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The Russian authorities are not giving up on trying to use Aliaksandar Lukashenka as a mediator of peace negotiations — first of all, he was entrusted with proposing a return to the Istanbul Agreements of 2022 as the basis for the upcoming compromise. On April 11, during negotiations with Putin, Lukashenka put forward: “Take out the document that you once showed me and handed over, put it on the table and move along it. This is a reasonable position. There is an acceptable position for Ukraine as well.”ⁱ He returned to this issue once again on April 25, insisting that the Istanbul Agreements can be “the starting point for resolving the Ukrainian crisis.”ⁱⁱ Experts believe that Lukashenka is acting as Putin’s “press secretary” here: for Russia itself to directly make a call for peace would mean initially taking a weak negotiating position. This is unacceptable for Putin, both in terms of foreign policy — it would mean an actual admission of defeat and readiness for serious concessions — and in domestic politics, since it would destroy all propaganda narratives related to border protection, opposition to the West, successfully overcoming sanctions, and the denazification of Ukraine.ⁱⁱⁱ The Istanbul Agreements were published by WELT and their contents were not refuted by the parties involved in the negotiations:^{iv} the document assumed a return to the pre-war (February 2022) borders and also opened the way for Ukraine to join the EU. Returning to these borders in 2024 means all Russian military efforts and losses over 2 years have been meaningless. Moreover, since the Istanbul Agreements were recognized before the start of negotiations, it means that Putin was even ready to make some concessions beyond those offered at the time. Therefore, Lukashenka was instructed to publish this idea, and he was specially summoned to Moscow for this, experts believe^v — after all, coming from Putin, such a thing would sound like an official surrender. Putin himself, who paid an official visit to Belarus on May 23-24, spoke much more cautiously on the issue of peace and its conditions: he offered to return to the agreements reached in Belarus and Turkey in 2022, but “taking into account today’s realities that have developed on Earth.”^{vi} Negotiations between Putin and Lukashenka in Minsk were clearly devoted to a much wider range of issues than was publicly announced, experts from the Voice of America^{vii} believe: the prospects for an escalation of the conflict in Ukraine and the expansion of its borders were at the center of attention. This is evidenced by the fact that ex-President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich may have arrived in Belarus at the same time as Putin,^{viii} which could serve as an implicit threat to Kyiv. In addition, Russian Foreign Minister

Sergei Lavrov and Defense Minister Andrei Belousov also arrived in Minsk: from this it can be concluded that Putin and Lukashenka were demonstrating their seriousness not so much to Ukraine as to the West. “Kyiv is in a panic!”, “A powerful signal to NATO countries”, “Putin and Lukashenka recognized Zelensky as illegitimate” — the Voice of America notes that such headlines in the Russian media exhaust the pathos of the negotiations in Minsk. In addition, Belarus is participating in Russian exercises to verify readiness for the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons — these maneuvers began on May 21. As reported, during the exercises, the use of warhead carriers with a range of up to 5,500 kilometers^{ix} was practiced — it is precisely this kind of weapon that Russia has deployed on the territory of Belarus. The combat readiness check once again made observers wonder: has Moscow handed over control of tactical nuclear weapons to Minsk? There is still no direct answer, but indirect signs indicate that Putin still has the “red button”: Russian military expert Boris Rozhin notes that the nuclear weapons test was arranged by Moscow, and this eloquently demonstrates who is the boss here. Although remaining on the sidelines in political and military relations while in tandem with Russia, Belarus continues to actively militarize. On May 23, Pavel Muraveyka was appointed Vice-Minister of Defense of the country; he is known for calling for “breaking through the corridor to the Baltic Sea by force of arms.”^x In Belarus, laws related to the mobilization of military personnel are being tightened: draft summons can now be served via SMS messages, penalties for draft evasion (up to 3 years in prison) have become stricter, and the military has the right to deprive military personnel of the opportunity to travel abroad.^{xi} Ukrainian experts note that Belarus has reduced its military presence on its southern borders — now there are approximately 2,000 soldiers there. However, the composition of these units has changed qualitatively: a significant number of them are specialists in the field of special operations. Moreover, they allegedly even penetrated into the territory of Ukraine — although this was not broadcast, as it could provoke an aggravation of the bilateral conflict.^{xii} The scandalous story of the threats made by the head of the Belarusian KGB, which was voiced from the rostrum of the All-Belarusian National Assembly, reveals a high level of mutual distrust between Ukraine and Belarus. It was stated that fighters in the Belarusian volunteer units who are fighting in the ranks of the Ukrainian army are considered legitimate targets by Minsk. Hospital buildings that were listed by the chairman of the KGB were

immediately evacuated in Kiev.^{xiii} later, the Security Service of Ukraine accused the Belarusian side of conducting active “information and psychological operations.”^{xiv} ”

II

The military doctrine of Belarus adopted at the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly is a document aimed at the militarization of the country; at the same time, the aggressiveness of the authorities is directed not so much outward as inward. Experts note that independent public structures hostile to the authorities are almost considered the main enemy — authorities are now allowed to use unlimited force against them.^{xv} Indeed, the military doctrine presupposes not only countering “destructive forces within the country”, but also fighting “destructive ideologies”, which is already being used as a justification for the strictest censorship and police measures to combat dissent.^{xvi} In this sense, the most outrageous ideas that were born in the minds of the authors of dystopian fiction have been implemented in Belarus — for example, citizens of the country are now being given the chance to watch themselves. For this purpose, the Stop Extremism application has been developed: users install it as a browser extension so that it informs them about visiting Internet resources listed as extremist and blocks such sites from being downloaded.^{xvii} It is noteworthy that visiting such sites is not formally illegal and, therefore, we are talking about spying on oneself in order to demonstrate hyper-loyalty. At the same time, the scale of police terror is increasing, despite the destruction of all organized resistance in the country. Another film has appeared in the Belarusian media that tells the story of “a group of saboteurs, which included teenagers and which was organized by the Ukrainian special services.”^{xviii} The authors and interviewees claim that six underage college students prepared bomb attacks on police units, as well as pasted leaflets and applied anti-government graffiti. It is reported that employees of the Ukrainian special services trained them and defined their tasks. Two more saboteurs, who became known from another ONT TV channel film, were sentenced on May 23: Belarusian Vadzim Patsenka and Russian citizen Alexey Kulikou were sentenced to 21 and 23 years in prison for allegedly preparing a terrorist attack at an oil refinery — on behalf, as reported, of the same Ukrainian special services.^{xix} Kulikou stated at the trial that the case had a political background, but since the court sessions were closed to the public, it was impossible to judge the reliability of the charges against the convicts. By the end of May, the number of Belarusian political

prisoners exceeded 1,400.^{xx} Repressive structures are clearly faced with a shortage of targets, since active representatives of the opposition have been neutralized for a long time, and even identified cases of dissent have become extremely rare by now. Paradoxically, even activists who are neutral or loyal to the authorities become occasionally objects of pressure from the KGB and other official structures: for example, Vitebsk activist Elvira Mirsalimova, a supporter of the “Russian world”, reports that arrests of “loyalists” have become common in her city and she herself spent more than a day behind bars.^{xxi} The telegram channel of political scientist and supporter of the ideology of “Western Russianism” Usevalad Shymau was closed by order of the special services.^{xxii} Belarusian special services are increasingly trying to control activity outside the country. At the All-Belarusian Assembly, Lukashenka directly threatened that the relatives of people living abroad are hostages and may suffer because of the actions of emigrants: “Do not forget that you are very much harming your relatives. Do not forget that you have some kind of property here — I advise you to forget about this property already. But do not put your relatives at risk.”^{xxiii} The special services have actively begun to implement this order. On May 16, the Investigative Committee reported that 104 more names appeared in the case of “Belarusians abroad”. All of them are accused of taking part in actions dedicated to “Freedom Day” (the day of the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic on March 25, 1918). The Investigative Committee threatens these people with the confiscation of movable and immovable property.^{xxiv} They were identified by photographs and video footage of demonstrations in European capitals — in Vilnius, Warsaw and others. Another 257 people — all those involved in the preparation of the elections to the Coordination Council or participating in them — have been charged with “conspiracy to seize state power.”^{xxv} The relevant article provides for the death penalty and confiscation of property: since all the accused are out of reach, they are in danger of having their property taken away.^{xxvi}

III

The elections to the Coordination Council of the opposition have become a serious test for the special services of Belarus: they set the goal of disrupting them, or at least profaning them, but the challenge was to do it remotely, without being able to send special forces after the participants in the elections. A lot of materials appeared in the Belarusian pro-government media, in which it was reported about the leakage of

personal data of the participants of the “Victory Plan” (“Plan Pieramoha”).^{xxvii} According to official media, all those who were in the Peramogi database received promotional appeals from the head of the organization “ByPOL” Aliaksandr Azarau, who called for voting for his list of candidates.^{xxviii} Allegedly, such a message would contain a certain amount of data: it is not difficult to detect the receipt of such a message using access to the information databases of providers. It is not known whether this is the case: however, all the phones of the persons who are in custody were checked for receiving such messages — if the mailing text was found, these people would face charges of membership in an extremist group. The telegram channels of the special services publish reports on the initiation of criminal cases against identified participants of the “Victory Plan.”^{xxix} Materials have also been published indicating that the property of all those involved in or who participated in the elections to the Coordination Council have been arrested.^{xxx} Pro-government channels also report that Azarau’s advertising newsletter was sent to addresses from the Golas system database (which was created for the independent monitoring of the 2020 elections^{xxxi}). Allegedly, this newsletter also makes it possible to identify the participants in the “Holas”, with the most tragic consequences for them.^{xxxii} It is likely that we are talking about a campaign of intimidation: the number of participants in the Victory Plan and the Holas platforms is hundreds of thousands of people — 500,000 are members of Holas alone. The Belarusian repressive machine is hardly capable of digesting such a large number of victims, even with its current appetite, especially since they would have to be punished using articles that involve the most severe punishments. The elections to the Coordinating Council were held, and 6,723 people^{xxxiii} took part in them. According to some experts,^{xxxiv} the Belarusian authorities have achieved their goal — they blocked the possibility of the public mobilization of democratic forces both in Belarus and outside it. The election to the Coordinating Council was considered by the organizers as an opportunity to demonstrate the unity and power of opposition-minded citizens to the Belarusian authorities. It turned out to be the opposite: the regime’s repressions silenced not only Belarusians inside the country but also the majority of political emigrants. The author Mikola Buhaj of “Nasha Niva” concludes that the time for direct and public action has not yet come — this is a period of reaction, hidden organization and a gathering of forces. This was convincingly demonstrated by the elections to the Coordination Council, which was and is the main structure uniting Lukashenka’s opponents.

Experts note^{xxxv} that the election campaign for the Coordinating Council revealed an unprecedented high level of fear among Belarusian citizens when it comes to interacting with foreign public structures. For this reason, of those who voted there were practically none who live in Belarus. The low voter activity, contrary to all hopes, prevented the Coordinating Council from breathing new life into the democratic movement. Moreover, even the internal hierarchy in the structures of the Belarusian opposition has not changed: the Coordinating Council could not oust either Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya or the United Transitional Cabinet as the main representative of the democratic movement. The elections also revealed a high degree of disappointment even among Belarusians of the diaspora: at least 350,000 people live abroad, but only a few thousand of them voted — this can only be explained, political scientist Schreibman is sure, by fatigue and the loss of hope by Belarusians for imminent changes.

ENDNOTES

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^{xviii} ONT-TV Channel. ““ДЕТИ на прицеле. ЗАВЕРБОВАННЫЕ врагом”: как СБУ ИСПОЛЬЗУЕТ детей для совершения ТЕРРАКТОВ. Фильм ONT [“CHILDREN in the crosshairs. TARGETED BY THE ENEMY”: how the SBU USES children to carry out TERRACTS. Film ONT].” *YouTube*, April 29, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ivAqNnSPDE>

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^{xxviii} ЖС Premium. “Беглый дегенерат Азаров указал пальцем на всех, еще по каким-то причинам не сидящих в тюрьме участников плана Перамога [The fugitive degenerate Azarov pointed his finger at all the members of the Peramog plan who were not yet in jail for some reason].” *Telegram*, May 22, 2024. <https://t.me/sewerfsefsd/44708>

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^{xxxi} ЖС Premium. “Штоооооо? Азаров оказался подонком в квадрате! Помимо базы данных «пьяна «Перамога» он использовал ещё и базу «Голоса», чтобы разослать приглашение поучаствовать в «выборах» в КС [What? Azarov turned out to be a scumbag in square! In addition to the “Peramoga” database, he also used the “Golos” database to send out invitations to participate in the “elections” to the CC].” *Telegram*, May 22, 2024. <https://t.me/sewerfsefsd/44729>

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