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Belarus and Russia creating a joint group of troops

Belarus and Russia have agreed to create a joint group of troops. This statement was made by Lukashenka on 10 October 2022 during a meeting on security issues.¹ It is noteworthy that the agreement was not made public immediately, but rather three days after the conversation between Lukashenka and Putin in St. Petersburg: on 7 October. Information that the *tete-a-tete* talks took place and lasted about an hour was circulated.²

Between 7 and 10 October, a significant event that could require the immediate implementation of this agreement with indefinite deadlines occurred. On 8 October, an explosion took place on the Kerch Bridge, which connects the Krasnodar region of Russia with the Crimean Peninsula. The Kremlin considers the General Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine to be the organizer of this attack.³

In Kyiv, the formation of a joint Belarusian-Russian army group was regarded as an attempt to create a threat in a new strategic direction: –Ukrainian political experts quite clearly formulate this understanding of the danger: “When we take Kherson, Putin will order Lukashenka to hit Ukraine from the north”.⁴ The Ministry of Defense of Belarus rejects any suspicions of this kind. The Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus, Colonel Viktor Tumar, stated the following: “we are watching how the countries of the North Atlantic Alliance are increasing their military potential at our borders. In Poland and the Baltic States, the military infrastructure is being improved [...] To ensure parity in the sphere of military security and peacekeeping, it was decided to create a joint regional group of troops on our territory [...] (It) is an exclusively defensive project”.⁵

The Russian part of the joint group will number 9,000 people. The first echelons of soldiers began arriving in Belarus in mid-October. The army units will be provided with aviation, which will also be transferred to Belarusian airfields. At the same time, the basis of the group will be Belarusian units deployed “according to the peacetime state”.⁶ While the total number of personnel in the joint army will be 30,000 people “at the first stage”, the joint group may include the entire army of Belarus, which, according to some reports, has 45,000 military personnel. The Russian part of the

group will be reinforced with 200 armored personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles, 170 tanks, 100 artillery pieces, and mortars.

Considering this power, the joint group, according to the state Belarusian edition, can reach “both Kyiv and Warsaw”.⁷

The creation of the group obviously required an effective reaction from Kyiv. However, neither the transfer of troops to the north of Ukraine nor other measures have been reported yet. Meanwhile, speculation is spreading in the press about the possibility of a pre-emptive strike on Belarus in the event of an escalation of the threat or if there is any suspicion of the possibility of an attack. On the air of the FREEDOM channel, the historian Felshtinsky called on Ukraine to strike at its northern neighbor, since this is a weak link in the enemy environment and here “it will be much easier to defeat Putin”.⁸ In the comments of Belarusian political scientists in exile (Pavel Usov, for example), the creation of the joint group is “part of Putin’s operation to drag Belarus into the war”.⁹

At the same time, both official Minsk and the country’s population view the perspective of becoming direct participants in the war extremely negatively.

The latest Chatham House poll suggests that 53% of Belarusian citizens do not approve of the country’s participation in the war against Ukraine, and 42% consider this war pointless. Only 22% of respondents are ready to admit their responsibility for striking Ukraine from Belarusian territory, and 51% fully or partially reject such involvement.

Moreover, with the passage of time, pacifist sentiments among Belarusians are growing stronger – in August, there were more opponents of the war than six months before.¹⁰ Taking into account these public sentiments, Lukashenka does not tire in claiming that his soldiers will not enter the territory of Ukraine under any circumstances. Immediately after the creation of the regional group, the first such statement was made in an interview with NBC: “But we did not kill anyone there and we are not going to kill. Firstly, no one is asking us to participate in this operation, including Russia. And we do not intend to get involved there”.¹¹

Over time, more and more certainty appears in these statements. “Today they are shouting: ‘Lukashenka wants to send his servicemen to Ukraine!’ I have already said twelve hundred times that I have no such plans [...] We have nothing to do there, in Ukraine. And there is no need for us to send people there to fight”.¹²

The November statements contain a categorical rejection of sending troops and also do not mention the conditions under which such a dispatch would be possible. But the situation is changing. The future of the joint group of troops and the aims of its creation cause numerous speculations. Ukrainian experts have new reasons to discuss the possibility of a Russian-Belarusian invasion: the visit of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to Minsk on 3 December is one such cause. Lukashenka made several statements during the meeting, which can be understood in different ways. “We are preparing today as a single group, a single army. Everyone knows about it. We didn't hide it [...] We have openly stated our position. Neither you nor we wanted and do not want war [...] (With you today) we will work out a unified position on our further actions to protect our territorial integrity”.¹³

Obviously, Lukashenka now is against Belarus's active participation in the war in Ukraine, but he does not want to (and cannot) completely exclude it as an option.

This indicates that the probability of Belarus's direct involvement in Russia's war in Ukraine would remain low as long as Lukashenka has at least the smallest freedom in decision-making in this matter.

Economic downturn mitigated by state interference

Since 6 October, Belarus has been operating in a unique macroeconomic experiment. Lukashenka forbade the raising of prices and administratively stopped inflation. “From 6 (October), any price increase is prohibited [...] Not from tomorrow, but from today. So that prices are not inflated during the day [...] And God save someone in accounting who does something retroactively, some calculations, recalculations”.¹⁴ On some occasions, it is allowed to raise prices for goods and services if such a measure is approved by the relevant ministries or local government bodies.

Control over the execution of the order to freeze prices is entrusted to the Prosecutor General and the head of the State Control Committee. It seems clear that Lukashneka's threats were not fiction. The State Control Committee found an increase in prices for approximately 70 goods in the stores of the retailer "Neighbors" ("Sosed"). As a result, the director of the company was arrested.¹⁵ And this is not the only case. In the second half of October, the authorities reported about 34 criminal cases and the detention of 20 people on suspicion of "unjustified price increases".¹⁶ The reasoning for forced price fixing was explained by the Minister of Antimonopoly Regulation and Trade Alexey Bogdanov. According to him, there are no economic shocks now, and the dollar exchange rate is declining. Therefore, there are no grounds "for multiple increases in prices".

In the spring of 2022, the situation in Belarus lost stability due to the sanctions imposed on Belarus and Russia, which caused a currency panic that affected the consumer market.¹⁷ Indeed, in March, the dollar and euro exchange rates against the Belarusian ruble were almost one and a half times higher than at the end of October of the same year.¹⁸ The driver of inflation was sanctions, which led to the rupture of many supply chains or caused complications. The delivery of goods to Belarus by traditional routes has become more expensive. A number of circumstances have led to this: for example, the mandatory change of means of transport at the Lithuanian and Polish borders from European to Belarusian, or otherwise registered in the CIS.

The effects of other factors continued after the fall in dollar and euro exchange rates, but the impact of these is difficult to assess. In any case, the decline in exchange rates did not affect prices in any way because of the freezing of prices. In March, inflation began to rise sharply, and by the middle of the year it reached the level of 17-18%.¹⁹ According to government forecasts, this level was expected to remain until the end of the year, and in 2023 it would reach 19%. Lukashenka demanded that next year the price increase should not exceed 7-8%.²⁰

Different forecasts for the period after the administrative price freeze were given. The most pessimistic forecasts painted apocalyptic pictures, such as a shortage of goods in trade, as well as the paralysis of industry due to the ban on adjusting the cost of raw materials and the ban on increasing prices for final products of production (Pavel Samiev, CEO of the analytical agency "BusinessDrom" (8), etc.).

The consequences of the price freeze in the longer term can be assessed in the light of the following fact. One of the first macroeconomic consequences of the price freeze was deflation (about 1%), which took place in October, as reported by Minister Andrey Kartun.²¹ Otherwise, in December 2022, the Belarusian market was functioning without noticeable disruptions. There were no significant disruptions in the exchange of goods within the country and/or with foreign agents. As far as can be judged, the authorities used the reserves to reduce (freeze) prices due to excessive marginality, which was provided to market agents by exchange rate spikes. In the case of *force majeure*, the government reserved the right to administrative price increases. However, this tool has not yet come in handy. Although, of course, there are no guarantees that the hidden cancellation of price fixing will not be required in the very near future.

Infiltration of the Belarusian opposition

During October and November 2022, the circumstances of the scandal related to the exposure of an agent of the Belarusian special services, Artur Haiko, became clear. He had infiltrated the Belarusian opposition media structures in exile. On 2 October 2022, the Belsat TV channel published an investigation.²² On 9 November 2022, an open letter from Yanina Sazanovich, a former administrator of several opposition Telegram channels, was published on Facebook.²³ According to these materials, it became known that from September 2020 to May 2021, Haiko had access to the databases one of the largest opposition channels, the “Black Book of Belarus” (BBB). It is likely that he received information about everyone who collaborated with the channel during this period.

Perhaps the scale of the damage caused by the agent’s activities was even more significant. Sazanovich tells that Haiko had warm and trusting relations with several staff members of Sviatlana Cikhanouskaya’s office.

Both Sazanovich and Belsat correspondents believe that the intensity and targeting of the repressions of the Belarusian special services has increased dramatically due to the access of repressive structures to the lists of members of the opposition movement.

Representatives of Sviatlana Cikhanouskaya's headquarters admit that the Belarusian authorities have received information about anyone who came into contact with the BBB, and that these people should leave the country immediately for security reasons.²⁴

The lists of repressed persons associated with the opposition Telegram channel is growing day by day. In Belarus, the BBB was judicially recognized as an extremist organization on 29 April 2021,²⁵ and any person who subscribed to the channel can be charged with a criminal offense. That is, any cooperation with the channel means mandatory imprisonment. The channels of the Belarusian special services report on the detention of persons associated with the BBB almost daily.^{26 27 28} It is obvious that there are hundreds of these people and the fate of most of them remains unknown to anyone. According to the official data, by July 2022, dozens of people were detained for contacts with the "BBB", and moreover, about 20 citizens were held in only one of the criminal cases: they were later sentenced to prison terms from 5 to 11 years.²⁹

By now, there are approximately 1,500 Belarusian prisoners recognized as political prisoners.³⁰ In August, the country's authorities announced that on 17 September, on the occasion of the so-called national holiday of "Unity Day", a broad amnesty would be announced. It was assumed that 4,500 people could be candidates for release, some of whom belong to those convicted under political articles. However, on 10 November, the amnesty law was adopted by the House of Representatives³¹ – an analysis of the document shows that political prisoners should not wait for either release or mitigation of punishment.

The plans of the authorities have obviously changed over the past few months. Initially, it was expected that the amnesty could affect not only criminals. Analysts admit that during this period there were some negotiations between Belarus and the West, which ended in vain: this led to an increase in the intensity of repression and the rejection of gestures aimed at national reconciliation.³²

ENDNOTES

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