



Belarus
Research
Network
on Neighborhood
Policy

Bimonthly Review **(July-August)**

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



2024

July 2024 was marked by a number of events that sparked hope for a warming of — and maybe in the near future a normalization of — relations between Belarus and Ukraine. On June 28, 10 Ukrainians were transferred to Kyiv, five of whom were held in Belarusian prisons and five of whom were in Russian ones. It is known that Ukrainian citizens Nikolai Shvets, Natalia Zakharenko, Pavel Kuprienko, Lyudmila Goncharenko and Ekaterina Bryukhanova have left Minsk for their homeland — all of them had been convicted in Belarus for espionage and sabotage.ⁱ Shvets, in particular, was convicted in the case involving sabotage at a Belarusian airfield, as a result of which a Russian A-50 military aircraft was seriously damaged.ⁱⁱ Aliaksandar Lukashenka provided details of this exchange.ⁱⁱⁱ “The procedure was agreed with Putin. In response, Kyiv released an orthodox priest, Metropolitan Jonathan of Bratslav, [who was] convicted of denying the fact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine”.^{iv} Shortly after that, Lukashenka announced that there had been a withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the border with Belarus: on this basis, he announced that tensions on the border had decreased and ordered the withdrawal of Belarusian troops from the border.^v Lukashenka also came up with a vague peace initiative — he stated that intends to discuss it in the near future with Putin: “We need to negotiate!”.^{vi} At the same time, Lukashenka claims, the “north-western direction” has become the most dangerous — this refers to the borders with Lithuania and Poland. “They are provoking us to get involved in this war,” he said.^{vii} The peaceful notes in the rhetoric coming from Minsk seem to have garnered a response: on July 8, the seizure of the property of Service Oil, a subsidiary of the Belarusian state company Belarusneft, was finally lifted in Kyiv. Assets worth UAH 4 billion had been frozen since June 2022.^{viii} However, hopes for a possible normalization of relations were not destined to be realized. Since the moment units of the Ukrainian army entered the territory of the Kursk region, Russian online media have been increasingly complaining about Lukashenka: allegedly, it is due to the fact that Belarus withdrew its troops from the northern border of Ukraine that the Ukrainian armed forces were able to transfer their units to the east and use them as an invasion force.^{ix} The following events, as reported by the Russian telegram channel Nezygar (which is known for publishing leaks from the Kremlin), could have been caused by the fact that “Moscow talked to him”;^x Minsk announced that on August 9, Ukrainian attack drones with explosives appeared over the territory of the country — some of them were allegedly shot down, and some

flew onward to the Yaroslavl region of Russia, where they were destroyed by air defense. Lukashenka called it a “violation of all rules of conduct”.^{xi} The Minister of Defense was immediately ordered to transfer additional contingents of troops, as well as tactical missile systems and air defense missiles, to the border with Ukraine.^{xii} It is characteristic that accusations of provocation were made shortly after it became known that there are regular flights of Russian drones in the direction of Ukraine: in July, at least nine such episodes were registered. Moreover, in seven cases, Russian combat drones proceeded into the airspace of Ukraine.^{xiii} In this case, the Belarusian authorities did not express any complaints to the “sender” of these devices, did not warn the “recipient”, and even more notably did not apologize. Regarding the transit of the “Shaheds” over Belarusian airspace, experts express the following opinion: it is possible, of course, that Belarus became a victim of the battle of radio-electronic intelligence in these neighboring countries and that the drones were knocked off the course by the Ukrainian military (or got lost by themselves); perhaps the Russian military sent them along a route where Ukraine’s air defense systems are especially weak. However, in any case, the transit of the “Shaheds” through Belarus was aimed at stopping the barely noticeable warming in relations between Kyiv and Minsk — Moscow probably acted consciously in this regard.^{xiv}

Lukashenka decided to mark the end of the brief “détente” in relations with Ukraine with a visit to the border — according to him, he should personally “deal with the problems”^{xv}: these problems, as it turned out, are serious enough to create new tensions, but at the same time are not so serious that the Belarusian commander-in-chief is threatened by them.

II

The human rights situation in Belarus did not undergo any serious changes in July-August, in spite of some encouraging signals from the authorities. In early July, Lukashenka announced that he was ready to release some political prisoners: “Don’t be surprised if very seriously ill people are released in a few days... People in trouble, I believe, do not have citizenship and we must help them”.^{xvi} What he meant by “citizenship” is not entirely clear: among the famous people who received their freedom, there were only Belarusians and not a single foreigner. However, the full list of those amnestied and pardoned is still not known. Human rights activists report that 18 people were released, among whom only one is widely known — Rygor Kastuseu, the leader of

the liquidated Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front. Most of the remaining political prisoners were supposed to be released during the current year, some even during July. At the same time, some of those who were offered an exemption refused it, apparently because the conditions were unacceptable.^{xvii} This act of mercy cannot be called exceptional, but it did arouse vague hopes in observers: Tatsiana Khomich, co-founder of the Association of Relatives and Former Political Prisoners, believes that we are talking about Lukashenka implementing some kind of agreement with an influential party — this gives hope for the release, in the more or less near future, of some or all of the one and a half thousand people languishing in Belarusian prisons for political reasons.^{xviii} According to the human rights center Viasna-96, as of mid-August there were 1,385 political prisoners in Belarus, and this list is probably far from complete — it is not possible to get information about all those who are behind bars.^{xix} Meanwhile, a lawyer for Viasna-96 noted that with regards to the recent prisoner-release situation, the Belarusian authorities could not even comply with their own laws: political prisoners were released, which is an undoubted blessing — however, they did it in violation of their own laws, which exclude from the list of persons subject to amnesty those who were convicted under “articles on extremism”.^{xx} If we assume that the release of political prisoners was the result of some secret agreement, then this agreement was obviously not concluded with the United States, which has demanded the release of all those deprived of liberty for political reasons.^{xxi} The European Union made a similar statement, and it also imposed new sanctions against 28 representatives of law enforcement agencies and employees of state media. Now, in total, restrictions on 261 individuals and 37 organizations have been imposed by the European Union.^{xxii} The fact that the authorities in Belarus do not intend to give up repressive practices was repeatedly confirmed in July and August, such as when the Brest Regional Court sentenced the board members of the organization “Forum of Democratic Forces of Belarus”. Anatoly Kotau, Volha Karach and Veranika Tsepkala got imprisonment for up to 12 years each, and they were also fined up to EUR 180,000.^{xxiii} In August, a raid was also carried out with mass arrests in the city of Kobrin: the exact number of those arrested is not known, but there were at least 15 of them. All of them are being held pending a criminal case of “extremism”, which means almost guaranteed long-term imprisonment.^{xxiv}

The story of German citizen Rico Krieger alone says a lot about the political, judicial and penitentiary practices of modern Belarus. On July 31, it was announced that Krieger had been pardoned by Lukashenka after the German citizen was sentenced to death in Belarus by one of the country's courts. It was reported that Rico Krieger arrived in Belarus on October 2, 2023, and on October 5 he detonated an explosive device on one of the country's railways.^{xxv} He was arrested, and during the investigation he pleaded guilty to all charges. Krieger was sentenced to death, after which he gave several interviews in which he complained about the indifference of the German authorities to his fate.^{xxvi} As it turned out, the indifference was an illusion: Germany was negotiating the Krieger exchange not with Lukashenka, but with Moscow. This was probably not a secret for the condemned man himself — otherwise it is impossible to explain why he did not appeal against the sentence imposed on him. From all this, experts conclude that Krieger may have been convicted precisely for the purpose of a subsequent prisoner exchange — and the death sentence was supposed to increase the value of the German as an object around which the bidding was conducted. At the same time, Minsk was deprived of the opportunity to play its game here: the Belarusian court was probably guided not by the orders of the local authorities, but by Moscow's demands, albeit transmitted through Lukashenka.^{xxvii} The story with Krieger, therefore, gives us an idea of the degree of independence of not only the Belarusian judicial, police and intelligence systems, but also of Lukashenka himself.

III

The events of July and August demonstrate the steady loss of political subjectivity by Belarus and Lukashenka. It is known that Belarus's neighbors are not negotiating with Minsk on the issue of the crisis at the border caused by massive attempts to violate it by migrants from Asia and Africa. It is known, in particular, that Polish President Duda during a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping said that access to Europe for Chinese goods could be closed if Beijing did not put pressure on Minsk to stop the flow of illegal migrants. China reacted immediately: Warsaw and Minsk were asked to resolve this problem through mutual consultations as soon as possible.^{xxviii} It is not known whether this had an effect — however, China certainly has instruments with which to put pressure on Lukashenka: the countries conduct joint exercises, and cooperation with Beijing in the military sphere indicates the country's high importance

for Minsk. Moreover, it was with the approval of China that Belarus became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, on which it places great political and economic hopes.^{xxxix} But Poland is also trying to act independently to resolve the border crisis — not by entering into negotiations, but by giving Minsk signals. For example, Foreign Minister Sikorski said in an interview that the issue of opening additional checkpoints on the border with Belarus could be considered after the release of Polish-Belarusian journalist Andrzej Poczobut.^{xxx} Poczobut was arrested in 2021, and in 2023 he was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of “inciting national hatred and justification of Nazism”.^{xxxi} Poland tried to negotiate his release directly, but the authorities in Belarus demanded in exchange that they extradite one of the leaders of the Belarusian emigration abroad, Pavel Latushka.^{xxxii} Even up to the present day, Warsaw is still looking for efficient ways to interact with Minsk, but, apparently, Poles now prefer direct equal contacts to put pressure on Lukashenka through foreign partners. The authorities in Minsk are trying to establish some kind of formal — or even informal — contacts with the EU. Apparently, significant hopes are being pinned on the visa-free regime for citizens of the European Union, which was introduced on July 19, 2024: Lukashenka personally made a decision in this regard.^{xxxiii} Nevertheless, the EU is increasingly tightening sanctions against Belarus: in 2024 alone, new restrictions were introduced three times — in February, June and August.^{xxxiv} In July, restrictions began to apply on the supply of dual-use goods, including chips used in household appliances, as well as advanced technologies and military products.^{xxxv} According to experts, gestures and signals from Minsk are deliberately ignored by Europe: the problem is not even Lukashenka’s unreliability as a negotiating partner, but rather that Belarus is gradually losing its subjectivity, and, consequently, it is pointless to negotiate with the country about anything.^{xxxvi}

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ “Правозащитники сообщили об освобождении 10 политзаключенных, Минск передал Киеву украинского ‘диверсанта’ Николая Швеца. Главное в Беларуси за неделю - BBC News Русская служба.” [Human rights defenders reported the release of 10 political prisoners, Minsk handed over the Ukrainian sabotage agent Nikolai Shvets to Kyiv. The main news in Belarus for the week – BBC News Russian Service]. BBC News Русская служба, July 5, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cxe2k7y7e37o>
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^{xxvi} Белорусское телеграфное агентство. “‘Вообще ничего не делают’. Террорист Криегер о реакции властей Германии на его приговор,” [They do absolutely nothing. Terrorist Krieger on the reaction of the German authorities to his sentence]. July 25, 2024. <https://www.belta.by/society/view/voobsche-nichego-ne-delajut-terrorist-krieger-o-reaktsii-vlastej-germanii-na-ego-prigovor-650373-2024>

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^{xxx} Зеркало. “‘Это уже ваш выбор’. Интервью ‘Зеркала’ с главой МИД Польши — о закрытии границы, визах и принудительном развороте белорусов на Восток,” [This is your choice. An interview with the head of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in ‘Zerkalo’ about border closure, visas and the forced redirecting of Belarusians to the East]. August 5, 2024. <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/75058.html>

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^{xxxii} Новости Беларуси | euronews.com. “Лукашенко предлагал обменять Почобута на Латушко,” [Lukashenko proposed to exchange pochobut for Latushko]. August 3, 2024. <https://euronews.com/ru/lukashenko-predlagal-obmenyat-pochobuta-na-latushko>

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