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Belarus on the lookout for new export markets

In 2022, Belarus's GDP decreased by 4.7%. In Minsk and the Minsk region, the drop was even greater – 6.2% and 9%, respectivelyⁱ. The income of the population also decreased by 3.7% in January-November 2022ⁱⁱ. The inflation rate was 12-13% per year. Deflation was observed in the last months of 2023 due to administrative interference in the economy. At a meeting with the government, Aliaksandar Lukashenka assessed the situation ambivalently: “I won't say that you are great, but you could have done a little better”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Nevertheless, the Belarusian authorities are acutely aware of the problem of finding a replacement for the (partially or completely blocked) European and Ukrainian markets. This can explain their interest in such exotic economic partners as Zimbabwe: the trade turnover of the two countries in 2022 is estimated at USD 40 million^{iv}. Lukashenka's visit to Harare (from 30 January to 1 February) was full of anti-colonial pathos. In particular, Lukashenka said: “We are not going as the colonialists once went, as they seized and exploited the people. We bring technology here and train people here with it, train specialists”^v. According to the official results of the visit, its “total economic effect” was estimated by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry at USD 200 million. As far as it is possible to judge, the USD 200 million refers to the sum of contracts, and not the profit that these contracts will bring. An agreement was confirmed on the supply of 4,000 tractors to Zimbabwe^{vi}.

After visiting Harare, Lukashenka went to Abu Dhabi on 1 February 2023. The volume of mutual trade between Belarus and Abu Dhabi in 2021 amounted to a modest USD 290 million^{vii}. The agreements made at that destination were rather vague, and it is difficult to assess their economic effect. The official presidential website only states that “agreements have been concluded in a dozen directions” without providing further detail^{viii}. Taking into account the volume of Belarus's foreign trade turnover, which amounted to approximately USD 80 billion^{ix} in January-November 2022, the results of Lukashenka's Asia and Africa tour cannot be called a breakthrough. Rather, it was a probe. This probe proved that replacing the traditional partners of Belarus (the EU and Russia) is practically impossible to make quickly.

Belarus receiving weapons from Russia

Belarus receives and will continue to receive new weapons systems from Russia, representatives of the Belarusian armed forces report. The air force in 2023 will increase its potential due to Mi-35M helicopters and Su-30SM aircraft, the exact number of which is not yet known. In January, the TOR-M2K battery was received for the needs of air defense^x. In December, the Belarusian army began the independent operation of the Iskander tactical missile system, the range of which is 500 km. Previously, such systems were serviced only by Russian crews^{xi}. From 16 January to 1 February^{xii}, joint Belarusian-Russian aviation exercises took place. According to the commander of the Belarusian Air Force Andrei Lukyanovich, “due to the difficult military-political situation, we have created a regional grouping of troops. The aviation component was also strengthened. The tactical flight exercises that we conducted are one of the elements of coordination between our and Russian crews”^{xiii}.

The meaning of “strengthening the defense capability of Belarus” and the main threats was explained by a representative of the military academy, head of the faculty of the general staff Andrei Bogodel: “When we say ‘Poland is arming itself’, it is difficult to imagine that it will attack a nuclear power, which is Russia. But as for Belarus, the risk is very high. If Russia gets bogged down in Ukraine, it will be much easier to resolve the issue with us”^{xiv}.

According to the Belarusian military, about 400 sea- and air-based cruise missiles are deployed along the country’s borders. In addition, 17,000 Ukrainian soldiers are stationed near the southern border of Belarus. In this regard, the threat of an attack is considered by the Belarusian side as quite real^{xv}. In particular, Minsk officially explains the creation of a joint Belarusian-Russian group of troops by the need to resist these threats. Lukashenka himself again categorically ruled out the possibility of the Belarusian army participating in military operations abroad: “I am ready to fight together with the Russians from the territory of Belarus only in one case so far: if at least one soldier comes from there to the territory of Belarus to kill my people”^{xvi}.

Opposition activists under trial

On 16 February, the trial of Stiapan Putila, Jan Rudzik and Raman Pratasevich began. All of them acted as editors of the NEXTA telegram channel and a number of other information structures. The court sessions opened in the absence of two defendants –

only one of the former associates of the defendants, Raman Pratasevich, was present. He was detained by the Belarusian authorities after a Ryanair plane made an emergency landing in Minsk in May 2021^{xvii}. Pratasevich admitted his guilt in full^{xviii}. This trial has become another one in a series of trials of iconic emigre opposition figures. Similar absentee trials are being conducted in the cases of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her associates.

The trials of activists who have remained in Belarus are also continuing. The process of the so-called “rail partisans” has ended. The Mogilev Regional Court found the accused guilty of carrying out terrorist activities and sentenced two defendants to 22 years in prison and the third defendant to 1.5 years. All three were classified as “political prisoners” by human rights organizations^{xix}. Polish media correspondent and activist Andrei Paczobut was sentenced to eight years in prison^{xx}. The verdict was also announced in the case of the “Workers of the Rukh” organization, which positioned itself as an independent trade union – 10 defendants received prison terms from 11 to 15 years^{xxi}. These convicts were also given fines (in addition to their detainment terms), and Putila and Rudik may well expect the seizure of property. In accordance with the new procedural practice, a sentence with confiscation of property can be passed in absentia – a precedent has already been created by the case of Olympic champion Alexandra Gerasimenia^{xxii}.

The Belarusian authorities are trying to divide emigrants into “sheep and goats”: the first are waiting for absentee trials, the second will be given the opportunity to return to their homeland.

For the purpose of selection, a special commission has been created, which determines by voting whether a citizen’s offenses are insignificant and whether he/she can safely return to Belarus^{xxiii}. The commission consists of, among others, “representatives of the public” who are not related to the field of justice – for example, employees of state media^{xxiv}. The verdict of the commission, which guarantees immunity upon return, is valid for only three months: an emigrant who does not use the permit during this period loses security guarantees. The authorities are confident that even under such conditions, the return migration flow will become massive. The possibility of unconditional refusal of persecution is not even considered – everyone who decides to

return must give a written commitment not to oppose “state symbols and legislation”^{xxv}. Hundreds of thousands of citizens have left the country over the past three years^{xxvi}. The authorities hope that the activities of “the return commission” will help to reverse the situation.

At the same time, the formation of a new political and administrative system is being completed, in which the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly (ABA) will play an important role. Lukashenka signed a law that defines the functions and powers of this structure. The ABA will be formed, as before, not by direct vote, but by co-opting delegates public, industrial, and managerial structures. The president (or an ex-president) of the country is a mandatory participant in the ABA: only this structure has the right to dismiss the head of state from power, among other responsibilities^{xxvii}. Rapid geopolitical changes apparently forced adjustments to the initial plans of the authorities: the All-Belarusian Assembly is unable to find a place in the political system of the state, as the state is at the epicenter of an armed conflict. The Assembly was supposed to become an instrument of great domestic political intrigue and a backup control circuit – however, not in the conditions of a major European war being actually underway. As a result, the law has not escaped anachronisms: the ABA should be held at least once a year^{xxviii}, but the last one took place in February 2021, and the next one will be held in April 2024^{xxix}. Obviously, the Belarusian authorities do not have urgent tasks that the All-Belarusian Assembly could solve. Nevertheless, the authorities are creating the tools necessary to ensure full control over the process of forming the ABA. Lukashenka signed the law “On the foundations of civil society”: this act establishes “special forms of interaction” only with structures that have at least 100,000 members (trade unions, etc.). It is they who will participate in the formation of the ABA. Another act, “On changing the laws on the activities of political parties and other public associations”, requires the re-registration of political parties: now they must consist of 5,000 activists, not 1,000 – this condition means that only structures hyper-loyal to the authorities are possible^{xxx}.

ENDNOTES

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