

Belarus's role in the invasion of Ukraine

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To the West, Lukashenka hopes to appear impartial; to Putin, he hopes to appear a loyal ally. Juggling both is backfiring

It was at the end of November last year that Lukashenka first publicly announced he would take Russia's side in the event of war with Ukraine. For several months, his regime has consistently escalated its rhetoric around the situation on its southern borders, unleashing hysteria and repeating support for Vladimir Putin's invasion.

While Belarusian government has for years had a close, if subordinate, relationship with Moscow, it has sought to balance with the West to extract financial and political gain from both sides. But the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections and their bloody aftermath have shaken the legitimacy of Lukashenka's regime, and have left it isolated from Western institutions over its election falsifications and police repressions – forcing Lukashenka to increasingly turn to Putin for support.

Only 18 months ago, Belarus had been seeking dialogue over eastern Ukraine, including a peacekeeping role. Yet since late last year, the threat of war in Ukraine has become an excellent distraction for the regime's difficulties, allowing it to shore up its public image. But, now, as events spiral out of control, the war could be a backdrop in which Belarus's sovereignty is finally handed over to Russia.

Last week, on the morning of 24 February, Russian troops began to invade Ukraine, including via Belarus. Lukashenka thus broke one of his most famous promises: for years, he had assured Ukraine that it would never face an attack from Belarus.

The map of current hostilities demonstrates Russia's advantage of being able to attack Ukraine from the Belarusian border. Thanks to Lukashenka, Russian troops are now directly threatening Kyiv at a time where forces that entered the country directly from Russia or Crimea have stalled en route to the capital. Belarus has become a conduit for the ground invasion of Ukraine, as well as for rocket and air strikes, while wounded Russian soldiers are sent to hospitals in Belarus's Homyel region for treatment. This kind of role has a fairly unambiguous interpretation: according to Resolution 3314 of the UN General Assembly of December 1974, the actions of a state that provides its territory to be used for an act of aggression against a third country is also regarded as military aggression.

Lukashenka's theatre

While initially outspoken in support of the invasion, Lukashenka's tone has in recent days been uncharacteristically less forceful.

In the month leading up to the invasion, the Belarusian president spoke about the war in virtually every speech he made. At times, his rhetoric was far harsher and more aggressive than that of the Russian leadership. He inspected military installations, advocated launching missile strikes on Ukraine and even hinted at the use of troops. He also promised that the war would last "a maximum of three or four days", threatening that troops would reach the English Channel.

But with the invasion under way, Lukashenka has been spending his time visiting hospitals and going skiing, while calling for an end to the conflict. He also offered to host peace talks.

Of course, Lukashenka still blames the Ukrainian leadership for starting the war. He has hurled insults at Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyi, supported the actions of the Kremlin, and urged Ukraine to fully accept Russian conditions for peace. But at the same time, he has tried to present himself as a dove who wants to prevent slaughter. "The main thing is that people shouldn't die," he told journalists after going skiing on 26 February, the third day of the invasion.

The Belarusian president is thus walking a political tightrope. He cannot simply remain silent but appears reluctant to get involved in the conflict, saying that there are no Belarusian troops in Ukraine. But he immediately notes: "if Belarus and Russia need it, [troops] will [enter Ukraine]." He also contradicted himself by claiming that there have been no military operations launched into Ukraine from the territory of Belarus, while in the same speech admitting that missile strikes were carried out from Belarus.

Speaking to the press, Lukashenka feigned surprise at the fact that Belarus is considered a participant in the invasion, instead attributing the claim to the international community. However, during a meeting with the Belarusian security chiefs, which he called in the first hours of the war, Lukashenka used a phrase that fully explains these contradictions: "We must by no means get involved in shit, nor become traitors."

Simply put, Lukashenka does not want to be drawn into a full-scale war, but he cannot become a traitor in Putin's eyes either. Both options would be disastrous for him.

The threat of a split

Lukashenka's behaviour in the first days of the war is explainable: he still retains a gauge of the mood of Belarusian society.

The Belarusian regime's propaganda machine has long trumpeted the slogan of 'let there never be a war again'. Indeed, it has trumpeted it to absurdity, to the point where it became a cornerstone of state ideology. People who supported Lukashenka, or were at least indifferent to the existing system, justified everything that happened by referring to this idea. 'Yes,' Lukashenka supporters would say, 'we live in poverty and our rights are not respected. But our soldiers do not die in other people's wars.'

Here, it should be understood that the attitude of Belarusians and Russians to the war is noticeably different. According to various polls, between half and two-thirds of Russian respondents support, in one way or another, the war with Ukraine.

Meanwhile a survey of Belarusians by Chatham House found that 11-12% of respondents supported the participation of the country in war, and only 5% supported sending Belarusian troops to Ukraine. And that is against a backdrop of fragile support: that same poll suggests that 27% of respondents support the current regime.

So, the vast majority of Belarusians consider the idea of drawing Belarus into the war absolutely unacceptable; Belarus's participation, therefore, would not only split the dictatorship's electorate - it may ultimately provoke a split in the regime itself. Lukashenka is well aware of this risk. It is impossible for him to appear as an aggressor or participate in an armed conflict.

It appears that Lukashenka hoped that Russian escalation would be limited to blackmailing Ukraine, rather than entering into armed conflict. And that if the situation did move into war, it would be

considered merely a 'special operation' (as the Russian side calls it) and Ukraine would fall quickly and without much bloodshed.

Lukashenka would have been quite satisfied with the constant balancing on the brink of war. Perhaps this would be an ideal form of existence for the Belarusian regime in its current state, which explains why the authorities spread military hysteria with such enthusiasm in late January and early February despite a real war seemingly not being part of Lukashenka's plans.

Macron's attempt

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine from Belarusian territory, some analysts asked: can Belarus now be considered a sovereign power at all? Is Lukashenka capable of making independent decisions, or is he under Putin's complete control? Lukashenka himself repeatedly gives grounds to these concerns, referring to the opinion of the Kremlin whenever he publicly comments on one or another fundamental issue – whether it is the deployment of Russian troops in Belarus or participation in the war. During a visit to Moscow on 18 February, he even promised to consult with his “older brother” (Russia) about his political future.

Meanwhile, on 26 February, French President Emmanuel Macron held a phone call with Lukashenka, to demand the withdrawal of Russian troops from Belarus, and urge Minsk to abandon subordination to Moscow and stop aiding the war against Ukraine. In a different situation, Lukashenka would have taken advantage of such attention from the West to play on their confrontation with Russia and achieve concessions on the issue of sanctions against Belarus. This is exactly what happened in 2014-15, when Lukashenka deftly distanced himself from the Kremlin's actions in Crimea and Donbas, and then reconciled with Europe.

But now Lukashenka is completely dependent on the Kremlin's support and is unable to escape this conflict unilaterally. Any attempt to deviate from Moscow's course would be perceived by Putin as a knife in the back – and the existence of the Lukashenka regime will lose all meaning for the Russian president. Macron's quest was doomed from the start.

The fate of Lukashenka is now inextricably linked with that of Putin's. Along with Putin, he is also the target of unprecedented Western sanctions. However, sanctions and isolation are not the worst threats facing Lukashenka.

Anti-war movement

By the end of last week, rumours arose that Belarus would soon take an active part in Russian aggression. On the afternoon of 27 February, the Ukrainian Center for Defense Strategies, a think tank, reported that Lukashenka would make an imminent decision on whether to use Belarusian troops to invade Ukraine.

The emergence of such alarming news coincided with Belarus's anti-war protests, which had been announced earlier by exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. People began to gather at polling stations, where they were due to vote on a constitutional referendum that would allow Russia to store nuclear weapons in Belarus, and protests spread to the centre of Minsk. Thousands chanted 'No to war', 'Glory to Ukraine' and made insulting speeches about Putin. At least 800 people were detained, with criminal cases opened against a number of demonstrators. However, these were the first significant protests in Belarus since early 2021. After a year and a half of total political terror, the protests underlined the depth of opposition to the war and to Belarus's role in it.

How powerful the anti-war movement in Belarus will become depends on how far Lukashenka goes in this war. Opposition leaders have called on Belarusians to take to the streets again, as well as to

block railroad tracks in order to stop Russian troops from moving. Tsikhanouskaya stated that the next step would be to prepare for an anti-war strike by Belarusian workers. Pavel Latushka, another opposition leader, urged Belarusian military personnel not to carry out “criminal orders” and Belarusian conscripts to evade conscription or take up arms in order to fight the “crazy dictator”.

Last try

It was against this backdrop that Lukashenka made a hopeless attempt to transform his role in the conflict by hosting talks between Russia and Ukraine on 27 February.

The initiative itself looked like a poor imitation of a negotiation process. First, it was obvious that Homyel, a location used as a base for Russian troops, was not the best place for negotiations. Secondly, the Russian side informed Ukraine that they had already arrived for the talks and were waiting – an attempt to paint the Ukrainian delegation as failing to turn up to the negotiations and thus instigating the war. The Ukrainian leadership responded that there had been no agreement on a meeting in Homyel: they were not satisfied with the location and considered Russia’s preconditions (the requirement to lay down arms) unacceptable.

When it became clear that the Ukrainians would not go to Homyel and the Russian delegation would soon return to Moscow, Lukashenka called Zelenskyi, whom he had insulted just a couple of hours previously. In the end, they agreed that the meeting would still take place – though not in Homyel, but close to the Belarusian-Ukrainian border, in the area of the Pripyat River. According to his press service, Lukashenka persuaded Putin not to recall the Russian delegation and still hold a meeting.

The talks predictably came to nothing. However, Lukashenka’s behaviour around this episode is quite remarkable. Apparently, Lukashenka yearns to return to a time when he successfully portrayed himself as a peacemaker on the international stage. But it is too late, he is already involved in this conflict. Indeed, there is a real threat that the Belarusian army will soon join the Russian invasion. On 28 February, the same day as the peace talks, the Ukrainian military reported that Belarusian troops had begun deploying at the border shared by the two countries. And several Ukrainian media have reported that Belarusian troops have been identified near the city of Chernihiv in northern Ukraine.

That said, what happened during the negotiations is important. During the conversation between Zelenskyi and Lukashenka on the afternoon of 27 February, the following guarantees were given to the Ukrainian side: while the delegations were travelling to Belarus and while negotiations were ongoing, all Russian planes, helicopters and missiles deployed on Belarusian territory would remain grounded. Both Zelenskyi and Lukashenka’s press service mentioned these promises. But the guarantees were broken. That evening, it was reported that Belarusian territory had hosted new strikes on the Ukrainian cities of Zhytomyr and Chernihiv with Russian Iskander missiles.

Some will see Lukashenka’s actions as treachery. But we are more likely talking about a situation in which the Belarusian president has no control over the actions of the Russian military stationed on Belarusian territory. This is the price that Lukashenka has paid for clinging onto power: a loss of sovereignty and being dragged into a war.

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