

AUTHOR

Oliver Davis graduated from King's College London with a Master of Arts in Intelligence and International Security



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PUTIN'S ACHILLES' HEEL?

BELARUS' role in assisting the Russian military in the Ukrainian conflict has led to widespread reports of Belarussian activism and partisan groups targeting Russian logistics and Alexander Lukashenka's regime. This article aims to outline the implications of these movements for Russia and place them within the wider context of Russo-Belarussian relations.

Belarus' role in Putin's war in Ukraine and increased isolation from the West has led some to label the landlocked country as a client state of Russia and merely an extension of Russian territory. Whilst this is true to some degree, as Lukashenka's regime is almost entirely dependent on the Kremlin for political survival, evidence suggests that ordinary Belarussians are more defiant than their leader. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, there have been increasing reports of anti-Lukashenka activists targeting the regime. Support for

such movements dramatically increased during the 2020 mass protests in the wake of Lukashenka's fraudulent re-election. Putin's war in Ukraine has inspired more Belarussians to join activist and partisan groups to disrupt and sabotage Russian logistics within Belarus or to defect and fight for Ukraine. Evidence also suggests that increasing anti-Lukashenka and anti-war sentiments have diffused from the population into the Belarussian military with reports of defections and resignations. Although Putin has consolidated his control over the Belarussian dictator, the same cannot be said for the rest of Belarus.

BELARUS' IMPORTANCE TO RUSSIA

Belarus is arguably Moscow's most important alliance on its Western flank. Belarus' geography allows it to act as a buffer state against NATO and fits in with

¹Deni, John. 2022. "NATO Must Prepare to Defend Its Weakest Point – The Suwalki Corridor". *Foreign Policy*.

the Russian military strategy of active defence. Furthermore, its proximity to Kaliningrad allows the isolated Russian enclave to serve as an asset in projecting Russian military power. However, Kaliningrad's role in projecting military power is contingent on Belarus being aligned with Moscow. Should Belarus develop adversarial relations with Russia and draw closer to the West, Kaliningrad's proximity to Belarus becomes a weakness rather than a strength. The Sulwalki Gap running along the Polish-Lithuanian border separating Kaliningrad from Belarus could theoretically cut the Baltic states from Poland and the rest of NATO. Due to Belarus' alignment with Moscow, the Sulwalki Gap is sometimes referred to as NATO's "weakest point" as the Baltics are some of the alliance's "most exposed members" and a military choke point.¹ For Belarus, the primary motivations for integration with Russia are economic incentives and financial benefits; however, for the Kremlin keeping Belarus

within its sphere of influence is fundamental to its security concerns and defence of its Western border.

LUKASHENKA'S SPONSORED AUTHORITARIANISM

To ensure that Belarus remains aligned with Moscow, Putin has consolidated a dysfunctional relationship of sponsored authoritarianism with Lukashenka. This relationship between both states was cemented by Belarus' isolation from the West which required Lukashenka to turn to Putin to ensure his political survival. Prior to the Belarussian dictator's brutal crackdowns on pro-democracy protesters in the aftermath of his fraudulent 2020 re-election, he was often described as the ultimate deal-maker. This arose from his ability to balance Belarus' relations with Russia and the West, attempting to gain concessions from both sides and resisting Russian integration by keeping them at arm's length. However, Lukashenka's suppression of pro-democracy movements in the wake of his re-election halted his tentative rapprochement with the West as the US and European states swiftly cut ties with the regime. The autocrat furthered Belarus' new-found pariah status in 2021 with the notorious hijacking of a Ryanair flight in Belarussian airspace to detain a journalist

²Clark, Mason. 2021. "Russia in Review". *Understanding War*, 1-5.

³Giles, Kier. 2022. "Belarus Plane Action Eases Russian Military Restraints".

⁴Leukavets, Alla. 2022. "The Role of Belarus in The Ukrainian Crisis". *Wilson Center*.

⁵Whitmore, Brian. 2021. *Review of Russian-Belarusian Military Merger Accelerates on NATO's Eastern Flank*.

⁶Furlong, Ray. 2020. "Belarus Lives It Up as Neighbours Lock Down Over COVID-19". *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

⁷Wilson, Andrew. 2021. *Belarus: Europe's last dictatorship*, 279.



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“TO ENSURE THAT BELARUS REMAINS ALIGNED WITH MOSCOW, PUTIN HAS CONSOLIDATED A DYSFUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIP OF SPONSORED AUTHORITARIANISM WITH LUKASHENKA.”

and the artificial migrant crisis weaponising individuals for political blackmail. In light of economic sanctions and reduction of trade with EU members “Belarus [could] no longer see European states as viable economic partners”, leaving it with few allies other than Russia.² This isolation from the West forced Lukashenka's hand; he was left with no other option other than to place his bets with Russia and embrace Putin as his only remaining ally.³

ESTABLISHING CONTROL

Moscow was quick to take advantage of the opportunities that Lukashenka turning his back on the West presented by swiftly establishing its control over the regime. Briefly after the Ryanair incident, Russia confirmed an aid package of \$500 million for Lukashenka's regime and consolidated the partnership in a series of personal meetings in 2021. Under increased financial pressure from Western sanctions, Belarus' economic dependence on Moscow increased and “Lukashenka [was] forced to turn to Putin for financial support to ensure his survival”.⁴ Lukashenka had long resisted closer integration with the Russian

military and pushed back on Moscow establishing an airbase in Belarus. However, Lukashenka now lacked the power to act as the ultimate deal-maker and Russia rapidly expanded into Belarus establishing a permanent military presence. For the first time since 2014 Lukashenka publicly recognised Russia's annexation of Crimea in a TV interview, also stating that he would allow Putin to return nuclear weapons to Belarus. Although the details have not been fully published, a new military doctrine was signed between both states under the Union State framework forming a joint military training facility. According to Lukashenka, Russia and Belarus have essentially created a “single army” focused “in the western direction”.⁵

A TURNING POINT IN BELARUSSIAN ATTITUDES

Lukashenka's new-found closeness with Putin and abandonment of balancing between East and West drew sharp criticism from the Belarussian population. Although Moscow has forged a relationship of sponsored authoritarianism with Lukashenka's government in which he is reliant on Putin

for political survival; the same cannot be said for the Belarussian population. The mass protests in the wake of Lukashenka's fraudulent re-election are generally considered the turning point in Belarussian attitudes towards the dictator. However, discontent with the regime was building prior to the election and the roots of Belarussian activism in the Ukrainian conflict can be traced back to Covid-19.

Lukashenka's handling of the coronavirus pandemic undermined his social contract and focussed his population on the shortcomings of his autocratic regime. As the rest of Europe was imposing strict lockdowns, Lukashenka called the virus a “psychosis” stating that “there are no viruses here... did you see any of them flying around? I don't see them either”.⁶ Belarussian state television grew increasingly illogical in its reporting, using manipulative methods to convince the population of the competence of authorities and the insignificance of the virus. Belarus was the only European nation not to suspend its football league and “there was no lockdown, shops and restaurants stayed open”.⁷ He showed no

empathy for the vulnerable or victims calling them “old” and “fatties” and organised his own World War II victory celebrations despite veterans being amongst the most vulnerable.⁸

As a result of Lukashenka's failure to address the challenges posed by coronavirus and provide basic social goods, his population had to band together for protection by providing personal protective equipment and respirators to the under-equipped health service through online crowdfunding and donations. Citizens formed their own networks and informal organisations to supply the assistance that their government was refusing to provide. Socially distanced protests were held in solidarity for health workers and individuals began to turn to social media and independent outlets to seek out reliable information on the pandemic – “Lukashenka was unwittingly fostering social cooperation and cohesion”.⁹ Furthermore, his actions pushed people towards independent media outlets, to question information produced by state-

run channels and to rely on non-state organisations and networks for basic services. This growing unpopularity, alongside the newfound social cohesion within his population, set the stage for the mass protests in the wake of his fraudulent 2020 re-election.

Despite Lukashenka's growing unpopularity and widespread support for opposition leader Svaityana Tsikhanowskaya, the Belarussian dictator officially received 80 per cent of the vote with Tsikhanowskaya receiving a mere ten per cent in a blatant fraud. Some estimates place Tsikhanowskaya's true votes to be ten times the amount she ‘officially’ received. The Chatham House Post Election Survey estimated that Lukashenka only received 20.6 per cent of the vote and that Tsikhanowskaya received 52.2 per cent.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, due to the blatant election fraud, protests erupted across Belarus which were met by brutal repression from Lukashenka's security forces. Similar to the Maidan protests in Ukraine, reports of torture, unlawful

detentions and disappearances fuelled the protest movements igniting moral outrage aimed at Lukashenka's regime. The government attempted to restrict social media and internet usage, however, the population, adept at circumventing censorship and government controls, used virtual private networks, private internet service providers, and proxy servers to avoid these barriers. After 90 days of constant protests, the movement began to die out, due to a sharp rise in the number of police officers, lockdowns in the capital Minsk, and new legislation enabling the detention of demonstrators for years instead of the previous 15 days. However, the level of repression demonstrated by Lukashenka's regime would be difficult to replicate again without direct Russian involvement and according to Andrew Wilson: “The new Belarus could not be bottled up for long; a new civil nation had been born.”¹¹

PUTIN'S WAR IN UKRAINE

Belarus' role in Putin's war in Ukraine has been that of

an enabler and co-aggressor which has led to further Western economic sanctions on Lukashenka's regime. Belarus has provided logistical support to the Russian military, allowed its territory to be used as a launchpad for the Russian invasion and launched ballistic and cruise missiles against Ukrainian targets. Although the Belarussian military has not entered the conflict, it has deployed special forces along its southern border and provided Russia with refuelling points, transportation of equipment and use of airspace. Russia's initial invasion plans were contingent on Belarussian support. Without access to their territory and logistical networks Russia's assault

⁸Kramer, Andrew. 2020. ““There Are No Viruses Here”: Leader of Belarus Scoffs at Lockdowns”. *Nytimes*

⁹Ibid

¹⁰Astapenia, Ryhor. 2022. “What Belarusians Think About Their Country's Crisis”. *Chatham House*.

¹¹Wilson, Andrew. 2021. *Belarus: Europe's last dictatorship*, 292.

“LUKASHENKA'S GROWING UNPOPULARITY, ALONGSIDE THE NEWFOUND SOCIAL COHESION WITHIN HIS POPULATION, SET THE STAGE FOR THE MASS PROTESTS IN THE WAKE OF HIS FRAUDULENT 2020 RE-ELECTION.”



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on Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, would have been implausible. Although Russia failed to take the city and was forced to retreat and refocus its efforts on the Southern and Eastern regions, the significance and role of Belarus in the original invasion highlight Putin's control over Lukashenka.

BELARUSSIANS' RESPONSE TO THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

Despite Lukashenka's eagerness to aid Putin's war, this sentiment

is not ubiquitous amongst the Belarussian population and the social cohesion fostered during Covid-19 and the 2020 protests appears to be manifesting itself in numerous activist and partisan groups. The Russian invasion appears to have triggered many of these groups to shift their focus towards Putin and the Russian military. Evidence suggests that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has "rekindled opposition networks formed during the 2020 protests".¹² The Russian military is heavily reliant on road and particularly rail networks

"THE CYBER-PARTISANS WAS ORIGINALLY COMPOSED OF 15 INDIVIDUALS BUT HAS RAPIDLY EXPANDED, ESPECIALLY SINCE THE RUSSIAN INVASION, WITH MANY MEMBERS WORKING OUTSIDE OF BELARUS FOR SAFETY."

for transportation, resupply, and reinforcements. These supply routes within Belarus have been a primary target for saboteurs and activists seeking to disrupt the Russian war effort. Underground networks of Belarussian activists, hackers, railway workers and security service defectors have been disabling railway tracks and equipment to damage Russian supply lines. Signal control cabinets were targeted which paralysed Belarus' railways forcing trains to reduce speed to a walking pace due to the lack of automated signalling. According to a former Belarussian security service member, sympathetic employees of train companies have leaked information on Russian movements through Telegram channels which are then read and acted upon by supporters. Although Russia's logistics have been notoriously poor in the Ukrainian conflict these acts of sabotage have certainly contributed to Russian logistical failures. It is likely that the rail delays forced Moscow to shift certain resupply routes to roads which led to similar problems; notoriously the 40-mile military convoy in northern Ukraine.

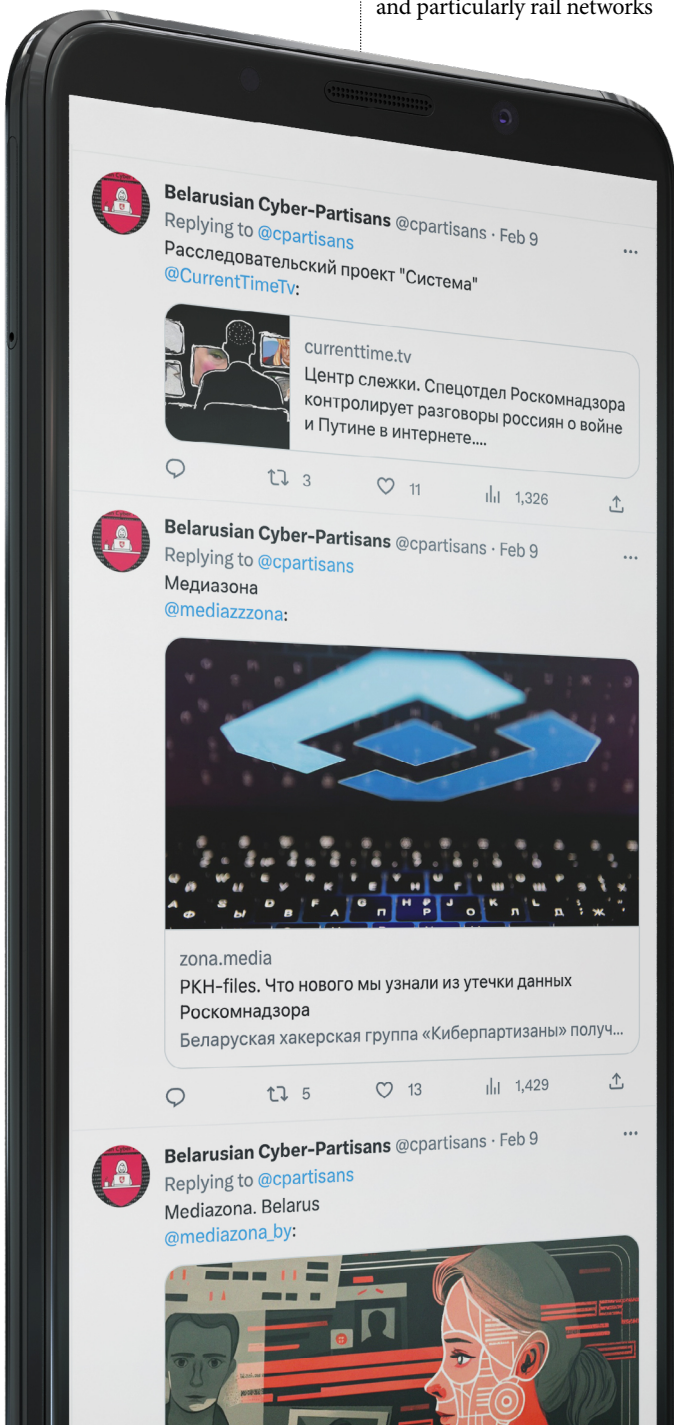
Also aiding in these railway sabotage efforts is the hacker group 'Cyber-Partisans'. This anonymous 'hacktivist' group emerged out of the 2020 protests, during which it conducted cyberattacks against government websites. Since the Russian invasion the group claims to have hacked Belarus' railway databases to disrupt the transport of Russian military units. The hacker group has also revealed Minsk's under-reporting of Covid deaths, abuse of immigrants and state-sanctioned violence, all in a

bid to undermine Lukashenka's regime. It is reported that the Cyber-Partisans was originally composed of 15 individuals but has rapidly expanded, especially since the Russian invasion, with many members working from outside of Belarus for safety.¹³ Judging the effectiveness of Belarussian sabotage is less important than the fact that it is occurring and increasing in volume. Lukashenka's popularity has been in steady decline since 2010, however, the events in 2020 and Russia's war in Ukraine have disillusioned much of the Belarussian population from Russia and his regime leading to an unprecedented increase in partisan movements.

These reports of sabotage directly targeting Russian logistics and exposing Lukashenka's regime provide greater insight into the anti-Lukashenka and more recent anti-Russia attitudes developing within the Belarussian population. This is a source of weakness to Putin as although Belarus has become Russia's 'staunchest ally', this can only be said about Lukashenka's regime and not the Belarussian population. Although Putin may control Lukashenka, he does not control the Belarussian population. Should demonstrations similar to 2020 re-emerge, threatening Lukashenka's presidency, Putin will have to ensure the suppression of these movements if he wants to ensure Belarus remains within his sphere of influence.

¹²Sly, Liz. 2022. "The Belarussian Railway Workers Who Helped Thwart Russia's Attack on Kyiv". *Washington Post*.

¹³Bozovic, Marijeta, and Benjamin Peters. "Belarus as Media, Part II: Enter the Cyber Partisans." *Slavic Review* 81, (2022): 207-8.



Picture: Zlanko Plamenov/Freepik

In an effort to deter sabotage and tighten his grip over his population, Lukashenka recently imposed the death penalty for acts of 'attempted terrorism'. Nevertheless, support for anti-war networks is increasing, especially the opposition leader Svitlana Tikhanovskaya and her anti-war movement, which has assisted in countering propaganda and disinformation inside Belarus. Thousands of Belarussians have fled the country since the Russian invasion, especially those close to the military conscription age. Others have sought to assist partisan movements within Belarus by joining opposition and anti-war movements and organisations.¹⁴ Despite the threats of violence and detention from security forces, hundreds of Belarussians attended anti-war street protests, many of whom were the mothers of young conscript soldiers highlighting the defiance amongst the Belarussian population.

ATTITUDES WITHIN THE BELARUSSIAN MILITARY

This defiance against Lukashenka and Putin's war in Ukraine is not confined to ordinary Belarussians, there have been waves of defections among political and military officials. Lukashenka's Deputy Defence Minister and chief of the general staff Major General Viktor Gulevich resigned due to his government's role in the Russian invasion. He stated that the

¹⁴Hopkins, Valerie. 2022. "Pulling Levers in Exile, Belarus Opposition Leader Works to Keep Her Influence Alive". *Nytimes*.

¹⁵Beck, Eldad. 2022. "Defections and Resignations in Belarussian Military Prevented Country from Joining Ukraine Invasion". *Israelhayom.Com*.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Whitmore, Brian. 2022. "Belarussian Military Reluctant to Join Vladimir Putin's Ukraine War". *Atlantic Council*.

¹⁸Rudnik, Alesia. 2022. "Belarussian Volunteers See Ukraine War As Steppingstone To A Free Belarus". *Atlantic Council*.



Picture: Mil.ru, CC BY 4.0

“LUKASHENKA'S DEPUTY DEFENCE MINISTER AND CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF MAJOR GENERAL VIKTOR GULEVICH RESIGNED DUE TO HIS GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN THE RUSSIAN INVASION. HE STATED THAT THE BELARUSSIAN MILITARY IS ANTI-WAR AND IS REFUSING TO PARTICIPATE IN THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT.”

Belarussian military is anti-war and is refusing to participate in the Ukrainian conflict. Belarussian diplomat Natalia Khvostova, stationed in Munich, also stepped down in protest of Lukashenka's role in the Russian invasion. There have also been numerous other resignations and defections amongst senior and junior military personnel.¹⁵ According to Franak Viacorka, a senior adviser to Tikhanovskaya, in the days prior to the Russian invasion multiple military officials fled Belarus seeking contact with Tikhanovskaya's opposition in exile. According to Viacorka, it was this wave of resignations and defections that “prevented the Belarussian military from invading Ukraine”.¹⁶ There are widespread reports of demoralisation and refusal to fight within the Belarussian military; many officers have taken sick leave or fled the country.¹⁷ Furthermore, there are numerous reports and social media footage of Belarussian troops and volunteers joining the Ukrainian side to fight against Russia. They are the only nation to have organised a battalion of foreign fighters

on the side of the Ukrainians (Kastus Kalinouski) and played a crucial role in defending Kyiv and retaking the districts north of the capital, especially around Irpin.¹⁸

On the basis of the fragmentary evidence, it appears likely that the Belarussian military is suffering from low morale and would lack the moral fighting component if it was required to assist the Russian military in Ukraine. Furthermore, it is also likely that a decision to send Belarussian troops into Ukraine would trigger a wave of further defections, resignations, and desertions of military and political officials and wider protest movements. This suggests that Russo-Belarussian military cooperation, which according to Lukashenka consists of a 'single army', may not be as effective or as compelling as the ambitious doctrine sounds.

CONCLUSION

As Russia's 'staunchest ally', Belarus has assisted in Russia's conflict in Ukraine and intimidation of NATO and the West; however, as the Belarussian population has become increasingly rebellious towards Russia and their leader,

the dysfunctional relationship that has bound both states together may become more of a liability than an asset to Putin. Although Putin may control Lukashenka, he does not control the rest of Belarus thereby endangering Russia's most important Western security alliance. Furthermore, Kaliningrad's strategic importance rests on Belarus' alignment with Moscow. A popular uprising that deposed Lukashenka would transform the enclave from a strategic military asset into an isolated and exposed territory. The longer Putin's war in Ukraine continues the greater the risk of triggering a more powerful opposition movement than in 2020. Requesting the Belarussian military to enter the conflict would likely generate another challenge to Lukashenka's power which would be difficult to suppress with Russia's resources stretched thin in Ukraine. Belarus is developing into an Achilles' heel for Putin; although he can turn to Lukashenka to espouse Kremlin narratives, he cannot rely on Russo-Belarussian military cooperation or on Belarussians to allow Lukashenka to continue his Russia-sponsored rule.