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| **Lukashenka’s health condition deteriorates**  |

On 9 May, Aliaksander Lukashenka took part in the celebrations that took place in Moscow. Those present noticed that he looked unwell, was unable to walk 300 meters across Red Square, and had to be transported by electric car. A bandage was visible on his arm. The program of his Moscow visit was shortened. But even after returning to Minsk, Lukashenka was only present at the solemn ceremony on 9 May – he did not speak and quickly left the celebration. After that, he disappeared from the public eye and did not even make his mandatory appeal to citizens on the “Day of the Coat of Arms, Anthem and Flag” (14 May).[[1]](#endnote-1) A representative of the National Anti-Crisis Management body, Pavel Latushka, said that, according to confidential sources, Lukashenka suffers from allergic myocarditis brought on by an infection – this is a chronic heart disease that sometimes sharply escalates.[[2]](#endnote-2) The Russian political scientist Suzdaltsev,[[3]](#endnote-3) with reference to sources in the Russian authorities, claimed that we are talking about a chronic disease that required routine surgery – there is no question of either poisoning or agony.[[4]](#endnote-4) Thus, representatives of mutually hostile political camps were in solidarity that Aliaksander Lukashenka’s condition, although serious, does not appear to be deadly. The Belarusian Investigative Center[[5]](#endnote-5) has made a calculation: the current disappearance of Lukashenka is his fourth. In 2006, after the elections, he disappeared from the public sphere for 15 days – the inauguration had to be postponed, and the reasons for his absence were not given. In July 2018, he disappeared for five days, and he had to cancel one official visit. In August 2020, Lukashenka was absent for another five days without any explanation.[[6]](#endnote-6) On 15 May, he appeared at the central command post of the Air Force and air defense forces, where he spoke about the current military-political situation; he looked gloomy and his ill health clearly made itself known.[[7]](#endnote-7) On 23 May, official explanations of the situation followed. Lukashenka stated that he had adenovirus: “Adenovirus or whatever it was? Adenovirus ... is treated for three days. But since I didn’t have the opportunity to be treated, then I had to go to Moscow, then subbotniks, then to Grodno, then Gomel ... all this has accumulated”.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, the adenovirus is highly contagious – that is, Lukashenka, if he was a carrier of this virus, would have put the presidents and prime ministers who gathered in Moscow on 9 May at risk of infection. This is extremely unlikely. In addition, adenovirus causes high fever, nausea, and diarrhea[[9]](#endnote-9) – Lukashenka did not demonstrate and of these symptoms while in public. He returned to the topic of his illness regularly in order to explain his pained appearance and frequent disappearances, as well as to dispel the suspicions of his detractors: “As experts told me, a person could be cured of this for a long time, [but it will take] a long time until he will finally recover. Three months, maybe … Don’t worry, I’m still alive and I’ll live!”.[[10]](#endnote-10) On 14 June, it became known that the youngest son of Lukashenka went to study at Peking University.[[11]](#endnote-11) Previously, according to some sources, he had studied at the Belarusian State University in the department of “biotechnology”, which was created especially for him.[[12]](#endnote-12) As the move to Beijing was hasty and happened in May-June, this probably gives reason to suspect that the illness of the elder Lukashenka was not entirely harmless and the family was preparing for any outcome.

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| **OSCE reports on the repressive political mechanisms in Belarus** |

In May 2023, an OSCE report on the situation in Belarus was published. The document gave a comprehensive description of the repressive political mechanisms in the country. The following quotation can be considered as a leitmotif: “The high number of political prisoners in Belarus is part of a pattern of public policies aimed at increasing politically motivated repression of the Belarusian people. This information cover, on the one hand, a consistent set of governmental practices and, on the other hand, a series of statements of the highest governmental authorities”.[[13]](#endnote-13) The report contains a detailed compilation of facts and official statements from the Belarusian leadership, which allows the OSCE to conclude that politically motivated repressions are large-scale, representing the systematic persecution of individuals, public organizations and the mass media. Over time, the scope and brutality of repression has only increased, as evidenced by the increase in the number of convicts on political charges, as well as the persecution of new swaths of Belarusian society[[14]](#endnote-14). The report mentions about 1,500 political prisoners. This figure is conditional and inaccurate: the OSCE emphasizes that the political nature of the repression is masked by the use of the term “extremism”. The Swedish Prosecutor General reports that in 2020-2023, “3,000 criminal cases were initiated against 3,645 persons”.[[15]](#endnote-15) Perhaps not all, but most of these cases are, in OSCE terminology, “politically motivated” and, therefore, perhaps 3,000 or more people were subjected to repression. It is not known how many of them ended up in prison or who got off with a suspended sentence. But political processes continued in Belarus in the spring and summer. On 22 May 2023, the case of Eduard Babaryka (the son of Viktar Babaryka, a former Belarusian presidential candidate) began. He was charged with financial crimes (tax evasion), as well as “inciting racial, national, religious or other social enmity”. The prosecutor’s office asked for 20 years of imprisonment for him.[[16]](#endnote-16) Eduard Babaryka has been in custody for three years, and there has been no information about the fate of his father for about two months.[[17]](#endnote-17) The defendant does not admit his guilt.

The investigations continued – one of the main targets was Raman Pratasevich, one of the founders and editors of the telegram channel “NEXTA”.[[18]](#endnote-18) He was sentenced to eight years in prison, but was later pardoned.[[19]](#endnote-19) Later, his girlfriend Sofia Sapiega, the administrator of the telegram channel “Black Book of Belarus”, was also pardoned, after being sentenced to six years in prison.[[20]](#endnote-20) These two events were so exceptional (the release from punishment of such prominent opposition media figures) that they were commented on by Aliaksander Lukashenka himself. He summed up his decision on Pratasevich as follows: “This guy did everything he promised!”. About Sapiega he said: “It’s moral: She fell in love with a guy, and after he was pardoned and released, the girl will sit there?”. Lukashenka immediately noted the exceptional nature of his decision: “I have never been a traitor and I will go to the end ... By the way, there would be no pardon [in normal circumstances]. They have brought so much harm to the country!”.[[21]](#endnote-21) Confirmation of the fact that mercy was situational and will not become the norm may be seen in the verdict for Yana Pinchuk. This Belarusian citizen was detained in November 2021 in Russia. She was the editor of three telegram channels, including Vitebsk 97%. Pinchuk was sentenced to 12 years in prison “for creating a terrorist organization and participating in it”. The process took place in a closed hearing.[[22]](#endnote-22)

The trial *in absentia* in the case of Vadzim Prakopieu, one of the activists of the Belarusian opposition, has begun. He is accused of transporting weapons and preparing a terrorist attack against Belarusian Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Commission on International Affairs Aleg Gaidukevich. Prakopyeu faces 25 years in prison and a fine of approximately 10,000 USD.[[23]](#endnote-23)

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| **Official Minsk braces for the threat of war** |

The current Belarusian political system is being actively transformed due to the threat of war and external intervention. A draft law “On the People’s Militia” was submitted to the National Assembly.[[24]](#endnote-24) The document is intended to resolve an unsolvable paradox: the creation of territorial defense involves the mass distribution of weapons, but at the same time these weapons should not fall into the hands of oppositional citizens – and there are quite a lot of disloyal Belarusians, judging by the mass protest activity in 2020. The law assumes that the special services will carefully monitor those who are entrusted with weapons in order to catch the slightest sign of disloyalty towards the authorities. It was stated that the experience of Ukraine was used in the creation of the militia, and the necessary stocks of weapons were created by the Ministry of Defense. Registration in the people’s militia has already begun: its could ultimately reach 150,000 people. Amendments to the law “On the State of Emergency”[[25]](#endnote-25) have been prepared. They assume that the All-Belarusian Assembly will receive the right to impose a state of emergency, and the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly will also be able to impose one in “case of inaction of the President of the Republic of Belarus”. All these structures, as well as the president himself, will be able to limit the validity of legal acts for the time of an emergency. Obviously, the purpose of the amendments to the law is to enable a more rapid response of government structures to external threats, as well as to expand of the list of institutions that can make decisions in this area. This is probably due to the need to form new security mechanisms to maintain the stability of the functioning of state structures.

According to Ukraine, Russian troops are being withdrawn from Belarus: their number has reached 2,500 and continues to decline.[[26]](#endnote-26) The need to rely mainly on their own resources has forced the Belarusian authorities to actively rearm their army.

The commander of the Air Force and Air Defense forces, Andrei Lukyanovich, reported to Lukashenka that his subordinates were receiving new Belarusian-made Rosa and Vostok radars, and they were also waiting for deliveries of new anti-aircraft missile systems and Su-30SM aircraft.[[27]](#endnote-27) T

he Belarusian leadership had high hopes for tactical nuclear weapons. However, it seems that disagreements remain between Moscow and Minsk regarding the conditions of their placement and use. Vladimir Putin said that the deployment of these weapons on the territory of Belarus would begin in July, although he later said that they had already been delivered and placed.[[28]](#endnote-28) Control over these weapons will remain with Russia; this was announced by Russian Defense Minister Shaigu after signing the relevant documents.[[29]](#endnote-29) Lukashenka said that not only were nuclear weapons delivered to Belarus, the power of these is 60 kilotons, which is “three times more powerful than the one used in Hiroshima”.[[30]](#endnote-30) At the same time, he also claims that the decision on the use of an atomic bomb will be made by Minsk: “God forbid if I will have to make a decision on the use of this weapon … There will be no hesitation if aggression is committed against us”.[[31]](#endnote-31) Although the Belarusian authorities are actively preparing for a military conflict in any form, the population of the country, for the most part, would choose neutrality in the regional confrontation. A poll among Belarusians aged 18 to 35 years shows that a third of respondents would like to withdraw foreign troops, and only 13% (12% and 1%, respectively) are ready to support Ukraine or Russia with military force.[[32]](#endnote-32) Although the study can hardly be called representative, and the methodology of its conduct does not guarantee the accuracy of the sociometry, this survey gives some idea of the attitudes of Belarusians in general and Belarusian youth in particular.

However, events in Russia could dramatically change the picture of public sentiment. The sudden military revolt in the country caused the activation of political processes in Minsk.

The Security Council of Belarus published an appeal stating that the country has been and remains a loyal ally of Russia.[[33]](#endnote-33) It is noteworthy that the words “President Putin” do not occur either separately or together in this document. In addition, it was reported that “Lukashenka held two meetings with the security forces and the military against the background of events in Russia”.[[34]](#endnote-34) In turn, the Joint Transitional Cabinet under the leadership of Tsikhanouskia stated that “the decisions of the Lukashenka ‘government’ and its Security Council have no legal force on the territory of Belarus and beyond” and that she “denounces the agreements on the creation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia [and] announces the withdrawal of the Republic of Belarus from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Eurasian Economic Community, [and] the Commonwealth of Independent States”.[[35]](#endnote-35) A commander of the Kalinouski Regiment, a unit of the Ukrainian army formed from natives of Belarus, made an appeal to Belarusians: “We need people for decisive action. Get ready to join the self-defense units and wait for our signal”.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The resolution of the Russian crisis related to the military rebellion led by Prigozhin turned out to be completely unexpected: the press service of Aliaksander Lukashenka said that the conflict was resolved with his direct participation. Columns of mercenaries stopped their movement in the direction of Moscow,[[37]](#endnote-37) Prigozhin went to Belarus, and his criminal prosecution was terminated.[[38]](#endnote-38) There was news about the possible relocation of all Prygozhin’s fighters to Belarus.[[39]](#endnote-39) This news was immediately refuted.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Prygozhin is neither a military commander nor a military administrator, but only the organizer of a mercenary army and a “merchant of death”.[[41]](#endnote-41) Allowing him to work in Minsk would mean the creation of military structures parallel to official ones: such structures, as the mutiny showed, are controlled exclusively by Prigozhin. It is probable that he will be allowed to set up a headquarters in Belarus, as well as a recruiting, logistics and transfer point, and training camps will be provided. However, the private army itself will most likely be stationed somewhere in another country.

By the beginning of July, the situation had only partially cleared up. As Aliaksander Lukashenka said:

“Inviting them (mercenaries) at your own expense is a boon for our army! ... Their instructor guys will come and give us combat experience, it’s a blessing for our army!”.[[42]](#endnote-42)

It became known that more than 500 multi-bed tents of the Russian model were installed in Target (300 pieces), at the Abuz-Lyasnouski landfill (150), at the Rapishcha landfill (30) and at the Lepel landfill (75).[[43]](#endnote-43) Thus, up to 25,000 mercenaries can be deployed – in other words, their number will be comparable to the Belarusian army itself, which seems to be an unnecessary number of instructors. Putin said that 86 billion RUR (about 1 billion USD) was allocated for the maintenance of the Wagner company over the year,[[44]](#endnote-44) as mercenaries value themselves too dearly and are not inclined to engage in charity. In general, it is not yet clear how many of them there will be and what they will do in Belarus.

**ENDNOTES**

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4. <https://t.me/suzdaltsev/11143> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
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14. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/5/543240.pdf> section «Political motivated repression”, pp. 20-22 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
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42. <https://www.interfax.ru/world/909676> state-controlled news-agency (Russia) [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
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