

Analytical report:
Situation in the field of
national security and defence
of Belarus (August 2020)

Minsk

The most important events of the month. On August 9, 2020, the presidential elections were held in Belarus. They were marked by falsifications and massive punitive actions of the authorities in dozens of cities of the country. This brutality was unprecedented even for the Belarusian realities and was used first against the protesters, and then against everyone – usual passers-by. Firearms were indiscriminately used against unarmed people. Two protesters (in Brest and Minsk) were deliberately killed in front of other protesters, clearly for the purpose of intimidation. Several more deaths (at least three) are regarded as related to violence by the authorities. At least 9000 people have been detained so far, at least 1000 (including minors) only in Minsk experienced violence of the law enforcement agencies. There are at least 450 facts of torture (only according to first estimates). After a month, not a single criminal case was initiated even on the facts of the murders. Moreover, there are reports that individuals who have filed complaints of violence by government officials are intimidated by criminal prosecution in a fake criminal case of mass riot.

Despite this, the country experiences the most large-scale street protests and civil disobedience in the history.

In addition to the scale of violence and protests, a new quality of the current situation is the complete decentralization of resistance to the regime. The authorities traditionally try to look for leaders, headquarters and political centres. Meanwhile, we are talking about a mass uprising, which is coordinated but not controlled. New technologies play an important role in this.

While the situation remains uncertain, the authorities as a whole maintain control over the situation in the country thanks to better organization, material resources, controllability, and the ability to manoeuvre their forces. This is also connected with the non-violent nature of the protests. But the punitive system is overstretched and has few reserves. The outflow of personnel from law enforcement agencies has become a problem: many employees who do not want to tarnish themselves by participating in crimes against their people are quitting. The exact number of such cases is unknown: as of mid-August, there was insider information about the filing of reports on the dismissal of about 1,000 Interior Ministry employees; in the first ten days of September, there is information about 6500 reports/applications for dismissal from all law enforcement agencies over the last month. It is impossible to confirm these figures for sure. However, judging by the hysterical reaction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the dismissals of its employees, who at the same time declared a public protest, the problem is quite acute. In addition, one must understand that a much larger number of security officials who do not support the policy of the authorities remain in the system for one reason or another.

One should also pay attention to the bureaucratic system. Which, on the one hand, is frightened by the scale of the protests. On the other hand, it clearly understands that the culprit of this situation is Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Under these conditions, the threat of sabotage of his decisions by the bureaucracy is growing.

The current crisis for the regime is complex: in addition to the difficult internal political situation, the achievements of Belarus' conventional foreign policy of the past 6 years have been destroyed; the authorities face the prospect of a severe financial crisis and loss of budgetary revenues, with the simultaneous closure of debt capital markets.

The refusal of the official Minsk to discuss the internal political situation in Belarus with the West directly was a mistake: wishing to demonstrate his disrespect for Western politicians, Lukashenka decided to communicate with them in absentia, through Vladimir Putin. This was a serious political mistake: the West perceived such behaviour as a sign of the loss of official Minsk's foreign policy subjectivity and falling into critical dependence on the Kremlin. The latter seems to be a significant exaggeration. In the near future, the regime will face the issue of its legal capacity in terms of the conclusion of any international agreements.

For both external and internal actors, the critical shrinkage of the social base of Lukashenka's support became obvious.

The regime lost its symbolic capital: opinion leaders, including those favoured by the regime, did not support the behaviour of the authorities. Even the pro-Lukashenka Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (its leader headed the initiative group for nominating Lukashenka as a presidential candidate) came out with cautious condemnation of the violence and expressed readiness to provide the victims with whatever they needed. It also called for an end to the violence and a peaceful dialogue.

Attempts to organize pro-government rallies through the forced participation of employees of budgetary organizations did not have the desired effect. Moreover, many organizations in Minsk sabotaged assignments for the participation of their employees in such events. As a result, military personnel and cadets of universities of law enforcement agencies were sent to imitate popular support for the regime.

Relations with religious institutions have seriously aggravated: if the Orthodox Church took a more neutral position, then the Roman Catholic Church came out with a strong condemnation of the punitive actions of the regime against the people. In response, official Minsk de facto banned the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus Metropolitan Tadevush Kandrusевич from entering the country, despite the fact that such actions are unconstitutional, because he is a citizen of Belarus.

Unable to suppress popular protests, the regime changed its tactics:

- an active campaign began to involve the army in confrontation with the people, in order to intimidate the disaffected and rely on the declared high army authority;

- in order to discredit the protests and shift attention away from their causes, there were numerous allegations that the West in various combinations (the United States, Poland, Czech Republic, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Ukraine, NATO and the EU) unleashed a hybrid war against Belarus and that internal protests were allegedly accompanied by force pressure from outside by NATO. According to state propaganda, the protests are provoked, funded and managed from outside the country. And Poland, allegedly, is planning the annexation of part of the Belarusian territory (this message, in particular, is actively used to indoctrinate the Ministry of Internal Affairs Interior Troops (MIA IT), who are hammered into their heads that they are fighting not with peaceful protesters, but with separatists who want to seize part of the territory of Belarus in favour of Warsaw ... following the example of Donbass). This narrative was promoted personally by Lukashenka during various events with his participation;

- in an effort to weaken the protest and again to divert attention from its real causes, an attempt to split the Belarusian society was made. The invited Russian political strategists and propagandists began promoting the narratives tested in Russia and Ukraine (regional and religious confrontation, putting provocative "labels" on opponents of the

authorities, fakes and information manipulation, attempts to provoke anti-Polish sentiments). In fact, the Belarusian state propaganda for the first time in many years began to work in unison with the Russian one. But this has not yet brought much success to the Belarusian regime.

From August 21, 2020, the access to a number of the largest socio-political Internet resources in Belarus was banned (in total, about 80 websites fell under the restrictions).

The developments within the month. Continuing the performance of the official Minsk on the topic of an alleged military threat from NATO, on August 20, 2020, Belarusian Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin ordered to conduct a comprehensive tactical exercise to prepare and conduct defence in the Hrodna tactical direction. This decision was reported to Lukashenka on the night of August 20. The brigade level exercise took place on August 28-31.

The mobilization of some military units was planned. However, it was hardly large-scale: in August they reported about the deployment of one tank battalion at the expense of those called up from the reserve.

As part of the exercise, units from other regions of the country were involved:

- The battalion of the 103rd Viciebsk Airborne Brigade, which covered 700 km in a day on its military equipment on public roads.

- The battery of the MLRS “Polonaise”, which, judging by the information about the 250 km march, could have been deployed in the area of the Belarusian-Lithuanian border.

- Subdivisions of the 465th missile brigade, which performed simulated training launches. The missilemen covered a distance of more than 400 kilometres on their military equipment.

- The units of the 740th anti-aircraft missile regiment covered more than 400 kilometres, after which they took up combat duty.

A mechanized battalion of the 6th mechanized brigade was involved in the exercise. Artillery units (as far as can be judged, two divisions of self-propelled howitzers, an MLRS division and an anti-tank division), UAVs and electronic warfare, anti-aircraft divisions of the 6th and 11th mechanized brigades were involved as well.

Several helicopters were relocated from the Mačulišчы airfield to the Lida airfield.

In the course of the exercise, the issues of strengthening border protection, searching, blocking and destroying enemy forces using air search and assault groups of the Special Operations Forces in cooperation with tank and motorized rifle units, conducting defensive combat in two directions were worked out. The exercise was also carried out outside the territory of the test site in real terrain.

On August 24, 2020 within the framework of the international forum “Army-2020” held in Russia, the Chairman of the State Military Industry Committee (SMIC) of Belarus Dzmitry Pantus met Director of the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation of Russia Dmitry Shugaev. It is reported that in 2019 the volume of exports of Belarusian military products to Russia amounted to over 30% of the total export of the Belarusian defence industry. About 300 organizations of the two countries have partnerships with each other. Work to create joint ventures is underway as well.

During the “Army-2020” forum, Belarusian representatives signed a number of contracts for the supply, repair and maintenance of equipment for the Belarusian army with companies from the Russian military-industrial complex. Only a part of the deals is known: delivery of two battalion sets of BTR-82A, delivery of the first batch of four Mi-35M fire support helicopters and delivery of modern air defence systems until 2025.

In August, the farce with the detention of the so-called PMC Wagner troops came to an end: they were released (having previously apologized), and the criminal case on their preparation of terrorist acts in Belarus just disappeared.

Until that moment, the Belarusian propaganda claimed about the disclosure of a large-scale conspiracy to destabilize the situation in Belarus. On August 1, 2020 Lukashenka heard the report of the Chairman of the State Security Committee (SSC) Valery Vakulchyk and the Chairman of the Investigative Committee Ivan Naskevich on the case of the Wagner troops. Lukashenka said that the facts found out by the Belarusian authorities contradict the Russian version that the detainees were traveling in transit through Minsk to a third country and had no other purpose of staying in Belarus. In the opinion of the Belarusian authorities, the destination of the detainees was precisely Belarus, and the goals had to be determined. And in general, the detainees are only the first part of the group of 180 or 200 people, which was planned to be transferred to Belarus from Russia.

On August 5, 2020, Lukashenka had a telephone conversation with President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The issues of ensuring border security and the Wagner troops detained in Belarus were discussed. The Ukrainian prosecutor’s office is investigating some of them on the facts of participation in hostilities in the Donbass. Lukashenka promised cooperation within the framework of existing international agreements. Later, after the release of the detained mercenaries, Lukashenka said that he did not plan to extradite them to Ukraine under any circumstances.

On August 6, 2020, at a meeting on ensuring the security of the election campaign, Lukashenka said that the detained 33 Wagner troops were only part of a sinister plot. He immediately gave instructions to invite the prosecutors general of Ukraine and Russia to Belarus in order to decide the further fate of the detained mercenaries. The apotheosis of the presentation was Lukashenko’s assertion that the Belarusian authorities uncovered the conspiracy, but it is unknown who is behind it: either the USA and NATO, or Ukraine, or Russia. He concluded that a hybrid war was unleashed against Belarus, but it is not clear by whom, and an attack must be expected from any side.

Russia consistently denied the guilt of its citizens and characterized the actions of the Belarusian authorities as a performance caused by the need to mobilize Lukashenka’s electorate in the face of an imaginary external threat.

In August, a meeting of the SMIC board was held. A negative impact on the economic activities of the department of the Chinese coronavirus pandemic and the closure of state borders, the fall in world oil prices and changes in exchange rates was underlined (this is a clear allusion to clients from the Persian Gulf countries, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia). As a result, some performance indicators were worse than last year. Particular emphasis is placed on the export of products and services as the main driver of SMIC economic development. Despite the difficulties, the net profit of the SMIC organizations increased by 1.5 times, and the profitability of sales remained at a

relatively high level of 17.9%. There were no net losses. Finally: “So far (sic!) we are able to prevent a fall in wages”.

At the same time, there is a task to prevent the deterioration of key performance indicators in the second half of the year. It is obvious that the SMIC management is not waiting for easy times.

Conclusions. Starting from the evening of August 9-11, during the period of the most violent clashes between the regime and the people, a complete shutdown of the Internet was observed in Belarus in order to limit the dissemination of information and the coordination of protests. On August 12, the repressions began to decline sharply, and the Internet was restored. On the same day Lukashenka held a meeting on topical issues. Although the details of the agenda were not disclosed, it can be assumed that the change in the behaviour of the authorities was not caused by considerations of humanity, but by the overstrain of the punitive system and the radicalization of protests. This created a threat not only of getting new victims, but also of a complete loss of control over the situation with the loss of force mechanisms of influence on the situation.

The August events showed a qualitative change in Belarusian society, the end of the process of forming a political nation of a European type and the readiness, ability and desire of people for grassroots self-organization and solidarity. This process can be traced back to the “anti-parasite” protests of early 2017, which were much smaller than the current ones, but covered a significant part of the country. They were not concentrated only in the capital, which was typical for traditional actions of the political opposition.

The existing system of power in Belarus does not meet the expectations of the society. But the regime is not showing readiness for transformation. This means that the conflict with varying degrees of intensity will continue until the complete dismantle of the ruling regime.

Using the pretext of an external military threat, official Minsk seeks to enlist Moscow’s unequivocal political support. Which should be further transformed into financial support. As expected, Moscow guaranteed support in the event of a security threat; there is still no clear response to the financial requests of the Belarusian authorities.

It seems that, despite the harsh rhetoric, the Belarusian regime seeks to avoid serious economic sanctions from the West, while at the same time securing political and economic support from Russia. The main task is to wait for favourable changes in the external environment, which will allow Lukashenka to re-engage in the geopolitical “swing”. However, the blow to relations between Belarus and the West (including Ukraine) has been so serious that it seems almost impossible to restore any productive dialogue while maintaining the current regime. There is no longer any need to talk about any serious cooperation in the security sphere, which has just begun to yield results: trust to the official Minsk has been destroyed to the ground.

The statements about more than 30% of Belarusian military-industrial complex exports to Russia in 2019 are surprising: as recently as January 2020, SMIC officially announced that the share of Russia in the export of defence products over the past year amounted to 26%. It is obvious that even the official data do not provide adequate information about the real situation in the Belarusian defence industry. But given the absence of other credible data, we are forced to focus on these.

The idea of creating joint ventures with Russia in the military-industrial complex is a long and very sad story. Just recall the projects blocked by the Russian side: the creation of a Belarusian-Russian short-range air defence system and the history of a joint company in the development and production of electronic warfare equipment, which was created and then liquidated without starting production activities. Moscow has never demonstrated a desire to assist Belarus in building up its military potential. Taking into account the extreme political weakening of the Belarusian regime at the present time, there is no reason to expect that the Russian position will change.

Speaking about the prospects for the supply of the BTR-82A, we note the following. The vehicles are planned to equip the Special Operations Forces. Plans for their purchase were first announced in August 2015. Deliveries were planned for 2016, but were personally blocked by Lukashenka. The reason was the lobbying activities of representatives of the Belarusian military-industrial complex, who were promoting their own armoured vehicles, which, at the same time, are not a full-fledged alternative to armoured personnel carriers. The BTR-82A is a modernisation of the Soviet BTR-80, still having its main disadvantages (lateral landing of the crew, insufficient level of protection, especially from the detonation of explosive devices). The advantages of the vehicle are the armament complex, which includes an automatic cannon, and a low price.

With regard to the purchase of Mi-35M helicopters, most likely we can talk about plans to supply a squadron of such aircraft (at least 12 units).

The total cost of 4 Mi-35M helicopters and 2 battalion sets of BTR-82A can be estimated at about USD 100 million. Taking into account the current crisis of state budget revenues, it is very likely that the contracts were signed on suspensive terms before the start of funding. It is interesting to note that during the current year there is no information on the prospects for the supply of the second batch of four Su-30SM fighters. On August 6, 2020 the Ministry of Finance of Belarus reported that the state budget deficit by the end of the year could be about 20% of the planned budget expenditures, which will be more than 5 (!) times higher than the planned budget deficit.

The renewal of the helicopter and armoured vehicle fleet in itself would be welcome. But here we have persistent suspicion that the official Minsk is using such contracts not as part of a long-term plan to modernize the national defence potential, but as a way to demonstrate to the Kremlin its importance for Russia's security.

The open deception of Kyiv by the official Minsk in the case of Wagner troops will have great influence on bilateral political relations. It is a blow to the Belarusian-Ukrainian dialogue in the security sphere.

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