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Deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus

On 25 March, the President of Russia announced that sites for the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons will be set up in Belarus by 1 July. According to Vladimir Putin, the decision was made in response to the UK's intention to supply Ukraine with depleted uranium shells: Belarus has long offered to place nuclear weapons on its territory, the Kremlin points out, but it was only the British plans that made this an urgent necessity. At the same time, Putin said this is not a violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty: Moscow will retain full control over the nuclear weapons.ⁱ Yet judging by the contradictory statements in this regard, there is no complete agreement when it comes to interpreting these agreements and the competencies of the parties. A few days after Putin's statement, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry indicated that the move was not about the transfer of control over the weapons, and therefore there was no reason to talk about a violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.ⁱⁱ However, three days later, Aliaksander Lukashenka delivered a message to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly, after which he said: "There are no uncontrolled weapons in Belarus and there cannot be. Therefore, we will manage everything that exists in Belarus here".ⁱⁱⁱ The Russian Defense Minister later clarified: some aircraft in the Belarusian Air Force have been modernized and are now capable of carrying nuclear weapons; the Iskander complex, whose missiles are capable of carrying nuclear warheads, has been transferred to the Belarusian army; and Belarusian crews are being trained in the use of Iskanders at the Russian test site.^{iv} Shaigu did not comment on the control problem, but instead exhaustively listed the situations in which the Belarusian side would get access to nuclear weapons: Minsk will have the means of delivery and the skills to use such weapons, but there is no question of any transfer of the warheads. On 14 April, the Belarusian Defense Minister announced that it was not only tactical nuclear weapons but also strategic nuclear weapons that could be deployed in Belarus: "We are already preparing our existing sites. And if the hostile rhetoric (of the West) continues, this will be the next step. We will respond to force only with force". However, Viktor Khrenin refused to talk about who would control these weapons – "our president answered this question very clearly".^v Secretary of State of the Security Council of Belarus Aliaksander Valfovich said that 43 facilities where nuclear weapons can be placed have been prepared in the country since Soviet times. The authorities do not consider it mandatory

to move the launchers close to the borders with Poland, Lithuania or Latvia – the means of delivery make it possible to disregard the location of weapons.^{vi} Ukrainian politicians and experts are skeptical about plans to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus. Secretary of the Security Council Danilau is sure that there is no room a conversation on this, since it is the statements of Beijing, not Moscow and Minsk, that are important here: “There will not be and cannot be any deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus until China gives permission. Will the PRC give permission? I’m more than sure [it won’t]. Putin’s statements about such plans are the usual blackmail aimed at ensuring that the Americans agree to go to some negotiations as soon as possible”.^{vii} An expert from the Ukrainian Institute of the Future (Ukraine), political scientist Igor Tyshkevich, also believes that the deployment plans will face a Chinese veto: as threats that are a political tool, Beijing is ready to accept Belarusian and Russian statements about nuclear weapons, but any attempts to implement them will be immediately blocked.^{viii} Tyshkevich also admits that the statements about deployment are an attempt by Lukashenka to guarantee his hold on power in the country: the presence of such weapons is protection against any violent interference in the internal affairs of the Belarusian authorities, and this also ensures the interest of governments along the Belarusian borders in maintaining internal political stability in Belarus.^{ix} In fact, Ukraine has noted a decrease in the level of Russia’s military presence in Belarus: out of the 4,000 soldiers stationed there, 2,000 are being transferred to the east of Ukraine.^x In this situation, the Belarusian authorities have to make additional efforts to ensure that the country continues to appear to be a formidable military force. In April, the combat readiness of the Belarusian army was checked. As the Ministry of Defense reported on 14 April, “The reception of the mobilization resources has been completed ... weapons, military and special equipment have been removed from storage”.^{xi}

The activities of the Belarusian police

In March-April, the incident involving an attack on a Russian A-50 military aircraft in Machulishchy (26 February) was informative and politically relevant. The final official version of this event was published by the ONT TV channel. In particular, the film “Gaspar did not get in touch” presented a look at the events around Machulishchy by the Belarusian KGB, who acted as the main consultant and *de facto* co-author of the ONT TV channel broadcast. The authors of the Gaspar tape reported that Shvets, a citizen of Ukraine, acted on the instructions of the Security Service of Ukraine. He was actively

assisted by Belarusian citizens who provided him with accommodation, collected necessary information on his behalf, and moved him around the territory of Belarus. One of Shvets's associates, IT worker Zmicer Mastavy, set up a live broadcast from the Machulishchy airfield, which allowed real-time monitoring of the activity of the Russian military and the publishing of secret data on telegram channels. In total, the KGB considers 30 people to have been involved in this attack: they have been charged under an article of the criminal code that provides for the death penalty as the most severe punishment.^{xii} The film also reported that a Russian citizen, Alexey Kulikov, was detained in Grodno after he informed the SBU about the work of local oil refineries, as well as about the military enlistment office and the city administration. The press officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Nikolenka answered accusations of official Kyiv involvement in the Machulishchy incident by saying: "We categorically reject the insinuations by Aliaksander Lukashenka about the alleged involvement of the Ukrainian side in the events at the Machulishchy airfield."^{xiii} This did not prevent Aliaksander Lukashenka from calling Uladzimer Zialensky a "nit" for his alleged involvement in the attack on the airfield.^{xiv}

In March-April, there were several more police-related stories that received significant media attention. The Belarusian Interior Ministry detained Aliaxey Maskaleu at the request of the Russian authorities: he was sentenced to two years in prison for "discrediting the Russian army". Maskaleu's conflict with the state began with his daughter's anti-war drawing, which caused a sharp reaction from the administration of the school where the girl studied. In the end, the child was transferred to an orphanage^{xv} – her father was sentenced to imprisonment, and he tried to leave Russia via Belarus, where he was arrested.^{xvi} There is no information about his future fate, but Maskaleu was probably handed over to representatives of the Russian Interior Ministry. In addition, a verdict was passed in the case of Valery Tsepkala, a prominent opposition figure and a former influential official. He was sentenced to 17 years in prison and a monetary penalty of 12,000 EUR.

In addition to economic crimes, Tsepkala was also charged with political crimes by the Prosecutor General's Office: "[being] an opponent of the current government, he committed a number of extremist crimes such as the creation and leadership of an extremist formation, discrediting the Republic of Belarus, propaganda of war, slander, and public insult of the President of the Republic of Belarus".^{xvii} The accused has been

abroad for a long time, and therefore he was charged *in absentia*. When discussing notable political processes, it is impossible not to mention the “NEXTA” case: the creators of a number of opposition online media appeared on the docket – two were tried *in absentia* (Putcila and Rudzik) and one was present in the courtroom (Pratasevich, who was arrested at Minsk airport on 23 May 2021 after the forced landing of a RYANAIR plane^{xviii}). The prosecutor’s office demanded a sentence for Sciapan Putcila and Jan Rudzik of 20 and 19 years in prison, respectively, as well as 10 years for Roman Pratasevich. The verdict will be delivered on 3 May.^{xix} Political processes continued; they became a daily routine. Mikalay Davydu^{xx} was sentenced to two years in prison – the mediocrity of this event in the current political and legal situation was accentuated by the fact that his name was not even mentioned in the state press. It was only reported that this case was about the leading design engineer of the Gomselmash plant: he was accused of “publicly insulting the President of Belarus, as well as government officials in connection with the performance of their official duties”.^{xxi} “Preventive” political detentions, searches, and interrogations have become commonplace in the country. An example of this is the police operation on 13 April conducted in Pruzhany. About 20 people were detained – they were searched, the contents of their phones were examined, and they were interrogated. Most were released, but some remained behind bars until their trial. Similar events took place in Pinsk, but the number of detainees there is unknown.^{xxii} These people, of course, are not listed as having been subjected to political persecution and are not included in the figures on political prisoners (of which human rights activists now number more than 1,500 – Belarus crossed this line in mid-April).^{xxiii} Nevertheless, such events create in the citizens of Belarus a sense of the totality of police control and the inevitability of punishment for any dissent: after all, everyone who lives in the country has information about such abuses in their immediate lives, among friends and relatives.

Lukashenka “half-recognizes” Russian territorial increments in Ukraine

Since the beginning of the war, diplomatic relations between Belarus and Ukraine have been frozen, but they were not severed. Belarusian diplomats left Kyiv on 18 March 2022,^{xxiv} but the Ukrainian ambassador remained in Minsk.

In April, Dzianis Pushylin, the head of the Donetsk People’s Republic, arrived in Belarus from Russia to meet with Aliaksander Lukashenka. It was announced that the participation of Belarus in the reconstruction of cities and industrial enterprises in

Donbass was discussed during the negotiations.^{xxv} This became a new link in a chain of meetings and visits through which Lukashenka “half-recognized” Russian territorial increments. In September 2022, he visited Sukhumi, which caused sharp dissatisfaction with the authorities and society of Georgia.^{xxvi} On 1 February 2023, the head of the self-proclaimed independent region of Abkhazia, Bzhania, visited Minsk: on the official website of Aliaksander Lukashenka, the guest is called “President of the Republic”, which is a *de facto* recognition of his own status and the status of his territorial entity.^{xxvii}

As a continuation of this trend, the meeting between Lukashenka and Pushylin represents an actual change in Belarusian approaches to the issue of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Up to now, Lukashenka has diligently avoided direct and unambiguous statements that could be considered either an acceptance of Russian territorial increments or a refusal to recognize them.

The Ambassador of Ukraine Kizima left for his homeland for consultations immediately after the meeting between Lukashenka and the “head of the DPR”. Kyiv issued a sharp official statement: “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine condemns Aliaksander Lukashenka’s meeting with Dzianis Pushylin in Minsk on April 18 as an attempt to legitimize this representative of the Russian occupation administration in Donetsk”.^{xxviii}.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ <https://sputnik.by/20230325/putin-stroitelstvo-khranilischa-dlya-yadernogo-oruzhiya-v-belarusi-zakonchat-v-iyule-1073647731.html> Russian state-owned information agency
- ⁱⁱ https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/d73d30578e49412b.html Official site of The Belarussian ministry of Foreign Affairs
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-na-vopros-o-jadernom-arsenale-beskontrolnogo-oruzhija-v-belarusi-net-i-byt-ne-mozhet-558577-2023/> Belarussian state-owned information agency
- ^{iv} <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/17443695> Russian state-owned information agency
- ^v <https://www.belta.by/society/view/kak-belarus-otvetit-v-sluchae-prodolzhenija-vrazhdebnoj-ritoriki-zapada-rasskazal-ministr-oborony-561308-2023/> Belarussian state-owned information agency
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- ^{vii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbACGhA0L4o> 00:47
- ^{viii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TDWaC5NAqs> 07:07
- ^{ix} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MT700c_ZQFA 07:36
- ^x <https://www.unian.net/war/rossiya-perebrasyvaet-iz-belarusi-tsyachi-trenirovannyh-voennyh-cto-ugrozhaet-ukraine-12206670.html>
- ^{xi} <https://t.me/modmilby/25739>
- ^{xii} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbIOEwGL_A
- ^{xiii} <https://www.facebook.com/oleg.nikolenko.50> Official account of press-officer of The Ukrainian ministry of Foreign Affairs
- ^{xiv} <https://www.belta.by/president/view/ukrainskij-terrorist-i-ego-posobniki-zaderzhany-v-belarusi-lukashenko-rasskazal-podrobnosti-i-nagradil-554148-2023/> Belarussian state-owned information agency
- ^{xv} <https://ru.euronews.com/2023/03/30/antiwar-girls-father-arrested>
- ^{xvi} <https://sputnik.by/20230330/mvd-belarusi-podtverdilo-zaderzhanie-grazhdanina-raf-alekseya-moskaleva-1073837461.html> Russian state-owned information agency
- ^{xvii} <https://prokuratura.gov.by/ru/media/novosti/nadzor-za-resheniyami-pougolovnym-i-grazhdanskim-delam/lishenie-svobody-na-0704/> Official site of The Belarussian Prosecutor General's Office
- ^{xviii} https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%98%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82_%D1%81_%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9_Boeing_737_%D0%B2_%D0%9C%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B5
- ^{xix} <https://www.belta.by/society/view/budu-predelno-chesten-i-kratok-cto-skazal-protasevich-v-svoem-poslednem-slove-563334-2023/> Belarussian state-owned information agency
- ^{xx} <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/mikalai-davydau> Official site of The Belarussian human rights organization «Viasna-96»

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- ^{xxi} <https://gp.by/novosti/chp-i-kriminal/news267093.html> Belarusian state-owned newspaper
- ^{xxii} https://t.me/viasna_brest/3445 Official channel of The Belarusian human rights organization «Viasna-96» (Brest branch)
- ^{xxiii} <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru#list> Official site of The Belarusian human rights organization «Viasna-96»
- ^{xxiv} <https://www.belta.by/society/view/eto-polnejshij-bespredel-pod-prikrytiem-zakonov-voennogo-vremeni-posol-o-situatsii-v-ukrainskom-kpp-491293-2022/> Belarusian state-owned information agency
- ^{xxv} <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-vstretilsja-s-vrio-glavy-dnr-pushilinym-561884-2023/> Belarusian state-owned information agency
- ^{xxvi} <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/509829> Project of the UN Association of Georgia
- ^{xxvii} <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-prezidentom-respubliki-abhaziya-aslanom-bzhaniya> Official site of Aliaksander Lukashenka
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