

BELARUS AS A FOOTHOLD IN THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

Contrary to Russia's wishes, Belarus has not sent its army units to Ukraine.

By supporting Russia morally, materially and logistically, including by allowing the free use of its territory for manoeuvres and strikes against Ukraine by Russian forces, Belarus hopes to reduce Russian pressure to intervene militarily in the war in Ukraine.

The Belarusian Army's direct involvement in the Ukrainian conflict would be a political gesture with no significant strategic impact on the course of the war.

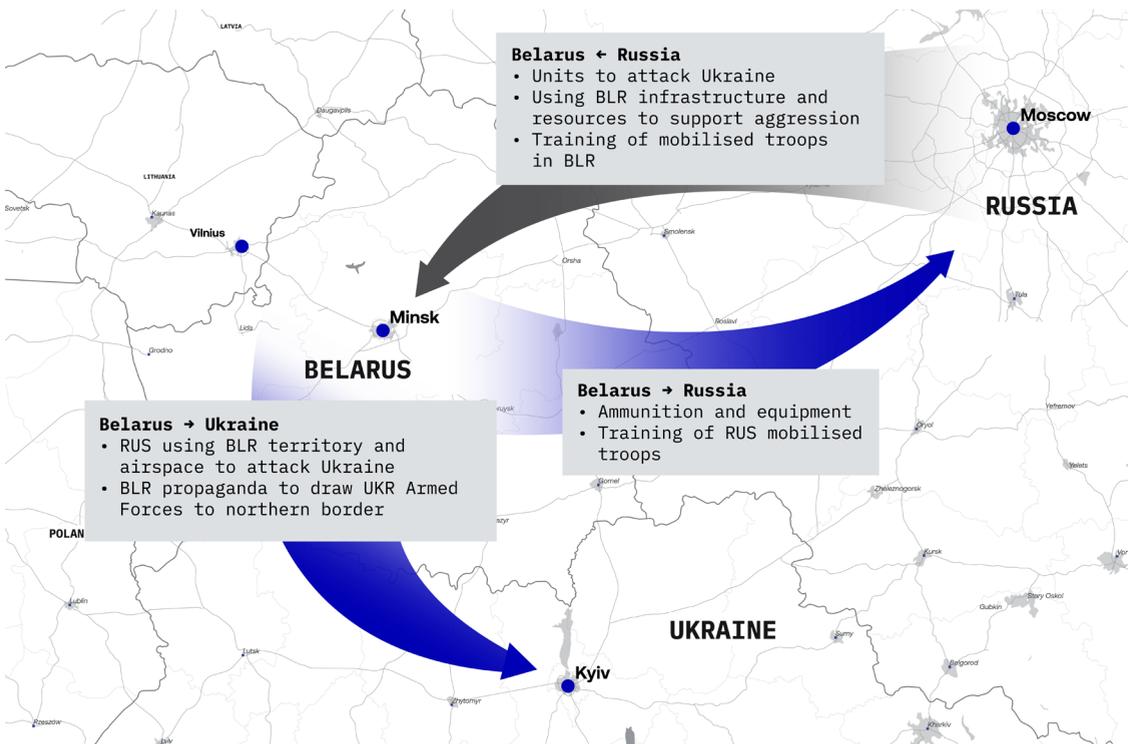
In January and February of 2022, units of Russia's Eastern Military District arrived on the territory of Belarus as part of the Union Resolve exercise, which was an unexpected and unusual step in the context of Russian-Belarusian military cooperation. The large-scale Zapad exercise had ended in the autumn of 2021. While units of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army have previously been in Belarus as part of the Russian-Belarusian combined Zapad and Union Shield exercises (they form the Regional Grouping of Forces with the Belarusian army in times of crisis or war), units of the Eastern Military District had no previous contact or cooperation experience with the Belarusian Armed Forces. Also, no one had heard of the Union Resolve exercise.

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All this took place while Russia was massing strike units along the Ukrainian border amidst a general atmosphere of preparing for war. Belarusian representatives promised the exercise posed no threat to Ukraine and that all Russian units would leave Belarus after its end. However, the exercise was just a smokescreen – in the early hours of 24 February, Russian manoeuvre units entered Ukraine from Belarus and launched an attack on Kyiv. This probably came as a surprise even to the Belarusian leadership, as the Kremlin kept Alyaksandr

Lukashenka in the dark about its real plans until the very last moment. The attack on Kyiv stalled and ended with the retreat of Russian units to Belarus and their relocation to a new operational area in eastern Ukraine in April. After the Russian manoeuvre units left, some military aircraft and air defence systems stayed in Belarus.

Since the Kyiv operation, the Russian army has enjoyed complete freedom of action and movement on the territory of Belarus. The Gomel region of Belarus, bordering Ukraine, essentially became a large Russian logistics and supply base during the operation. In addition, Belarus provided extensive logistical support to Russia: it allowed the use of its railways and airfields, repaired damaged equipment, treated the wounded, and supplied fuel and food. At the same time, the export of ammunition from Belarusian arsenals to Russia began in March and continues even now. In the autumn of 2022, Belarus also began to supply Russia with T-72 tanks. According to our information, Russia's Defence Ministry also demanded that Belarusian experts be sent to Russia to repair equipment damaged in the war in Ukraine.



Belarus as a foothold in the conflict in Ukraine as of January 2023.

Alongside materiel and logistics, Belarus also supports Russia's activities in Ukraine in the public information space. This is an inexpensive way for Lukashenko to demonstrate his loyalty to Vladimir Putin. The Belarusian leader's speeches contain aggressive anti-Western rhetoric and constantly draw attention to the country's contribution to protecting the border of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. The Belarusian media borrows news reports on the war in Ukraine from the Russian media and broadcasts these unchanged.

Despite pressure from Putin, the Belarusian Armed Forces have not intervened in the military operations in Ukraine and do not wish to do so in the future. The war is unpopular in Belarusian society, and reports of high casualties at the front reinforce this attitude. Belarusian Armed Forces largely rely on conscripts, and sending them to war would threaten the regime's stability. The proportion of professional (contract) soldiers is smaller than in the Russian Armed Forces; the training and equipment are rather poor. Lukashenka cannot be sure that, if sent to Ukraine, his contract soldiers would not desert or join the Belarusian volunteers fighting on the Ukrainian side. Announcing a mobilisation in Belarus carries even greater risks for the regime's security – those called to arms may turn against Lukashenka.

Putin can put pressure on the Belarusian leadership up to a point, but the collapse of Lukashenka's regime would also threaten the Kremlin. Given Russia's engagement in Ukraine, Putin is probably not interested in creating political chaos in Belarus. However, it is possible that Lukashenka will eventually be forced to send troops into Ukraine if the pressure from the Kremlin becomes too strong to withstand.

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In October 2022, Russian mobilised troops arrived in Belarus for training. Lukashenka can present this to the Kremlin as another contribution to the war effort while avoiding direct involvement. At the time of compiling this report, the Russian mobilised units in Belarus do not pose a direct threat to Kyiv; however, their presence in Belarus forces Ukraine to deploy some of its units to the north, pulling them away from other fronts.

The use of Russian mobilised units for a new attack on Ukraine from the north would result in heavy losses for the Russian forces. Their progress would be hindered by the mobilised troops' low motivation and training, as well as the Ukrainians' preparedness for an attack from the north. The Belarusian army's involvement in the Ukrainian conflict would be a political gesture without significant strategic impact on the developments on the ground. However, it would still tie up some of Ukraine's forces.