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Developments of the military plot of Wagner

The military plot involving the Wagner company saw developments in July, although there is still not complete clarity with regards to the status, prospects, and nature of the activities of this group on the territory of Belarus. Belarus's official media regularly publishes videos showing the arrival of the next batch of mercenaries at the training ground near Asipovichy. The Ministry of Defense stated that Wagner employees act as instructors. They work with territorial troop units. The ministry has developed a "roadmap", according to which there are plans to organize cooperation with the military units who arrived from Russiaⁱ ⁱⁱ. According to experts, the first large group of mercenaries arrived in Belarus on 15 July as part of a column of 60 vehicles: the unit was sent to the village of Tsel, where it set up a tent campⁱⁱⁱ. According to Ukrainian Border Guard Service press officer Andriy Demchenko, "separate groups of mercenaries have arrived on the territory of Belarus, but there is no talk of any mass or large-scale arrival of representatives of the PMCs... As of now, they do not pose a threat to Ukraine"^{iv}. The attitude of the Belarusian authorities towards a private military company remains unclear. For example, Lukashenka has declared that "I absolutely do not see any risks from the placement of the Wagner PMCs in Belarus". At the same time, he admits that neighboring countries have a reasonable concern: "all neighbors, including ... the leadership of the United States of America, understand that this is a very powerful combat unit and there are hardly units in the world equal to Wagner in combat experience". He immediately noted that "the Armed Forces of Belarus are very combat-ready units, not inferior to Wagner"^v. From these statements, it can be concluded that Lukashenka is aware of the risks associated with the deployment of a private army on the territory of Belarus, one which does not obey him and has serious combat skills. A rather strange statement was made at the meeting between Lukashenka and Putin in Moscow (23 July): "the Wagnerians are creating problems for us. They say: 'we want to go West. Let us... go on an excursion to Warsaw, to Rzeszow'. I keep them, as agreed, in Belarus. I would not like to relocate them there [to the West], because their moods are bad"^{vi}. Was Lukashenka emphasizing the limitations of his control over Wagner? Is his statement a veiled threat to Poland? The official statements from the Russian side about Wagner are quite stingy. The very status of the group remains a mystery: on the one hand, they are rebels, on the other, Vladimir Putin himself met with its commanders on

29 June after the end of the riot. Moreover, the head of the Kremlin discussed with the rebels “issues of their further employment”^{vii}. Russian military-analytical publications claim that Wagner will become part of the “regional grouping of troops of the Union State of Russia and Belarus”. The publication *Military Review* also reports that the mercenaries’ deployment on the territory of Belarus is being paid for by the Ministry of Defense of Russia^{viii}. However, neither Moscow nor Minsk have officially confirmed this yet. Nonetheless, this interpretation of the status of “Wagner” makes it possible to understand why Lukashenka is so calm. Firstly, the Belarusian side is spared from worries about financially supporting the mercenaries – and the costs for their “owners” are very expensive: Putin spent 86 billion (about USD 1 billion) on them in just one year of the war^{ix}. In addition, Lukashenka’s calmness is a sign of the probable subordination of Wagner to the Russian political and military leadership – if the reports about the participation of mercenaries in the “regional grouping of troops of the Union State” are true, then the mercenaries are not commanded by Prigozhin but by more predictable and respectable figures in Moscow. However, it is not entirely clear what Wagner will do in Belarus. According to the calculations of a number of experts, there will be 8,000 mercenaries^x, and this is too much for instructor and training activities – after all, the Belarusian army itself is numerically only a few times larger (48,000 in 2022). It can be assumed that Wagner employees will train more than only Belarusians: in July, Minsk ratified an agreement with Russia on the establishment and operation of joint training centers for military personnel of the armed forces^{xi}.

In addition, Belarus has adopted the law “On the People’s Militia”^{xii}. This force includes 100,000 to 150,000 people – almost all the men of the country who are able to carry weapons, as stated by Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin^{xiii}. Moreover, this militia will be created as an addition to not only the regular army, but also to the territorial defense forces: thus, more than 200,000 people will apparently need to acquire combat skills in Belarus, and, therefore, Wagner will have something to do.

In addition, if there is a continuation of the subordination of these mercenaries to the Russian Ministry of Defense, they may well be stationed on the territory of Belarus only temporarily, until they receive a new combat mission. The temporary nature of the Belarusian mercenary mission was confirmed by the owner of Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin: “it has been decided that we will be in Belarus for some time. During this time,

we will make, and I am sure of it, the Belarusian army the second [greatest] army in the world”^{xiv}.

Political prisoners in Belarus

The number of those repressed for political reasons in Belarus is close to 1,500 people^{xv}. Representatives of diverse social strata are being prosecuted, and it is possible to become the object of repression for the most minor offenses or even without committing any at all. For example, a law student was expelled before the defense of her diploma: the reason was not even the purchase of a thesis, which the girl admitted, but the fact that there were links to the resources in tut.by and spring96.org , both of which are included in the list of extremist websites^{xvi}. And in the city of Lida, a local resident was arrested for 10 days for reposting a message in the telegram messenger app – the offense was committed back in 2020^{xvii}. Igar Karney, an ex-journalist from Radio Svaboda, was also detained: initially he was sentenced to 10 days in prison, but a criminal case was immediately opened. It can be assumed that he will not be released soon. It has been suggested that Karney was taken into custody after he attended a commemorative event in connection with the death of the artist Ales Pushkin^{xviii}. Pushkin was sentenced to five years in prison in March 2022 “for inciting national and religious discord”. The artist died on 11 July: he was taken, unconscious, to the prison hospital with stomach ulcers and peritonitis, which caused his death. According to people familiar with the situation, Pushkin was killed by prison food and a lack of medical care^{xix}. In June 2023, 560 detentions, 409 administrative prosecutions for political reasons, and 151 fines were recorded^{xx}: in July, the intensity of various kinds of harassment was comparable. In addition, sentences were handed down in a number of political cases, the most notable among which was the trial of Eduard Babaryka, the son of ex-presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka. Eduard was sentenced to eight years in prison: he was accused of inciting hostility, organizing riots, and the non-payment of taxes. He has been in custody since 12 June 2020^{xxi}. Meanwhile, amendments to the “Law on Citizenship of the Republic of Belarus” came into force on 11 July. From now on, citizenship can be lost as a result of “the entry into force of a court verdict ... which confirms the participation of a person in illegal activities ... (As well as) the evasion of a person from executing a sentence of a Belarusian court and staying outside Belarus”, said Aliaksei Begun, head of the Citizenship and Migration Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs^{xxii}. The issue of the deprivation of citizenship will be considered by a

special commission and approved by Aliaksandar Lukashenka. At the same time, the emergence of a significant layer of stateless persons seems to Minsk to be a “far-fetched problem”: if a convict is in the country, he will go to prison, but no one will deprive him of his passport, and if he is hiding abroad, “then what kind of citizen is he?”^{xxiii}.

Nuclear weapons delivered to Belarus

In July, the first confirmations appeared that nuclear weapons had been delivered to the territory of Belarus after all. The Defense Intelligence Agency (USA) stated that it has data on the arrival of a certain number of tactical nuclear charges at locations in the country^{xxiv}. It is notable that satellite imagery did not detect any activity to ensure nuclear safety measures. However, American intelligence believes that there are a number of Soviet-built facilities in Belarus that are well-preserved and do not require reconstruction. At the same time, American intelligence and army structures do not believe that the observed activity represents preparation for the use of nuclear weapons. The DIA is also confident that control over tactical charges will not be transferred to Lukashenka. According to American intelligence, Russia has 1,900 tactical charges, but it remains unknown how many of them were sent to Belarus. The fact that Moscow does not intend to lose control over its nuclear weapons in Belarus was confirmed by Vladimir Putin. Putin has not entered into disputes with Lukashenko about who will remain in control of tactical charges. He simply stated that “Belarus is a part of the Union State. Unleashing aggression against Belarus will mean aggression against the Russian Federation. We will respond to this with all the means at our disposal”^{xxv}. From this, it follows that Putin considers the “Belarusian means” of countering aggression insufficient, and “sufficiency” can only be provided by Russia. This is a direct refutation of Aliaksandar Lukashenka’s statements: “God forbid, I have to make a decision on the use of these weapons. There will be no hesitation if aggression is committed against us”^{xxvi}. At the same time, the idea of deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus is not understood by Lukashenka’s fellow citizens. The Belarusian Analytical Workshop (BAW), working in Warsaw under the leadership of Andrei Vardamatsky^{xxvii}, conducted a sociological study in June. Respondents were asked the question: “How do you feel about the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus?”. According to BAW, 52% of Belarusians are against it, and only 35% support it^{xxviii}. In general, Belarusian society is quite pacifist. BAW notes that respondents are categorically against the use of the Belarusian army in military operations that are being

conducted in Ukraine: 80% of citizens do not accept it, and only 10% support it. Moreover, even Russia's use of Belarusian military infrastructure in the Ukrainian conflict is negatively assessed by 50% of respondents. According to experts, these figures prove the limits of Belarusian official propaganda resources: both in connection with the war in Ukraine, and regarding the deployment of nuclear weapons, Belarusian citizens failed to come to an opinion that contradicts the fundamental foundations of their worldview^{xxix}.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ <https://t.me/modmilby/29945> Official channel The Belarussian Ministry of Defense
- ⁱⁱ <https://t.me/modmilby/29945> Official channel The Belarussian Ministry of Defense
- ⁱⁱⁱ https://t.me/Hajun_BY/7101 Belarussian OSINT monitoring channel
- ^{iv} <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2023/07/16/7411564/> Ukrainian news-portal
- ^v <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-nikakih-riskov-dlja-belarusi-ot-razmeschenija-chvk-vagner-net-575541-2023/> Belarussian state-owned news agency
- ^{vi} <https://ria.ru/20230723/vagner-1885783266.html> Russian state-owned news agency
- ^{vii} <https://ria.ru/20230710/putin-1883237514.html> Russian state-owned news agency
- ^{viii} <https://topwar.ru/221733-chvk-vagner-vojdets-v-sostav-regionalnoj-gruppirovki-vojsk-sojuznogo-gosudarstva-s-bazirovaniem-v-belorussii.html> Russian state-controlled media
- ^{ix} <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/finansirovanie-wagnera/32478006.html> USA state-owned media
- ^x <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-belarusi-predstavili-doroznuu-kartu-po-vzaimodejstviu-s-cvk-vagner/a-66242244> German news portal
- ^{xi} <https://www.belta.by/president/view/belarus-ratifikirovala-soglasenie-s-rossiej-o-sozdanii-uchebno-boevyh-tsentrov-dlja-voennosluzhaschih-577395-2023/> Belarussian state-owned news agency
- ^{xii} <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/prezident-podpisal-zakon-o-narodnom-opolchenii> Official site of Aliaksandar Lukashenka
- ^{xiii} <https://www.belta.by/society/view/kto-popadet-v-narodnoe-opolchenie-i-kakie-zadachi-ono-budet-vpolnjat-hrenin-otvetil-na-glavnye-voprosy-551278-2023/> Belarussian state-owned news agency
- ^{xiv} <https://www.unian.net/war/prigozhin-vystupil-pered-vagnerovcami-v-belarusi-video-12334041.html> Ukrainian news agency
- ^{xv} <https://prisoners.spring96.org/be#list> Belarussian human rights media-channel
- ^{xvi} <https://spring96.org/be/news/112228> Belarussian human rights media-channel
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} <https://spring96.org/be/news/112174> Belarussian human rights media-channel
- ^{xx} <https://t.me/viasna96/20196> Belarussian human rights media-channel
- ^{xxi} <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/32489000.html> USA state-owned media
- ^{xxii} <https://www.belta.by/society/view/chto-stanet-osnovaniem-dlja-utraty-beloruskogo-grazhdanstva-pojasnili-v-mvd-576179-2023/> Belarussian state-owned news agency
- ^{xxiii} <https://sputnik.by/20230710/v-belarusi-vstupaet-v-silu-zakon-o-lishenii-grazhdanstva-1077362720.html> Russian state-owned news agency

^{xxiv} <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/21/politics/putin-russia-nuclear-weapons-belarus/index.html> US news portal

^{xxv} <https://tass.ru/politika/18330669> Russian state-owned news agency

^{xxvi} <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-nazval-uslovija-ispolzovanija-jadernogo-oruzhija-s-territorii-belarusi-571517-2023/> Belarussian state-owned news agency

^{xxvii} <https://thinktanks.by/research/beloruskaya-analiticheskaya-masterskaya-baw.html>

^{xxviii} <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32502443.html> USA state-owned media

^{xxix} <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32502443.html> USA state-owned media