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Intensification of repression as a way to strengthen control over society

By the end of 2023, the intensity of political repression in Belarus had increased significantly. The reasons for this are partly explained by the following statement, which appeared on the telegram channel of the state TV channel ONT – this text represents the “editorial opinion”, that is, the official position of the media and, to some extent, the state: “Our land has been cleared of the fifth column – not completely, but to a large extent. There are still ‘baseboards’ left. But getting rid of b-ch-b [b-ch-b refers to “belachyvona-bely”, or white-red-white, the colours of the Belarusian national flag] cockroaches is not a quick process [...] stop playing democracy. We have won, blocked the rebellion, and now we must and will impose our information policy.”ⁱ It is noteworthy that the rhetoric of state television literally coincides with the rhetoric of the Rwandan Thousand Hills Radio, which played a crucial role in the information campaign that once resulted in the Tutsi genocide – the term “cockroaches” was also used thereⁱⁱ. According to some experts, ONT’s comment is a kind of theoretical justification for the intensification of repression: elections are approaching, which are due to take place in February 2024ⁱⁱⁱ, and therefore attempts are being made to completely block any, even potential, protest activity^{iv}. The elections are not perceived by citizens as fateful, but many recognise their possible impact on daily life in some respects. For the authorities, the election campaign is, apparently, a test to see whether society is completely manageable^v. Yury Drakakhrust believes that the organisers of the repressive campaign are clearly guided by the logic that allowed Stalin to declare “the intensification of the class struggle as we approach socialism”^{vi}: in conditions of the complete elimination of an organised opposition, one can expect spontaneous manifestations of protest – that’s what they are trying to prevent with the use of police tools.

The most high-profile criminal case in recent months has been the case of the Coordinating Council of the Belarusian Opposition, in which about 100 people are suspected. According to the Belarusian Investigative Committee, searches and interrogations were conducted as part of the inquiry procedures^{vii}: “it is established that suspects have property and real estate on the territory of our country for the purpose of subsequent arrest.” It has been reported that information about all the members of the coordinating council for organising the process of overcoming the political crisis (or the Coordinating Council of the Belarusian Opposition^{viii}), including those previously unknown to the authorities, was brought to Minsk by a defector, whose name was not

given. The new data made it possible to make the repression campaign extremely extensive and even total: dozens of searches were conducted. The suspects are accused of treason, conspiracy, calling for sanctions and the creation of extremist groups^{ix}. On 10 January 2024, there were 1,420 political prisoners in Belarus^x. Among those arrested for political reasons, Inessa Vorikhova, the mother of Sviatlana Tikhonovskaya's adviser Margarita Vorikhova, should be mentioned: Inessa Vorikhova was detained by a squad of riot police at her workplace. The father of activist Aliaxei Trubkin, 69-year-old Anatoly, was also detained – his computer and books were confiscated after a search^{xi}. The case of the arrest of the members of the rock band “Nizkiz” was thunderous: the musicians became famous during the protests of 2020, when they shot a video for the song “Pravily” during one of the opposition demonstrations^{xii}. Upon their return from Poland, where the musicians participated in the recording of the Belsat New Year's concert, they were arrested – the performance in Warsaw served as a trigger, as telegram channels close to the security forces hint^{xiii}. The growing intensity of repression may mean that the Belarusian authorities are planning in the near future to carry out some political reforms that are important for them, ones which require absolute control over any public activity – this is likely to have something to do with the convening of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (APA), which is expected to formalise structural changes in the power system (the chairman of the APA, the presidium of the APA and other elements of the management mechanism will take power one way or another^{xiv}).

The authorities are trying to bring emigration under control

The problem of mass emigration is recognised by the Belarusian authorities – they prefer to address it not by reducing repressive pressure, but by expanding it to areas previously untouched by police restrictions. In particular, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus adopted a resolution on the procedure for granting the right to travel abroad for permanent residence^{xv}. From now on, every Belarusian citizen must submit an appropriate application to their local department for migration and citizenship. Information about education, tax status, alimony payments, and so on will be transmitted to the police. A request will then be sent from the migration department to the military enlistment office: in total, up to 35 days are allowed for verification. Based on the results of monitoring, a decision is made on whether the citizen has the right to travel abroad for permanent residence. This rule complements the earlier decision from

7 September 2023, which mandated that it would only be possible to replace passports in person inside Belarus and no longer in its diplomatic missions abroad^{xvi}. These two measures restrict the rights of a significant number of citizens. The right to legally travel to live abroad may be arbitrarily prohibited by any of the government agencies. At the same time, a person who has already travelled abroad risks being left without their main travel document (their passport) if they emigrated for political reasons and face criminal prosecution in Belarus. By the end of 2023, according to some reports, about 1.5 million people had left Belarus for political reasons^{xvii}. It is difficult to judge how accurate these figures are since the 2023 data of the National Statistical Committee have not yet been published. At the same time, the emigration of Belarusians, at least to Lithuania, is also complicated by an initiative of the Lithuanian government. The Lithuanian special services state that there are about 60,000 Belarusian citizens in the country, and by 2025 their number may reach 100,000. Darius Jauniškis, head of the State Security Department, says that only one-fifth of these people are political refugees: economic refugees are the most common. According to the official, there are a significant number of KGB agents among the Belarusians permanently residing in Lithuania – Jauniškis informed his government about the threats related to this and expects some effective measures to be taken^{xviii}. According to Lithuanian Interior Minister *Agnė Bilotaitė*, in 2023, the authorities deprived 411 Belarusians of a residence permit and 562 Belarusians of the right to temporary residence. Due to threats to national security, 16,000 foreigners were banned from entering the country, mostly from Belarus and Russia^{xix}. These measures have significantly limited the immigration of Belarusians to Lithuania. The case of the European Humanities University may become another serious blow to the Belarusian community in Lithuania. About 1,300 students study at EHU. The educational institution, which for a long time managed to avoid direct violent conflicts with the Minsk authorities, took fire from the main state propaganda tools – Jury Azaronak^{xx}, Maria Petrashka^{xxi}, Igor Tur^{xxii} have all devoted their programmes to the EHU. All of them persistently warn the university management that cooperation with Tikhanovskaya's office, or any financial partnership with her, will lead to the declaration of the EHU as an "extremist organization". This, in turn, will be the basis for the criminal prosecution of both university employees and students. The attack on the EHU is a rather unusual example of the repressive tactics of the Belarusian authorities: they usually do not warn their victims about an upcoming attack. Apparently, this time it was decided to give a

warning shot: declaring more than a thousand people as extremists (if you count students and university staff) means ultimately squeezing these people out of Belarus – and, perhaps, their families. It seems that Minsk is not yet ready to spur on emigration processes so seriously.

The reform of governance structures as a way to ensure the transition of power

Kyiv politicians reported some remarkable facts about the activity of Aliaksandar Lukashenka in the early days of the Russian-Ukrainian war. David Arahamia, head of the Servant of the People faction in the Verkhovna Rada, said that in the early days of the conflict, Lukashenka called Kyiv: “Zelensky refused to talk to Lukashenka, but he insisted that information from him should at least be listened to [...] He then said: ‘We will not fight with Ukraine’. He said it honestly: ‘I cannot allow them not to use my infrastructure and not to enter or launch missiles through Belarus, but I guarantee that not a single Belarusian soldier will cross the border of Ukraine’^{xxiii}.” And Polish journalist Filip Domb-Mirowski reported that, according to him, at the very beginning of the war, Aliaksandar Lukashenka made inquiries in Warsaw about whether his plane would be allowed to land there if he had to flee Minsk^{xxiv}. Domb-Mirowski points out that at that moment the Polish authorities were considering the possibility of sending sabotage units to Belarus – and Lukashenka, allegedly, was extremely afraid of destabilising the situation and was seriously preparing for evacuation. This story has seen a kind of continuation. The fact that in early January he signed amendments to the law “On the President of the Republic of Belarus”^{xxv} can be considered proof that Lukashenka is seriously concerned about his future fate. Notable innovations have appeared in this document. On the one hand, restrictions have been introduced into the law that deprive people of the opportunity to occupy the highest position in the country if they have both a Belarusian passport and a foreign one (or a residence permit). A citizen should not have left the country for any length of time during the 20 years preceding the elections^{xxvi} – in practice, this cuts off all migrants, all political refugees, and Belarusians of the diaspora from participating in the presidential race. But this was probably not the only purpose of the amendments: the law now also contains a remarkable set of guarantees for the president in retirement. The president “has immunity,” and after leaving office, “cannot be held accountable for actions committed in connection with the exercise of his presidential powers.” In addition, guarantees are provided to the president’s family members. A president who

has ceased to perform their duties or has resigned becomes a delegate to the All-Belarusian People's Assembly^{xxvii}. According to historian and political commentator Aliaxandar Friedman, this set of legal innovations is not intended for immediate application. Lukashenka is creating a legal environment for further manipulations related to the transfer of power: obviously, he does not consider his youngest son Nikolai, who is 19 years old, as a successor – the minimum age for election to the presidency is set at 40 years. Plans regarding the timing and method of transferring powers to Lukashenka's heir are unlikely to exist in a complete and definite form: it is not yet entirely clear how exactly the structures of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (APA) will work – it is supposed to take on part of the power of the executive and legislative branches. It's not even clear what position Lukashenka himself will occupy in the APA structures. Most likely, plans regarding the transfer of power in Belarus will continue to be created and refined. Russia will certainly try to influence the post-Lukashenka transition of power, but the ways it will attempt to do this can only be guessed at. Even publicists from media close to the Kremlin do not have a clear vision of the options for developing the situation^{xxviii}. Of course, Lukashenka does not believe in trusting the voluntary observance of guarantees by his successor – he assumes it will be necessary to force such observance, but the way to do this, as well as the candidacy of his successor, has obviously not yet been determined^{xxix}. From the history of amendments to the law "On the President of the Republic of Belarus," it can be concluded that Lukashenka cares about his own and his family's future seriously, and this, in turn, is indirect proof of the truth of his contacts with Warsaw regarding a possible flight.

As for the Russian war in Ukraine, Lukashenka has currently gained relative freedom in building his policy in this area: Belarusian society is still split on the issue of the war. According to Chatham House, there were no significant changes in the attitude of Belarusian citizens towards the war in 2023. At the same time, there is a slight increase in Russia's supporters in this conflict: in November 2023, 36% of respondents support (or "rather support") it, and 38% do not support (or "rather do not support") it. At the same time, in the first months of the war (June 2022), 33% of respondents were supporters and 43% were opponents^{xxx}. In general, this unties Lukashenka's hands. At the same time, in recent months, he has not paid much attention to the war, and Belarus has ceased to be a factor seriously influencing the war (through the deployment of

Wagner mercenaries, who have mostly left the country by now – there are no more than 1,000 people left^{xxxii}). Neighbouring countries were plunged into their own problems (elections in Poland and Lithuania, elections and problems with the counteroffensive in Ukraine, etc.), and Belarus, in the absence of active external political pressure, found itself on its own.

ENDNOTES

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