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Joint drills of the Belarusian army and non-strategic nuclear forces of Russia continued in June. During the first stage of maneuvers, the troops of the two countries practiced the deployment of “Iskander” missiles and the use of hypersonic “Kinjal” missiles. In the second stage, Russian and Belarusian units mastered the skills related to the “combat use of non-strategic nuclear weapons”, including the detonation of tactical nuclear munitions.ⁱ Reuters notes that the United States has not observed changes in Russia’s strategic approaches, although American intelligence takes seriously exercises where the use of nuclear weapons is practiced. The head of the Belarusian General Staff Pavel Muraveyka said that Iskander launchers moved to designated areas on the territory of Belarus, received special munitions, were outfitted with missile warheads, and were sent to designated targets. Muraveyka especially noted the fact that now the Belarusian military has the necessary skills to handle atomic charges.ⁱⁱ In connection with the exercises, experts have identified a number of important points. Russian independent analyst Anatoly Nesmian (a writer and blogger who is well-known for criticizing the Putin regime, as well as exposing the political adventurism and corrupt aspirations of the Russian top bureaucrats) points out that in the Soviet military doctrine, the use of tactical nuclear charges was assumed during offensive combat operations as a way to break through the enemy’s defensive formations. From the point of view of defense, such nuclear weapons are completely useless – the radius of destruction of the charges is small and it is impossible to stop an offensive on a wide front using them, says Nesmian.ⁱⁱⁱ Another expert, British colonel Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, who has served in command positions in the British army and NATO for a long time, suggests that the Russian-Belarusian exercises are an attempt to mislead a potential enemy. According to Bretton-Gordon, there has been a significant degradation of combat potential in Russia’s nuclear forces over the past 30 years: as a result, if Moscow still has nuclear weapons at all, which there are serious doubts about, then the danger of such weapons is seriously exaggerated by the Kremlin’s propaganda machine.^{iv} The British officer suggests not to take seriously the current exercises and Russian threats to use weapons of mass destruction. The opinions of the two experts are quite consistent: it makes no sense to practice the use of tactical nuclear weapons for defensive purposes if such weapons exist; if they do not exist, then the purpose of such exercises is only for the media, not a build-up of defense potential. For the

Belarusian side, it is primarily the propaganda effect that is important – after all, Lukashenka probably does not have the right to press the “red button” and is hardly interested in a nuclear war unfolding on the territory of his country.

Meanwhile, tensions on the western border of Belarus are growing. On June 6, a Polish soldier, who had been wounded on May 28 by participants of an illegal attempt to break through the border from Belarus to Poland, died.^v Warsaw immediately demanded that Minsk investigate and detain the murderer. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry responded to this demand by accusing Poland of blocking all border cooperation for many years and claimed that for this reason it will be difficult to provide effective assistance.^{vi} The tragedy associated with the death of the soldier has become another piece of evidence of the growing threat from the east for the Polish authorities. On June 10, the Tusk government approved the “Eastern Shield deterrence and defense program” worth 10 billion PLN (about 2.5 billion USD). It involves the creation of a detection, warning and tracking system based on a network of base stations on the borders with Belarus and Russia. Advanced operational bases will be built, including the deployment of missile and air defense systems to combat drones. To limit the mobility of the advancing forces, it is planned to build anti-tank ditches and to mine roads and bridges.^{vii}

Meanwhile, the association of Belarusian security forces in exile (BYPOL) issued a statement that during the breakthrough across the border, when the Polish soldier was killed, the special services of Belarus planned to scatter anti-personnel mines along the border strip on the territory of Poland.^{viii} This move has raised doubts even among emigrants, but BYPOL continues to insist on it. After the murder of the Polish soldier, the Belarusian authorities made several demonstrative gestures to prove their interest in reducing tensions on the border: in particular, dozens of illegal immigrants were detained near Minsk and are awaiting deportation. Nevertheless, in Poland, according to analysts from Warsaw, there is complete unanimity on the issue of relations with Minsk: there can be no liberalization in this area, only a tightening is possible. Moreover, Lukashenka himself does not seem to have the goal of normalizing relations with the West, since he sees this as a threat to his power.^{ix} In total, according to the Polish Defense Minister, in 2024 about 20,000 people have so far tried to enter the country from Belarus.^x As a result, Polish Foreign Minister Sikorski said that his country is considering the possibility of completely closing the land border with Belarus^{xi}.

Meanwhile, Minsk has also provoked a conflict with Israel – and for no apparent reason. In his speech on exposing the corrupt activities of Belarusian Railway officials, Lukashenka said: “Here are three dozen people listed. Excuse me, I’m not an antisemite, but more than half are Jews. Do they occupy a special, privileged position with us, do they steal and do not think about their future?”.^{xii} The Israeli government’s reply followed immediately: the Israeli Foreign Minister accused Lukashenka of antisemitism, and a protest note was handed to the government in Minsk.^{xiii} Israeli media collected a number of statements by Lukashenka, which, according to Tel Aviv, are enough for him to be considered an antisemite.^{xiv}

II

The Belarusian state TV channel ONT reported that the KGB had uncovered a group of schoolchildren from Mahileu who were allegedly engaged in the manufacture of explosive devices on the instructions of foreign special services. “The child terrorists were preparing for terrorist attacks. They confessed immediately after their detention. One of the three was charged with the illegal possession of explosives and preparation of an act of terrorism.”^{xv} Earlier, a group of teenagers, including minors, was arrested by the KGB. They were charged with preparing attacks on police stations on behalf of the Ukrainian special services.^{xvi} The details of the case of the Mahileu schoolchildren are not known, and the ONT report does not allow us to form an exhaustive picture of it. According to chemical experts, however, the facts that have been given allow us to qualify the actions of the detainees as ordinary childish pranks. Tampering with explosive objects was widespread among schoolchildren: in addition, iodine vials were used as containers for packing explosives, and the “explosives” were made from ordinary paint.^{xvii} However, the campaign against the so-called “sabotage operations” of foreign intelligence services is gaining momentum in the country.

In June, official reports appeared about the arrest of former employees of the Belarusian sanatorium in Lithuania. The director and head of the marketing service of the “Belarus” sanatorium were accused of collecting information about clients – influential Belarusian officials – through the Belarusian boarding house in Druskininkai for the Lithuanian special services.^{xviii} A marketing manager has already been sentenced to 6 years in prison.^{xix}

In June, the International Labour Organization^{xx} lodged a sharp protest about the violation of the professional rights of Belarusian citizens. The IOL demanded freedom for organizations that defend the rights of workers. According to representatives of the organization, independent trade unions in Belarus are persecuted, their leadership is in prison, and any attempts to protect workers' rights are suppressed by brutal repression. The IOL also elected Aliaksander Yarashuk to its Administrative Council. Yarashuk, the head of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, has been in prison since April 2022.^{xxi} In total, at the end of June 2024, human rights defenders recognized nearly 1,500 people as political prisoners.^{xxii}

The Lukashenka regime continues to put pressure on political emigrants by passing sentences *in absentia* and confiscating their personal property. Blogger Andrey Pavuk and his wife Volga, opera singer Marharyta Liauchuk, and bloggers Illia Salenkou and Uladyslau Navazhilau^{xxiii} were all sentenced to long terms of imprisonment *in absentia*. In particular, they are accused of creating an “extremist formation” in the form of a satirical YouTube channel titled “Rudabelskaya Pakazukha”. They were punished with detention in prison for terms from 6 to 12 years.^{xxiv} In June, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s adviser Franak Viachorka was sentenced to 20 years in prison. He is also abroad and was therefore punished remotely.^{xxv} All of them were also given huge fines and had property seized as payment.

III

On June 20, the State Border Committee of Belarus issued a statement warning that no provocations on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border would be tolerated or accepted. The SPC claimed that there was an increase in the deployment of troops on their common borders, including special forces troops and units of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate. These units are equipped with heavy weapons, including infantry armored vehicles, howitzers, and self-propelled artillery.^{xxvi} The Border Committee stated that Belarus has the necessary resources to respond to any provocations. The Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation responded immediately. Kyiv believes that Lukashenka’s regime is acting within the framework of a joint strategy with Russia to destabilize the situation by conducting disinformation and psychological operations against Ukraine^{xxvii}. At the same time, a representative of the State Border Committee of Ukraine admitted that a fortification of the border is taking

place, but indicated that there is no provocation in this act. Kyiv considers an escalation of border security inevitable since Belarus took the side of Russia in the war.^{xxviii} Analysts have been working to explain the sudden aggravation of the situation on the border between the two countries. There are few reliably established facts, so completely speculative versions of events appear – for example, one narrative claims that after Putin's trip to North Korea, Moscow began implementing some kind of “hybrid offensive” plan. Belarus has its own role in this: constant exercises, an emphasis on the nuclear threat and an increase in tensions all serve to divert Ukrainian troops so they are permanently positioned on the northern border.^{xxix} In this regard, the migration crisis of moderate (and manageable) intensity on the border with Poland also plays a role. Belarus’s active participation in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict on Russia’s side was the reason for the adoption by the European Union of the 14th package of sanctions against Minsk.^{xxx} The main purpose of this package is to block the supply of smuggled goods to Russia from the EU through Belarus.^{xxxi} The sanctions were formulated in a hurry, since the Hungarian presidency of the EU was about to begin on July 1, 2024, and it could block economic restrictions on Minsk because of its special relationship with Belarus.

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