



Belarus
Research
Network
on Neighborhood
Policy

Bimonthly Review no. 8

**by the Center for Belarus and Regional Studies at the European
Humanities University**



The unauthorized entry of two Belarusian military helicopters into Polish airspace

On 1 August 2023, the Polish Foreign Ministry officially lodged a protest in Minsk in connection with the unauthorized entry of two Belarusian military helicopters into its airspace. According to the Polish side, the border was violated in the Bialowieza region: helicopters invaded at a low altitude, which meant they could not be detected by radarsⁱ. That is why Warsaw first reacted calmly to the incident, and later radically changed its position, categorically claiming that a violation had taken place. The Polish side explained the correction of its position by referring to eyewitness accounts and clarifying data from the military. The Pentagon and NATO were immediately informed about the incidentⁱⁱ. The US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller later said that NATO and the United States were closely monitoring the events but saw no reason to intervene: “There is a process that is in place for NATO countries to invoke Article 5. We are not at that stage at this point”ⁱⁱⁱ. For its part, Minsk presented a diametrically opposite version of events. According to the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, the helicopters flew over the border, but the Polish side was informed about it in advance. The military provided objective control data, which was transmitted through diplomatic channels to Warsaw: this information, according to the Belarusian side, proves that there was no violation of the border^{iv}. It is noteworthy that no independent investigation of this incident was carried out, so the statements of the two parties were not verified, which raised the possibility of further escalation of the conflict. Both Warsaw and Minsk consider the actions of their counterparts a provocation, and they react accordingly. There is a version according to which the helicopters accompanied Aliaksandar Lukashenka, who was visiting the western regions of the country at that time: an intentional provocation, according to the authors of this version, is all the more unlikely because Lukashenka himself was at a distance of 10 kilometers from the border, and an armed response from Poland could pose a threat to him^v. Poland claims that the helicopter incident was a continuation of a series of unfriendly actions, which includes the creation of a migration crisis by Belarus on the borders of the EU, as well as the transfer of 100 Wagner mercenaries to the Suwalki corridor^{vi}. On this basis, Warsaw held consultations with Lithuania on the possibility of the complete closure of borders with Belarus: Prime Minister Morawiecki

and President Nauseda agreed on this during a meeting. In addition, the Polish prime minister said that there are already 4,000 Wagner PMC mercenaries on the territory of Belarus, and this poses a serious threat to neighboring countries^{vii}. The number of mercenaries grew over the course of a month, but then began to decline due to the fact that neither the Belarusian nor the Russian authorities accepted them. However, by the end of August, there were still about 4,000 of them in Belarus, according to the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces^{viii}. For this reason, the authorities of the neighboring EU countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) continue to consider the possibility of a coordinated closure of their borders. This meant a complete blockade of direct land communication between the EU and Belarus. The final approval of all aspects of the land blockade took place on 28 August – the interior ministers of Poland and the Baltic states participated in the meeting: they stated that would seal off their borders with Russia’s ally Belarus in the event of any military incidents or a massive migrant push by Minsk. In a joint statement, the interior ministers of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia demanded that Aliaksandar Lukashenka immediately remove Wagner Group mercenaries from Belarusian territory^{ix}. In relation to this, the Joint Transitional Committee headed by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya held talks with the Polish authorities on the opening of a humanitarian corridor through which political refugees could cross the border: the idea had serious flaws from the very beginning, since it assumed the goodwill of not only Warsaw, but also Minsk, which categorically denies the existence of both political prisoners and politically persecuted people. However, the Polish Minister of Internal Affairs, due to the real possibility of the imminent closure of borders, promised assistance to all those who are being subjected to political persecution, and he promised to develop appropriate mechanisms for this during discussions with the Belarusian opposition – however, Mariusz Kamiński has not yet presented concrete solutions to the problem^x. Pavel Latushka is skeptical that the interests of Belarusian citizens will be taken into account by EU countries: “our neighbors will [make a decision] based on [various] considerations, first of which is their own national security”^{xi}. Another project designed to solve the problem of the legalization of Belarusian refugees was presented in Warsaw at the height of the “helicopter crisis” and indirectly connected with it. The

Belarusian authorities have introduced legislative amendments that allow the deprivation of citizenship by a court verdict if the sentence is handed down to a fugitive who has left the country. Also, quite a few emigrants are faced with the inability to update or replace their passport – this, in turn, makes it impossible to either embark on cross-border travel or even simply to obtain documents for legalization in the host country.

The “passports of Belarusians in exile” presented by the Joint Transitional Cabinet (MIC) should help with this.

A mock-up of the passport has been created, and there are 20 foreign representative offices of the defense industry, which act as a kind of embassy: however, the Belarusian equivalent of the “Nansen passports” is not yet internationally recognized, and the prospect of turning these papers into full-fledged documents remain illusory^{xii}.

Belarusian citizens detained after the publication of the documentary

At the end of July 2023, Maminau’s documentary *Chronicles of the Present*, which talks about the events of 2020, was published on the DELFI news portal and YouTube channel. According to the authors, the risks associated with this screening for people who remained in Belarus were discussed: however, precautions were not taken on the grounds that, allegedly, all the published footage is already at the disposal of employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs^{xiii}. As far as can be seen, this turned out to be far from the case. The film was removed from YouTube, but soon it began to be published by channels affiliated with law enforcement agencies. Information also appeared about mass arrests, which resulted from the identification of participants in mass actions based on a study of the film materials. In only the first day, 14 people were detained – as stated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, four of these were reported by “concerned citizens”^{xiv}. Structures engaged in helping political prisoners also noted a sharp increase in appeals: people who recognized themselves in the footage published by Maminau were afraid of detentions and asked for help ensuring their safety – as stated by the head of BYPOL Andrey Stryzhak, “we are talking about



dozens of people”^{xv}. In the first week of August, Telegram channels affiliated with law enforcement agencies reported another hacking of the “Peramoga Plan” database – the contact details of supporters of the Belarusian opposition were collected there^{xvi}. It is not known whether another leak took place, but numerous detentions were definitely made – for example, this source mentions that at least four people were arrested in connection with involvement in the “Peramoga Plan”. It should be noted that prosecution for participation in the mass actions of 2020 could still be civil (although usually it is associated with imprisonment)^{xvii}, however, only criminal cases are being initiated, and the harshest sentences are imposed on those involved in the “Peramoga Plan”: this structure is recognized by the Belarusian authorities as an “extremist formation”^{xviii}. It was officially announced that those who registered in the “Peramoga Plan” “will be prosecuted under Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code [...] Its sanctions provide for up to 7 years of imprisonment”^{xix}. More evidence that the Belarusian special services are engaged in monitoring emigrant media can be seen in the material on the Belarus-1 TV channel, where some members of the Bialystok and Vilna sections of the “Passpalitae Rushenyye” – a paramilitary organization staffed by refugees from Belarus and recognized by the authorities at home as extremist – were deanonymized. Using materials that were filmed by the Belsat TV channel but did not get on the air, the special services in Minsk (the author of the Belarus-1 material has said this directly) were able to identify a number of the heroes of the video and criminal cases were initiated against them^{xx}. At the same time, the Belarusian authorities continued “party purges”: in August, two of the country’s oldest parties, the Belarusian Popular Front Party (BPPF)^{xxi} and the United Civil Party (UCP), were closed by a court decision. In total, six parties were liquidated over the summer, including the Greens and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Assembly). None of these organizations have applied for re-registration, and the leaders of a number of them are serving prison terms – in particular, Kazlou, Aliakseeva and Kisialyou from UCP^{xxii}

Belarusian role in the war in Ukraine

In August, for the first time after a long break, the Ukrainian media reported a massive launch of missiles from the territory of Belarus. Later, a refutation appeared: a representative of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of

Ukraine suggested that the launch was “electronic” – that is, a simulation of the launch took place^{xxiii}. Nevertheless, in reference to the missiles, the Ukrainian media published remarkable statistics: since 24 February 2022, at least 721 rockets are believed to have been fired from the territory of Belarus^{xxiv}. Meanwhile, Lukashenka gave an interview in which he defined his understanding of the role of Belarus in the Ukrainian conflict, both currently and in the past. Lukashenka's statements of the past have changed significantly revealing much about the current state of his regime.

After the initial statement that Minsk would not take part in the conflict if no Ukrainian soldier set foot on its territory, confessions were made for the first time that Russian soldiers were attacking Ukraine from Belarusian territory^{xxv}.

Also, for the first time, Lukashenka said that Putin did not inform him about preparations for the war^{xxvi}. According to analyst Yuri Drakahrust, this is an attempt to create an alibi for himself and emphasize his minimal involvement in the preparations and implementation of plans for the Russian invasion. It is almost the first time that Lukashenka has emphasized his subordination to Putin, and his dependence on him – before, he always insisted on his equality with the master of the Kremlin^{xxvii}. Another remarkable event that characterizes Lukashenka’s military policy is the visit of Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu to Minsk. The joint military programs of the two countries, which are publicly reported, are not striking in scale – there are only rare joint maneuvers: the next one, for example, will be held in 2024^{xxviii}. Political scientist Ihar Tyshkevich (from the Institute of the Future, Ukraine) believes that we are talking about an “inspector's visit”: the Chinese minister spent one day in Moscow and three whole days in Minsk, and this says a lot about Beijing’s priorities. Tyshkevich points out that Li Shangfu arrived to find out how the production of weapons using Chinese military technologies is progressing in Belarus. Beijing is also closely watching to ensure that these technologies do not get into Russia in an uncontrolled manner. Finally, China would like to normalize Belarus’s relations with its western and northern neighbors, since the conflict threatens commodity transit^{xxix}. During 2022, for example, the volume of rail shipments from China to the EU decreased by more than 30%^{xxx}. The possible closure of the borders with Poland and the Baltic states may greatly damage



China's overland transit of goods since then only the trans-Caspian route will remain^{xxxi}. Taking into account all these factors, Lukashenka's desire to distance himself from Putin and the emphasis on his forced involvement in the conflict may be a consequence of China "taking Belarus out of Putin's pocket" (Tyshkevich)^{xxxii}.



ENDNOTES

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