

Minsk's Signals: Belarus and the War in Ukraine

Russian troops have launched attacks on Ukraine from Belarus. The Lukashenka regime is Putin's closest ally, but their interests diverge. It is thus key to differentiate and read the erratic actions and rhetoric from Minsk as signals towards east, West, and south.

By Benno Zogg

From the onset of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian army used Belarusian territory and infrastructure at its will, launching missiles and artillery strikes from Belarus and using it as a launching pad for its botched attack towards Kyiv. Russian troops remain stationed in Belarus, and Belarus itself has doubled down on military maneuvers, re-armament, and aggressive rhetoric.

This makes Belarus an important actor and an active supporter of Russian aggression – and a source of worry for its neighbors in Ukraine, the Baltics, and Poland, even after an end of the war in Ukraine. The regime of Alexander Lukashenka proves to be Russia's closest ally in terms of military, politics, and economics. Lukashenka's violent crackdown on the Belarusian protest movement since August 2020, for which the Kremlin supported and the West isolated him, reinforced their alliance. Consequently, Belarus' sovereignty and ability to withstand pressure from Moscow are severely limited.

Nonetheless, despite fears and false alarm from observers and Kyiv, Belarusian troops have not taken part in hostilities. Lukashenka is hugely wary of such a step, which would tie him even closer to a war Russia can hardly win and alienate the overwhelming majority of Belarusians. Lukashenka's saber rattling

and aggressive parroting of Russia's rhetoric against NATO and Ukraine may actually substitute for not engaging directly in the war.

Despite that, Belarus is currently almost solely viewed through the prism of the war in Ukraine and considered as a Russian appendix. However, preferences for developments in Ukraine differ between Lukashenka and

Key Points

- Belarus has been an important supporter of Russia's war against Ukraine, is used as a launching pad for attacks, and has seen its sovereignty severely diminished. However, it will most likely refrain from committing its own troops to the war.
- Lukashenka's preferences for the war in Ukraine are different from the Kremlin's and the Belarusian population's. Highlighting this distinction, a Russian victory would have been the worst outcome for all camps in Belarus.
- Actions and rhetoric from Minsk are often contradictory, at times reassuring and at other times angering Moscow. They should be understood less for their content and more as signals toward particular audiences – including the West and Kyiv.
- Nuance is key to comprehend Belarus' position and options for reacting to it and can prepare observers and policymakers for a time after the war in Ukraine and for the post-Lukashenka era.

Putin, and between the Lukashenka regime and a majority of Belarusians (see table). To understand that, signals from Minsk are critical. Lukashenka's contradictory and mostly aggressive rhetoric and actions should be read as signals to a particular audience and cross-checked with developments on the ground. Such an analysis reveals how the Lukashenka regime makes a poor effort to "communicate" and show reassurance, dependence, and independence toward Moscow, the West, and Ukraine.

A nuanced distinction could help identify what leeway Belarus has left, differentiate the regime from the population, limit the threat from Minsk to its neighbors, and preserve Belarusian sovereignty. Western policymakers will need to walk a fine line between distinguishing Belarus from Russia and maintaining channels of communication without legitimizing or strengthening the Lukashenka regime. This long-term perspective can also help prepare for a time after the war in Ukraine and for the post-Lukashenka Belarus.

Whither Belarusian Sovereignty

Lukashenka's authoritarian course and reliance on Russia had experienced periodic crises but were maintained over decades. Oddly, Lukashenka has kept Russian influence in and out at the same time. He had taken a partially independent course particularly after 2014, not recognizing the annexation of Crimea and flirting with the West.¹ Domestically, Lukashenka limited the activity of pro-Russian political parties or movements. At the same time, he prevented Belarus from modernizing, democratizing, and genuinely fostering ties with the West, which kept it dependent on Moscow.

Following the fraudulent Belarusian presidential elections of August 2020, Lukashenka cracked down on protests. In that, the Kremlin's endorsement and support were decisive. Since then, the Belarusian regime has tightened repression at home and pushed the opposition into exile. A broad coalition of states heavily sanctioned and isolated Belarus politically and economically. Lukashenka has been at the Kremlin's mercy ever since.

Having said that, Lukashenka appears to have both guaranteed and sacrificed Belarusian sovereignty. With hindsight, it is highly probable that Russia would have intervened militarily had the democratic protest movement in Belarus succeeded in 2020.

Over the course of 2021, Belarus and Russia, within the murky supranational framework of their "Union State," agreed on joint air defense systems and new military training facilities. Furthermore, the Kremlin pushed for more political and economic integration.

Russian troops moved into Belarus in September 2021 for their regular "Zapad" military exercises and again in February 2022 for "Union Resolve." According to the Military Doctrine of the Union State, any Russian troops in Belarus would have to be placed under Belarusian command. Instead, these troops never left and ended up forming the core of Russia's invasion force towards Kyiv. Days before, the Belarusian government had offered assurances that the Russian troops would pull out. As a small circle in Moscow planned the invasion against Ukraine, the Lukashenka regime most likely did not even receive warning of the invasion.

Today, the limits of Belarusian agency lay bare. By trading sovereignty for regime survival, Lukashenka had partially pulled Belarus into Putin's war and made it a co-aggressor. Further Western sanctions hit some of Belarus' few sources of revenue hard, such as transit fees and exports of potash and petroleum products, thus exacerbating Belarus' economic woes.

Differing Interests

Belarus continues to support Russia's aggression and has provided military logistics, treated wounded Russian soldiers, and supplied the Russian army from Belarus' arsenal and defense industry. The Belarusian army has boosted its activity and exercises, and it announced that it was increasing its size to 80,000 and deploying advanced weapons systems. Observers are worried about potential deployments of Iskander-M missiles to Belarus and about the refitting of Su-25 fighter jets. Both could carry Russian nuclear warheads.

In October 2022, a limited number of Russian troops and armament were again deployed to Belarus, officially as part of a joint "regional group of forces." The permanent presence of some Russian troops in Belarus is likely. Due to Belarus' geographic location, this alters the strategic balance in the region.

In fact, minimizing Belarus' association with a war that Russia is unlikely to win and preserving Belarusian independence are common goals of the Lukashenka regime, the Belarusian opposition movement, and a vast majority of the population (around 80 per cent oppose partic-

Further Reading

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Osteuropakunde, "**Belarus: Gewalt statt Macht – Macht statt Gewalt,**" *Osteuropa* 10-11 (2020).

This special issue elaborates on and documents the domestic political situation in Belarus during and after the crackdown on the protest movement [in German].

Chatham House, "**What Belarusians Think,**" [belaruspolls.org](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/02/belarus-polls), 2022.

Despite the limitations on the ground, Chatham House offers the most comprehensive and reliable surveys on the attitude of Belarusians towards the war in Ukraine.

Belarus and Potential Developments of the War in Ukraine			
	Russia wins	Russia loses	Unresolved conflict and instability
Consequence for Belarusian people and opposition	<i>Worst outcome.</i> Russia dominates Belarus and autocracy continues.	<i>Best outcome.</i> May allow Belarus to modernize, democratize, and open up.	<i>Mixed.</i> Regime stability and economic crisis likely.
Consequence for the Lukashenka regime	<i>Worst outcome.</i> Russia dominates and may seek pro-Russian regime change.	<i>Fairly bad outcome.</i> Pressure on the regime to open and democratize. If Putin falls, he may fall.	<i>Likely best development.</i> Russia depends on and supports Lukashenka but cannot dominate.

ipation by Belarus in the war, according to surveys²). Even though Belarus is hugely exposed to the Russian information space, only around one-quarter of Belarusians support Russia's war – a war that, by the way, is usually called a war in Belarus. Belarusian cyber activists and railway workers, for example, have sabotaged Russian military activity, and several hundred Belarusians joined the Ukrainian armed forces.

When thinking about potential outcomes of the war in Ukraine, a simplified matrix (see table) reveals distinctions between Belarus and Russia and between the Lukashenka regime and the likely long-term interests and preferences of the majority of Belarusians. A Russian victory – now unrealistic – would have been the worst outcome for Lukashenka and the Belarusian population: Belarus and Lukashenka may have been the next target of emboldened Russian nationalism and militarism. In turn, a Russian defeat would weaken the Putin regime politically and economically, reduce its appeal and ability to support Lukashenka, and would thus open the best prospect for liberal and democratic forces in Belarus, with or without Lukashenka.

Committing Loyalty Instead of Troops

Since the February invasion, Lukashenka has touted the alleged threat of NATO or Ukrainian troops infiltrating into Belarus and thus justified the need to partially mobilize and deploy troops to, and thus to protect, the Union State's borders. This is where the logic comes in that such messages should be interpreted less in terms of their content and more with their particular setting and target audience in mind. In fact, Lukashenka has hardly ever relied on the Belarusian army against domestic opposition, and the threat to Belarus itself from NATO is largely fictional. Lukashenka may not believe it himself. The mobilization has been very limited.

Instead, Lukashenka tries to signal his value to the Kremlin – and particularly the hawks in the Russian elite – to protect domestic stability and act as Russia's loyal buffer to the West. His deliberately aggressive rhetoric can partially compensate for Belarus' lack of active participation in the war effort. It is currently unknown whether or to what extent the Kremlin may have pushed the Belarusian regime to commit troops to the war. Lukashenka could have made the case that the Belarusian army is underfunded, underequipped, that morale is poor – and, con-

vincingly in Putin's ears, that troops are needed to ensure stability in Belarus itself. While unlikely, Belarus may be pressured to join actively given Russia's need for manpower and ordnance. Lukashenka would have a hard time refusing, even though protests and disobedience would accompany such a deployment.

In that vein, Lukashenka has been keen to boast his loyalty to Russia on several other occasions, too. Belarusian state media echo the Kremlin's rhetoric and propaganda about the war. At the summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in Moscow in May, Lukashenka called for more support, discipline, and solidarity within the bloc.

His act has partially paid off. Russia has provided loans, oil, and gas at preferential prices – issues that had long been a subject of tensions between the two – and started to purchase petrol refined in Belarus, thus partially offsetting the ceased trade in these products with the EU and Ukraine.

Signals East, West, and South

What has puzzled and frustrated Western observers and policymakers is that Lukashenka has also sent desperate, bizarre, and contradictory messages westwards. In spring during the negotiations between Ukrainian and Russian delegations, Belarus was keen to host talks and suggested that Belarus should also be part of security guarantee arrangements. In April 2022, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei sent a letter to several EU counterparts complaining about the disruption in EU-Belarusian relations. This was a signal of frustration and of efforts to push back against a tendency to conflate Russian and Belarusian actions.

In a poor attempt ostensibly upholding diplomatic routine, Lukashenka congratulated Ukrainians on their Independence Day, wishing them "peaceful skies" – while Russian missiles launched from Belarus were hitting civilian targets in Ukraine. In September, Lukashenka visited the Georgian separatist territory of Abkhazia – a signal of support to Moscow – but has not recognized it as independent – a sign of Belarus' middle way.

Towards its neighbors, the Belarusian defense ministry was keen to stress that its troop build-up was not a prelude to an attack on Lithuania, Poland, or Ukraine. Belarus re-introduced visa-free travel for citizens of Lithuania and Latvia. This is again a signal of good will but un-

likely to receive much echo. Minsk may have considered more accommodating signals, but these would have been viewed unfavorably in Moscow while not promising any benefits from the West.

In October, Belarus applied for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This can be read as Minsk's attempt to foster ties with China, India, Pakistan, and others to diversify its foreign policy ties.

Beyond Signals

Belarus will remain an active supporter of Russia's war in Ukraine. It has no other choice. Some Russian troops are likely to stay in Belarus. Even limited Belarusian and Russian military activity ties down Ukrainian forces. Active Belarusian participation in the hostilities cannot be ruled out but sending troops across the border remains unlikely. Lukashenka and most Belarusians are anxious to avoid it. Russia is unlikely to deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus, as the Kremlin would be concerned about their security.³ Furthermore, the benefit of a deployment would be limited.

This highlights that Belarus is still more than a Russian satellite, and that its remaining sovereignty matters. To its neighbors, an independent Belarus is still preferable to it being a nuclear-armed oblast of the Russian Federation.

Given that, Western observers and policymakers cannot afford to ignore Belarus, to conflate it fully with Russia, or to conflate the Belarusian regime with the population. Regarding Belarus only through the prism of the current war in Ukraine limits tailored responses. According to surveys, the Belarusian population is genuinely polarized, with high sympathies both for Russia and Ukraine. Even parts of the Belarusian administration may view the loss of Belarusian sovereignty critically.

Currently, Western policies rightfully sanction the Belarusian elite. However, the isolation and difficulty for Belarusians to get visas to travel or study hit all segments of Belarusian society equally, including the many who oppose the war and Lukashenka. As ties and trade relations with the rest of Europe are eroding, Belarus is facing an economic crisis and even more one-sided trade relations with Moscow.

Instead, the West – including Kyiv – may need to find ways to build on distinctions between Belarus and Russia and maintain or expand channels of communication. This can serve to gain information about the extent to which Minsk has lost its sovereignty, to add some transparency in the region, and to identify trends within the regime and society. Western capitals may reciprocate benign signals from Minsk. They should consider selective sectoral engagement if they do not bolster the Lukashenka regime's capacity or legitimacy. Diplomatic back channels and potential track-two exchanges are key to that end. Although unlikely, were the regime to improve its currently appalling human rights record and release the more than 1,000 political prisoners, some of the West's pre-February 2022 sanctions should be lifted. Currently, no such mechanism exists.

All of this can also lay the groundwork for a period after the war in Ukraine, when Belarus will be an actor in regional security considerations, and for the post-Lukashenka era, which could open room for Belarus to be a partner in regional security and for a more liberal, more democratic Belarus. Currently, while Lukashenka's repressive regime and unwavering endorsement of Putin's aggression will continue to limit differentiation and engagement, signals should be read for what they are, and some nuance should still be added.

Selected sources

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2. Chatham House, "How Belarusians' views on the war have changed over six months," 22.08.2022.
3. Yauheni Preiherman, "Belarusian-Russian Cooperation against the Backdrop of the Ukraine War," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 27.09.2022.

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