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Policy

# ***Bimonthly Review*** **(March)**

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



**2024**

The entire internal policy of the Belarusian authorities in March 2024 was focused on one point: ensuring the organization and holding of the so-called All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA). Candidates for deputies of the Assembly began to be nominated on 12 March and were being elected in the period from 1–10 April.<sup>i</sup> Of the 1,200 delegates, only 690 are elected, while the rest are included in the Assembly by virtue of their position — these include the president, ministers, and representatives of the judiciary and legislature. In total, 400 people should be elected as representatives of “civil society” — the restriction stipulates that we are talking about public organizations with at least 100,000 people — but in practice, only quasi-public structures such as the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus<sup>ii</sup> and the pro-governmental Belarusian Republican Youth Union<sup>iii</sup> meet this condition in the country. In addition, the association “Belaya Rus” (ABPA), the Belarusian Association of Veterans, and the Belarusian Union of Women, which are also controlled by the government, would nominate their own representatives to be elected.<sup>iv</sup> There are only four<sup>v</sup> political parties left in the country — they are extremely small and they are completely controlled by the authorities. According to experts, the particular attention paid to the formation of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA) controlled by Lukashenka can be explained by several reasons. Firstly, the latest version of the constitution assigns exceptionally broad powers to the Assembly, which, in case of Lukashenka becoming incapacitated, could be used to usurp power, notes Klaskouski, an analyst at the *Pozirk* news agency.<sup>vi</sup> The fact that the ABPA was created to ensure a soft transit of power is noted by Artsyom Brukhan, an analyst at the National Anti-Crisis Management. In his opinion, this mechanism can still be used — Lukashenka simply has not made a final decision on the matter. Accordingly, the ABPA could become a key element of transition at any time, but it could also be completely excluded from it if another option comes to the fore.<sup>vii</sup> However, the thoroughness of the preparations for the Assembly, which was held on 24–25 April,<sup>viii</sup> as well as the scale of the propaganda campaign associated with it, suggests that the ABPA has to play an important political role. Some statements by informed persons make raise the idea that in the near future Lukashenka intends to make some political maneuvers that will allow him to maintain his status but change the name of his position. When asked “will you go to the next election?” he replied “I’ll go, I’ll go, I’ll go!”<sup>ix</sup> Lukashenka, however, was immediately corrected by Igar Tur, a correspondent for the

state-owned ONT channel: “it is not necessary to take the president’s words about his nomination in 2025 as an official statement... This [is] the answer to external opponents located outside the country.”<sup>x</sup> Since Tur is entrusted with carrying out the most important information campaigns (in particular those initiated by the KGB), this remark by the official journalist was probably initiated from the highest state structures: it is impossible even to imagine that Tur would risk correcting Lukashenka without sanction from above. One of the most likely manipulations of the highest position in the country is renaming the head of state from “president” to the “chairmen of the Assembly”, whose powers, formally, are almost greater than those of a formal head of state. And later, Lukashenka himself confirmed that his “I’ll go, I’ll go” statement was said without taking into account a number of factors — in particular, the ABPA. Analyst Yuri Drakokhrust believes that these mutually exclusive statements were made in order to keep officials on their toes, to show Russia that the transition process is under full control, and to emphasize that the final version of the transformation of the power mechanism has not yet been determined.<sup>xi</sup>

## II

By the spring of 2024, Belarus’s foreign policy orientation had not undergone significant changes, but its vector has slightly adjusted: in relations with its main ally, Moscow, there are some rough edges that have the potential to develop into serious conflicts. In particular, Lukashenka declared a “war of interpretations” vis-à-vis the Kremlin in connection with the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall. Putin’s statements emphasized that the militants, while fleeing from the scene of the crime, were heading to the “window” on the Russian-Ukrainian border<sup>xii</sup> — this statement acted as the main evidence of “the Kyiv trace” in the organization of the terrorist attack. However, Lukashenka disavowed Putin’s statement: according to him, the militants were moving to Belarus, but “we... activated our units. Therefore, they could not enter Belarus in any way. They saw it. Therefore, they turned away and went to the section of the Ukrainian-Russian border.”<sup>xiii</sup> Perhaps there is only a coincidence here, but immediately after the statement about Crocus City Hall, Russian businesses took legal measures to ensure that Belarus was on the verge of default: Minsk refused to pay its Eurobonds in January 2024, and in connection with this debt, Russian bondholders prepared a lawsuit at the London Arbitration Court. They intend to seek official recognition of the default of the

Republic of Belarus, arresting and confiscating all foreign assets of the country in 172 countries of the world. The plaintiffs believe that their victory is beyond doubt because Minsk refuses to fulfill its international financial obligations — we are talking about an amount of approximately one billion dollars. Given the degree of control over Russian businesses by the authorities of the country, one cannot help but see an obvious political motive in such an escapade.<sup>xiv</sup> Alongside political activity to the east, Lukashenka does not leave other areas unattended. Tension is growing rapidly along the perimeter of the borders of Belarus, excluding, perhaps, the Russian one. Military activity in the south is not decreasing. Additional fortifications are being built in the Zhytomyr region on the Belarusian border, head of the Regional Administration Vitaliy Bunechko said.<sup>xv</sup> For the first time, the head of the SBU (the Security Service of Ukraine), Vasily Malyuk, officially recognized the fact that his department organized and conducted sabotage on the territory of Belarus — in particular, this refers to the destruction of the Russian A-50 aircraft at the airfield in Machulishchi.<sup>xvi</sup> Ukraine has pointed out that Belarus is an actual participant in the war on the side of Russia, but so far Kyiv has not demonstrated an intention to transfer military operations to the territory of the northern neighboring country. The initiative of President Macron did not go unnoticed in Belarus either: he proposed to send troops to Ukraine — either from NATO, the EU countries, or France alone. It was also suggested that this contingent would be stationed on the border with Belarus in order to free up Ukrainian units for transfer to the front. Lukashenka even commented on this, saying he is sure that the French will demonstrate less belligerence than the Ukrainians: “This is good for us. They will not defend Ukraine in the way as Ukrainians are defending it now.”<sup>xvii</sup> This speech, however, sounded rather ambiguous — it serves as confirmation of the existence of plans to attack Ukraine. However, tension is growing not only on the southern border but also on the northern border of Belarus: statements from an interview with Valery Sahashchyk, the head of the Ministry of Defense in the Transitional Cabinet of Sviatlana Tikhanouskaya,<sup>xviii</sup> can serve as a sign of this. According to him, there are similar plans for Lithuania: “Russia and Belarus are preparing to use nuclear weapons and blitzkrieg on Vilnius [...] Belarusian generals and their colleagues from Moscow are drawing arrows on maps towards Vilnius”<sup>xix</sup> (this information was later denounced by Lithuanian officials). Lukashenka’s statements became an obvious reaction to the potential for conflict regarding the situation along the perimeter of Belarus’s borders. It is hardly by

chance that he went to the border with Lithuania to make declarations such as: “I will say publicly: any provocation must be stopped by armed means. Don’t mess with them. Anyone violating the state border must be annihilated!” At the same time, he offered a direct response to Sahashchyk: “do they seriously think that we and the Russians are trying here to fight or will attack them? Why are they digging anti-tank ditches? [...] We’re not going to go there!”<sup>xx</sup> Regarding the deployment of foreign military contingents in the Baltic countries, as well as in connection with military exercises on their territories, he said: “do you think that the Germans and Americans have come here and will defend Lithuania in case of a clash with Belarusians and Russians? This has never happened before. And they won’t defend [the Baltics now]. At the first serious situation, they will flee from the battlefield.”<sup>xxi</sup> Such a thinly veiled threat looks like a strange addition to defensive and peace-loving rhetoric. Meanwhile, the deterioration of Lithuania’s relations with Belarus has a purely practical dimension for citizens and businesses. Since 1 March, two border crossings have been closed — now there are only two functioning checkpoints on the borders of the two countries.<sup>xxii</sup> In response to Lithuania’s actions, the Belarusian government has sharply limited the list of goods that are allowed to be imported from the neighboring country.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### III

From the point of view of the authorities, important political campaigns (elections to the House of Representatives, local councils and the National Assembly), as well as the growth of foreign policy tensions, had the expected effect: repression against opponents of Lukashenka, to say the least, did not weaken. At the end of March, the human rights organization Viasna-96 reported that there were 1,405 political prisoners.<sup>xxiv</sup> To combat its opponents, the authorities are increasing the repressive apparatus. Lukashenka’s interior minister Ivan Kubrakou, in particular, said that last year the potential for suppressing anti-government activity increased dramatically: “since December 2022, eight special forces detachments and two volunteer detachments [composed of] special forces veterans have been formed.”<sup>xxv</sup> Lukashenka also signed a decree “On the transfer of state bodies and other organizations to work in wartime conditions,”<sup>xxvi</sup> which refers not only to actions during a period of war, but also, in particular, “during a period of increasing military threat” — that is, formally, in peacetime. The document creates a mechanism for the most expeditious transfer of administrative structures to the military mobilization regime and even introduces the assignment of army ranks to senior

officials — this will allow Lukashenka, as the supreme commander-in-chief, to manage any part of the state apparatus directly, rather than through a system of departmental relations and subordinates. Strict controls are carried out at the border of Belarus to ensure that those entering adhere to the right way of thinking: according to human rights activists, 207 people<sup>xxvii</sup> were detained and punished in 2023 only for subscribing to the “wrong” social media, and these detentions included not only Belarusians but also citizens of Ukraine, Lithuania, and Russia. Of these, 18 people were victims of criminal prosecution, and 12 were sentenced to prison. Trials also continued against prominent figures of political emigration. “For attempting to disrupt the constitutional referendum of 2022”, four people were sentenced to long prison terms in absentia: Pavel Marynich (head of the ZUBR and Malanka Media), Pavel Lieber (creator of the Golos platform), Alena Zhyvaglod (head of the Honest People organization), as well as Aliaxandar Dabravolsky (adviser and the head of internal policy of Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya’s office).<sup>xxviii</sup> On the eve of the 2022 “plebiscite”, all of them were behind the organization of a campaign that involved sending letters to members of the election commission reminding them of their responsibility for electoral manipulation. In addition, the Investigative Committee has started a criminal case against at least 100 foreign activists involved in the work of “People’s Embassies”<sup>xxix</sup> and structures that unite “Belarusians abroad.”<sup>xxx</sup> The houses of these people have been searched, and their property has been seized. Thus, the government is clearly indicating its readiness to confiscate the property of persons who have been persecuted — recently, such measures have become, from the point of view of the authorities, the most effective measure of pressure on political emigrants. Probably, one of the reasons for the intensification of the repressions was also the action by the Belarusian opposition on 24 February, when a video greeting from the head of the Transitional Cabinet, Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya, appeared on advertising screens throughout Belarus. According to experts, her performance could have been broadcast on 2,000 electronic advertising media — in the subway, at train stations, and on the streets of the country.<sup>xxxi</sup> Most such ad screens do not have sound output and it is unlikely that this in itself poses a threat to the stability of the Belarusian regime. At the same time, this action convincingly demonstrated the incomplete control of society held by the authorities and the readiness of political emigres to go on the offensive at any moment. Media analysts also confirm that Belarusian society has not been completely isolated — people still

seek and receive information about events in the country not only from government publications but also from foreign sources and independent Belarusian media in exile. Repression and propaganda pressure have played a role, but there is no absolute information dominance of official propaganda even on the territory of Belarus proper, says analyst Mikhail Darashevich: “what causes a reduction in the audience of non-state media? How much has it decreased? According to my estimates, it has not decreased [...] If we count by subscribers, then BelTA has 1.5 million subscribers, News of Belarus and Mir have 1.1 million each, ONT has one million, STV has 849,000, SB TV has 858,000. At the same time, 61% of BelTA’s audience is from Russia, ONT 44%, STV 45% and SB TV 63%. If we count the Belarusian audience of these five leading state-owned media, it will amount to 849,000 people [...] These are not such amazing results.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> In general, there is every reason for the following conclusion: the Belarusian authorities are making every effort to bring society under total control — both through police repression and by taking control of information sources to create limited access to independent media. However, to date, this control has not been complete — one way or another, it fails in a variety of areas — and at the same time, the authorities’ attacks on the rights and freedoms of citizens continue.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Центральная избирательная комиссия Республики Беларусь. “Сегодня начинается выдвижение кандидатов в делегаты Всебелорусского народного собрания[Today the nomination of candidates for delegates to the All-Belarusian People's Assembly begins].” March 12, 2024. <https://rec.gov.by/ru/from-telegram-ru/view/segodnja-nachinaetsja-vydvizhenie-kandidatov-v-delegaty-vsebelorusskogo-narodnogo-sobranija-1626-2024>
- <sup>ii</sup> Wikipedia. “Федерация профсоюзов Беларуси [Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus].” N.d. [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F\\_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%84%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%8E%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%B2\\_%D0%91%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%84%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%8E%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%B2_%D0%91%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8)
- <sup>iii</sup> Wikipedia. “Белорусский республиканский союз молодёжи [Belarusian Republican Youth Union].” N.d. [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F\\_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%84%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%8E%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%B2\\_%D0%91%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%84%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%8E%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%B2_%D0%91%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8)
- <sup>iv</sup> Центральная избирательная комиссия Республики Беларусь. “Всебелорусское народное собрание[All-Belarusian People's Assembly].” 2024. <https://rec.gov.by/uploads/files/Pdf/2024/vns2024-about.pdf>
- <sup>v</sup> [https://minjust.gov.by/directions/compare\\_coverage/registratsiya-obedineniy-partiy-i-fondov/svedeniya-o-politicheskikh-partiyakh-zaregistrirovannykh-v-respublike-belarus/](https://minjust.gov.by/directions/compare_coverage/registratsiya-obedineniy-partiy-i-fondov/svedeniya-o-politicheskikh-partiyakh-zaregistrirovannykh-v-respublike-belarus/) Official website of the Belarusian Ministry of Justice
- <sup>vi</sup> Богуславская, А. ““Не мешать Лукашенко”. Для чего в Беларуси утверждают ВНС? [“Do not interfere with Lukashenko”. What is the purpose of approving the ABPA in Belarus?].” *DW*, March 19, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/ru/ne-mesat-lukashenko-dla-cego-v-belarusi-utverzdaut-vns/a-68615823>
- <sup>vii</sup> Богуславская, А. ““Не мешать Лукашенко”. Для чего в Беларуси утверждают ВНС? [“Do not interfere with Lukashenko”. What is the purpose of approving the ABPA in Belarus?].” *DW*, March 19, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/ru/ne-mesat-lukashenko-dla-cego-v-belarusi-utverzdaut-vns/a-68615823>
- <sup>viii</sup> БЕЛТА. “Всебелорусское народное собрание соберется в новом статусе 24-25 апреля [The All-Belarusian People's Assembly will meet in a new status on April 24-25].” March 18, 2023. <https://www.belta.by/society/view/vsebelorusskoe-narodnoe-sobranie-soberetsja-v-novom-statuse-24-25-aprelja-622077-2024/>
- <sup>ix</sup> БЕЛТА. “Лукашенко ответил на вопрос, пойдет ли на следующие президентские выборы [Lukashenko answered the question whether he will go to the next presidential election].” February 25, 2024. <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-otvetil-na-vopros-pojdet-li-na-sledujuschie-prezidentskie-vybory-617564-2024/>
- <sup>x</sup> Главный. Тур. “Не стоит воспринимать слова Президента о выдвижении в 2025 году как официальное заявление [Don't take the President's words about the nomination in 2025 as an official statement].” *Telegram*, February 29, 2024. [https://t.me/glav\\_tur/10501](https://t.me/glav_tur/10501)
- <sup>xi</sup> Дракахруст, Ю. “Заблытаў і сваіх, і чужых. Чаму Лукашэнка какетнічае наконт свайго ўдзелу ў выбарах 2025 году? [Confused both his own and others. Why is Lukashenko coquettish about his participation in the 2025 elections?].” *Svaboda*, March 7, 2024. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32851993.html>
- <sup>xii</sup> ТАСС. “Путин заявил, что четверо непосредственных исполнителей теракта в "Крокус" задержаны [Putin says four direct perpetrators of the terrorist attack in Crocus City Hall detained].” March 23, 2024. <https://tass.ru/proisshestviya/20334117>
- <sup>xiii</sup> Президент Республики Беларусь. “Рабочая поездка в Ошмянский район Гродненской области [Working visit to Oshmian district, Grodno region].” March 26, 2024. <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/rabochaya-poezdka-v-oshmyanskiy-rayon-grodnenskoj-oblasti>



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<sup>xiv</sup> РАЧКОВ, И. ИГНАТЬЕВА, А. “Бонд, да не тот: борьба за белорусские еврооблигации [Bond, but not the same: the struggle for Belarusian Eurobonds].” *Pravo*, March 27, 2024. <https://pravo.ru/opinion/252259/>

<sup>xv</sup> Розгон, О. “В Житомирской области на границе с беларусью строят дополнительные укрепления [Additional fortifications are being built on the border with Belarus in Zhytomyr region].” *UNN*, March 26, 2024. <https://unn.ua/ru/news/v-zhitomirskoi-oblasti-na-granitse-s-belarusyu-stroyat-dopolnitelnie-ukrepleniya>

<sup>xvi</sup> Бовсуновская, К. “Малюк раскрыл детали "хирургического" поражения российского самолета А-50 в Мачулищах [Malyuk revealed details of the “surgical” defeat of the Russian A-50 aircraft in Machulishchi].” *UNIAN*, March 26, 2024. <https://www.unian.net/war/vasiliy-malyuk-rasskazal-kak-sbu-osushchestvili-specoperaciyu-po-porazheniyu-vrazheskogo-samoleta-a-50-v-machulishchah-12584541.html>

<sup>xvii</sup> Президент Республики Беларусь. “Рабочая поездка в Ошмянский район Гродненской области [Working visit to Oshmian district, Grodno region].” March 26, 2024. <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/rabochaya-poezdka-v-oshmyanskiy-rayon-grodnenskoj-oblasti>

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<sup>xix</sup> ОБЫЧНОЕ УТРО. “САХАЩИК, ДОРОФЕЕВ: будет ли ядерный удар из Беларуси по НАТО, война Путина с Литвой [SAHASHCHIK, DOROFEEV: Will there be a nuclear strike from Belarus on NATO, Putin's war with Lithuania].” *YouTube*, March 27, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saEW1e7KIA0>

<sup>xx</sup> Президент Республики Беларусь. “Рабочая поездка в Ошмянский район Гродненской области [Working visit to Oshmian district, Grodno region].” March 26, 2024. <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/rabochaya-poezdka-v-oshmyanskiy-rayon-grodnenskoj-oblasti>

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<sup>xxii</sup> Государственный пограничный комитет Республики Беларусь. “Литва закрывает еще два пункта пропуска на границе с Беларусью [Lithuania closes two more checkpoints on the border with Belarus].” February 29, 2024. <https://gpk.gov.by/news/gpk/158641/>

<sup>xxiii</sup> БЕЛТА. “Правительство Беларуси запретило ввоз отдельных товаров через белорусско-литовский участок границы [The Government of Belarus banned the import of certain goods through the Belarusian-Lithuanian section of the border].” March 14, 2024. <https://www.belta.by/society/view/pravitelstvo-belarusi-zapretilo-vvoz-otdelnyh-tovarov-cherez-belorussko-litovskij-uchastok-granitsy-621424-2024/>

<sup>xxiv</sup> Весна. “Па стане на 22 траўня ў Беларусі прызнаныя палітычнымі вязнямі 1392 чалавекі [As of May 22, 1,392 people were recognized as political prisoners in Belarus].” N.d. <https://prisoners.spring96.org/>

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<sup>xxvi</sup> Президент Республики Беларусь. “Усовершенствован порядок перевода госорганов с мирного на военное время [Procedure for transferring state bodies from peacetime to wartime has been improved].” March 4, 2024. <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/v-belarusi-usovershenstvovan-poryadok-perevoda-gosorganov-s-mirnogo-na-voennoe-vremya>

<sup>xxvii</sup> Весна. “Минимум 207 задержанных по возвращении в Беларусь: актуальная статистика от “Вясны” за 2023 год [At least 207 detainees on return to Belarus: current statistics from “Viasna” for 2023].” January 11, 2023. <https://spring96.org/ru/news/113903>

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