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New security outlook of the regime after Machulishchy

One of the most notable events of the first quarter of 2023 was, without a doubt, the incident at the military airfield in Machulishchy. The first vague reports about this appeared on the morning of 26 February: news agencies, with reference to Belarusian organizations based outside of the country, reported several explosions, as a result of which a Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft was damaged. Russia has only 9 such aircraft, each with an estimated cost of USD 330 millionⁱ. Responsibility for the sabotage was assumed by "Belarusian partisans who are in the ranks of the BYPOL security forces association": on 2 March, this group published a video taken during the sabotageⁱⁱ. For a long time, official structures refused to recognize the fact of the incidentⁱⁱⁱ, then they insisted on the complete ineffectiveness of the drone attack and even demonstrated in official media the flight of an intact A-50 aircraft with tail number 43^{iv}. In the end, Aliaksandar Lukashenka admitted that although the aircraft did not receive "significant damage, except for ... scratches and one hole in the hull, which do not interfere with the [ability of the] military aircraft to perform its functions", "nevertheless, we asked the Russians to take this aircraft for maintenance and send us another one"^v. According to British intelligence, the A-50 went to Taganrog for repairs; it reached its destination at a relatively low altitude, which may indicate that the cabin was depressurized as a result of an explosion^{vi}. The sabotage was promptly investigated by the Belarusian special services, and Lukashenka stated that a certain Mikalai Shvets, who had Ukrainian and Russian citizenship, was arrested near Minsk. During the interrogation by the KGB, Shvets stated that his training and transfer to Belarus were provided by the Security Service of Ukraine^{vii}. Later, the Belarusian special services accused Warsaw of involvement in the sabotage: allegedly, Polish intelligence enabled Belarusian emigrants to provide assistance to Shvets by delivering drones and explosives to the territory of Belarus. According to Minsk officials, the Poles were also preparing escape routes for saboteurs^{viii}.

As Lukashenka stated, even before the arrest of Shvets, mass detentions of oppositional citizens began in Belarus: "I ordered a few days ago ... to conduct a brutal sweep across the country ... They have hidden and are sitting ... We're already on our way to them. Our guys are already on the threshold, let them prepare. The best option is if they come by themselves: hands up, come and surrender ... We will capture them all!"^{ix}

The KGB reports that 21 people received administrative penalties, and 5 received criminal penalties. The essence of the claims against them is not known, but in terms of involvement in the incident in Machulishchy, apparently, they are not incriminated^x. It is also known that 20 people were detained in connection with the sabotage in Machulishchy – according to Lukashenka, they are considered accomplices of Shvets – and a number of other defendants in

the case disappeared abroad^{xi}. Attempts by a number of foreign-based Belarusian media to establish the identity and fate of the detainees ended with limited success: only three were identified accurately – these are people who were somehow connected with the search for housing for Mikalai Shvets^{xii}. The incident in Machulishchy had a certain impact on the transformation of the domestic and foreign policy strategy of Belarus. Aliaksandar Lukashenka still insists that attempts to make Belarus an active participant in the Ukrainian conflict will remain unsuccessful: "If you think that by challenging us, you will drag us into a war that is already going on all over Europe today, you are mistaken!"^{xiii} Nevertheless, some subsequent events are clearly related to the sabotage of the A-50. Aliaksandar Lukashenka signed a decree on the conscription of 250 reserve officers for active military service. Some of them should strengthen the border service (20 people), the rest (230 people) will serve in the armed forces^{xiv}. If the existing proportions remain, then we are talking about an increase in the number of active army personnel of at least 1,000 people^{xv}.

In addition, the Security Council of Belarus decided to prepare a new concept of national security and change the country's military doctrine, taking into account the "transformation of the entire spectrum of modern threats". The concept will be prepared for the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which will be held in 2024, and changes to the doctrine will be promptly prepared by the Ministry of Defense^{xvi}. It is premature to judge the essence of the changes, but the above statements of Aliaksandar Lukashenka imply a tightening of the repressive vector of domestic policy, tighter control of external borders, increased defense capability and a numerical increase in the army.

Innovations in criminal justice threaten opposition leaders

In March, Belarusian courts handed down sentences in a number of high-profile cases involving well-known political and public figures. The Leninsky District Court of Minsk sentenced Nobel laureate and the head of the human rights center "Viasna" Ales Bialiatski to 10 years in prison. His colleagues Valiantsin Stefanovich (9 years), Uladzimir Labkovich (7 years) and Dzmitry Salauyou (8 years) were also sentenced. They were charged with smuggling and financing group actions that grossly violate public order^{xvii}. The defendants were also fined in the amount of almost USD 400,000, which can be applied to their property. Bialiatski was detained on 14 June 2021, and on 7 October 2022 he was declared a Nobel Peace Prize laureate^{xviii}. A few days later, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (head of the Coordinating Council of Belarus for Ensuring the Process of Overcoming the Political Crisis) and Pavel Latushka (head of the People's Anti-Crisis Management of Belarus), as well as several members of the Coordinating Council, were sentenced. All the defendants were convicted in absentia. Tsikhanouskaya was sentenced to 15

years in prison, Latushka to 18 years, and three members of the Coordinating Council to 12 years each^{xix}.

In accordance with the practice of recent years, the property of convicts has been fully or partially converted into state income – for example, money on Latushka's accounts in Belarusian banks (about USD 50,000), as well as two of his residential buildings, have been seized; tax measures have been taken against other convicts^{xx}. Pavel Latushka's sentence was harsh, and his fate was meant to inspire civil servants with the idea that any disobedience or opposition to Aliaksandar Lukashenka will have the most disastrous consequences for the official. Another confirmation of this was the following innovation: Aliaksandar Lukashenka signed the law "On changing Codes on criminal liability"^{xxi}. In particular, this provides for the death penalty for officials who have committed treason against the state. A fine of over USD 500,000 is possible for "anti-state crimes".

Criminal penalties are also being introduced for discrediting the army, promoting terrorism, and violating the requirements for the protection of state secrets. The use of these innovations would, for example, threaten Tsikhanouskaya and Latushka with the death penalty – they were both accused of treason against the state. Since the courts of Belarus are prone to an expansive interpretation of accusations and demonstrations of cruelty, in practice, any manifestation of dissent can be subject to the harshest punishment.

This can be confirmed by two trials that ended with harsh sentences in one day. On 17 March, political scientists Valeryia Kastyugova and Tatsiana Kuzina, who are recognized as political prisoners, were each sentenced to 10 years in prison^{xxii}. Details are unknown because the court was closed. They were charged with "attempting to seize state power" and "inciting hostility" – according to Kuzina, the accusation was based on 340 words uttered by her during internet communication. On the same day, 17 March, Maryna Zolatava, the editor-in-chief of the *tut.by* news portal, was sentenced to 12 years, and Lyudmila Chekina, the general director of the portal, was sentenced to 12 years. Chekina was accused in organizing a *coup d'état* through the mass media and spreading appeals to foreign leaders with calls for violent actions against Belarus^{xxiii}.

By 17 March, the organization "Viasna-96" reported that there were about 1,460 political prisoners^{xxiv}.

Opposition activists under trial

The beginning of spring 2023 was marked by an increase in the foreign policy activity of the Belarusian government. Aliaksandar Lukashenka paid visits to China (28 February to 2 March) and Iran (12-13 March). No meaningful information was published about the content of the first

of the trips: the exception was on Chinese official websites, which published 15 points on the development of the strategic partnership between the two countries^{xxxv}. As far as can be judged, China sees Belarus as an element of the "Belt and Road" transcontinental trade and economic initiative, and it also intends to actively cooperate with Minsk in placing its export-oriented production facilities. In this regard, Beijing guarantees Belarus foreign policy support and protection from any threats. If the visit to China had a more strategic nature, then the trip to Iran was aimed at discussing specific trade and economic projects. At least, the official media focused on this point – in particular, the words of Aliaksandar Lukashenka were quoted: "I can estimate the effect of the current visit, if we implement all our agreements, at USD 100 million"^{xxxvi}. However, the United States believes that the trip to Tehran had other goals than simply increasing the volume of mutual trade. This was stated by State Department spokesman Ned Price: "Regarding Lukashenka's visit to Iran, we see it as further deepening relations between Iran and Russia"^{xxxvii}. Thus, Minsk acts either as a mediator or a partner in some informal contacts between Moscow and Tehran, Washington believes. It is difficult to judge the content of these contacts, but it is known that Iran supplies Russia with weapons (drones, missiles, etc.), coordinates strategy in the field of oil trade, and cooperates in circumventing financial and trade sanctions.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ <https://www.unian.net/war/ataka-na-samolet-drlo-a-50u-vks-rf-v-machulishchah-novye-podrobnosti-diversii-12160419.html> (Ukrainian Independent News Agency)
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SoqX8YRJB4> (BYPOL's youtube-channel)
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/svedenija-o-podryve-samoleta-v-machulischah-okazalis-fejkom-553230-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{iv} https://t.me/ATN_BTRC/91646 (telegram-channel of The Belarusian state owned TV)
- ^v <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ukrainskij-terrorist-i-ego-posobniki-zaderzhany-v-belarusi-lukashenko-rasskazal-podrobnosti-i-nagradil-554148-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{vi} <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1633715451774763008> (official twitter of The UK Ministry of Defence)
- ^{vii} <https://www.belta.by/society/view/ukrainskij-diversant-rasskazal-kak-ego-gotovili-kurator-y-sbu-k-teraktu-v-belarusi-554249-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{viii} <https://www.belta.by/society/view/operativnik-kgb-k-popytke-organizatsii-terakta-v-belarusi-prichastny-spetssluzhby-polshi-554539-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{ix} <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ukrainskij-terrorist-i-ego-posobniki-zaderzhany-v-belarusi-lukashenko-rasskazal-podrobnosti-i-nagradil-554148-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^x <https://www.belta.by/society/view/ostatsja-v-teni-ne-udastsja-mvd-o-vyjavlenii-skrytyh-jacheek-ekstremistov-i-ih-posobnikov-554733-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{xi} <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ukrainskij-terrorist-i-ego-posobniki-zaderzhany-v-belarusi-lukashenko-rasskazal-podrobnosti-i-nagradil-554148-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{xii} <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/34274.html> (independent belarusian online media)
- ^{xiii} <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ukrainskij-terrorist-i-ego-posobniki-zaderzhany-v-belarusi-lukashenko-rasskazal-podrobnosti-i-nagradil-554148-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{xiv} <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/podpisan-ukaz-o-prizyve-oficerov-zapasa-na-voennuyu-sluzhbu-1678459733> (official website of Aliaksander Lukashenka)
- ^{xv} https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Вооружённые_силы_Республики_Беларусь
- ^{xvi} <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P223s0001&p1=1> (official portal for publishing state juridical acts)
- ^{xvii} <https://www.belta.by/photonews/view/v-sude-leninskogo-rajona-minska-oglasili-prigovor-po-delu-tsentra-vesna-32322/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{xviii} <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/ales-bjaljackiy> (website of The Belarusian human rights organization)
- ^{xix} <https://www.belta.by/society/view/tihanovskoj-15-let-kolonii-v-minske-vynesli-prigovor-po-delu-koordinatsionnogo-soveta-553991-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency) and <https://www.belta.by/society/view/obvinjaemym-po-delu-koordinatsionnogo-soveta-moroz-kovalkovej-i-dylevskomu-dali-po-12-let-kolonii-553999-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{xx} <https://www.belta.by/society/view/sud-ostavil-pod-arestom-imuschestvo-obvinjaemyh-po-delu-koordinatsionnogo-soveta-554015-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{xxi} <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12100085&p1=1> (official portal for publishing state juridical acts)
- ^{xxii} <https://spring96.org/ru/news/111094> (website of The Belarusian human rights organization)
- ^{xxiii} <https://www.belta.by/society/view/delo-tutby-marina-zolotova-prigovorena-k-12-godam-kolonii-556011-2023/> (Belarusian state owned News Agency)
- ^{xxiv} <https://prisoners.spring96.org/be#list> (website of The Belarusian human rights organization)
- ^{xxv} http://ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/zgxw/202303/t20230302_11033905.htm (website of The China embassy in Russia)
- ^{xxvi} https://www.belarus.by/ru/press-center/news/pochemu-vizit-lukashenko-v-tegeran-nazyvajut-perelomnym-momentom-razbiraem-glavnye-zajavlenija-rukovodstva-belarusi-i-irana_i_0000154020.html (official state-owned portal of The Republic of Belarus)
- ^{xxvii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2mJkTqNDI4> (official channel of The US Department of State)