



POLAND

Wanted in Belarus, combatants in Ukraine

by Stefano Schirato





Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Hanna asks a young man from the group of fighters to take a photo of her with her husband Ihar.



HAVING FLED FROM LUKASHENKO'S BELARUS, THEY HAVE BECOME FOREIGN FIGHTERS READY TO DEFEND KYIV

These Belarusian volunteers were recruited via Telegram. Many have never picked up a weapon before, however, all of them have one thing in common: their opposition to the regime of Aleksandr Lukashenko. Regardless of whether Belarus decides to enter the war alongside Putin's Russia, these volunteers are ready to fight side by side with the Ukrainian resistance.

“My parents don't know I'm about to leave,” explains a young man at the Belarusian Volunteer Centre in Warsaw, Poland. “I'll make sure they don't find out by continuing to talk to them on the phone as if everything were normal. I don't want to endanger them. Since I fled Belarus the police have come to the house more than once to look for me. The phenomenon is not uncommon: the men

photographed in this report number around twenty and range from the very young to fifty-somethings. Many of them fled the country following the “slipper revolutions”, the series of popular protests between 2020 and 2021 against corruption, repressive policies and the mismanagement of the Covid-19 emergency that followed Lukashenko's re-election for the sixth time since 1994. Managing the Belarusian Volunteer Centre is Pavel, aged 24 and a former combatant in the Donbas who fought the Russians between 2016 and 2017. Since then he has never been back to Belarus.

“I collect donations and deal with the enrolment of volunteers via a Telegram channel,” he explains. “But I also coordinate transport to Ukraine via Lviv and Kyiv by car, bus or train as well as the first contacts with the resistance that supplies them with weapons and military training.”



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association.
Andrej Kushniarou checks his phone.
The departure has been delayed. The
fighters have to wait a few more hours
and there is an air of tension.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. After having dinner, the Belarusian fighters await instructions about the time of their departure. They will arrive early in the morning in Medyka, the last city in Poland, before crossing the border into Ukraine.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Adrian, aged 26, from Brest, Belarus. That night, he is to cross the border in order to “fight for the freedom of Europe”. More than 150,000 Belarusians are estimated to live in Poland, many of them have arrived in the past two years since Lukashenko’s regime violently cracked down on mass demonstrations following the rigged presidential elections in 2020.



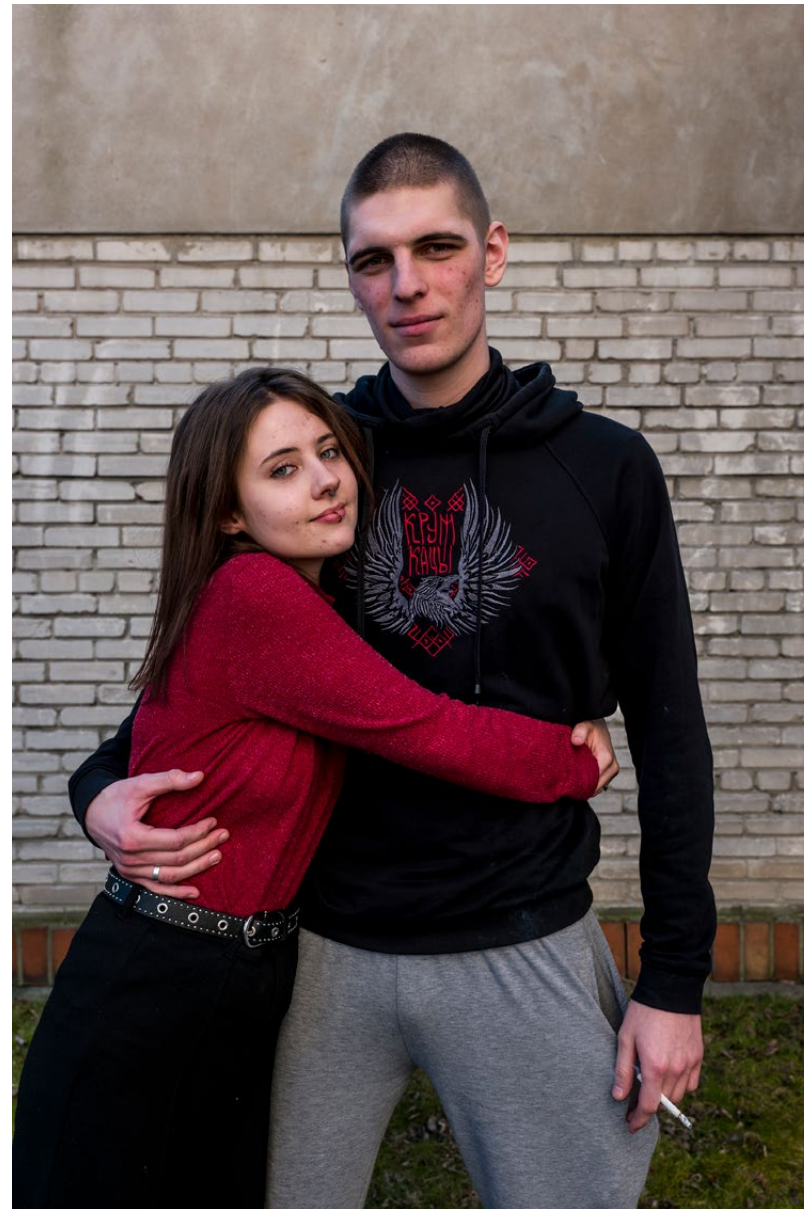
Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Andrei Kushniarou, aged 40, from Minsk. That night he is to cross the border with 15 Belarusian young men with the aim of fighting against the Russia invasion. Andrei says there are now enough Belarusians in Ukraine to form a battalion, which would include Belarusians from their own country and expatriates from third countries, not just Poland.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Adrian, aged 26, from Brest, Belarus. Adrian has volunteered to fight in Ukraine.



The Belarusian House Association in Warsaw is organizing the entire agenda of the Belarusian opposition. Pavel Kukhta (standing in the back), aged 24 and a native of Belarus, served on the frontline in the Ukrainian Donbas region at the age of 18 and is now coordinating the deployment of Belarusian volunteers from Warsaw who want to fight to defend Ukraine from the Russian invaders.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Ihar, 21, and his wife Hanna, 20, both from Minsk. They chose to get married in Ukraine and they have a strong sense of attachment to the country. For this reason, Ihar has decided to espouse its cause and go to fight for freedom. On this same night he will cross the border together with 15 other Belarusian fighters.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Andrei Kushniarou, aged 40, from Minsk. Behind him are the flags of Belarus and Ukraine. Andrei has decided to go to war to fight for the freedom of Ukraine. Together with him, several Belarusian young men based in Poland are heading to Ukraine to fight against the Russians. "It is a way to help liberate our country from the dictatorial rule of Putin's ally Lukashenko," they say.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Just before their departure the fighters finalize the details of the mission and communicate via Telegram with their contacts in Ukraine.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Just before their departure the fighters finalize the details of the mission and communicate via Telegram with their contacts in Ukraine.

Warsaw, Belarusian House Association.
Combat instructor Kamil Panek takes
the equipment for a combat survival
course from his car.





Warsaw. Hanna says goodbye to her husband Ihar as he gets into the car bound for Medyka, the last city in Poland, before the border with Ukraine.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Kamil Panek, a combat and self-defence instructor and the owner of a Shooting Academy, demonstrates to fighters how to provide first aid in conflict situations.



Warsaw. Fifteen Belarusian youngsters are set to cross the border that night to fight against the Russian invasion. They have only known each other for a few hours. They initially made contact via a Telegram channel and met in the Belarusian House in Warsaw, a hub for the Belarusian expatriate community in Poland.



Belarusian fighters prepare to go to war. In the Belarusian House in Warsaw, they stock up on food and basic necessities to take with them when they cross the border.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Maxim (left), aged 22, from Minsk and Eugene Gad (right), aged 34, from Mozyr in Belarus. Maxim and Eugene have both decided to go and fight as foreign fighters for Ukraine against what they see as an attack on freedom.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Before leaving for Ukraine, the Belarusian fighters undergo a survival and first aid course held by Kamil Panek, a combat instructor.

Warsaw. Hanna bids goodbye to her husband Ihar as he gets into the car bound for Medyka, the last city in Poland before the border with Ukraine.





Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Kamil Panek, combat and self-defence instructor and owner of a Shooting Academy, shows fighters how to provide first aid in conflict situations.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Ihar, aged 21, and Hanna, 20, share a moment of tenderness during the long wait before his departure. Ihar has decided to go and fight for Ukraine, the country where he married Hanna one year ago. They are both from Minsk.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. More than 150,000 Belarusians are estimated to live in Poland, many have arrived in the past two years since Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime violently cracked down on mass demonstrations following the rigged presidential elections in 2020. Some of these Belarusian expats are now volunteering to fight in Ukraine.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association. Andrej Kushniarou eats a meal before leaving. The Belarusian Association has prepared take-away kits with food for all the fighters as they await their departure.



Warsaw, Belarusian House Association.
A Belarusian fighter about to leave for
the war wears an armband displaying
the flag of his home nation.

