*

Now that hostilities have shifted to the South and East of Ukraine, we can make the tentative conclusion that the likelihood of Belarus entering wholesale into the war has decreased, although it hasn't disappeared from the agenda entirely. But even if Putin needs to send the Belarusian army into battle at some stage of the war – to achieve certain new military aims or to smear Lukashenko once and for all – the latter will resist.

Despite Minsk's current colossal dependence on Moscow, Lukashenko's undeniable priority is his own political survival. He will only bend to the will of the Kremlin if he believes that not doing so would be more dangerous. Sending in Belarusian troops under Russian pressure, against the will of nearly the entire population, is clearly beyond the scope of acceptable risk for Minsk.

If the Russian offensive stalls in Donbas as well, which would be considered a fully-fledged defeat for Moscow, we cannot exclude a scenario in which Lukashenko tries to sell the fact that he held back from full participation in the war in talks with the West. On 7 April, he complained that he had been wrongly designated as a collaborator of the aggressor and demanded that Minsk be invited to peace negotiations as a party in its own right.

In future, Lukashenko may speak through his diplomats and declare that Belarus has simply been unwittingly used without its consent, that it was not possible for Minsk to resist tens of thousands of Russian soldiers on its soil. He may argue that they did what they could by not entering directly into the war. This would be little consolation for Ukraine, but for politicians in the West who may want to drive a wedge between Putin and Lukashenko, it could constitute grounds for lifting sanctions from

Minsk, at least partially, in a new, post-war reality.

---