

Analytical report:
Situation in the field of
national security and defence
of Belarus (December 2019)

The most important events of the month. The main events of December 2019 were connected with Belarusian-Russian relations, which by the end of 2019 almost escalated into a conflict over Russian oil supplies to Belarus. At the same time, the official Minsk was its initiator, being not satisfied with the price proposed by Russia. It is worth recalling that in previous years there were also difficulties with reaching oil agreements. But then it was about the volume / balance of supplies. Never before have oil supplies been stopped due to the absence of an agreement: during the first quarter of the next year, the previous conditions continued to operate until a new deal was reached.

On December 5, 2019 Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced that Russian President Vladimir Putin is experiencing severe anti-Belarus pressure from his subordinates. Obviously, this refers to the Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Medvedev, who has personal accounts with the Belarusian ruler. At the same time, security issues were named as the most important area of bilateral cooperation. Cooperation in this area needs to "... match with the economy and show what it costs". Then Lukashenka traditionally spoke about Belarus being the western outpost of Russia. But the Belarusian ruler didn't clarify, from whom Belarus is defending Russia.

On December 7, 2019 Lukashenka met Putin to discuss the most problematic issues in bilateral relations. As a result of 5 hours of negotiations, the parties refused to make any statements. For Lukashenka, silence regarding Belarusian-Russian relations is unusual: he usually quite quickly reveals some details about this. But not at this time. Later Lukashenka publicly invited Russian Prime Minister Medvedev to visit Minsk before the end of December to resolve the contradictions. The invitation was defiantly ignored.

On December 12, 2019 the final meeting of Lukashenka and Putin last year took place. During the meeting the Belarusian ruler returned to his traditional and previously win-win trump card - cooperation between the two countries in the field of security (a single defence space, air defence, grouping of troops, as well as a single space for the work of special services).

On December 30, 2019 a Lukashenko and Putin held a telephone conversation. For more than an hour, they discussed volumes, terms and prices for the supply of hydrocarbons and other types of raw materials. They agreed to either conclude an agreement on oil and gas supplies by January 1, 2020, or to develop an interim option before the final decision-making by the heads of the two countries. Who, if necessary, will meet for decision-making in mid-January 2020.

On December 31, 2019 at the Russian initiative, Lukashenka and Putin held another telephone conversation. Details of the discussion were not disclosed. On the same day, Lukashenka held a telephone conversation with Russian Prime Minister Medvedev on oil supplies to Belarus. Then he discussed the same issues by telephone with the Minister of Energy of Russia Alexander Novak. Then Lukashenka held an emergency meeting on the problem of oil supplies to Belarus. It was publicly recognized that negotiations with the Russian leadership on this issue did not bring the desired result. After that, among other things, Lukashenka ordered to begin supplying oil from alternative sources. There were plans to start deliveries both by rail from ports in the Baltic Sea and by using the Druzhba pipeline (obviously, from the Ukrainian Yuzhny port to Mazyr).

The development of the situation within the month. On December 3, 2019 in Belgrade Aliaksandr Lukashenka held talks with the President of Serbia, Alexander Vučić. It was stated that security issues are an important part of bilateral cooperation.

On December 8-10, a delegation of Belarusian industrialists was in Egypt. They held negotiations with the State Minister of Military Industry of this country Mohamed al-Assar. The parties discussed the development of bilateral cooperation and the removal of barriers in mutual trade. In particular, they reached an agreement to continue the joint assembly of MAZ trucks.

On December 9-12, the Belarusian delegation, headed by First Deputy Chairman of the State Military Industrial Committee (SMIC) Ihar Dzemidzenka, visited Jordan to attend the 5th meeting of the Joint Committee on Military-Technical Cooperation. The parties discussed the implementation of previously adopted decisions and priority areas for its development. The Belarusian delegation visited one of the air defence units of the Jordanian ground forces.

On December 13, 2019 SMIC Chairman Raman Halouchanka met with Turkish Ambassador to Belarus Nilvana Drama in connection with the end of her diplomatic mission. It is reported that during the meeting topical issues of the Belarusian-Turkish cooperation in the military-technical sphere were discussed. Mr. Halouchanka said that cooperation between the two countries in this area is developing.

On December 17, 2019, the Chairman of the State Border Committee of Belarus, Major General Anatoly Lapo met the Chairman of the State Border Service of Ukraine, Colonel Sergei Deyneko. The parties discussed the issues of the contractual basis for cooperation, demarcation of the border and ensuring security in its area contaminated with radiation. It was stated that the situation on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border is stable and the planned cooperation measures between the border guards of the two countries are being successfully implemented.

On December 19, 2019 Lukashenka signed a new State Defence Plan. The document pays significant attention to preventing destabilization of the situation within the country, which is considered as part of the state's defence, as often preceded by external armed pressure. It is stated that the new Belarus Defence Plan focuses on strategic deterrence. At the same time, it is not specified which instruments to carry out this deterrence are planned.

The new Defence Plan clarifies the wartime government system. It is stated that it "... has been tested during several exercises ... will allow clearly, purposefully, efficiently direct all forces and means in defending the state". At the same time, it is not clear, whether we are talking about the technical issues of the country's governance system in wartime or the organization of the whole state system.

Acting Chief of the General Staff Aliaksandr Valfovich explained that in preparing the Defence Plan and the documents accompanying it, the developers were considering the worst-case scenario for Belarus. The experience of conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Bolivia, Venezuela was studied. The likelihood of a large-scale war is not currently considered as a real threat. Speaking about the threat to internal stability, Mr. Valfovich put on par the political opposition and sabotage and intelligence troops.

Together with the Defence Plan, the Concept for the Development of the Armed Forces until 2030 was approved. It does not imply any significant changes, the national army as a whole will retain the existing composition and structure. The document declares the orientation to qualitative development and rearmament of the army. It is planned that over the next 10 years, spending on the army will grow to 1.5% of GDP. Which amounts to a negligible amount of USD 15 million per year (in terms of 2018). First of all, financial resources will be provided for the development of unmanned aircraft, electronic and radar reconnaissance, as well as for the modernization and purchase of combat aircraft, the modernization of missile forces and existing systems of barrelled and rocket artillery. It is also planned to solve the problem of purchasing ammunition, primarily anti-aircraft and anti-tank guided missiles, as well as other high-precision ammunition for existing weapons systems.

Anticipating the signing of the Defence Plan and the Army Development Concept, Lukashenka made a number of indicative statements. He pointed out that military power is being built up on both sides of Belarus, referring to NATO and Russia. Minsk will rely on its own security system and the continuation of military cooperation with friendly countries, primarily the CIS. At the same time, neither the CSTO nor the so-called The “Union State” were mentioned as a separate guarantee of security.

On December 27, 2019 in the Presidential Administration a meeting of the interdepartmental expert group on improving the legislation on administrative responsibility was held. We are talking about fundamental changes that will remove a number of acts from the category of punishable. Following the event, Interior Minister Yury Karaeu said that the MIA does not want to be a punitive body and will focus more on anticipation of offenses as well as explanatory work rather than on recording violations and punishing those responsible.

In December, a number of events in the field of international military cooperation took place:

- On December 2-6, 2019, a delegation of the Air Force and Air Defence of the Army of Belarus visited China, where together with the Chinese colleagues discussed the development of military cooperation in the field of Air Force and Air Defence. The Belarusian delegation also visited military units of the Air Force of China.

- On December 3, 2019, a meeting of representatives of the defence departments of Belarus and the United States was held. The parties discussed the problems of regional security, the state and prospects of bilateral cooperation in the military sphere.

- On December 5, 2019 the Chief of the General Staff of the Italian Army visited Minsk. The parties discussed cooperation in the field of peacekeeping, the state of international security, and the development of bilateral military cooperation (source). It was later stated that Belarus is negotiating with NATO on issues of conducting joint peacekeeping exercises in connection with the possible sending of Belarusian peacekeepers to the Italian contingent in Lebanon.

- On December 23, 2019, the defence ministries of Belarus and Serbia held consultations on the results of bilateral cooperation in 2019 and on the plans for 2020. It is planned that in February 2020, the Minister of Defence of Serbia will visit Belarus. Also, in 2020, the first bilateral Belarusian-Serbian military exercises “United Strike” will take place.

The work of the prosecutor's office to strengthen the rule of law in the troops continues. In December, it was reported about a meeting of prosecutors with officers and civilian personnel of the military commissariats of the Minsk region with a view to preventing corruption.

In the Viciebsk region, the prosecutor's office held a meeting with the military personnel of the 7th brigade of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA IT) on the anti-corruption topics.

Conclusions. Given the importance of the petrochemical sector for the Belarusian economy, the situation around the supply of oil from Russia to Belarus can be seen as a manifestation of a serious political conflict at the highest level. The Kremlin has ceased to respond to the previously win-win topic of Belarusian-Russian security cooperation, which in previous times helped resolve other pressing issues on the bilateral agenda.

It is necessary to recall, that back in December 2017, Belarus stated that the question of Russia renting two military facilities on the territory of Belarus (Baranavičy radio center with a missile attack warning station and the 43rd communications center of the Navy in Vilejka), the terms for which expires in 2020, will be decided in 2018. On December 31, 2019 the Belarusian authorities declared that this issue will be resolved in 2020. Obviously, if Moscow wants to extend the period of use of military facilities in Belarus, Belarus will not object with a probability close to 100%. Judging by the fact that Russia has modernized the Volga missile attack warning station (the main object of the Baranavičy radio engineering center), Russia intends to maintain a military presence in Belarus even after 2020.

Further, on December 19, 2018, Vladimir Putin approved the draft military doctrine of the so-called "Union State" of Belarus and Russia. Previously, the project was approved by Belarus. The document was to be approved by the Supreme State Council of the "Union State". But it still is unapproved.

Obviously, the official Minsk's hopes for developing cooperation with Egypt so far have a modest result. The high level of political dialogue has not led to a significant increase in trade and economic cooperation. Including in terms of exports of products and services of Belarusian military industry. Nevertheless, it is worth paying tribute to the Belarusian authorities, who purposefully and persistently promote the idea of expanding the Belarusian-Egyptian cooperation.

Not much is known about cooperation between Belarus and Jordan in the field of military industry. However, it is indicative that the chairman of the Jordanian part of the Joint Committee on Military-Technical Cooperation is Brigadier General Rateb Arif al-Daadzhei, the head of the air defence of the Jordanian ground forces. During the visit to the military unit, Belarusian specialists were presented the "Shilka" radar guided anti-aircraft weapon system. The Belarusian military-industrial complex has certain achievements regarding the modernization of these weapons.

Official Minsk does not consider external threats as the most important ones. The regime is concerned about maintaining control over the situation inside the country amid economic stagnation and the collapse of Russian financial support. There is reason to believe that the Belarusian authorities are taking into account the possibility of the development of social tension into political one. In the event of such crisis, a State Defence Plan may include:

- the temporary endowment of the army with important functions in terms of ensuring internal security;
- temporary reassignment of the army to the Ministry of Internal Affairs Internal Troops, which requires the improvement of their interoperability;
- building up the efforts of the MIA IT to prepare reserves.

Speaking about direct military defence of the state, it can be assumed that the approved Plan takes into account the following factors:

- integration of existing missiles with a range of 300 km into MLRS “Polonaise” and the prospect of creating a ballistic missile for “Polonaise”, which becomes especially relevant given the age of the existing “Tochka-U” missile systems;
- the likely purchase of a limited number of full-fledged combat UAVs manufactured/developed abroad;
- building up the capabilities of the Special Operations Forces both in connection with the growth of their numbers (tentatively, plus 30% in comparison with 2014) and with their selective rearmament (the issue of supplying wheeled armoured personnel carriers with cannon weapons is still unresolved);
- additional purchase of “Yak-130” combat trainers and their usage as attack aircraft and light fighters, as well as of “Su-30SM” heavy fighters, which can perform target designation for “Yak-130”;
- new/additional tasks for the territorial defence forces, taking into account the creation of artillery units in these forces.

Speaking about the Concept for the Development of the Armed Forces, one should note, that nothing is reported about the prospects for the purchase of new air defence systems, including the medium range ones. This puts the question on the future of the Belarusian military industry projects in this area. Apparently, until 2030 it is not worth expecting for noticeable deliveries of new armoured vehicles for the ground forces.

Regarding the prospects for changing the legislation on administrative responsibility, we should note the following. In conditions of economic stagnation, the Belarusian authorities do not have the ability to “buy” the loyalty of the population with the growth of wealth. Therefore, they decided to eliminate some “irritants” for society, but only in the fields, not affecting the interests of the existing political regime. The time will show how the Belarusian authorities will manage to combine “a kind word and a gun”.

For a long time the official Minsk has been striving to expand its foreign policy and economic base by developing cooperation with Western countries. Security is one of the tools to achieve this. A deterrent to political cooperation between Belarus and NATO is the West’s continuing view of Belarus as Russia’s appendage in the military-political sphere. In addition, the specifics of the Belarusian political regime is a serious constraint on the development of cooperation with NATO. Minsk is forced to prove its subjectivity to the West. The peacemaking field here acts as a platform for dialogue. At the same time, Lukashenka still does not perceive Western values, moreover, he considers them dangerous.

The prosecutor's attention to military commissariats is explained by the problems associated with conscription for military service: many young people are ready to go against the law in order to avoid it, including by paying a bribe.

In September 2019, the prosecutor's office had already conducted an anti-corruption event in units of the MIA IT 7th brigade. Since then, there were no reports on corruption in this unit. Holding an event on the same topic after a short period of time may mean that the activity of the prosecutor's office to ensure law in the army degenerates into another show-off, when the number of events becomes more important than their practical result.

Andrei Porotnikov,
The head of Belarus Security Blog project

