



# THE BELARUSIAN DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT AND RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE

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### **PeaceRep's Ukraine programme**

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is a multi-partner initiative that provides evidence, insight, academic research and policy analysis from Ukraine and the wider region to support Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity and democracy in the face of the Russian invasion. PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is led by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) partnering with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) in Ukraine, the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Germany, the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) in Austria and Jagiellonian University in Poland. Through our collaboration with KSE we work closely with researchers, educationalists and civic activists in Ukraine to ensure that policy solutions are grounded in robust evidence and are calibrated to support democratic outcomes.

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## Foreword from Luke Cooper

I am delighted to present this new report from PeaceRep's Ukraine programme. The authors, Volha Biziukova and Aliaksandr Bystryk, offer a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Belarus and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine launched in February 2022.

The report brings to light the complexity of the Belarusian perspective on the on-going war. It shows how the war has impacted domestic politics with the democratic opposition breaking with Moscow, while public opinion has moved in a different direction to the trends in Russia.

It is published as part of the work of PeaceRep's Ukraine team on several research projects:

- **Ukraine and the new global fragmentation.** The Russian war against Ukraine has been commonly but mistakenly cast as a 'return of geopolitics' and 'great power politics'. Rather than this assessment we see the conflict as indicative of a fragmentation of world order<sup>1</sup>, one marked by a decline in the centralised, hierarchal blocs associated with the Cold War and a proliferation of new geopolitical players able and willing to pursue interventions overseas. Crucially, this fragmentation of the international order involves a multiplicity of social relations and trans-boundary ties that shape 'the field of action' available to states. We argue that state-centric analyses of the Russia-Ukraine War, which focus wholly on intergovernmental and military blocs/alliances, will occlude the vital role played by a diverse range of civic and political actors that are shaping the overall course of the conflict. Our research in this area therefore seeks to identify these *transnational* interconnections and combinations which are contributing to Ukraine's defence of *national* sovereignty.
- **Regional implications of the war for development and security.** This research also advances our work to build a Ukraine-centred regional network, drawing together scholars and practitioners in a programme of data generation, transnational dialogues for knowledge production and dissemination and collaboration on research outputs. The report brings to light the challenges facing the regional security order in the context of the hitherto failure of Russia to achieve its aim of crushing Ukraine's democracy.
- **Ukraine's post-2014 democratic pathways and the challenges of security sector governance.** While states conducting 'total wars' have traditionally created highly centralised political-economies in which the state intervenes aggressively to direct capital and labour towards the war-effort, Ukraine has not adopted such a model.<sup>2</sup> In a conventional 'all-out-war' model, security sector governance becomes a form of economic management that sees a militarisation of the wider economy under the auspices of the central state. Ukraine's hybrid model instead combines elements of economic centralisation alongside internal fragmentation dynamics, including a pervasive informality in the political economy of the state, military and security sector.

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<sup>1</sup> On this see, Peter, M. & Rice, H. (2022). Non-Western approaches to peace-making and peacebuilding: State-of-the-art and an agenda for research. (PeaceRep Report: Global Transitions Series). PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh.

<sup>2</sup> Cooper, L. (2022). Market economics in an all-out-war? Assessing economic and political risks to the Ukrainian war effort. Conflict and Civicness Research Group, The London School of Economics.

In this analytical context, the report discusses the role of Belarusian volunteer brigades on the Ukrainian side that form part of a wider political economy of war finance, which sees units fundraise independently to purchase military equipment and supplies and even assume a degree of political influence in the public sphere. This case is thus illustrative of the dangers facing democratic security governance in Ukraine. The report also draws attention to the impacts of the war on authoritarianisation in Belarus, and the downstream risks that may be implied by the democratic opposition's sharp 'turn' towards a politics of armed struggle against the Lukashenka regime. It brings to light the political and military impact of the Belarusian volunteers in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), and the geopolitical activity of the democratic opposition in exile, as central elements in the fragmentation of the regional order.

The topic of the relationship between Belarus (and its multi-layered ties to the war) has been the subject of considerable discussion in Ukraine but is still overlooked in some western policy discussions – despite the potential for this to lead to the regionalisation of the war. We hope this report contributes to a vitally needed discussion of the challenges and risks that lie ahead.

*Luke Cooper is an Associate Professorial Research Fellow in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science and the Director of PeaceRep's Ukraine programme.*

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## List of Abbreviations

AFU – Armed Forces of Ukraine

UTCB - United Transition Cabinet of Belarus

KKR - Kastus Kalinouski Regiment

BVC - Belarusian Volunteer Corps

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## Executive Summary

- The involvement of Belarus in Russia's war on Ukraine was facilitated by the failure of the 2020 revolution and Lukashenka's subsequently unstable position as a de facto Kremlin's dependent.
- The Belarusian organised democratic movement has been reshaped by the war:
  - Before the war, due to the large-scale political repression in Belarus, the organised opposition movement was active predominantly in exile. Tsikhanouskaya's Office remained the main power centre. The movement faced fragmentation, questions about legitimacy and efficacy of the Office, as well as the problem of preserving relevance to the situation in Belarus.
  - The organised opposition movement has taken a unanimous pro-Ukrainian position and designated the Russian state as the aggressor in the war and the enemy of democracy in Belarus (this may be contrasted to a somewhat pro-appeasement position toward the Russian regime in 2020).
  - The war had a twofold impact on the reconfiguration of the organised opposition movement. On the one hand, it facilitated a certain reconsolidation of the movement with different political groups and civic initiatives expanding coordination of their activities and forging new (or trying to revitalise existing) structures. This includes the formation of the United Transition Cabinet of Belarus (UTCb) as a more inclusive alternative governing body.
  - On the other hand, there have been emerging players who try to position themselves as a political alternative to Tsikhanouskaya's Office and allied forces. These alternative players include some leaders from the "traditional" pre-2020 opposition movement, some figures who rose to prominence during the 2020 revolution, and new actors represented by volunteer-fighters' units.
  - There is a tendency of radicalisation of the "protest core." In particular, there is a shift in the vision of the means of regime change in Belarus among active participants of the protests and members of the organised opposition movement – embracing the possibility of the use of force for removing Lukashenka from power (thus, departing from the previous peaceful strategy).
  - There is an increased presence and visibility of the figures associated with the "security block" in the organised opposition movement, also in the composition of the UTCb (unlike in 2020).
  - Despite attempts to reconsolidate, the organised opposition movement, first of all, Tsikhanouskaya's Office and the UTCb, struggles to retain efficacy and exert impact on the developments in Belarus. Their calls for national-wide strikes and anti-war mass protests failed.

- The reaction of Belarusian society to the war is complex and multifaceted:
  - Belarusian society is split regarding the assessment of Russia's actions. Still, more people tend to support Ukraine in the war.
  - There is a broad social consensus on the rejection of the idea of the direct involvement of the Belarusian army in the war (across political and socio-economic divides).
  - There is a connection between the attitudes to the war and the types of preferred media. Those who prefer Russian and Belarusian state media tend to approve Russia's aggression and do not see Belarus as part of the conflict. Those who follow Belarusian non-state and Ukrainian media disapprove of Russia's actions and are more likely to recognize Belarus' role as Russia's accomplice in the aggression.
  - The popular attitude to the war is very different from Russia, where the available opinion polls demonstrate a consistently high support for the actions of the Russian army.
  - The outbreak of the war provoked mass protests which became the largest in more than a year; however, a large-scale mass anti-war movement did not materialise. The dictatorial regime continues intensive mass political repression violently suppressing all expressions of dissent.
- Belarusians have been engaged in several forms of active participation in the war. There has been an increasing influence of the volunteer fighting units as new players in the organised opposition movement:
  - Several individual groups were engaging in "partisan" actions. There were cases of sabotaging the logistics of the Russian army on the Belarusian railroads at the beginning of the war. Recently, there was a drone attack targeting a Russian military plane.
  - "Bielaruski Hajun" became an important initiative for monitoring the movement of the Russian army on Belarus' territory.
  - The expansion of the Belarusian volunteer fighter units as part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, with the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment (KKR) as the most significant among them.
  - The KKR has emerged as a new political force and recently started positioning themselves as political subjects and forging alliances with more-nationalist oriented political figures. The KKR distances from Tsikhanouskaya's Office and the UTCB.
  - The rise of the groups actively engaged in the war on the Ukrainian side is part of the general tendency of radicalisation of the Belarusian opposition movement.

- The Ukrainian government and political figures have taken a rather ambiguous position on Belarus:
  - The official government representatives refused to recognize or communicate directly with the UTCB or other Belarusian anti-regime forces except some figures contacting the KKR.
  - The position of the Ukrainian authorities on dealing with Lukashenka's regime also proves to be ambiguous. There were reported backdoor contacts and negotiations between the Ukrainian authorities and the Belarusian regime, including lobbying for a "milder sanctions regime" for Belarus.

## Introduction

Belarus' participation in Russia's war against Ukraine has been facilitated by the outcomes of the revolutionary movement of 2020 and its failure to defend the results of the elections and remove Lukashenka from power. The present report provides an overview of the reactions and response of the Belarusian democratic movement to the war in the context of its development since 2020 and its condition on the brink of the invasion. Furthermore, the report also describes how the war reshaped this movement creating new players, facilitating the changes in the strategy, and generating new divides. The analysis addresses activities of the organised democratic oppositional movement in exile, as well as developments inside Belarus, including the dynamic of popular political participation and public opinion. A dedicated section of the report specifically focuses on the active participation in resistance to the Russian invasion in the form of monitoring or sabotaging activities on the territory of Belarus or joining Belarusian volunteer units under the command of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

The analysis is based on open sources and media materials. While focusing on the democratic opposition movement in the context of the war, many issues regarding the developments within the democratic movement that relate to the Belarusian "domestic agenda", or internal organisational conflicts, remain outside the scope of the analysis. The report also does not cover the topic of the involvement of Lukashenka's regime in the war, as well as the possible participation of the Belarusian army in the conflict and the factors that might influence this decision (or touches on these points only marginally).

## The Belarusian Democratic Movement vis-à-vis the Regime on the Brink of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Assessing the consequences of the war for the Belarusian democratic movement can be a complex challenge due to this movement's nature and dynamic. This movement is primarily associated with mass pro-democratic mobilisation, which took place around the rigged presidential elections of 2020. This mobilisation started prior to the elections, at the stage of the registration of candidates, and its distinctive trait was its spontaneous or non-organized character. On the one hand, this active popular involvement was incited by the emergence on the political stage of three alternative candidates who were rather political neophytes and were not part of the established democratic Belarusian opposition. Furthermore, the political agendas of all three leading contesters were very dissimilar to the traditional programs of the Belarusian opposition figures, who typically drew on the discourse of national self-determination, promotion of Belarusian national culture, and hold an explicitly pro-EU orientation. Meanwhile, all three aspiring candidates – Viktor Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and Valery Tsapkala – put at the centre of their programs the issues of socio-economic wellbeing and development, the inadequacy of the current political regime, and the preservation of a relatively neutral international position of Belarus (presenting Russia as an important partner). Furthermore, all three were Russian speakers, as were the majority of the key figures of the 2020 movement. Moreover, all three candidates were periodically suspected and publicly accused of ties to Russia and its political regime.

The mobilisation was not an outcome of political campaigns or organised support provided by political parties. It seems that the agendas of the candidates were inclusive and appealing enough to consolidate a very broad coalition from the representatives of different sections of society and harness the accumulated discontent with and tiredness of Lukashenka's regime. This dissatisfaction was aggravated by the Belarusian state's gross mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the stagnation tendencies in the economy.

Therefore, the contenders became key figures and the symbols of the protest, but not its creators or those in control. By the date of the elections, Viktor Babaryka and Siarhei Tsikhanouski were behind bars and Tsapkala had left Belarus. Subsequently, the movement consolidated around one candidate - Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (Siarhei Tsikhanouski's wife), who was backed by representatives of two other forces - Maryia Kalesnikava (from Babaryka's office) and Veranika Tsapkala. By this means, Tsikhanouskaya became what can be called a "protest candidate."

From the very beginning, Tsikhanouskaya positioned herself not as a prospective ruling president but as an "interim" president who will be in charge of running fair and transparent elections in which all candidates who were previously disqualified would take part. Therefore, while Tsikhanouskaya together with Kalesnikava and Tsapkala were important symbols and influential public figures, they were not actually the leaders of the protests. The trio even consciously denied such a role, as they described themselves as those who join the mass movement rather than lead it. Similarly, none of the public figures positioned themselves as the representatives or leaders of the oppositional movement claiming power in the country. Even the Coordinating Council that was formed in the aftermath of the elections described itself as a "mediating body" and not an alternative government legitimately representing Belarusian citizens. Tsikhanouskaya herself was pushed out of the country within days after the elections.

Meanwhile, the available evidence suggests that the majority of Belarusian citizens did not support the regime and voted against Lukashenka. Mass protests were unprecedentedly widespread and took place across the country in different cities, towns

and even villages, but were most numerous and visible in the capital city of Minsk. They drew participants from a broad range of backgrounds and social standings, so that the total number of participants comprised a significant share of the country's total population. The protests had a grassroots character, were loosely coordinated via major Telegram channels (most importantly, NEXTA<sup>3</sup>) and were not led by a particular party. Importantly, the fear of Russia's military intervention was one of the major deterrents for protests taking more active forms, such as occupation of government buildings.

Subsequently, mass protests were violently suppressed by large-scale mass repression, with tens of thousands detained and thousands convicted for years in prison on political grounds. This also triggered a mass exodus from Belarus: while there is no consolidated figure, estimates vary from tens to hundreds of thousands<sup>4</sup>; many of these people were active participants of the protests. Interestingly, Ukraine was one of the major destinations of this politically-motivated flight from the country. Most prominent public figures of the protests also either ended up behind bars or left the country (e.g., Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veranika and Valery Tsapkala). Viktor Babaryka's team, which enjoyed the most popular support in the run-up to the elections, suffered the gravest damage from repression as all its leadership have been imprisoned, including Viktor Babaryka, Eduard Babaryka, Maryia Kalesnikava, and Maksim Znak. Thus, this most influential oppositional political force lost its representation and was, in fact, crushed.

After the active phase of protests was over, the crackdown on the opposition movement and civil society at large, the continuing expansion of mass political repression, and punitive legislation against dissent pushed many of those involved in the protest movement into apathy and de-politicization. Many stopped following the news and the current agenda. At the same time, due to the extreme suppression of freedom of speech and the press (and any expression of dissent) in Belarus, independent media were forced to minimise their activities inside the country and move abroad (while dozens of journalists remained political prisoners). This dynamic created inevitable cleavages between "those who left" and "those who stayed." The former group appears to be much better represented and has more opportunities to make their voices heard in the independent media and major Telegram channels, who themselves work in exile. This creates an inevitable distortion in the depiction of popular moods and opinions when speaking about Belarusian society or its democratic movement.

In the aftermath of the regime crackdown, all significant Belarusian non-state media were forced to leave the country. Furthermore, their usage is criminalised under the current "anti-extremist" repressive legislation (so that the mere subscription to Telegram channel is penalised). But they still manage to retain a significant share of the audience inside Belarus. Belarusian non-state media comprise an uneven landscape as they are composed of "traditional" established media (e.g., Zerkalo-Tut.by, Nasha Niva, Radio Freedom Belarus, Belsat) and the new players, including, first of all, Telegram channels and bloggers as alternative forms of media. NEXTA represents the largest and most influential of them, both for the Belarusian audience and internationally. Meanwhile, at the end of 2020, many smaller but still significant media resources joined up with the Infopoint agency.<sup>5</sup> Initially, this association declared as its goals fact-checking and coordination of protest activity. The creation of Infopoint was an idea of Tsikhanouskaya's adviser Franak Viačorka, who has been also serving as the organisation's director. While Infopoint claims that the director does not have influence over the content spread through the media, the organisation clearly has close ties with

<sup>3</sup> A grassroots Belarusian social media platform distributed via YouTube and Telegram.

<sup>4</sup> Also <https://belretail.by/news/covid-tri-volnyi-emigratsii-i-minus-pochti-tyis-jiteley-belarusi-za-god>

<sup>5</sup> <https://nashaniva.com/ru/303137>

Tsikhanouskaya's Office. In late 2022, Infopoint became implicated in a major scandal that publicly erupted in the Belarusian opposition movement. It was revealed that the telegram channel "Black Book of Belarus," which cooperated with Infopoint was infiltrated by the Belarusian security service. This led to a leakage of the personal data of thousands of people who contacted the channel and dozens of them were subsequently prosecuted in Belarus. Still, despite these differences and tensions, all non-state Belarusian media took a pro-Ukrainian position, condemning Russia's war on Ukraine and, despite all challenges, they continue to preserve a significant audience in Belarus (though their coverage has shrunk).

Thus, by the beginning of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the mass democratic movement that emerged in the context of political mobilisation of 2020 appeared to be fragmented, deflated, and poorly coordinated. The organised opposition, in fact, could function only in exile. Tsikhanouskaya became the major political figure who enjoyed an exclusive resource of popular legitimacy due to the results of the elections. However, she did not proclaim herself the president-elect at that moment; this announcement would happen only several months into Russia's war against Ukraine. Meanwhile, her team was in fact created anew and included some new figures as well as many representatives of the "traditional opposition." The latter, in combination with the fact that Tsikhanouskaya appeared to be very much oriented at and dependent on the Belarusians abroad, conditioned the change of the agenda of Tsikhanouskaya's Office.

After several unsuccessful attempts to relaunch the protest movement inside Belarus in the form of a nation-wide strike and later on other occasions, the question about the relevance and the influence of the Belarusian opposition in exile became more and more salient. Some doubts started being raised regarding whether it could exercise any impact on the processes that take place inside Belarus, whether it still represented the broad pro-democratic movement, and whether it was still seen as a legitimate representative by those who voted for Tsikhanouskaya against Lukashenka in 2020. Thus, there was a certain crisis of legitimacy and representativeness of today's organised opposition, especially, since Tsikhanouskaya was perceived as a symbolic figure and not a political leader from the beginning. On the brink of the war, the opposition movement seemed to find itself in a deadlock.

Meanwhile, Lukashenka did not manage to re-consolidate power and reclaim legitimacy within the country (as was the case with all previously contested elections). The systematic large-scale violence and repression seem to be the only pillar on which the current regime relies. This condition of the Belarusian democratic movement vis-à-vis the illegitimate dictatorial regime in many ways conditioned the reactions to Russia's war against Ukraine and the forms of response. Furthermore, the failure of the revolution of 2020 and the position in which Lukashenka's regime found itself as a result of a loss of popular legitimacy, international isolation, and increased dependence on Russia largely conditioned the way in which Belarus became implicated in the war as an accomplice to Russia's aggression.

The cleavages, disconnections, and discontents between different segments of the broad pro-democratic anti-regime movement are crucial for understanding the range of the reactions and narratives that emerged in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Belarus' role in it. For instance, as it will be shown in the subsequent sections of the report, the statements of the figures of the organised political opposition appear to diverge both from the predominant opinion of people in Belarus and the parts of more radicalised anti-regime forces. Importantly, the war became the major factor for reshaping the opposition movement itself, along with its declared strategies and objectives.

## The Organised Democratic Opposition Movement: It's Response to the War and Evolution Under These New Circumstances

### The Onset of the War

Russia's war against Ukraine was launched at a moment of change for the Belarusian regime. On February 27th, the state scheduled a so-called "referendum" with which it sought to accept a new "constitution" that, similar to Russia's precedent of 2020, would further entrench the personal dictatorship, as well as diminish and erode the remaining forms of civilian control and democratic participation. It also aimed at the "nullification" of Lukashenka's presidential term limits<sup>6</sup> and establishing a mechanism for his potentially life-long stay in power. Importantly, the new constitution also erased the point about Belarus' neutral status,<sup>7</sup> thus, opening up a possibility for the deployment of Russian troops permanently and even creating military bases. Furthermore, it also renounced the republic's non-nuclear status.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the referendum reshaped both the country's system of political government and its security architecture.

In the preparation to the referendum, different democratic organisations associated with the 2020 elections – Tsikhanouskaya's Office, the Coordination Council, the Honest People initiative, the "Holas" platform, ByPol<sup>9</sup>, ZUBR, and the National Anti-crisis Management – formed the Operational Headquarters of Democratic Forces<sup>10</sup> in order to formulate and promote among Belarusians a joint position on the "referendum". They denounced the "referendum" and asked supporters in Belarus to express their disagreement<sup>11</sup> by the method that does not breach the law, namely, by showing up to the polling stations but turning ballot papers invalid by filling them in an unrecognised manner. Furthermore, they also called for a form of mass demonstrations — to show up at the same hour, at 14.00, by polling stations (usually, organised in schools, colleges, and other public buildings).

The preparations for the referendum took place against the backdrop of what was back then presented as joint military exercises of Russia's and Belarus' armed forces, which raised concerns about the possibility of Russia's preparing for aggressive actions in Ukraine. These fears, unfortunately, came true in the most drastic form and scale, which many, of course, did not anticipate. In the early hours of the morning of February 24th, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, using the territory of Belarus as the base of its major assault toward Kyiv and other cities in the North and North-East of Ukraine. The Belarusian regime also permitted Russian forces to use the country's infrastructure and support service personnel (doctors, mechanics, etc.) facilitating this outrageous and openly imperialist campaign.

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<sup>6</sup> Formally, the new version of the constitution introduced a two-terms limit on the tenure of the president, which was absent from the previous version. However, the legalistic clause makes it possible to start the count or Lukashenka's terms in office after the current one expires, that is, in 2025. Furthermore, the constitution established a new "representative body", the so-called "All-Belarusian People's Assembly." This Assembly seeks to substitute in many instances the mechanism of direct democratic voting and, by this means, override democratic mechanisms of governance. The former president can become a lifelong member of the Security Council, which provides a mechanism for Lukashenka to stay in power after exiting the post of the president.

<sup>7</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-moscow-belarus-alexander-lukashenko-9f634ff4c13687cd9314648b6912c2b0>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/launchpad-russias-assault-ukraine-belarus-holds-referendum-renounce-non-nuclear-2022-02-27/>

<sup>9</sup> Association of anti-regime former security service officers. <https://bypol.org/en/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://rada.vision/demokraticheskie-sily-obedinyajutsya-v-operativnyi-shtab-na-vremya-referenduma>

<sup>11</sup> <https://d2vl587z6eumfr.cloudfront.net/>

## The Reaction of Tsikhanouskaya's Office to the War

From the very first hours of the war, Tsikhanouskaya's office took an explicitly anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian position. In addition, while acknowledging Belarus' participation as a co-aggressor country, Belarusian citizens (both those in Belarus and abroad) were portrayed as the hostages and victims of Lukashenka's and Putin's actions. Thus, the war became the turning point for taking a position on Putin's regime as an enemy of democratic Belarus allied with Lukashenka. This represented a U-turn compared to the neutral and even at times a Moscow-friendly position articulated by Tsikhanouskaya and other protest leaders in 2020. Tsikhanouskaya herself commented on this change explaining that calling Putin "wise" in 2020 was a way to diplomatically convince him not to intervene in the Belarusian events, and now she could openly call Putin an aggressor.<sup>12</sup>

Simultaneously, Lukashenka was represented not only as an oppressor of Belarusian citizens but as a traitor to the interest of Belarus and a threat to international security. Tsikhanouskaya released<sup>13</sup> her first address within hours after the war onset. In a short video, she mentioned all these major points. Later the same day, in another address,<sup>14</sup> Tsikhanouskaya reiterated all those positions and announced the creation of a so-called "transition cabinet." She described herself as the representative of the Belarusian people "on the basis of the powers given to me by the Belarusian people in the results of the presidential elections of 2020", as well as the guarantor of independence and national interests of the Republic of Belarus, still, falling short of proclaiming herself a president-elect. It took her nine more months – she did eventually call herself the "president-elect" in an opinion piece for Politico in November 2022.<sup>15</sup>

On February 24th, Tsikhanouskaya also appealed<sup>16</sup> to the Belarusian military personnel, calling them not to comply with the illegal orders. She called for the mass civic mobilisation planned on the day of the referendum, February 27th, to become protests against the war. Subsequently, she released appeals to continue these mass actions on the following days as well as to engage into strikes and non-collaboration with the regime (e.g., withdrawing money from bank accounts). Tsikhanouskaya also announced the establishment of the Anti-War Movement.<sup>17</sup> However, although there were a number of demonstrations against the war starting from its first day across Belarus and hundreds of people were detained, a mass large-scale anti-war protest movement, whose scale could be compared to the 2020 events, did not materialise. The dynamic of the anti-war protests will be described later in the report. The initiative of the Anti-War Movement basically faded away by mid-summer.<sup>18</sup>

After the anti-war movement inside Belarus did not sustain, Tsikhanouskaya's Office focused on the work with the Belarusians abroad in attempts to lobby for refugee and migrant rights and against legal and societal discrimination of Belarusian citizens, focusing at first on visas and residence permit issues. They were also engaged in the issues of humanitarian help to people in Ukraine and refugees (including Belarusians who fled the war) and assistance to the Belarusian volunteer-fighter units (especially, via BySol<sup>19</sup>).

As described above, Tsikhanouskaya and her Office continued to be the major political force which also coordinated and allied with other political agents, civil initiatives, activists, and media on the issues of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, there was a mounting criticism against Tsikhanouskaya's office for their non-transparency, limited

<sup>12</sup> <https://t.me/tsikhanouskaya/2525>

<sup>13</sup> <https://t.me/tsikhanouskaya/2280>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRMoXE0wj18>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/sviatlana-tsikhanouskaya-belarus-opposition-leader-democracy-elections-alexander-lukashenko-vladimir-putin-russia-ukraine/>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdmxQL\\_frlI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdmxQL_frlI)

<sup>17</sup> <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/b66f8091f11bb20.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://t.me/belplatform/890>

<sup>19</sup> A charitable foundation supporting repressed and victimised Belarusians. See <https://bysol.org/en/about/>

results of their activity, and the lack of an adequate strategy with a clear plan for achieving the declared objectives, i.e., removing Lukashenka from power and facilitating the end of the war (and, of course, Belarus' involvement in it). Furthermore, the onset of the war came to be used as additional evidence for suggesting the erroneousness of the strategy of Tsikhanoukaya's Office after the elections in 2020 and the alleged ineffectiveness of peaceful protest, in principle. Such sentiments were spreading among some participants of the Belarusian oppositional movement, as well as foreign players (including from Ukraine). This increased pressure for reshaping the cabinet's strategy. In general, the change of the situation with the war in Ukraine further exacerbated the already serious challenges to the ability of the organised oppositional movement in exile to develop adequate strategies of action and remain relevant to Belarusian citizens.

Moreover, their international position also became more difficult. Importantly, the Ukrainian government never acknowledged Tsikhanoukaya as the legitimate representative of the Belarusian people and all the top officials, including president Volodymyr Zelensky, avoided personal meetings with her. The involvement of Belarus in the aggression has cast a long shadow both on ordinary Belarusians abroad and those who claim to be their political representatives. In an attempt to reconsolidate and unite organised democratic forces in exile and strengthen their perceived legitimacy and representativeness, democratic forces organised a large joint conference of different democratic initiatives and associations — "New Belarus" that took place on August 8-9 2022 marking the biennial anniversary of the Belarusian elections. During this conference, Tsikhanoukaya's Office and their allies announced the establishment of the United Transition Cabinet of Belarus (UTCB).

### **The United Transition Cabinet of Belarus and the Evolution of the Organised Democratic Movement in Exile**

The composition of the Cabinet in many ways reflects the reaction to the criticism and attempts to develop a more adequate response to the current situation. The Cabinet is headed by Tsikhanoukaya; initially it included 4 other members and subsequently was expanded to nine participants<sup>20</sup>. From the very beginning, there were two representatives of the so-called "security forces block" ("*silovoy blok*") of the oppositional movement: Aliaksandr Azarau, a former member of internal security forces and the head of ByPol, leading the so-called "Law and Order" direction, and Valery Sakhashchyk, a former senior military officer, leading the Defence and National Security direction. Remarkably, such figures were absent in the Coordination Council formed in 2020.

As such, the associations of the representatives of the security forces were relatively late-comers within the organised opposition movement. Initially, the attempts to engage with the representatives of state security forces were represented by the initiatives<sup>21</sup> that sought to encourage, first of all, the police personnel not to comply with unlawful orders and, if necessary, quit their jobs. To this end, these initiatives offered help with re-qualification and finding work in another sphere (first of all, IT). At the beginning of November 2020, the BySol-associated initiative "handed over" its responsibilities to the newly formed ByPol, which took charge of dealing with all issues related to the security forces. ByPol was initially formed in October 2020<sup>22</sup> as a union of the (former) representatives of the security forces who took the side of the oppositional movement and left Belarus. ByPol was formed under the auspices of Tsikhanoukaya's Office. In public, the initiative has been represented by roughly a dozen former middle-ranked

<sup>20</sup> One of the initial members, Tatsiana Zaretskaya, resigned in the aftermath of a reputation-related scandal. The composition of the Cabinet also expanded and included new members after August 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Initially, Mikita Mikado launched the initiative "Protect Belarus" but after several weeks closed it after several of his company's employees were imprisoned (taken hostages) by the regime. In order to take up this task, under the umbrella of BySol, there was launched a spin-off initiative curated by Yaraslau Likhacheuski that offered similar support to those who wanted to leave the service <https://isans.org/analysis-en/belarus-review-daily/belarus-review-daily-september-20-2020.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://bypol.org/en/>

police officers with the headquarters in Warsaw, Poland. The leadership and the composition of this “core” team has been changing over the past two and a half years and, currently, the organisation is headed by Aliaksandr Azarau.

ByPol has been allegedly pursuing several main directions in its activities: 1) the documentation of the crimes committed by the Belarusian forces against citizens in the context of the repression (with an idea of using for the subsequent prosecution in court); 2) establishing a network of agents within the Belarusian security forces; 3) launching a network for supposedly triggering and coordinating popular mobilisation “Pieramoha” (Victory); 4) releasing media materials that exposed the mischief behaviour and crimes of the Belarusian state security forces. On December 1, 2020, Tsikhanouskaya announced the launch of the “United book of the registration of crimes” operated by ByPol.<sup>23</sup>

Being composed of former police officers with no involvement of “civil” participants, the organisation often professes the secrecy of a significant part of their activities and plans (citing security requirements). This seems to be informed by the logic of their professional experience of police work. In the absence of adequate power and resources to investigate and prosecute crimes, as the time passed by, the efficacy and relevance of such activities could become insignificant. The outbreak of the full-scale war and the involvement of Belarus gave a new, strong impetus to ByPol. Still, as the organisation focused on police forces, there emerged a strong demand for the initiatives and figures within the Belarusian organised opposition that would work on the issue of the armed forces.

This demand was embodied in the figure of Valery Sakhshchyk. Sakhshchyk has become a widely known public figure associated with the opposition and anti-war movement after he recorded a video-address<sup>24</sup> to the Belarusian military personnel on February 27th calling upon them not to participate in the war against Ukraine and not to obey criminal orders, if they are made. Sakhshchyk served in airborne assault forces in the Soviet and then the Belarusian army until he quit the military in 2002 in the rank of lieutenant colonel and the capacity of the commander of the 38th Separate Guards Air Assault Brigade. He became the most high-ranking representative of the security forces who joined the leadership of the organised opposition.

Together with the prominent presence of the figures related to the security forces in the UTCB, there was an apparent change in the position regarding the means of the protest and resistance. Importantly, the first goal identified in the Declaration on the Goals and Values of the Belarusian Democratic Forces,<sup>25</sup> which was accepted by the participants of the conference “New Belarus,” was the “liberation of Belarus from the presence on its territory of the military forces of a foreign power — the Russian Federation, and the ban on the presence of foreign troops on the country’s territory.” By this means, this Declaration expressed intention not only to bring to an end Belarus’ involvement in the war on Russia’s side but also reverse the outcomes of the February “referendum.” Furthermore, there was also a drastic change in the vision of the means with which the organised opposition aimed to pursue its goals.

As noted by political commentator Artyom Shraibman,<sup>26</sup> if, in 2020, the calls for using forceful means to remove the regime from power were marginal, in two years, they have become mainstream. He even suggested that “the idea of peaceful protest was conceptually laid to rest among democratic forces.” Elsewhere, Shraibman further explained<sup>27</sup> that, at least at the level of the leadership of the democratic movement, there is an acceptance of the idea of taking power using forceful means as a “normality” which was unthinkable two years ago, when all leading figures explicitly distanced

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<sup>23</sup> <https://ekrp.org/ekrp/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyazRoW57c8>

<sup>25</sup> <https://conferencenewbelarus.org/declaracija>

<sup>26</sup> <https://t.me/shraibman/372>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8VqgsppEZM>

themselves from using violence in any form. This tendency was described as the “radicalisation of opposition” first of all, in its rhetoric.<sup>28</sup>

Such a change in the organised opposition movement in exile led by Tsikhanouskaya reflects their attempt to respond to the situation of the war as well as to the expectations of their constituents. The latter are most vocally represented by more engaged participants of the protest movement, many of whom are also currently abroad and who can be identified with the core base of the protests. Still, this “protest core base” that takes a strong oppositional stance is significantly narrower than the 2020 broad pro-democratic coalition. While the calls for forceful means of resistance, especially, in response to the criminal violence of the Belarusian security forces, already gained traction after the large peaceful demonstrations were suppressed by repression and many pointed to the “peacefulness” as the cause of the defeat, the war in Ukraine only exacerbated these sentiments. It is not clear, however, to what extent this sentiment is popular in the wider Belarusian society as a whole. Still, the available estimates suggest that there is strong support for the idea of removing Lukashenka from power by force among those who can be identified as the strong opponents of the regime.<sup>29</sup>

Along with the telling composition of the UTCB, there was also a change in the focus of the activities of the organisations and initiatives that are part of the organised movement. In particular, the war in Ukraine and possible engagement of the Belarusian army became one of the focuses of ByPol. The main objectives of Valery Sakhshchychk as the head of the Defence and National Security Unit were formulated as the coordination with the units of Belarusian volunteer-fighters in Ukraine and providing them with diverse assistance. While the UTCB has closer ties with the volunteer-fighting unit “Pahonia,” the major armed unit — Kastus Kalinouski Regiment (KKR) — preserves its neutrality and distances itself from the current organisations of the democratic opposition. Nevertheless, there is still some assistance provided through the structures of these political organisations to the volunteers.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Sakhshchychk speaks about preserving certain contacts within the current Belarusian military and claims that large sections of the army are against the war in Ukraine. He even suggested that,<sup>31</sup> in February 2022, Lukashenka might have attempted to involve the Belarusian army into the war but did not succeed due to the lack of morale and motivation to engage in this conflict without clear reasons. It should be noted that, while this suggestion has been independently reiterated by many commentators in Belarus and Ukraine, there is no strong corroborating evidence publicly available.

Both ByPol and Sakhshchychk launched initiatives<sup>32</sup> aimed at providing some form of military training for Belarusian émigrés in the EU (also in the context of competition with the activities of the KKR). The ByPol’s initiative aims at recruiting and training paramilitary groups of Belarusians in diaspora, as part of their “Pieramoha” (“victory”) plan. Azarau claims that more than 600 Belarusians went through the military training.<sup>33</sup> Most recently, a group of ByPol trainees joined the KKR to form a new sub-unit,<sup>34</sup> which signifies a possible start of a new form of potential cooperation between these different forces. On the other hand, “Paspalitaie rushenne”, a “national sport-education organisation” initiated by Sakhshchychk, aims to unite diaspora Belarusians in regional units with the purpose of providing them with patriotic education, sport, and

<sup>28</sup> Pavel Slunkin, Artyom Shraibman, Philipp Bikanau, Henadz Korshunau, Kateryna Bornukova, and Lev Lvovskiy, *Belarus Change Tracker. June–August 2022* (September 2022), p. 12.  
<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19563.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Slunkin, Shraibman, Bikanau, Korshunau, Bornukova, and Lvovskiy, *Belarus Change Tracker. June–August 2022*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>30</sup> <https://kalinouski.org/news/news-2022-05-30-1515/>

<sup>31</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=2410&v=MXrXcVXMI\\_0&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=2410&v=MXrXcVXMI_0&feature=youtu.be)

<sup>32</sup> <https://malanka.media/news/19022>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5p9z9w854fg>

<sup>34</sup> <https://t.me/belwarriors/2363>

military training.<sup>35</sup> In February 2023, both initiatives seem to have united<sup>36</sup> under the guise of “Paspalitae rushenne” to form an independent sports-patriotic organisation of Belarusian volunteers outside of Belarus.<sup>37</sup> Notably, the organisers claim to have good relations with the “security wing” of the political forces in Belarusian opposition movement: ByPol, Sakhashchyk, Volnaya Belarus,<sup>38</sup> the KKR, CyberPartizans etc.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, the representatives of the Cabinet hint at the existence of unofficial but systematic contacts with the representatives of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). Most recently, Sakhashchyk published his recent selfie-picture with the Head of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, general Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Later, however, Sakhashchyk dismissed the suggestions that these photos signalled the achievement of some agreement between the UTCB and AFU. Still, he suggests that they are involved in the process of organising another military unit in close coordination with AFU, which is different from those currently existing.

Despite the radicalization of the rhetoric, it is not clear whether the UTCB has any actual ability to organise or foster such forms of struggle, either with the units in Ukraine or abroad. Furthermore, the parallel movement, which represents both an expression and a factor of the growing radicalisation of the core of the Belarusian protest, is the creation and the activities of the units of Belarusian volunteering fighters. While, as mentioned above, they tend to distance themselves from the leadership of the organised democratic opposition, they explicitly say that, after the victory of Ukraine in the ongoing war, their main objective is the “liberation of Belarus.” These units have already become influential political players. If, initially, they were ostensibly distancing themselves from organised political forces, recently, they have started positioning themselves as political subjects<sup>40</sup> in their own rights and also made some public gestures towards aligning with rather radical alternative political figures (i.e., Zianon Pazniak and Dzmitry Shchyhelski) from the traditional, nationalist wing of the opposition. Their activity and dynamic will be described in the respective section of this report.

Along with the change in the approach to the methods of struggle against the regime, the war also further exacerbated some tendencies in the evolution of the organised democratic movement in exile that emerged already in late 2020. There has been an increasing salience of what can be identified as the “national” agenda. During the largest scale of the protests, the declared objectives of the movement were purposefully kept clear and minimalistic: the termination of violence, freedom for political prisoners, and new, free, and fair elections. Even though the white-red-white colours of the original national flag became the main symbol of the protest, they were not exclusionary and often were side by side with the official red-green banners. The language of most public leaders and demonstrators was Russian. The issues of the Belarusian national culture and language were largely outside the mainstream protest agenda, though some groups aligning with the traditional opposition always kept these issues at the top of their demands.

However, with the suppression of the protests, imprisonment of leaders, the regime staying in power due to the explicit support of Russia and the exile of the major opposition centre, the impact and visibility of the traditional oppositional groups increased. Simultaneously, Tsikhanouskaya used the Belarusian language more and more frequently in her public speeches. Her first address after the start of the war was also in Belarusian. The need for a revival of national culture and identity, which were stifled by Lukashenka’s regime, became an important theme of the political discussion.

<sup>35</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/23060.html>

<sup>36</sup> <https://t.me/byopol/591>

<sup>37</sup> <https://rushennie.org/about-us/>

<sup>38</sup> Political initiative of Zianon Pazniak <https://www.bns-volnayabelarus.org/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://rushennie.org/partners/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/1880721/komandir-polka-kastusia-kalinovskogo-ob-ofise-svetlany-tikhanovskoi-im-nado-nas-priznat>

Russia's invasion of Ukraine further boosted the idea of the necessity to dismantle Russia's cultural hegemony, which was explicitly involved as the justification and the means of Russia's aggression. Now, disassociating from the aggressor country became an important issue, as the tendency among Belarusian oppositional movement mirrored the tendencies in Ukraine, though on a smaller scale. Tellingly, the "Declaration about the goals and values of the Belarusian Democratic Forces" adopted in August 2022 listed the development of national identity as the second most defining value of the movement.<sup>41</sup>

This resurgence of the national agenda is obviously linked to the change of the officially declared position of the Belarusian democratic movement toward Russia and taking an explicitly anti-Putin stance. Such a change in the public position was done not only by Tsikhanouskaya, who, as described above, still explained her initial Russia-friendly rhetoric as a form of appeasement that had been conceived as a means of mitigating the risks of the Russian aggression. The shift occurred even for such figures as Valery and Veranika Tsapkala, who used to express strong pro-Russian views and even initially fled to Moscow from persecution in Belarus. After the invasion started, however, Valery Tsapkala denounced Russia's attack<sup>42</sup> and later even suggested that the war could expedite the victory of the democratic forces in Belarus.<sup>43</sup> He also expressed support for the Belarusian volunteer fighters. The representatives of the organised democratic forces in exile also champion the idea about the necessity to recognize the difference in the responsibility of Belarusian and Russian citizens. They justify this with the argument that Putin's regime still enjoys popular support, while Lukashenka usurped power, betrayed Belarus' national interests, and does not represent Belarusian citizens, hence, they should not be held liable for the dictator's actions.

The leaders of the organised democratic opposition in exile also tend to speak about the "anti-war" sentiment among Belarusian society. However, as the available results of public opinion surveys show, the situation is more complex. Furthermore, as also described above, initially there were some expectations that the war and Belarus' involvement in it may function as a possible trigger for reviving mass protests. Indeed, the breakout of the war that coincided with the "constitutional referendum" witnessed the largest mass protests in more than a year. However, their scale did not achieve the level of 2020, and they were swiftly suppressed. We will describe this in more detail in the next section on the reaction of the Belarusian population to the war.

While we have focused predominantly on the reactions of the political leaders of the organised Belarusian oppositional movement in exile, it is important to underline that basically all civil organisations and initiatives as well as individual activists who identified with the Belarusian democratic movement took an explicitly pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian stance. Moreover, they reoriented a substantial part of their activities toward assistance to the people in Ukraine and refugees. BySol,<sup>44</sup> which was initially created to support those affected by repressions and assistance with relocation, started gathering and sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Well-known Belarusian protest activist Anton Matolka founded the project "Belaruski Hajun" which collects and publishes data on the movement of military equipment and personnel on the territory of Belarus. An explicitly pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian position in the context of the war was taken by all major media outlets associated with the opposition movement, including the most influential Telegram channels. All this has indeed created a consolidated pro-Ukrainian position on Russia's war among the representatives of organised democratic movement, most of whom are in exile.

<sup>41</sup> <https://conferencenewbelarus.org/declaracija>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CjKwWEoh8o>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/valerij-cepkalo-vojna-v-ukraine-priblizhaet-pobedu-demsil-v-belarusi/a-61600142>

<sup>44</sup> Some of the founders of BySol were involved in gathering humanitarian aid in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict starting from 2014.

All in all, while the shift towards hostility to Russia as a geopolitical actor might have been expected given the relationship between Putin's imperialism and the authoritarian crackdown in Belarus, it should still be acknowledged that there was a significant evolution of the democratic movement on this question. In 2020, for example, many of those participating in Belarus when asked about their reliance on the peaceful protest sometimes referred to "Maidan" (and the subsequent Russian violation of Ukraine's sovereignty in Crimea and Donbass) as the negative example of violence, which they would prefer to avoid in the transition of power in their country. Currently, it seems that, among the Belarusian organised oppositional movement, the "Ukrainian example" emerges as a model that should be followed, supplanting earlier references to non-violent Polish *Solidarność* or the Velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia. Now, one can observe wider acceptance of the inevitability of a certain degree of violence, a greater role of the national agenda (or indeed nationalism) as a consolidating force, as well as perceiving democratisation struggle in Belarus as intrinsically connected to the anti-imperial struggle against Russia.

In such a turnaround, many distinctive aspects of the Belarusian democratic movement, as it emerged in 2020 being largely civil-driven in its spirit,<sup>45</sup> are increasingly downplayed and transformed into a rather conventional model of a national-liberation movement. Nevertheless, again, this transformation occurred within the narrower circles of organised opposition and core-base protest groups. It is not clear whether such an agenda will be able to consolidate a mass movement comparable in scale to the one in 2020, especially, considering that back then, protests were not induced or inspired by political leaders. In the next section, we will describe the popular reactions and response to the war in Belarusian society.

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<sup>45</sup><https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/11/17/in-belarus-national-solidarity-not-nationalism-leads-the-day/>

## The Reaction and Response to the War of Belarusian Society: The Anti-War Protests in Belarus

The date February 27th was announced in advance as the date of popular mobilisation against the “referendum” by the organised democratic forces. The breakout of the war, however, forced the leaders of the movement to call for a joint agenda. The Operational Headquarters of Democratic Forces released an address<sup>46</sup> that reiterated Tsikhanouskaya’s statement about assuming the function of “the representative of the Belarusian people” and called for protests against the war and against the referendum. Thus, there was a sense of counting on the day of the referendum as the decisive point of mass mobilisation.

There were no mass actions in the first days of the war. On February 27th, following Tsikhanouskaya’s call to turn up to the voting stations at 14.00, there were some queues and crowding<sup>47</sup> around schools and other voting locations across the country. Already at that stage, the police started detentions. The Telegram channels also started publishing the photos of “invalidated” ballots that often contained anti-war and anti-Russian slogans.

Subsequently, Tsikhanouskaya called on people to gather by the Military Headquarters<sup>48</sup> in Minsk and at the central squares in other cities. There was indeed a gathering of hundreds of people by the headquarters as the crowd was chanting “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to Heroes,” “No to War,” and other slogans.<sup>49</sup> Then, protesters moved to the central locations of the city (like Nyamiha<sup>50</sup>) and participated in several marches<sup>51</sup> across the streets of the capital.

Minsk was not the only protest spot,<sup>52</sup> as similar mass gatherings took place across the country: from regional centres<sup>53</sup> to smaller towns.<sup>54</sup> In the absence of independent media operating on the ground in Belarus, it is impossible to estimate the numbers of people who were participating. All these actions were accompanied by mass violent detentions. As a result, the total number of people detained on this day was 800.<sup>55</sup> Tsikhanouskaya called for continuing protests. The next day, some activities also took place, but at a significantly narrower scale. The number of detainees comprised at least 61 persons.<sup>56</sup> This was, in fact, the end of mass anti-war demonstrations. While this was the most significant mass mobilisation in a year and a half, it still did not manage to reach the scale of the election protests of 2020 and waned soon. Nevertheless, in relative terms (i.e., per capita), more people were detained in Belarus in the course of the anti-war mass protests than in Russia. There, the main protests occurred in the first days of the war and the OVD-Info assessed the number of detainees at 6443 people.<sup>57</sup>

The failure of mass protests can be explained with reference to several circumstances. There is an obvious and powerful factor of violent repressions against participants – the high numbers of detainees further confirm its impact. The repressive police actions

<sup>46</sup> <https://rada.vision/zavavlenie-operativnogo-shtaba-demokraticeskikh-sil>

<sup>47</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/22103](https://t.me/nexta_tv/22103)

<sup>48</sup> <https://t.me/tsikhanouskaya/2292>

<sup>49</sup> [https://t.me/zerkalo\\_io/38017](https://t.me/zerkalo_io/38017)

<sup>50</sup> [https://t.me/zerkalo\\_io/38038](https://t.me/zerkalo_io/38038)

<sup>51</sup> [https://t.me/nexta\\_tv/22163](https://t.me/nexta_tv/22163)

<sup>52</sup> [https://t.me/zerkalo\\_io/37991](https://t.me/zerkalo_io/37991)

<sup>53</sup> [https://t.me/zerkalo\\_io/37986](https://t.me/zerkalo_io/37986)

<sup>54</sup> [https://t.me/zerkalo\\_io/37996](https://t.me/zerkalo_io/37996)

<sup>55</sup> [https://t.me/zerkalo\\_io/38162](https://t.me/zerkalo_io/38162)

<sup>56</sup> [https://t.me/zerkalo\\_io/38330](https://t.me/zerkalo_io/38330)

<sup>57</sup> [https://t.me/zerkalo\\_io/38282](https://t.me/zerkalo_io/38282); Subsequently, the current number displayed on the OVD-Info website increased to 19478 as it counts all people detained on the grounds of the war-related actions since February 2022.

[https://ovdinfo.org/?gclid=CjwKCAiAgvKQBhBbEiwAaPOw3Bc361qvHERm4gSq8jtTkWV1e8IT8v14ck4Yz1D6lIg9BdBVl4gahxoC4VYQAvD\\_BwE](https://ovdinfo.org/?gclid=CjwKCAiAgvKQBhBbEiwAaPOw3Bc361qvHERm4gSq8jtTkWV1e8IT8v14ck4Yz1D6lIg9BdBVl4gahxoC4VYQAvD_BwE)

alone, however, cannot explain the relative weakness of protests as, after all, the largest demonstrations in 2020 took place after three days and nights of unprecedented violence.

There seems to be a widespread apathy and disillusionment in mass (peaceful) protests as the form of political action in Belarusian society. The failure to defend the results of the 2020 elections and Lukashenka's ability to retain power have caused a general demoralisation among the participants of protests. Many preferred to distance themselves from politics and return to "life as usual."

However, the organised opposition movement in exile could also have contributed to such demobilisation and mass disengagement from direct political action. From the very beginning, those leaders who found themselves in exile encountered an ethical dilemma about the calls that they can make toward the citizens in Belarus who face security risks. First of all, this was the case for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who could in fact claim the status of the president-elect and chose not to do so. She, however, has systematically taken an extremely cautious position of "expressing her support for" protests rather than explicitly calling for such actions.

While refraining from active involvement in the events inside Belarus as a power contestant, Tsikhanouskaya's Office focused on international activity of establishing contacts with foreign governments and lobbying for the sanctions against the illegitimate regime.<sup>58</sup> These pursuits were also presented as an efficient way to remove Lukashenka from power without unnecessary human suffering by blocking and exhausting the sources of revenues. While Tsikhanouskaya's activity indeed gathered substantial publicity and visibility, the scale of the sanctions imposed by the Western countries on Belarus in 2020<sup>59</sup> did not substantially exceed the level of the sanctions after the elections in 2010.<sup>60</sup> Many foreign leaders seemed to be wary of what they saw as a possibility of pushing Lukashenka into "Putin's arms." Simultaneously, while the numbers at the rallies dwindled and the security forces escalated violent suppression, the significance of mass demonstrations was downplayed and their efficiency questioned. Franak Viačorka, the principal advisor of Tsikhanouskaya and a representative of "traditional opposition," even explicitly admitted<sup>61</sup> that initially he did not believe in mass actions as efficient means of political struggle against Lukashenka's regime and this disposition appears to be deeply internalised.

In parallel, there was a popular idea that the protests should not be constant but should take place at an advantageous moment with a favourable constellation of factors that would guarantee success. Meanwhile, before the conditions are favourable enough, there seems to be no point in mass actions. This idea managed to enter mainstream thinking and informed, for instance, the so-called "Pieramoha" (Victory) plan launched by ByPol. The concept of the latter initiative implies the formation of a network of participants who are ready for decisive actions and will follow the plan, which will be activated when an appropriate moment comes. However, neither the war nor the referendum became such triggers.

There was even an announcement of the termination of the protests for the winter due to the bad weather, with a suggestion that the protest movement will resume in spring 2021. It, however, never did; after the loss of the momentum in 2020, the relaunch of the protests never took place. While initially many of the groups of the protest-core embraced the idea that the international sanctions can work as effective means against the regime, currently, it seems that the idea of "forceful action" as the only effective

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<sup>58</sup> It is worth noting that the idea of imposing strict sanctions on Belarus as the way of political struggle is not a consensus among the democratic movement, even though it is supported by a large share of the protest core. For instance, Babaryka's team took a stand against the sanctions as they insist that these are primarily ordinary people who suffer and not the regime and the security apparatus.

<sup>59</sup> Before the forced landing of the Ryanair plane, the "migration" crisis on the EU-Belarus border, and the war itself.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/novyje-sankcii-protiv-belarusi-na-chto-oni-povlijajut/a-57956707>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRl4x6Ac0jo>

means of protest also reflects the general disillusionment of the failure of 2020-2021 movement, as well as the unwillingness to engage in mass actions. The latter are largely viewed as a self-defeating strategy and pointless risk for participants. This general situation of disillusionment in mass political actions, as it took shape before the war, can help to understand why the anti-war movement did not take off. The weakness of the anti-war protests in Russia also could be a contributing demotivating factor. Furthermore, if the protest-core seems to take a pro-Ukrainian position in the conflict, the moods and attitudes in Belarusian society at large seem to be more ambiguous, which will be described in the next section.

## Popular Attitudes to the War: Opinion Polls Data on the Assessment of the War in Belarusian Society

There are several research projects which explore the attitudes of Belarusian citizens to the war as part of the general assessment of trends of public opinion in Belarusian society. These projects include:

- 1) The initiative What Belarusians Think,<sup>62</sup> which is organised by the Belarus Initiative of Chatham House in partnership with the Centre for New Ideas.
- 2) The Belarus Change Tracker, which is supported by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation<sup>63</sup> (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung).
- 3) The Belarusian Analytical Workroom (Belaruskaya Analiticheskaya Masterskaya), which is led by Andrei Vardamatski.

The Belarus Initiative of Chatham House emerged in the context of the oppositional movement and the revolutionary events of 2020, with the first wave of polls conducted in September 2020. The first report of the Belarusian Change Tracker,<sup>64</sup> which also contained a part on public opinion, was released after the outbreak of the war and covered the period February-May 2022. The Belarusian Analytical Workroom, which was launched in 2012 in Warsaw, has been conducting telephone surveys of public opinion in Belarus for a decade by now. In all surveys, the representativeness of results is supposed to be achieved by weighting the sample against socio-demographic quotas in the population.

### The Question of Reliability of Opinion Polls

Regarding the question of reliability of opinion polls under authoritarian regimes, doubts are often raised regarding whether such survey data can be trusted due to the “fear factor,” self-censorship, and drop-offs. Such assumptions, however, do not find actual confirmation in empirical findings<sup>65</sup> as demonstrated in a dedicated analysis by an independent research organisation Levada-Center in Russia.<sup>66</sup>

The question of the “fear factor” was also addressed with regard to the surveys conducted in Belarus, especially, considering that the scale of mass repression in the country is incomparably larger<sup>67</sup> than in Russia. Still, analysts associated with different survey projects agree that the “fear-factor” is real, but it does not distort the picture radically and can still be approximately assessed (in 2021, 8-9 per cent).<sup>68</sup> In addition, Artyom Shraibman pointed out that, despite all obvious limitations, it is still possible to follow the dynamics of the indicators in time and that the staggering difference with the survey results in Russian “cannot be simply ignored.”<sup>69</sup>

<sup>62</sup> <https://en.belaruspolls.org/>

<sup>63</sup> [https://www.fes.de/t3php/publ\\_int.php?f\\_ABC=belarus&f\\_RSW=weissrussland&logik=or&t\\_listen=x&sortierung=jab&t3titel=Belarus](https://www.fes.de/t3php/publ_int.php?f_ABC=belarus&f_RSW=weissrussland&logik=or&t_listen=x&sortierung=jab&t3titel=Belarus)

<sup>64</sup> Friedrich Ebert Foundation supported a number of reports on Belarus for years. The analytical materials were, however, predominantly concerned with international relations and other themes, not engaging directly with studying public opinion.

<sup>65</sup> <https://rus.delfi.ee/statja/120088820/mnenie-mozgi-u-lyudev-s-trudom-no-shevelyatsya-lev-gudkov-o-rossiyskom-obshchestvennom-mnenii-vo-vremya-voyny>

<sup>66</sup> Ekateriny Kozerenko, ‘On inaccessibility and interrupted interviews (O nedostizhimosti i prervannykh interv'yu)’ (November 2022). <https://www.levada.ru/2022/11/15/o-nedostizhimosti-i-prervannyh-intervyyu/>

<sup>67</sup> From 2020 to 2022, the total number of detained people in the context of the crackdown on the protests in Belarus comprised around 45,850. Considering Russia’s population of 143 million that would mean 655,300 detainees. There is also routine practice of torture during detentions and administrative arrests, which is not the case for Russia.

<https://spring96.org/ru/news/101195>

<https://spring96.org/ru/news/106328>

<https://spring96.org/ru/news/110468>

<sup>68</sup> <https://en.belaruspolls.org/articles/fear-factor>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUGzkoJmkTY>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUGzkoJmkTY>

All in all, it is obvious that opinion polls in Belarus are prone to significant challenges. Nevertheless, if treated cautiously and put into a broader perspective, their results are still instructive for following the dynamics of change as well as comparison with the surveys in Russia. Apart from the fear factor, it should be noted that, while the surveys are conducted repetitively during the year, the teams sometimes change the formulations of questions, which hinders the ability to trace the dynamic of attitudes. In addition, there is a certain lack of transparency regarding parts of the survey methodology when it comes to the construction of indicators and their interpretation, as well as the conditions and procedures of data collection.

### **The Popular Attitudes to the War**

In relation to Russia's war against Ukraine, there are two major aspects of this conflict in the way people in Belarus perceive it: firstly, the actions of Russia against Ukraine; and, secondly, the participation of the Belarusian state in it and, in particular, the prospects of the involvement of the Belarusian army. Despite the differences in research methodology and variations in the estimates, the results of all projects agree on the two main tendencies regarding the attitudes of Belarusian society toward the war: while the population remains split on the general attitude to Russia's aggression against Ukraine (with a trend toward a greater support for Ukraine), there is a society-wide consensus against the possibility of an immediate involvement of the Belarusian army in the conflict.

### **The General Attitudes to the War**

Regarding the attitudes to Russia's war against Ukraine, based on the available data, the population of Belarus seems to be split with a tendency toward greater support for Ukraine. According to the Chatham House surveys conducted in June and August 2022,<sup>70</sup> around 43-45 per cent of respondents (with access to the Internet) disapprove of Russia's war against Ukraine, 30-33 per cent tend to support actions of Russia, and about a quarter of respondents remain undecided. However, neither the spring wave of the survey (poll conducted in March 2022) nor the most recent one<sup>71</sup> (poll conducted in November 2022) contained direct questions about the attitudes to Russia's aggression. The last report offered the data on the attitude toward the mass mobilisation in Russia, which is somehow "inverted," - 42 per cent definitely or most likely supported it, while 34 per cent definitely or most likely did not support the partial mobilisation, and 24 per cent said that they were not sure.<sup>72</sup>

Chatham House's reports also link this divide in the attitudes to Russia's war in Ukraine to the patterns of media consumption with respect to different types of sources. The latter include Belarusian state media, Russian state media, Russian non-state media, Belarusian non-state media, and Ukrainian media. Report VIII suggests that while there is "no single leading source of information for Belarusians. Loyalty to different media is evenly distributed in Belarusian society"<sup>73</sup> and people tend to follow frequently and draw more on one type of media sources. The choice of the source of information strongly correlates with the opinions on the war. For instance, in March 2022, 81 per cent and 67 per cent of the audiences of Russian and Belarusian state media respectively believed that Russia would win.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, 53 per cent of the audience of Belarusian non-state media and 59 per cent among the audience of Ukrainian media

<sup>70</sup> Chatham House, *How Belarusians' views on the war have changed over six months* (September 2022) p. 5. [Chatham House - Belarus - XI.pdf](#)

<sup>71</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' media consumption, attitudes to mobilization and political identities* (December 2022). [Chatham House - Belarus - XIII.pdf](#)

<sup>72</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' media consumption, attitudes to mobilisation and political identities* (December 2022), p. 10

<sup>73</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine* (March 2022), p. 9. [Chatham House - Belarus - VIII - war.pdf](#)

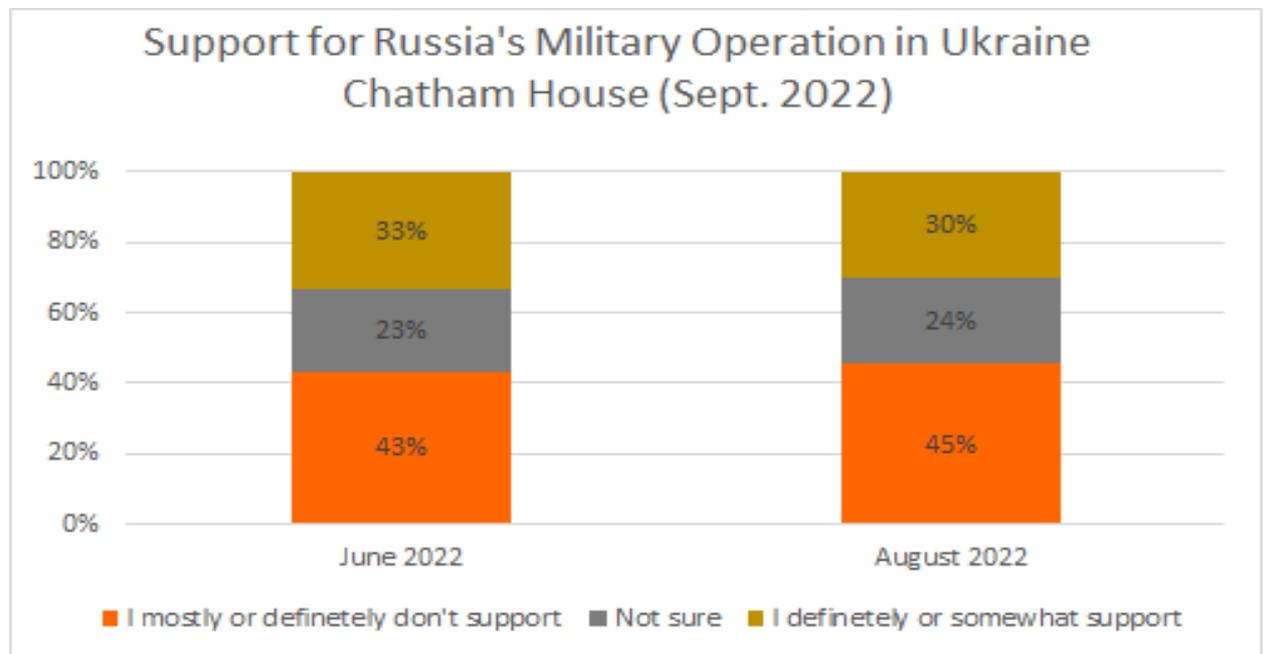
<sup>74</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine*, p. 10.

believed that Ukraine would prevail<sup>75</sup>. Remarkably, the opinion of users of Russian non-state media was somehow “in between”: 51 per cent believed in Russia’s victory.<sup>76</sup>

**Table 1. Support for Russia’s military operation in Ukraine**

	June 2022	August 2022
I definitely support it	14%	18%
I somewhat support it	19%	12%
Not sure	23%	24%
I mostly do not support it	8%	10%
I definitely do not support it	35%	35%

Source: Chatham House, How Belarusians’ views on the war have changed over six months (September 2022) p. 5



<sup>75</sup> *ibid.* p.10

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.* p.10

**Table 2. Attitude toward the partial mobilisation in Russia**

	<b>November 2022</b>
Definitely support it	28%
Most likely support it	14%
Not sure	24%
Most likely do not support it	20%
Definitely do not support it	14%

Source: *Chatham House, Belarusians' media consumption, attitudes to mobilisation and political identities (December 2022) p. 10*

The telephone survey conducted by the Belarusian Analytical Workroom has reported a similar split in the attitudes, characterised by a more pronounced polarisation. During the three waves of polls in March, May, and September, the rate of support for Russia's action in Ukraine comprised 42.7 per cent, 39.7 per cent, and 41.3 per cent correspondingly.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, the share of those disapproving Russia's aggression varied from 50.4 per cent to 51.4 per cent, to 47.3 per cent. The percent of those who were not sure about their assessment is significantly lower than in the data of Chatham House and comprised 5.8 per cent, 7.7 per cent, and 10.3 per cent respectively.

At the same time, there was a significant change in the share of people who sympathise with Ukraine. The Belarusian Analytical Workroom reported a drop from 50.3 per cent in May 2022 to 33.9 per cent in September 2022, while the sympathy to Russia increased from 21.1 per cent to 32 per cent. The reliability of this dynamic, however, was publicly questioned. For instance, Henadz Korshunau (the Belarus Change Tracker) pointed out<sup>78</sup> that the data conflicts with the assessments of Chatham House. Korshunau argues that the authors did not provide a sufficient explanation for what could account for such a significant change and, in addition, did not disclose some important details on methodology regarding the sampling and the timing of the data collection. One might add that the change is even more surprising, considering the fact that the indicator of (dis)approval of the actions of Russia did not change so dramatically.

While the assessments of different research projects vary and the teams that conduct them face obvious organisational challenges, which can affect the outcomes in terms of representativeness and reliability, they still allow us to conclude with a high level of certainty that Belarusian society remains divided in assessing the actions of Russian. This divide appears to correlate with the split of the audience between different media sources. It is worth mentioning that, while Belarusian state media in general line up with Russia's perspective, their rhetoric is less extreme and also political content occupies less time in the broadcasting of central channels. Meanwhile, Belarusian non-state media, while retaining a significant share of Belarusian audience, without exception, condemn Russia's aggression and take a pro-Ukrainian position.

The share of those disapproving the actions of Russia appears to be larger than the share of those who express some level of support. Furthermore, these rates of support are significantly lower than those registered in Russia. Levada Centre has been

<sup>77</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/23189.html>

<sup>78</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/23189.html>

reporting that the rates of support for the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine systematically exceed 70 per cent starting from the war's outbreak.<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, the share of those definitely or somewhat disapproving is around 20 per cent over the same period. The difference between Russia and Belarus is especially striking, when it comes to the opinion of Belarusians on the involvement of the country's army in the conflict (which is currently the case for Russia, as its army is fighting the war).

### **The Attitude Toward the Involvement of Belarus and the Participation of the Belarusian Armed Forces in the War**

The possibility of the participation of the Belarusian armed forces in the conflict is perceived by the Belarusian public as another distinctive question related to the ongoing war. The reports of all research initiatives agree that there seems to be a solid public consensus (across political and social divides) on the negative assessment of the possibility of the involvement of the Belarusian army in the conflict (of 80-85 per cent and higher).

There is, however, a caveat to understanding the way people approach this question, which is related to the general perception of the degree and forms of the current involvement of Belarus in the war. While, by providing its territory, infrastructure, and service personnel for the deployment of Russia's military forces, according to the international legal norms, Belarus is an official accomplice to Russia's aggression, there is no unanimity on this situation among the Belarusian population. According to the March survey of Chatham House,<sup>80</sup> when it comes to recognizing Belarus as an aggressor in this conflict, 54 per cent of respondents disagreed with this statement and 25 per cent were not sure, while only 22 per cent agreed. Furthermore, 39 per cent of respondents (including most supporters of the current regime) assumed that Belarus is not involved in the conflict and only 42 per cent considered that Belarus is involved in the war on the Russian side (19 per cent claimed that they were not sure).<sup>81</sup>

Analysts further explain these results by the impact of the media. Those who think that Belarus is not involved in the war tend to rely on the Belarusian and Russian state media. Meanwhile, the absolute majority of those who follow Belarusian non-state and Ukrainian media (82 per cent and 77 per cent accordingly) agreed that Belarus is involved on the Russian side.<sup>82</sup> The Belarusian Analytical Workroom offered similar assessments.<sup>83</sup> According to their data, the share of those who recognize Belarus as an accomplice in the conflict comprised 31-32.5 per cent and those who disagree with this – 60.4-62.9 per cent.

Still, Chatham House reports that the majority of informants (67 per cent) were against the Russian army shelling Ukraine from Belarus' territory and using the country's territory for aggression against Ukraine in general (52 per cent).<sup>84</sup> Only 8 and 16 per cent expressed their support on respective points.<sup>85</sup> The type of the media sources also strongly correlates with the answers to this as well as other questions as, among those who follow Belarusian non-state and Ukrainian media, more than 90 per cent are against shelling from the Belarusian territory and 85-91 per cent disapprove its use for waging the war.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the research shows that, in March 2022, there were widespread expectations of the worsening of the economic situation and other negative consequences related to the war due to international sanctions and the actions of the Belarusian regime.

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2022/12/23/konflikt-s-ukrainoi-otsenki-dekabrya-2022-goda/>

<sup>80</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine*, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine*, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine*, p. 12.

<sup>83</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/23189.html>

<sup>84</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine*, p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine*, p. 13.

Even while a significant share of the Belarusian population does not acknowledge its current involvement in the war, the absolute majority of respondents are against the possible participation of the Belarusian army on either side of the conflict. According to the Chatham House survey, from March to August, the share of those respondents who suggested that Belarus should enter the war on the Russian side varied between 3 per cent and 6 per cent and, on the Ukrainian side, from 1 per cent to 4 per cent.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, when asked about their attitude towards the Belarusian army not following the orders and laying down their arms in case they are sent to Ukraine, in August 2022, 49 per cent definitely or rather approve of this, 26 per cent were not sure, and 26 per cent would definitely or rather disapprove of such actions.<sup>88</sup>

A similar disapproval of the participation of the Belarusian army in the conflict is also registered by the Belarus Change Tracker. Their December report estimated that roughly 89 per cent of their respondents assumed that the country's armed forces should not take part in the war on either side.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, these views are dominant across the political spectrum. Among those whom the research identifies as "ardent supporters" of the regime, 86 per cent endorse non-involvement of the Belarusian army on either side. In a similar vein, the Belarusian Analytical Workroom reports the share of their respondents who negatively assess the possibility of Belarusian army's involvement to vary within a range of 80 to 85 per cent.<sup>90</sup>

All in all, on the one hand, Belarusians appear to be split on the assessment of Russia's aggression against Ukraine – as the available estimates suggest that around 30 per cent of the urban population express some degree of support for Russia's action. Still, the disapproval of Russia's aggression tends to prevail and strongly dominates in the section of society that remains in opposition to Lukashenka's regime. Furthermore, the majority appears to fail to acknowledge Belarus' current participation in the conflict. Nevertheless, there is a strong consensus on the rejection of the involvement of the Belarusian army on either side of the conflict. The awareness of this consensus may act as a deterrent to the current regime against active involvement of the Belarusian Army in the conflict. Seen in the context with the very poor performance of the Russian military in the war against Ukraine, and the huge losses it has incurred, this public opinion environment provides the regime with a further disincentive to direct involvement. Making the Belarusian army participate in the war on the Russian side could well trigger scenarios that the regime is unable to control.

### **The Impact of the War on the Popular Attitude to Lukashenka's Regime**

At the same time, the impact of the war on the popular attitude to the current regime appears to be rather complex. On the one hand, the share of those approving of Russia's actions in Ukraine (around 30 per cent) appears to roughly correspond to the social base of the supporters of the regime and strongly linked to the consumption of Belarusian and Russian state-controlled media. On the other hand, there is no perfect overlap between these two groups, as there are segments of people who are against Lukashenka's regime but condone Russia's aggression and vice versa.

Such cleavages stem from the fact that pro-Russian sentiments have been traditionally very widespread in Belarusian society, which still largely persisted after the war outbreak,<sup>91</sup> and were apparent during the 2020 events. Positive popular attitudes to Russia are facilitated by the tightness of political, economic, social, and cultural ties with the country in the post-Soviet era, as well as influence of Russian state media in Belarusian traditional broadcasting. In this relationship, Russia plays a dominant role

<sup>87</sup> Chatham House, *How Belarusians' views on the war have changed over six months*, p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> Chatham House, *How Belarusians' views on the war have changed over six months*, p. 10.

<sup>89</sup> Pavel Slunkin, Artyom Shraibman, Philipp Bikanau, Henadz Korshunau, Kateryna Bornukova, and Lev Lvovskiy, *Belarus Change Tracker. September - November 2022* (December 2022), p. 22.

<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19853.pdf>

<sup>90</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/23189.html>

<sup>91</sup> Chatham House, *How Belarusians' views on the war have changed over six months*, p. 12.

and has considerable leverage to influence the situation in Belarus through various means. In particular, its state propaganda machine plays a key role in framing the conflict, its causes, and its course of development (including the military performance of the two sides).

However, there is a growing differentiation on the question of the Belarusian international position and alliances. Belarusians seem to be making their choices about their preferences in today's changed situation when a neutral position, so popular in 2020, has become less tenable. According to Chatham House, if, from September 2020 and throughout 2021, the share of those expressing preference for Belarus to be in a union with the EU and Russia simultaneously varied between 39-46 per cent, after the beginning of the war it dropped to 25 per cent. Simultaneously, the share of those who opt for the union with Russia increased from 29-32 per cent to 38 per cent and of those who would prefer the EU - from 8-13 per cent to 18 per cent.<sup>92</sup>

The persistence of this popular pro-Russian sentiment contrasts strongly with the reorientation of the organised opposition. During the 2020 revolution, all major forces tried to assert their commitment to neutrality regarding Belarus' international positioning and express their interest in the preservation of close beneficial ties with Russia. Currently, even those figures that were most pro-Russian, like Tsapkalas, condemned Russia's war along with Lukashenka's complicity and took an explicit stand against Russia's current political regime.

On the one hand, there were pessimistic popular expectations about the impact of the war on the country in general and individual lives. According to the Chatham House reports, throughout April-August 2022, more than 50 per cent of respondents expected at least some negative consequences and more than 30 per cent were undecided.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that Lukashenka's regime managed to use this situation to further quell and mitigate active dissent and deflate discontent, especially among more "neutral" parts of society. This was helped by the fact that the Belarusian army was not immediately involved in the war and, in the view of the majority, Belarus is not part of the conflict. This happens despite the fact that aspects of the country's sovereignty have been yielded to Russia and the economic downturn is continuing with no sign of improvement in the foreseeable future.

Artyom Shraibman<sup>94</sup> further suggests that people in Belarus tend to compare their current situation with that of people in Ukraine and Russia, while the war made economic issues seem less important. The Belarus Change Tracker reports a substantial increase in what they identify as "trust toward the authorities."<sup>95</sup> However, even if this assessment reflects the actual social dynamic of an increasing trust toward the regime, the data discussed above allow us to suggest that this situation seems to be hinging on Lukashenka's ability to avoid a more direct involvement of Belarus and its security forces in the Russian war against Ukraine. It should not be taken as a sign of Lukashenka's ability to reconsolidate power and regain support or be interpreted as indicative of a situation in which the regime held sufficient political capital for it to venture into such risky unpopular steps as entering the war on the Russian side

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<sup>92</sup> Chatham House, *Belarusians' media consumption, attitudes to mobilization and political identities*, p. 16.

<sup>93</sup> Chatham House, *How Belarusians' views on the war have changed over six months*, p. 6.

<sup>94</sup> Shraybman *otvetit: udary po Belarusi, myatezh v armii i strannyye shutki Lukashenko (Shraibman will reply: strikes on Belarus, rebellion in the army, and strange jokes of Lukashenka)*, (December 2022) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tQd0quym68>

<sup>95</sup> We do not provide the numerical estimates reported by the Belarus Change Tracker due to several considerations related to the consistency of provided estimates and the validity of the proposed indicators for assessing trust to the current regime in today's situation (as well as their interpretation).

## The Active Participation of Representatives of the Belarusian Opposition Movement in the War

### The Resistance to the War Inside Belarus: Partisan Movement and Monitoring Activities

The radicalisation of the core-base of the protests toward embracing the use of force as the means of struggle also found expression in the forms of the anti-war resistance. Perhaps the most prominent example of direct anti-war action in Belarus was the so-called “Rail war.” It should be mentioned that sabotage on the railway was already practised by anti-regime activists during the 2020-2021 protests.<sup>96</sup> At that time, the sabotage was limited to simple false triggering of the signal system by connecting two rails with metal wires, which temporarily disrupted train movement. However, even these acts triggered a strong response from the state – several activists were caught by the police and later sentenced for disruption of railway communication. It was also during the 2020 protests when the pro-democracy railway workers community emerged.<sup>97</sup> It was a part of a wider pro-democracy workers’ movement which attempted to organise a number of strikes in 2020. After the suppression of active protests, the community monitored and published information on the use of railways by the regime, including the movement of Russian military units in Belarus starting in Autumn 2021.

With the outbreak of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine several of the existing pro-democracy groups in Belarus mobilised to prevent or slow down movement of the Russian troops via Belarus to Ukraine. The main actors in this “Railway war” were the aforementioned Community of Railway workers, ByPol<sup>98</sup>, Cyberpartizans, and later “Busly Lyatsiats.” It should be noted, however, that the affiliation of activists who performed acts of sabotage is difficult to identify, since the information is often contradictory, incomplete, or not available at all.

The first information about railway sabotage was announced by ByPol as early as the 27th of February.<sup>99</sup> The organisation alleged that railway infrastructure was attacked as a part of ByPol’s “Pieramoha” plan. The acts of sabotage continued throughout February and March 2022. The main targets of attacks were the cabinets for signalling control equipment. The destruction of the automated system for rail traffic control allegedly forced the railway authorities to switch to manual mode, which significantly slowed down traffic or temporarily stopped it altogether. According to the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs, there were around 80 episodes of rail sabotage in February-April 2022.<sup>100</sup>

The government response was predictably harsh.<sup>101</sup> After the first incident, all the railway infrastructure came under increased police surveillance. Acts of sabotage on the railway were declared terrorist activity, though ByPol publicly declared that they chose the method of attack specifically to prevent human casualties. The KGB (the Belarusian national intelligence agency) and police units cracked down on possible saboteurs, purging many disloyal railway workers, and arresting several activists. In the end, 11 people were arrested and charged with terrorist activities. A group of activists was fired

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<sup>96</sup> <https://spring96.org/ru/news/100399>

<sup>97</sup> [https://t.me/belzhd\\_live](https://t.me/belzhd_live)

<sup>98</sup> At least, according to their claims.

<sup>99</sup> <https://t.me/bypol/460>

<sup>100</sup> <https://belsat.eu/news/28-12-2022-ad-vyveshvannya-stsvagou-da-rejkavaj-vajny-yak-belarusy-zmagalisya-u-2022-godze>

<sup>101</sup> <https://spring96.org/be/news/107238>

upon, with police wounding some during the arrest.<sup>102</sup> It is important to note, however, that it is usually impossible to verify whether arrested individuals actually committed any acts they are accused of, since the police and the KGB continue to use the Stalinist method of false confessions under torture, to inflate their “success rate”. Still, at least three of the arrested activists have already been sentenced to extremely harsh prison sentences of more than 20 years in prison.<sup>103</sup>

The acts of sabotage on the Belarusian railway stopped by April 2022 due to the increased government surveillance as well as the Russian retreat from Kyiv and Chernihiv regions. At the same time, the “Rail war” spread to Russia itself. In April 2022, Belarusian militant formation “Busly Liatsiats” belonging to the “Supratsiu” group took responsibility for attacking railway infrastructure in two Russian regions neighbouring Belarus – Smolensk and Bryansk,<sup>104</sup> and later in another six Russian regions.<sup>105</sup> As with any such acts, it is impossible to independently verify these claims and identify the group responsible for the attacks.

An important part of the “Rail war” was conducted in the digital sphere. Here the Belarusian hacktivist group “Cyberpartisans” played a central role. Cyberpartisans like the other actors of this chapter were formed in the wake of 2020 protests and engaged in cyberattacks against internet infrastructure of the regime. The group closely cooperated with disloyal people in the government institutions to gain access to critical systems and databases. Thus, Cyberpartisans were well-prepared to launch an attack on the online train infrastructure in the first week of the invasion.<sup>106</sup> The attack allegedly disrupted the automated systems of rail traffic control and forced the Belarusian Railways to operate in the manual mode at least temporarily.

It is also crucial to mention the cultural context of the “Rail war”. The term itself alludes to the history of Belarus during WWII. In Soviet mythology created around the war, Belarus was proclaimed to be a “Partisan Republic” for allegedly nation-wide popular anti-Nazi guerrilla movement. The Rail War was a prominent part of this mythology, which claimed that disruption of German rail logistics by Belarusian partisans contributed to Soviet victories in Stalingrad and Kursk. Thus, the discussion of “Rail War” of 2022 often included references to WWII, claiming that guerrilla war was in “Belarusian genes.” Actors claiming responsibility for the sabotage acts, called upon Belarusians to join the struggle against Russian invaders and live up to heroic deeds of their ancestors, to become “Grandchildren of Partisans.” These narratives are part of the broader debates and claim-making about the heritage of WWII on both sides, which draw on these legacies as the resource of moral authority and legitimacy.

The “Rail War” of 2022 attracted international attention and praise.<sup>107</sup> For example, the head of Ukrainian railways thanked “honest workers of Belarusian railways” who contributed to the breaking of the railway link between Belarus and Ukraine.<sup>108</sup> Then advisor to the Office of the President of Ukraine Oleksii Arestovych said that “I can say that these people are true heroes, they risked their health and life doing this.”<sup>109</sup> At the same time, when Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya mentioned that the Russian attack on Kyiv was stopped in part thanks to the effort of Belarusian saboteurs, many Ukrainians commentators were outraged accusing her of cynically overblowing the impact of the

<sup>102</sup> <https://novychas.online/hramadstva/silaviki-straljali-u-rejkavyh-partyzan-na-paraze>

<sup>103</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/29243.html>

<sup>104</sup> [https://t.me/busly\\_laciak/821](https://t.me/busly_laciak/821)

<sup>105</sup> [https://t.me/busly\\_laciak/826](https://t.me/busly_laciak/826)

<sup>106</sup> <https://t.me/cpartisans/702>

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/23/ukraine-belarus-railway-saboteurs-russia/>

<sup>108</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/11456.html>

<sup>109</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/13359.html>

Belarusian “Rail War”, while ignoring direct assistance to the Russian invasion provided by Belarus.<sup>110</sup>

It should be mentioned that the formations belonging to the “Supratsiu” group seem to gravitate towards the KKR. Cyberpartisans announced joining the KKR officially.<sup>111</sup> As for “Busly liatsiats”, their media presence implies that at least part of the activists joined the KKR ranks.

The most recent case of serious partisan sabotage inside Belarus occurred on the 26th February 2023. According to ByPol, participants of the “Pieramoha” plan damaged a Russian airborne early warning and control aircraft A-50 which was stationed at a Belarusian air base “Machulishchy”.<sup>112</sup> The initiative claimed that “Belarusians partisans” used amateur drones modified with explosives to damage the aircraft’s radar and avionics. Although the satellite images did not show direct evidence of the attack, the aircraft was indeed moved to a repair facility in Taganrog four days after the attack.<sup>113</sup> ByPol have also released a video from a reconnaissance flight of the drone, which confirmed that amateur drone indeed flew in and landed on a radar dish of A-50 unimpeded.<sup>114</sup> There has also been a wave of police search operations across the country and further stiffening of border control checks.

Another important Belarusian initiative which emerged with the outbreak of the war is the monitoring group “Bielaruski Hajun”.<sup>115</sup> The initiative group was launched by well-known Belarusian activist and media figure Anton Matolka, whose media “MotolkoPomogi”<sup>116</sup> played a significant role in informing and mobilising Belarusian protests of 2020-2021. “Belaruski Hajun” initiative, launched in early 2022, has set as its goal the monitoring of all movement of Russian and Belarusian troops in Belarus, recording rocket and aircraft launches. According to Matolka himself, the initiative received more than 33000 messages from around 10000 users in the first 6 weeks of the war.<sup>117</sup> It continues to work till this day, remaining the most cited and reliable military monitoring group inside Belarus, reaching more than 564,000 subscribers at the time of writing. It should be stressed that the Belarusian authorities declared the initiative an “extremist formation” and are actively persecuting its contributors.<sup>118</sup>

## **Belarusian volunteers on the Frontlines and their Role as a New Political Force in the Belarusian Democratic Movement**

Involvement of Belarusians in the Russo-Ukrainian war stretches back to the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbass in 2014. According to the authors of “Belorusskii Donbass,”<sup>119</sup> there were estimates of 1000 to 1500 Belarusians taking arms on both sides of the conflict, with approximately two thirds of them fighting for the Russian proxy forces of so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics.<sup>120</sup>

Belarusians fighting on the side of Ukraine joined several military, paramilitary, and militia formations that operated in the chaotic conditions of 2014-2015, among them

<sup>110</sup><https://ukraine.segodnya.ua/ukraine/neset-nesusvetnyuyu-purgu-kak-ukraincy-otreagirowali-na-skandalnoe-zavavlenie-tihanovskoy-1620509.html>

<sup>111</sup> <https://t.me/belwarriors/2199>

<sup>112</sup> <https://t.me/byopol/617>

<sup>113</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/33881.html>

<sup>114</sup> <https://t.me/byopol/622>

<sup>115</sup> [https://t.me/Hajun\\_BY](https://t.me/Hajun_BY)

<sup>116</sup> <https://t.me/motolkohelp>

<sup>117</sup> <https://dev.ua/ru/news/motolko-1649672545>

<sup>118</sup> <https://spring96.org/be/news/110069>

<sup>119</sup> “Belorusskii Donbass” (Kharkiv, Folio, 2020) is a book by Belarusian journalists Ihar Ilyash and Katsiaryna Andreeva on the involvement of Belarus and Belarusians in the Donbass war in 2014-2019. Katsiaryna Andreeva is a political prisoner in Belarus since 2020.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.* pp. 270-272

volunteer battalions “Donbass”, “Azov” and the Right Sector (“*Pravyi Sektor*”) Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, all of which actively welcomed foreign fighters. Belarusians fighting in the latter declared a formation of Tactical Group “Belarus” in August 2015, which became the only specifically Belarusian military formation during the war in the Donbass.<sup>121</sup> Although most of the Belarusian fighters in Ukraine chose to remain anonymous due to the fear of criminal persecution in Belarus, those known to the public came from different backgrounds: anti-regime activists including former political prisoners, football hooligans (mostly but not exclusively right-wing), and regular Belarusians who sympathised with Euromaidan protests and Ukraine in general.

Russia’s full-scale invasion reignited the movement of Belarusians fighting for Ukraine. As early as March 2022, former members of Tactical group “Belarus” and other prominent Belarusian volunteers from the Donbass war declared<sup>122</sup> the formation of *Kastuś Kalinoŭski*<sup>123</sup> battalion, which was envisaged to unite all Belarusians fighting for Ukraine. The battalion was later expanded into a regiment, thus dubbed *Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment* or the KKR. Many of the new recruits came from a wave of Belarusian political refugees to Ukraine and the EU who fled Belarus following the government crackdown on 2020–2021 protests. The KKR are subordinated to the Main Directorate of Intelligence of Ukraine’s Ministry of Defence.<sup>124</sup>

The group formally joined the AFU on the 25th of March 2022. This was a symbolic date as it is the unofficial Belarusian Freedom Day, celebrating the independence proclamation of Belarusian People’s Republic in 1918, which became a traditional occasion for pro-independence and anti-regime demonstrations in Belarus since the 1990s. The military oath taken by the volunteers on this day summarises the ideological position of the KKR: “Belarus ... we swear to liberate and protect you wherever we are [...] to fight till victory for your liberty, like our forefathers did against the horde-like oppression of the Muscovites ...”.<sup>125</sup> The oath included references to militant parts of the Belarusian national mythology from the Middle Ages to the protests of 2020. In many of the interviews, the commanders and regular fighters of the KKR confirmed that the ultimate goal of their struggle is armed liberation of Belarus from Lukashenka’s regime following the Ukrainian victory or, as per their official website, “Liberation of Belarus through the liberation of Ukraine.”<sup>126</sup>

The formation of the KKR received widespread support and media attention in the Belarusian anti-regime and pro-democracy movement. At the same time, the KKR from its initiation declared its own political agenda, which differed significantly from the configuration of the democratic movement post-2020. For instance, representatives of the KKR criticised and publicly refused to cooperate with BySol – one of the leading fundraising initiatives of the Belarusian democratic movement.<sup>127</sup> Even more notably is the KKR’s distrustful attitude towards the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus formed by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s Office in August 2022. The regiment stated that they failed to see any concrete plans for liberation of Belarus from “internal and external occupation” suggested by any political groups, and thus ignored calls for closer

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.* pp. 69-85

<sup>122</sup> <https://euroradio.fm/ru/belorusy-sozdali-batalon-imeni-kalinovskogo-dlya-oborony-kiyeva%20%20https://t.me/belwarriors/868>

<sup>123</sup> One of the leaders of anti-tsarist 1863 uprising (January Uprising) in the territories of Belarus and Lithuania. Author of the first Belarusian language newspaper “*Muzyckaja prauda*”.

<sup>124</sup> <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32099737.html>

<sup>125</sup> <https://t.me/belwarriors/994>

<sup>126</sup> <https://kalinouski.org/en/about/>

<sup>127</sup> <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/15-07-2022-polk-kalinovskogo-vozmutilsva-bysol-ispolzuet-foto-voinov-a-dal-tolko-15-kasok>

cooperation.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, the KKR declared the formation of its own political representative organ – Sojm – consisting of 10 people. When asked about cooperation with the UTCB, representatives of the regiment claimed the lack of support for the KKR from the Cabinet and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office as the main reason for not establishing cooperation with these bodies.<sup>129</sup>

Most recently, the KKR expanded its political ambitions by allying themselves with Zianon Pazniak and Pavel Vusau - sharp critics of Tsikhanouskaya and the UTCB. Following the February 2023 visit of Pazniak and Vusau to Ukraine and consultations with the KKR, it was announced that a new “Council of National Security” will be formed which would include aforementioned politicians, representatives of the KKR and “Supratsiu”. Regiment's spokesperson Kabanchuk claimed that the Council will also act as a political representative of the KKR, but active servicemen will not be able to participate in it.<sup>130</sup> Still, this potential alliance is in its early days and it is hard to predict how sustainable and active it will be.

The KKR also rejected calls for closer military cooperation between another Belarusian military formation in Ukraine, namely regiment “Pahonia” which was created in March 2022.<sup>131</sup> Pahonia, unlike the KKR, is closely associated with the established political institutions of the Belarusian anti-regime movement. For instance, Pahonia cooperates with BySol for fundraising purposes, and its founder and former officer of the Belarusian army Valery Sakhshchik joined the UTCB in August 2022.<sup>132</sup> The KKR spokesman and deputy commander Vadzim Kabanchuk criticised Sakhshchik for his links to Russia (it was discovered that the latter had a Russian passport)<sup>133</sup> and alleged that Pahonia's military strength is significantly overstated by its representatives.

The KKR was also embroiled in a number of scandals within Ukraine and was criticised by several of its former members. Most notable cases are the forceful seizure of property of another Belarusian volunteer group based in Odesa<sup>134</sup> by members of the KKR. In a report by Belsat,<sup>135</sup> a former member of the KKR alleged serious problems within the KKR leadership characteristic to other volunteer units or militias in Ukraine: lack of professionalism, lack of transparency, tendency for extra-judicial “justice,” misuse of funds, political infighting and violence. Another former member of the regiment, added to his list of grievances against the KKR the lack of “national character” in KKR as all internal communication in the regiment is conducted in Russian rather than Belarusian.<sup>136</sup>

It is necessary to mention another group of Belarusian volunteer fighters who separated from the KKR in August 2022, namely the “Terror” battalion.<sup>137</sup> The unit later merged with other like-minded groups into “Belarusian volunteer corps” in December 2022.<sup>138</sup> Although the stated objective of the group aligns with other Belarusian volunteers - “Liberation of Ukraine and Belarus from Russian occupation”, the BVC leadership seems to come from far-right circles.<sup>139</sup> Tellingly, the symbol of BVC - a horizontal double cross

<sup>128</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/19993.html>

<sup>129</sup> <https://nashaniva.com/302040>

<sup>130</sup> <https://nashaniva.com/309317>

<sup>131</sup> <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/30-03-2022-belorusy-nachali-sozdavat-polk-pogonya-v-sostave-vooruzhennyh-sil-ukrainy>

<sup>132</sup> [https://t.me/belpolk\\_pogonya/51](https://t.me/belpolk_pogonya/51)

<sup>133</sup> <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32093202.html>

<sup>134</sup> <https://euroradio.fm/va-ukraine-adno-belaruskae-padrzdzvalenne-razzbroila-inshae>

<sup>135</sup> <https://belsat.eu/news/21-07-2022-budzem-mauchats-atrymaem-novaga-lukashenku-bylyva-bajtsy-kalinoutsy-prametady-kamandavannya-u-palku>

<sup>136</sup> <https://euroradio.fm/khaceli-manapoliyu-na-belaruskae-voyska-byly-baec-pkk-raskrytykavau-kiraunictva>

<sup>137</sup> <https://t.me/belwarriors/1887>

<sup>138</sup> <https://t.me/BDK022/11>

<sup>139</sup> <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/27-01-2023-boets-igor-yanki-rasskazal-o-poslednem-rejde-bdk-i-sostoyanii-zdorovya-ranenogo-rodiona-batulina>

- was used by Belarusian Nazi collaborators during WWII. So far, the BVC have not engaged in Belarusian opposition politics.

At the time of writing, the Belarusian groups of volunteer fighters are among the most numerous national groups of foreigners fighting on the Ukrainian side, along with Georgians. And, unlike Georgians, they explicitly declare the war in Ukraine as only the first stage of their activity, which aims at the liberation of Belarus.

It should be mentioned that Ukrainian politics played its own role in the internal politics of the Belarusian anti-regime movement. For example, in October 2022, while rejecting Tskikhanouskaya's call for establishing contacts between the Ukrainian authorities and the UTCB, the head of Rada's Foreign Affairs Committee Oleksandr Merezhko commented that "Kalinouski Regiment within AFU could be the legitimate Belarusian body with whom Kyiv could have a dialogue [...] the Regiment proved its pro-Ukrainian position and respect among Belarusian opposition with its military action on the frontline."<sup>140</sup> Several days later, representatives of the KKR met with the group of Ukrainian deputies from an inter-faction group "For Democratic Belarus" to discuss the issues of Belarusian fighters in Ukraine and broader representation of Belarusian interests on the international level. According to the KKR, it was decided among other things that "Ukrainian Rada's MPs together with representatives of KKR shall defend interests of the Belarusian nation in European and international parliamentary institutions, the OSCE, PACE, NATO, and PA."<sup>141</sup>

The comments of Merezhko and the subsequent meeting between Ukrainian MPs and the KKR caused a backlash among parts of the Belarusian democratic movement, who reject the legitimacy of the KKR as representatives of Belarusians on the international stage.<sup>142</sup> Commenting on the controversy a few days later, Oleksii Honcharenko, a Ukrainian opposition MP and a long term head of the "For Democratic Belarus" parliamentary group, stroke a conciliatory tone claiming that "for me, the KKR, Tsikhanouskaya and the UTCB are legitimate representatives of Free Belarus" and that "Ukraine does not have intention of meddling in Belarusian politics."<sup>143</sup>

Addressing the concerns of many commentators about the anti-democratic nature of a future military takeover of Belarus and fears of the KKR turning into "military junta" after taking power, the spokesperson of the regiment sought to reassure the wider movement by stating their commitment to democracy: "so that there are no accusations that we want to create some kind of junta, after the overthrow of Lukashenka's regime in Belarus we will declare free elections. [...] Everyone will be able to participate in them, including the democratic forces."<sup>144</sup> The representatives of the KKR also draw political legitimacy from direct evidence of popular support from common Belarusians: "our regiment is a popular [narodnyi] phenomenon. If not for the people's support, we wouldn't have volunteers, recruits, support, transport. We couldn't even fight. We exist only thanks to popular support. The Regiment is in fact a project of the Belarusian people."<sup>145</sup>

According to the October 2022 poll conducted by "National Poll" initiative, which allows tracing some tendencies in the opinions among core protest groups, more than 89 per cent of the respondents indicated support for Belarusian volunteer fighters in Ukraine. 86 per cent indicated their interest in receiving news about the KKR activities. However, only 54 per cent of respondents indicated that political activity of the KKR was

<sup>140</sup> <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-tykhanovska-ukraina-merezhko/32083904.html>

<sup>141</sup> <https://t.me/belwarriors/2081>

<sup>142</sup> <https://malanka.media/news/15904>

<sup>143</sup> <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32093157.html>

<sup>144</sup> <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32093202.html>

<sup>145</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/27961.html?c>

beneficial for the country. Furthermore, just 10 per cent of the respondents indicated that the Ukrainian government should give foremost priority to the KKR when discussing Ukraine-Belarusian relations. The majority of respondents (39 and 37 per cent) indicated that in such cases priority should be given to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office or the UTCB respectively.<sup>146</sup> There is a consistent tendency among the core of the oppositional movement to see Tsikhanouskaya (rather than any other oppositional figure) as the legitimate political representative of the Belarusian people.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has arguably created the conditions for the crystallisation of alternative points of political legitimacy in the Belarusian anti-regime movement. The war made the possibility of removing Lukashenka from power with some use of force<sup>147</sup> seem more realistic in the eyes of Belarusians. Consequently, those who are directly contributing to the weakening of Lukashenka's main supporter – Putin's Russia, believe they deserve political recognition for their sacrifice. The KKR claims legitimate representation of Belarusian interests through "doing the real work" i.e. fighting in the war. Moreover, they often implicitly juxtapose themselves with the "useless" or even "seditious" politicians who cannot offer anything in the cause of Belarus's liberation. It is no surprise, then, that the aforementioned Zianon Pazniak, a notorious Belarusian political émigré famous for his repeated accusation of nearly all Belarusian opposition leaders of working for the Belarusian KGB or the Russian FSB, has claimed that the KKR is "the only organised force that can change anything in Belarus."<sup>148</sup>

However, it would be an oversimplification to explain poor relations between the UTCB and the KKR as an ideological conflict between a liberal civilian structure and a nationalist military group. Rather, the conflict stems from differing positions on the legacy of 2020 protests, political legitimacy, and possible paths towards democratic transition in Belarus, as well as personal ambitions of leaders. Importantly, the volunteer units were not formed as "fighting wings" of some broader right-wing movements. Initially, they emerged as groups that brought together those willing to engage in active armed resistance to Russian aggression, i.e., with a rather broad agenda of anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian struggle. The ideological convictions and the backgrounds of their members vary. To our knowledge, their constituents include such groups as members of more traditional nationalist political circles, participants of the 2020 movement, and anarchists.<sup>149</sup> The new process of politicisation, including the emergence of explicitly right-wing groups, has been occurring in the course of the war, through splits and divisions and was also shaped by political tendencies in Ukrainian politics.

Despite the KKR's unwillingness to cooperate and align with the groups of the organised oppositional movement in exile, the latter still attempt to appeal and make appreciative gestures towards the KKR. By this means, they try to recognize the KKR's actual contribution to the anti-war struggle as well as to benefit from the legitimacy that they acquired due to their participation in the war on the side of AFU and ameliorate the guilt associated with Belarus' implication in the aggression. This is especially understandable

<sup>146</sup> <https://public.flourish.studio/story/1737906/>

<sup>147</sup> It should be noted that, in the popular view, the use of force in regime change in Belarus implies a range of forms and degrees of violence: from pushing back against police violence in an organised and systematic manner and the formation of some groups prepared and ready for active resistance to more radical scenarios.

<sup>148</sup> <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/04-10-2022-polk-kalinovskogo-edinstvennaya-organizovannaya-sila-kotoraya-mozhet-cto-to-reshit-intervyu-s-zenonom-poznyakom>

<sup>149</sup> Anarchists have been traditionally the most active political groups engaged in disruptive acts against the Belarusian regime before 2020.

considering that the ability of the UTCB to impact developments in Belarus was undermined by their failure to mobilise a popular anti-war movement in the form of mass demonstrations and strikes, despite their declared attempts. Specifically, in a very recent interview, Valery Sakhashchyk spoke about his attitude to the Belarusian volunteering fighters and the KKR, in particular:

*“I have wonderful relationships with many fighters in the regiment... I have some relations with their [the KKR’s] leadership. They decided to ‘go into politics’. I do not assess it in any way - it is their business. [. . .] I am sure about the following things. First, the KKR has done a great deed that is very important for Belarus – they defended the dignity and honour of our nation. They first started to fight, and they suffered significant losses, including many very honoured fighters who were fighting since 2014 and were at the origin of this formation. [. . .] Due to the KKR, all Ukraine knows that Belarus is fighting on their side. Their credit cannot be diminished. They indeed accomplished for our nation a certain heroic deed.”<sup>150</sup>*

As was mentioned previously, in early March 2023 ByPol and the KKR announced the formation of a new sub-unit within KKR consisting of a group of volunteers initially trained by ByPol.<sup>151</sup> This development might indicate establishing more trustworthy and cooperative relations between the UTCB and its affiliates and the KKR. The KKR together with other volunteering fighters has thus created a new centre of force and gravitation in the Belarusian democratic movement. They caused a significant realignment (association with Cyberpartizans in Belarus) and other players have to take their actions and positions into account. The growing influence of the volunteer units, both within organisational structures and in the opinion of the core-base of the protesters, further fosters the radicalisation of the Belarusian oppositional movement as well as the increasing salience of Belarusian nationalism.

<sup>150</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=1350&v=MXrXcVXMI\\_0&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=1350&v=MXrXcVXMI_0&feature=youtu.be)

<sup>151</sup> <https://t.me/belwarriors/2363>

## Ukraine's Policies Towards Belarus and their Impact on the Belarusian Democratic Movement

As it is evident from the previous section, Ukraine came to play a major role in the internal politics of the Belarusian democratic movement following the Russian invasion. With the dramatically altered geopolitical situation in the region and in the world, Ukraine gained enormous cultural, symbolic, political, media, and military influence, which necessarily had profound impact on the Belarusian society and its politics.

The problem of Belarusian authoritarianism, which became particularly prominent following the 2020-2021 protest, was usually viewed from within and from without as a tug of war between Western powers, primarily the USA and the EU who supported democratic opposition and civil society, and Russia, who supported Lukashenka's regime. Prior to February 2022, Ukraine was not usually considered as a player who was particularly active in this struggle. Indeed, compared to the reaction of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia to the rigged presidential elections of 2020, Ukrainian reaction was quite moderate. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, Zelensky stated the following:

*"It is obvious that far from everyone in the country [Belarus] agrees with the preliminary election results. ... Doubts of such magnitude are the direct road to violence, to conflict, to civic protest which grows stronger. ... We call upon our neighbours to display maximal tolerance and reject street violence. We call upon starting an open albeit difficult dialogue. ... Only mutual understanding among all sides can preserve the independence of the country and secure its ongoing movement towards freedom and democracy."<sup>152</sup>*

Such an ambiguous statement which did not outright condemn the election fraud and state violence caused disappointment within the Belarusian democratic movement, which hoped that Ukraine would be more proactive in supporting democratic changes in Belarus. Many Belarusian activists also regretted that Ukraine, unlike practically all other European countries, Canada and US, did not organise an official meeting with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. However, the lion share of attention of the Belarusian public at the time was directed towards reactions and actions of Russia, the EU, and the USA which were perceived as the only powers who could influence the situation in Belarus.

The Russian invasion changed this perspective. As the war progressed, and the Russian initial attempt at *blitzkrieg* failed, it became clear that Ukraine is likely to become an important and proactive player in regional politics. Many among the Belarusian pro-democracy activists came to believe that Ukrainian victory over Russia will open a window of opportunity for a democratic transition in Belarus. This differed significantly from the pre-invasion era, when hopes for a democratic transition were usually connected with a new attempt of a more organised and better prepared popular uprising. At the same time, many Belarusians were horrified that Lukashenka allowed Putin to use the Belarusian territory and infrastructure for its invasion, thus legally making Belarus an aggressor state.

Since the first hours of the war, Zelensky and other Ukrainian politicians, journalists and commentators became regular figures in the independent Belarusian media sphere. They tried to use this recognition to sway public opinion in Belarus to Ukraine's side. For example, Zelensky addressed Belarusians on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, the day of the "constitutional referendum" proposed by Lukashenka. In the address, Zelensky condemned Russia's attack on Ukraine and Belarus's involvement in the invasion. He called upon Belarusians: "you decide, who you are, and who you will be. How are you going to look in your children's eyes, how are you going to look in each others', in your

<sup>152</sup> <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2020/08/10/7262351/index.amp>

neighbours' eyes. And we are your neighbours. We, Ukrainians. So be Belarus and not Russia! ... I sincerely wish Belarus to again become that kind and safe Belarus, which everyone recognized not so long ago."<sup>153</sup> The latter sentence caused a negative reaction among many in the Belarusian democratic movement, as they perceived Belarus far from "kind and safe" in the year and a half since the 2020 elections. However, it seems that the address was directed rather towards neutral or even pro-regime Belarusians and Belarusian authorities, although the impact of such addresses is hard to estimate.

On the other hand, the attitude of Ukrainian authorities towards the established Belarusian opposition movement was quite evident. Ukrainian politicians on multiple occasions expressed their distrust towards Tsikhanouskaya and her Office. For instance, Mikhaylo Podolyak, advisor to the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, stated in June that "we did not understand Tsikhanouskaya's position on several issues regarding Russia. During the electoral campaign we heard odd statements which, frankly, did not differ much from statements of the official Minsk, and in some respects were more pro-Russian. We do not hear a coherent assessment of the full-scale Russian invasion into Ukraine. We do not see specific actions against participation of Belarus in this war, for example, organised rallies in front of Belarusian embassies around the world."<sup>154</sup> When fact checked by journalists, who indicated that Tsikhanouskaya made such statements and called for protests in Belarus and elsewhere, Podolyak doubled down: "it's not enough to make statements, one needs to act. Go to the embassy and say 'please, stop using the territory of Belarus for the attack on Ukraine.' There are many ways and technologies. You know, one needs to speak less and do concrete things." The statements also caused harsh reactions from Belarusian activists, many of whom were directly involved in various pro-Ukrainian activities.<sup>155</sup> Podolyak reiterated his position in February 2023, claiming that "we don't see a clear anti-war position on the opposition's side."<sup>156</sup> And indeed it is also difficult to see how such attacks on the democratic opposition forces of Belarus are in Ukraine's strategic interests.

Another reason for the lack of contact between Tsikhanouskaya's Office and Ukraine was suggested by Oleksii Arestovych, then advisor to the Office of the President of Ukraine. According to him, this was a pragmatic choice, as "effective control of Belarus is in Lukashenka's hand. He manoeuvres hard to prevent dragging Belarus into war. So, there are two possibilities, we either help him manoeuvre or hinder his efforts, thus increasing the chances of Belarus getting involved in the war or, what is worse, forcing him to make an emotional decision, which he will regret later..."<sup>157</sup> This kind of realpolitik argument also caused disappointment among Belarusian democratic activists, who saw it as deviating from the values of international democratic solidarity espoused publicly by the Ukrainian government. Logically, it is also hard to square with allowing Belarusian volunteer fighters to serve and organise in the Ukrainian army given that this seems to represent a far more antagonistic posture towards the Lukashenka's regime – especially given these forces have made no secret of their desire to extend the war to Belarus itself in a classical 'national liberation' or 'armed struggle' strategy.

Regardless of the actual reason, Ukraine's refusal to recognize Tsikhanouskaya or the UTCB in any capacity seriously compromised their legitimacy in the eyes of Belarusian opposition, especially among more nationalist and militant groups, such as the KKR, who tend to be even more pro-Ukrainian than the rest of the democratic movement. Critics of the UTCB use the same argument as Podolyak or Arestovych, claiming that

<sup>153</sup> <https://focus.ua/politics/507934-budte-belarusyu-a-ne-rossiey-zelenskiy-obratilsya-k-belorusam-video>

<sup>154</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/15939.html>

<sup>155</sup> <https://motolko.help/ru-news/faktchek-slova-mihaila-podolyaka-o-tihanovskoj-i-belarusah-ne-sootvetstvuyut-dejstvitelnosti/>

<sup>156</sup> <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/32537.html?c>

<sup>157</sup> <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/25-11-2022-arestovich-obyasnil-pochemu-zelenskij-ne-vstrechaetsya-s-tihanovskoj>

Tsikhanouskaya is not doing nearly enough, and that her alleged pro-Russian positions are irredeemable in the current climate.

Delegitimising the UTCB and its leaders can be viewed in a wider context of revisionist or critical narrative towards the 2020 protests, which grew prominent since the beginning of the war. One version of this narrative frequently includes semi-conspiratorial notions of 2020 protests being “flushed down the drain” by traitorous leaders – a Belarusian version of the “stab-in-the-back” myth. Another conspiratorial theory claims that 2020 protests were a planned provocation initiated by the Kremlin in order to push Lukashenka into Moscow’s hands. This view seems to be particularly widespread and accepted in Ukraine, as many media and political figures in the country subscribe to it. In this narrative, all the main figures of 2020 protests including Tsikhanouskaya are implied to be agents of Moscow to lesser or larger extent. At least some Belarusian groups are outright hostile towards her, claiming that she is the one responsible for the failure of the 2020 protest, and that she should be imprisoned along with Lukashenka after Belarus’s liberation.<sup>158</sup>

The Belarusian policy of the Ukrainian government thus alienated pro-UTCB groups within the Belarusian opposition, who became increasingly disillusioned with the prospect of Belarusian liberation through Ukraine. Many fear that there could be some kind of “realpolitik” agreement between a victorious anti-Russian coalition and Lukashenka, which would allow him to preserve his power. Despite this, no significant faction within the Belarusian democratic movement has moved away from unequivocal support for Ukraine in its national war-effort.

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<sup>158</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWAiqXKOGGO>

## Conclusions

Belarus' involvement in the war as Russia's accomplice was enabled by the brutal suppression of the Belarusian revolutionary movement in 2020. Lukashenka retained power, though lost popular legitimacy, and thus found himself in a situation of international isolation, relying on Russia as his sole but powerful backer. Having embraced the status of a Kremlin appointee, Lukashenka partially yielded the country's sovereignty and provided its territory and infrastructure for use by the Russia's armed forces in launching its 2022 attack on Ukraine.

The Belarusian democratic movement met the war in a rather grave condition, suffering from the mass repression marked with the scale and the level of violence unprecedented in the history of independent Belarus, even though the country spent 25 years under a brutal authoritarian regime. The organised opposition movement moved into exile and underwent a process of fragmentation and division, which is hardly surprising. While its major organisations, first of all, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office, continued a variety of activities, they experienced a challenge of preserving their relevance in Belarusian society and continue to have only a limited ability to substantively influence developments inside the country.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused a certain reconsolidation of the organised opposition movement in exile and the achievement of a broad consensus on the basis of a pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian position. In particular, this is manifested in the formation of the UTCB. The conflict also fostered the radicalisation of the organised opposition movement and core-base protesters, as they largely embraced the acceptability of using force in political struggle, and increased the salience of a "national" and anti-Russian (or anti-imperial) agenda. The outcome of the war is commonly acknowledged as a decisive factor for the possibility of a democratic change in Belarus. At the same time, the question of the relevance of the organised oppositional groups in exile to the situation in Belarus, especially, after the failure to launch a large-scale anti-war movement in the country, has become ever more apparent.

Meanwhile, in response to the war and the sham "constitutional referendum" organised by the regime, Belarus witnessed the largest mass protests in a year and a half. Nevertheless, in the situation of general apathy after the defeat in 2020-2021, the continuation of violent mass repression, the disillusionment in mass protests, and absence of political leadership inside the country, a large-scale anti-war movement never materialised. Still, if the protest base consolidated around the anti-war and pro-Ukrainian position, the situation in Belarusian society at large appears to be rather complex.

The available estimates of opinion polls that are still conducted in Belarus by independent organisations agree that Belarusian society is split on the assessment of Russia's action in Ukraine with a tendency toward a greater support for Ukraine. However, a large share of the population does not consider Belarus to be party to the conflict, despite it clearly being so by accepted international norms. While support for Russia and the failure to recognise Belarus' complicity correlates with the support for Lukashenka's regime, there is no perfect overlap.

Furthermore, it appears that Lukashenka managed to use the dire situation in the neighbouring countries to boost some tolerance toward his regime due to the appearance of "stability" in the country. Still, it would be wrong to conclude that the dictator managed to reconsolidate popular support. At the same time, in Belarusian society, there is a strong consensus on the rejection of an immediate involvement of the Belarusian army in the conflict, a point of view shared by people across socio-economic

and political divides. This environment appears to function as an important deterrent to Lukashenka in making a decision about the potential engagement of the Belarusian forces on the Russian side (still, the rumours about a possible deployment of the Belarusian army persist).

The war in Ukraine also prompted some to engage in active direct actions against Russia's aggression on the side of Ukraine. In particular, this is associated with the role of the groups of the Belarusian volunteer fighters. Their activity attracted significant public attention and served as the basis of the claim that the Belarusian democratic movement is engaged in the war on the Ukrainian side and is actively helping the country in the fight against Russia, in contrast to the criminal complicity of Lukashenka. While not aligning with any political organisation initially, these groups, and especially the KKR, became influential political players in their own right. Their activity further contributes to the popularisation of the idea of the necessity to use force in order to remove Lukashenka from power; they explicitly describe their engagement in the Ukrainian war as the preparation for the 'liberation' of Belarus.

As for Ukrainian influence on Belarusian politics, it remains ambiguous. On the one hand, the support for the KKR at least on a parliamentary level provides it with some international legitimacy, even if at the expense of the UTCB. On the other hand, the Ukrainian government's rejection of the UTCB as a legitimate representative of Belarusian society can alienate the pro-UTCB part of the opposition movement. Furthermore, Ukraine's unclear attitude towards Lukashenka's regime in Belarus undermines the hopes of many pro-democratic Belarusians for international solidarity in anti-authoritarian action. Despite all this, there is a widespread belief among the Belarusians who oppose Lukashenka's regime that Russia's defeat in Ukraine and the subsequent collapse of Russian influence in the region will hasten the democratic transition in Belarus.

## About PeaceRep

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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Cover Image: Belaruisan Protest Rally in Berlin  
by Ger Dijkstra 2022

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