

Analytical report:
Situation in the field of
national security and defence
of Belarus (February 2017)

Minsk

The most important events of the month. The most important events of February were mass protests against Decree No. 3, which actually revived the feudal per capita tax on permanent residents of the country, regardless of whether they have personal income or not.

The mass character and activity of the protests, that gripped the regions considered to be apolitical, became a surprise both for the authorities and for the opposition. Two weeks before the protests, the leaders of political parties, recognizing the growth of discontent, nevertheless, did not expect a mass of speeches.

The developments within month. The beginning of February was marked by the publication of a decision on the creation of a border zone by Russia on the border with Belarus. In Minsk this decision was apprehended cautiously. Belarusian officials noted that the decision by the Russian side was taken without notification of the Belarusian authorities and contrary to the existing contractual base in terms of ensuring border security.

During February, the Belarusian authorities underwent several information and psychological attacks behind which directly or indirectly stands Russia. First, there appeared false reports of Russian media (including liberal ones) about the withdrawal of Minsk from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (hereinafter referred to as the CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (hereinafter referred to as the EEU). In both organizations the information was quickly denied. The reaction of the Belarusian authorities was extremely nervous: the Ambassador of Belarus to Russia personally came to Russian television to give explanations.

Then, Russian blogger Alexander Lapshin was extradited from Belarus at the request of Azerbaijan for illegally visiting Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, in Minsk until the last moment expected Russia to publicly intervene, which would allow to transfer Lapshin to Russian competent authorities and to turn the problem into the format of the Azerbaijani-Russian relations. However, Moscow ignored the situation. And given the special nature of the Belarusian-Azerbaijani relations, Belarus had no choice but to transfer Alexander Lapshin to Baku. In response, tough statements were made by Armenian politicians, including those representing the ruling party: the speech again turned to the exclusion of Belarus from the CSTO. This time the leaders of the organization chose to remain silent, which can be not the best sign for the official Minsk.

Belarusian officials made very vague statements on the problematic issues of the Belarusian-Russian and Belarusian-Armenian relations. And the state-owned media were only able to quote Belarusian officials: the government propaganda was unable to respond to the information “volley”.

Further, on February 15, 2017 a group of Russian citizens carrying ID cards of journalists from the Russian media tried to disrupt the press conference of the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office in the Tripartite Contact Group for the settlement of the situation in the east of Ukraine, Ambassador Martin Saydik. Obviously, this was a purposeful provocation aimed at discrediting the so-called Minsk negotiating platform in Ukraine, one of the few foreign policy assets of the Belarusian authorities. Although people who tried to disrupt the press conference represent a political organization that is not formally connected with the Russian authorities and even at some point is opposed to the Kremlin, in Minsk there is an opinion that provocations were at

least promoted by Russian official structures (receipt of journalistic certificates from Pro-Kremlin media, information about the place and time of the event).

During February, Belarus conducted a comprehensive check of the army's combat readiness. The event is already traditional, nevertheless this year it has had a number of special features.

Firstly, a significant part of the activity was carried out at night. Paratroopers for the first time made jumps from an IL-76 aircraft in darkness. Pontoon crossings were established at night.

Secondly, the main task of the check was the development of mobilization measures, the deployment of new units at the expense of the military liable from the reserve, manning them with junior commanders. Thus, for the first time, the main department for reserve preparation was formed.

It's necessary to pay attention to the speed of conscription of the military liable from reserve: about 600 people on February 6, 2017 and about 900 people on February 7, 2017. At the same time, much attention was paid to the speed of the event. In some cases, less than 2 hours passed from the moment of notification until the arrival of persons liable for military service to the collection points. The situation was complicated by the factor of labor migration, as a result of which many of those subject to conscription were outside the country. About 3,000 people were called up for military training - the largest number for at least 7 last years.

In addition to calling from the reserve to participate in the activities of the combat readiness check, the formation of reserves from among specialists, whose knowledge could be claimed by the army, was trained.

The basis for the deployment of new units were the structures of the 72nd Joint Training Center, which after calling the military liable from the reserve were transferred to the subordination of the Western operational command. Second year students of the Military Academy were employed as commanders of the sections and deputy commanders of training motorized infantry (tank) platoons.

The newly formed units were given armoured vehicles from the number of tanks stored in the 969th base. It is worth noting that for the first time in many years old Soviet BTR-70 were taken out from storage. Obviously, one of the tasks was to bring these vehicles into order.

Traditionally for the last years the Belarusian military resisted the conventional illegal armed formations that penetrated into the territory of Belarus and had a significant number of armored vehicles.

The air defence forces on duty were inspected. The redeployment of anti-aircraft missile units was carried out, measures to protect their positions and to combat sabotage were trained. During the inspection, an increase of the grouping of troops involved in the implementation of the tasks of combat duty on air defence was carried out. The radar field was increased. Aviation was deployed at operational airfields. There were more than 10 aircraft operating at different heights - from medium to extremely low ones, representing targets for anti-aircraft guns.

In the Smaliavichy district of the Minsk region, a training with the reservists, who are part of the territorial defense headquarters and a separate infantry battalion of

territorial troops, was held. The purpose of the training was to improve skills in the performance of official duties, increase combat and mobilization readiness.

On February 14-15, the second training on issues of military security and defense of the state with the chairmen of the regional and capital executive committees, their deputies, military commissars of the regions was held. It is worth noting that during a similar event a year ago, chaired by President Lukashenka, a number of doctrinal statements on issues of territorial defense was made. This time no loud statements were made.

On February 20, 2017 a telephone conversation between Aliaksandr Lukashenka and the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev took place. One of the main topics was the relationship in the EEU. The parties expressed mutual concern over the existing problems. A significant place was given to the discussion of the contradictions in the Belarusian-Russian relations. The complexities of Kazakh-Kyrgyz relations were discussed as well.

On February 23, 2017 Minister of Defense of Belarus Andrei Raukou said that the issue of purchasing Su-30SM aircraft was under consideration, and 120-mm mortars Nona-M1 as well as UAVs for various purposes were planned to be purchased. In addition, modernized BTR-70MB1 and T-72BM1 tanks will be delivered to the troops.

Conclusions. The February protests put the Belarusian authorities in front of a dilemma: to maintain control over the situation in the country and not to start to high-scale repressions, which are fraught with a tough reaction from the West, at the same time. This, in turn, will cause displeasure in China, which counts at least on normalization of the Belarusian-European relations. But Moscow, while its relations with Belarus deteriorate, can take advantage of the situation. At the moment it's obvious that the regime will adhere to tactics, the main elements of which are the following:

- aggressive propaganda aimed at discrediting the leaders of the protests and intimidating the population by the possible destabilization of the situation in Belarus, following the example of Ukraine after the Maidan;
- if possible, abstaining from steps in the social and economic sphere, which can cause additional irritation of the population;
- pinpoint pressure on activists and protest leaders, especially in the regions, their temporary isolation, in order to "decapitate" the protesters.

It will be necessary to adjust the recent changes in the pension law. As a result of which hundreds of thousands of people lost their seniority necessary to obtain the right for labour pension. At the moment the population hasn't yet felt the nature of innovations. However, the situation is fraught with a social explosion.

The official Minsk got the impression that the EU, concerned about security and stability issues at its borders, will close its eyes to the repressive steps taken by the authorities against the protesters, if they aren't mass and cruel.

The growth of protest sentiments in the society can have an impact on the announced reduction in the number of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus. The redistribution of resources within the department in favor of the Interior Ministry troops is quite probable.

Protests against Decree No. 3 revealed a qualitative change in the situation in the information field of Belarus: new information technologies have become an effective tool not only for independent professional media, but also for non-professional distributors / news producers. Just note that over 1.19 million people viewed the video reports from the February protest march in Minsk made by the four main independent media in Belarus. And due to reports via social networks this number can be twice as large. The two million audience of one socially significant event is absolutely unattainable coverage for the Belarusian state propaganda. In the current form state-owned media aren't able to moderate the information field of Belarus. And this is a new reality that affects not only the conditions of mass media activity, but also political processes and issues of ensuring the psychological security of the country.

Moscow intends to establish full-fledged border control with Belarus. According to our information, the Federal Border Service of Russia began to deploy its structures directly along the Belarusian-Russian border. At the same time, public motivation of the actions of the Russian authorities is a kind of threat that allegedly originates for Russia from the territory of our country (illegal migration, smuggling, terrorism). In fact, we can observe the beginning of dismantling of one of the main ideological and practical achievements of President Lukashenka - the exclusive nature of the Belarusian-Russian cooperation. And together with it the status of Belarus as the main recipient of Russian financial and economic preferences comes to an end. Now Minsk can count only on the status of one of Moscow's partners, far from being first-rate one. And this is the best case. Statements about the possibility of Belarus' withdrawal from the CSTO and the EEU can be seen as a hint to the Belarusian authorities that their participation in these institutions isn't critical. And Moscow is quite ready for a full integration "divorce". Naturally, the responsibility for this will be assigned to the official Minsk.

It should be noted that on February 3, 2017, during more than 7 hours of speech, Aliaksandr Lukashenka recognized the crisis of the Belarusian-Russian relations and couldn't present the prospects for their normalization.

Insinuations about the withdrawal/exclusion of Belarus from the CSTO and the EEU (as well as the February protests) demonstrated the helplessness of the Belarusian state propaganda. Which can provoke the Kremlin to carry out a large-scale operation on psychological impact on the population of Belarus and pressure on the authorities. Official Minsk may have the only means of protection - the technical restriction of the dissemination of information, including in the Internet.

The very attempt to disrupt the press conference of Ambassador M. Saydik on February 15, 2017 isn't capable of exerting any influence on the negotiation process on the Donbas. However, a painful blow was struck on the reputation of the Belarusian authorities, proud of the order and high level of security in Belarus. It was publicly demonstrated that the ability of the Belarusian authorities to monitor the situation in the country is questionable. It's especially symbolic that the venue of the press conference (President Hotel) is located across the street from the residence of the President of Belarus. Although formally the action isn't directed against the Belarusian authorities, nevertheless they, and not the foreign diplomat, were the main target. This is another evidence that the Belarusian-Russian political relations are not just bad, they are rapidly deteriorating.

Speaking about the development of mobilization during the army's combat readiness check, we note that there are no official data on how many of the total number of military liable were called up to participate in the military training. However, according to the data from the previous events, the average turnout was about 50%. The reasons for non-attendance can be related to both labour migration and moving of people to a different place without registering there. It can also be connected to the antisocial way of life of the military liable.

It's necessary to pay attention to the fact that wheeled armored vehicles are currently used by the landing brigades and the brigade of the Nuclear, biological and chemical protection troops. The mechanized units are equipped with BMP-2 (there are about 900 combat and training-combat units). The combat value of BTR-70 in the conditions of modern combined-arms combat is around zero, the vehicle is obsolete. Its only advantage is the speed of movement. The reason for taking BTR-70 out of storage during the combat readiness check may be:

- the formation of a reserve of wheeled armored vehicles for equipping the Interior Ministry troops with them;
- the formation of units on armored personnel carriers intended for the protection of the rear during wartime;
- the planned increase in the number of army units equipped with wheeled armored vehicles (for example, an increase in the number of battalions in landing brigades or the formation of battalions in armored personnel carriers in mechanized brigades).

Before long we will see whether the February telephone conversation between Lukashenka and Nazarbayev is a sign of the formation of two factions within the EEU: Belarusian-Kazakh and Russian-Kyrgyz-Armenian. Recall that both Belarus and Kazakhstan have problems in their relations with Armenia. In fact, Minsk and Astana blocked the appointment of the Armenian representative to the Secretary General of the CSTO.

A decrease in the confidence of the military leaders of Belarus in the prospects of purchasing Su-30SM from Russia can be noticed: not so long ago, the Air Force commander talked about the acquisition of new aircraft as a practically solved issue. The Defence Minister's caution may be related to the financial factor: the economic situation in Belarus remains difficult and its improvement isn't yet visible.

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