

Analytical report:
Situation in the field of
national security and defence
of Belarus (March 2017)

The most important events of the month. The most important event in March was a wave of repression by the authorities, which was characterized by extreme chaos. It jeopardized the prospects for Belarus' relations with the West.

In early March, speaking on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian police, President Lukashenka said that someone wants to split the Belarusian society and destabilize the situation in the country: "We are like a bone in the throat of everyone".

On the night of March 20, 2017 at the checkpoint Aliaksandrauka at the Belarusian-Ukrainian border, a car tried to break through into the territory of Belarus. Border guards detained two people and began to search for a third person who could be in the car. In the vehicle the police found the objects that looked like a pistol and ammunition, as well as elements of an explosive device.

It's necessary to note a number of strange things related to this event:

- Ukrainian border guards report that the car, trying to break through to the Belarusian side, didn't cross Ukrainian checkpoints;
- nothing is reported about the registration number of the car (as well as about the country where its registered);
- nothing is reported about the identity of the detainees and the search results of the third person, who was in the car;
- items found in the car were called weapons, although this fact can only be established by examination.

This gave grounds to suspect the staging of the breakthrough of the border. The goal is to intimidate the population with threats from some armed extremists and to justify repressions against the population. Moreover, on the same day Aliaksandr Lukashenka stated that he is not afraid of NATO's activity at the borders of Belarus and the escalation of relations between the Alliance and Russia. He is much more concerned about the threat of destabilization of the situation inside the country, provoked from outside. At the same time, for the first time in several years President Lukashenka directly accused Western organizations, including special services, of subversive activities.

On March 21, 2017 Lukashenka announced the detention of dozens of armed militants who were trained in the camps in Belarus and neighboring countries. Traditionally, they intended to destabilize the situation in the country.

In the days that followed, a criminal case on the preparation of mass riots was started and 30 people were detained. Some of them were later released, but the majority were arrested. The events became known as the "Patriots' Case" (some of the arrested took part in the activities of the de facto state club "Patriot").

Also, a part of the figurants of the "Patriots' Case" were charged with creating an illegal armed formation.

The statements of Lukashenka about the involvement of neighboring countries in the preparation of certain militants to destabilize the situation in Belarus caused a

negative reaction from the neighbors. Moreover, the Belarusian authorities failed to bring any clear facts of this activity. Obviously, because of complete absence of such facts.

On the evening of March 23, 2017 Aliaksandr Lukashenka had a telephone conversation with the President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko. Issues of bilateral relations were discussed. The main intrigue of the conversation is who was the initiator. There is a high probability that the main task of the Belarusian side was to mitigate the possible consequences of Lukashenka's statements for bilateral relations. Ukraine remains the second or third market for Belarusian products and the prospect of acquiring alternative sources of oil for Belarus directly depends on the position of Kyiv. Official Minsk can't afford having bad relations with Ukraine.

The developments within the month. March began with a meeting of the leaders of the Security Councils of Belarus and Russia Stanislau Zas and Nikolai Patrushev. It is reported that the parties discussed a wide range of issues of bilateral cooperation in ensuring national, regional and international security, including the holding of exercises "West-2017". The issues of economic cooperation, production and scientific and technical cooperation of enterprises of the military industrial complex, combating crime in the economic sphere and illegal migration, strengthening border security were discussed as well.

On March 5, 2017 it was stated that the optimization of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus will be divided into several time steps. The corresponding plan was developed on the basis of the recommendations of the Security Council commission of Belarus, which, as far as one can judge, was created to study the situation in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, identify internal reserves and areas for improving the efficiency of the Ministry. Within the structure of the Ministry a department for reform and development, which will deal with the practical implementation of the transformation of the Ministry, will be created. This will be done in due time.

Reducing the size of the Ministry of Internal Affairs will be carried out through:

- reduction of the list of administrative procedures;
- turn of auxiliary units (rear, migration, etc.) from police into civil ones;
- reduction of all services due to the existing staff shortages in the first place.

The central apparatus of the Ministry of Internal Affairs will be reduced by approximately 10%.

On March 10, 2017 Lukashenka held a meeting on the results of the activity of law enforcement agencies in 2016. The event was attended by about 260 representatives of all law enforcement agencies, the prosecutor's office and the court.

During the meeting, the problems with interdepartmental communication and interaction of law enforcement agencies was stated. The maximum readiness of all security agencies to respond to threats to security was demanded as well.

The Investigative Committee of Belarus was criticized at the same time (low level of charge of some units, low level of compensation for harm caused by criminal actions).

The Ministry of Internal Affairs put forward a proposal to unite the district departments of internal affairs with a low level of charge in the interdistrict departments, but President Lukashenka didn't support this idea.

Special attention was paid to the discipline and legality in the ranks of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Minister of Internal Affairs Ihar Shunevich admitted that the range of crimes (crimes, not offenses in general) within the police are “beyond the borders”, and the Ministry is making efforts to correct this.

During the meeting Aliaksandr Lukashenka recognized the important contribution of State Security Committee (hereinafter SSC) to economic security and to the fight against corruption. But first of all he demanded SSC to concentrate on counterintelligence and fight against terrorism. The main task is to prevent people who bear hostile and extremist intentions from entering Belarus. Also, it is necessary to strengthen control over the situation in law enforcement and supervisory bodies, public administration structures.

Ministry of Emergencies (hereinafter MOE) expects further staff reductions. President Lukashenka recommends the department to develop a system of voluntary firefighters, following the example of Europe and the United States.

It is also stated that last year the army didn't achieve the planned optimization indicators in terms of reducing auxiliary structures. The attention was also focused on the existence of violations of discipline and offenses among soldiers and officers.

On March 12-15, an official delegation headed by the State Minister of the Military Industry of Egypt Muhammad Saeed al-Assar was in Belarus. During the meeting with the Chairman of the State Military Industrial Committee, Siarhei Hurulyou, the development of bilateral cooperation in the military-technical sphere was discussed, concrete directions for cooperation were identified. Egyptian specialists visited a number of enterprises of the Belarusian military-industrial complex. Muhammad al-Assar stated that his trip was a continuation of the Belarusian-Egyptian agreements reached in January 2017 in the field of industrial cooperation. In Egypt, the production of military models of MAZ vehicles is already being set up.

On March 14, 2017 Mr. al-Assar was received by President Lukashenka, who declared the readiness of Belarus to prepare personnel for Egypt, to transfer technologies of all types that Cairo might be interested in. On the same day, the State Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus Stanislau Zas met with Mr. al-Assar. The sides discussed issues of military-technical cooperation, as well as current problems of international and regional security.

On March 15, at the request of the Investigative Committee of Belarus, Yuri Baranchik was detained in Russia. Belarusian law enforcement officers accuse him of inciting ethnic hatred. Earlier in December 2016, three journalists of Russian chauvinistic information resources were detained in Belarus on a similar charge. Baranchik is accused of coordinating their activities. However, Baranchik was soon released from custody and applied for political asylum in Russia. After that, the topic of his extradition disappeared from the information space.

On March 21, 2017 Lukashenka approved the plan of the joint strategic exercise of the armies of Belarus and Russia “West 2017”. Up to 13,000 military men will be attracted to the event on the territory of Belarus. About 3 thousand of them will be Russian. The plans to invite observers from NATO were announced. However, this hasn't happened formally so far.

On March 21-22 in Baranavichy there was a command-staff training with the territorial defence (hereinafter referred to as TD) commanders. During the training, the issues of command and control in TD forces in the context of combining the two administrative districts (Baranavichy and Lyakhavichy districts), the active operation of subversive and reconnaissance groups and illegal armed formations were considered.

On March 21-23, a delegation from the Ministry of Defence of Belarus visited a number of enterprises of the Russian military industrial complex: “Rostvertol”, Izhevsk mechanical plant “Kupol”, “Kalashnikov” concern, Kazan helicopter plant.

At “Rostvertol” Belarusian specialists were shown the helicopters produced by the enterprise: Mi-28NE combat helicopter, the Mi-35M fire support helicopter, Mi-26T2 transport and cargo helicopter. The delegation of the Belarusian MOD and the top managers of the holding “Helicopters of Russia” and “Rostvertol” discussed prospects for bilateral cooperation. Within the framework of the visit, a contract for the supply of blades for Belarusian helicopters (apparently for Mi-24 and / or Mi-26) was signed.

On March 23, 2017 a meeting on the issues of public security under the chairmanship of President Lukashenka was held. He stressed the importance of preserving peace and quiet life of citizens in the country and demanded the maintenance of law and order “... in strict accordance with the laws and the Constitution”. And in simple terms - to protect the political regime from external and internal threats. It is interesting to note that Viktor Sheiman, who formally occupies an administrative and economic position and has no relation to security issues, attended the meeting. At the same time Mr. Sheiman is, in fact, the last member of the first team of Aliaksandr Lukashenka from 1994, who is in power at the moment. He enjoys the personal trust of the Belarusian leader (and, perhaps, is the only person who does it) and has the image of an anti-crisis manager and a person who has proven the ability to solve the most difficult issues in the interests of Lukashenka.

On March 27, 2017 the intention to create a republican system for monitoring public security was announced. It is an automated system for identifying, fixing and responding to events and actions that threaten the security of people, property and the environment. It is stated that the automation of the processes will allow “... to release a significant number of employees and resources engaged in the relevant spheres”. Which means to reduce costs. It is planned to put under video control not only important objects, but even yards and entrances of the blocks of flats. The new monitoring system will have with the function of face recognition.

As far as can be judged, the monitoring system will be operated by a private operator. Obviously, their commercial interest can be met either through service payments from the budget, or through a share in fines, collected with the use of the system. President Lukashenka set a task to receive “... a return” from the monitoring system, which is rather an economic the term.

Law enforcers record a significant criminalization of the economic sphere against the background of the crisis. In 2016, the structures for combating economic crimes of the Ministry of Internal Affairs recorded a record number over the past 10 years: 6,645 crimes of an economic and corruption nature. 58% of them are grave and exceptionally grave. The number of cases associated with encroachment on state property increased by

a quarter. 27 officials occupying responsible positions, including 4 listed in the personnel register of the head of state, were brought to the criminal liability. As a result of pre-investigation checks of public procurement, damage to the amount of almost USD 18 million has been prevented. There has been an increase in material damage in criminal cases of economic nature. So, in 2016 material damage was established in the amount of about USD 38.5 million (in 2015 - USD 20 million), 17.5 million and 5 million respectively were reimbursed.

Conclusions. We have to state that during March the Belarusian leader managed to choose the worst from all bad decisions in the field of domestic policy. In general, the actions of the Belarusian authorities created the impression of nervousness.

The accusations of the West in subversion against the Belarusian regime have been an integral part of Lukashenka's rhetoric for many years. The return to such rhetoric may be a signal of readiness of the Belarusian leadership to freeze relations with the West once again.

The conditional "balance" of repressive actions for the Belarusian authorities is rather negative. Despite the threats, the last decade of March was marked by sufficiently massive protest actions. The actions of the Belarusian authorities have brought unnecessary complications in the relationship with Ukraine. But Belarus is interested in the development of these relations at least not less (but in fact even more) than Ukraine. Mythical extremists didn't become an indulgence for the official Minsk in the eyes of the West. The normalization of relations is again questionable as well as the prospects for financial and investment cooperation, which is more important for the Belarusian authorities than political dialogue. For Belarusian authorities this dialogue is a process for the sake of the process without any comprehensible goals and time frames. The complication of relations with the West calls into question the prospects for attracting Chinese investments to our country (Chinese investors would like to use Belarus to locate industries oriented to the EU markets), which will affect the prospects for a political dialogue with Beijing. It also sharply increases the chances of Ukraine to become a point of entry into the European market for Chinese corporations.

Belarusian authorities risk being isolated because of doubts about their consistency, adequacy and negotiability. There is an accumulation of managerial errors. Thus there is no moves to correct them. For example, the persistence in the preservation of Decree No. 3 goes beyond common sense, because it came beyond the political expediency long time ago. It's obvious that the quality of public administration is the most important, and perhaps the key threat to the national security of Belarus. President Lukashenka demonstrates his reluctance to admit his own mistakes. Instead of drawing conclusions and correcting the situation, Belarusian leader prefers finding the guilty, conspirators, etc.

The events of March questioned the real weight of Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei in the system of Belarusian government and confirmed the thesis that Lukashenka decides everything in Belarus. While the President often takes decisions under the influence of emotions.

The statement of Lukashenka about the conspiracy to organize mass riots was unexpected. And although the events of March demonstrated the readiness of the regime to take tough actions against the protesters, few expected such brutal repressions. Initially, even the state TV didn't broadcast Lukashenka's words about uncovering the

conspiracy of mythical militants. It's necessary to underline the randomness in the initial actions of the SSC on the "Patriots' Case", which makes it possible to assert that the criminal case and detention on it were not a planned action, but rather an attempt to provide a factual basis for the statements of President Lukashenka.

The subsequent accusation the "Patriots" of the creation of an illegal armed group has three objectives:

- to intimidate society not just by some kind of destabilization, but by bloodshed, using the events in Ukraine as a background;
- to complicate the recognition of the persons involved in the "Patriots' Cause" political prisoners (taking into account the obvious political motivation of accusations of the preparation of mass riots);
- again, using Ukrainian events as background, to play on the possible phobias of the Kremlin and show who is the main ally and support of Russia in Belarus in order to preserve Russian financial and economic support and the special nature of bilateral relations.

Note that the club "Patriot" is an official structure that operated openly and in consultation with the authorities. The staff of the security forces took part in the work of the club. So, before the statements of Aliaksandr Lukashenka on March 21, 2017 SSC didn't see anything illegal in the activities of the club and didn't interfere in its work.

Not only security issues were the reason for the meeting of the leaders of the Security Councils of Belarus and Russia. And most likely security wasn't the main topic there. Representatives of the Ministry of Economic Development of Russia, Rosselkhoznadzor and relevant ministries and departments of Belarus took part in the meeting as well. Judging by the agenda of the event, it can be stated that a number of problems of Belarusian-Russian relations can no longer be resolved either at the level of sectoral ministries and departments or at the level of the governments of the two countries. It is worth recalling that the Security Councils are actually working bodies under the presidents.

It can be assumed that Stanislau Zas and Nikolai Patrushev discussed the following topics:

- issues of Russia's deployment of border guards on the border with Belarus because of the Belarus' refusal to introduce a united visa policy with Russia;
- import of sanctions products from Belarus to Russia;
- problems with the access of Belarusian food to the Russian market;
- problems with the access of Belarusian military industry products to the Russian market, which is the main market for Belarusian military industry with the volume of supplies of about USD 500 million per year.

Apparently, these issues are not settled definitively. Until now, the highest state council of the Belarusian-Russian union has not taken place. As far as we know, it happens on the initiative of Russia, which demonstrates to official Minsk that the value of Belarusian-Russian integration for the Kremlin has significantly devalued and isn't of critical importance.

Further, on March 7, 2017 a report entitled “The defence sector is concerned about the tension in relations with Russia” was shown on Belarusian state TV. In the video it is stated that the Russian military-industrial complex is developing production similar to the Belarusian one. After the introduction of sanctions by the West and Ukraine, there were plans to organize the import substitution of defence products with the use of the capacities of the CSTO countries. These plans, as it was said in the report “... in many respects” weren’t fulfilled. To be more precise, in terms of using the military industrial capacities of the CSTO countries, these plans are almost completely unfulfilled. The reason for the problems in the report is the tension between the leaders of the two countries.

Reports of the State Intellectual Property Ministry on the problems of cooperation between the military industrial complexes of Belarus and Russia testify to the extreme seriousness of the situation and the dubious prospects of its positive resolution.

The meeting on the results of the activities of law enforcement agencies in 2016 was aimed at bringing the general line of the authorities to the leaders of higher and middle level.

The merging of the district police departments into interdistrict departments would allow to optimize the lower level of the law enforcement system due to a reduction in the command staff. The fact that President Lukashenka, on the one hand, speaks about the reduction in the size of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and on the other denies the most rational way to do this (enlarging the units) speaks of his fear for preserving the legal capacity of the police, which can be influenced by the political situation in the country.

It is obvious that Aliaksandr Lukashenka intends to strengthen the activities of the SSC to ensure the security of the regime. It should be understood that the requirements of the fight against terrorism are largely an euphemism, which implies the demand to combat any activity against the existing political regime in Belarus. Ensuring loyalty and control over the authorities and the state administration system is a prerequisite for maintaining control over the situation in the country. And SSC was required to deal with this first.

In addition, the authorities realized the shortcomings of the pension reform. The possibility of changing the calculation of the length of insurance period necessary to acquire labor pensions is being studied. At the moment this applies only to the law enforcement agencies servicemen. But this can be a starting point and in some time we can expect changes for other groups of the population.

The development of cooperation with Belarus is of great importance for Cairo: before his trip to Minsk, Minister al-Assar reported on the prospects of the Belarusian-Egyptian cooperation personally to President Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi.

Russia obviously doesn’t want to extradite Yuri Baranchik to Belarus. It should be noted that there is no additional information on the case of pro-Russian publicists, although more than 4 months have passed since their detention. The usual term of the preliminary investigation is 2 months.

Belarus is interested in the transparency and emphatically defensive character of the “West-2017” exercises. However, it should be noted that these exercises may be

associated with the other ones, which will take place in the same period of time in the territory of Russia. And their scenario may radically differ from “West-2017”.

March training in Baranavichy may be the first sign of reforming TD system. One of its directions is the creation of TD districts on the basis of several administrative districts, and not on one, like it is now.

March visits of the delegation of the Belarusian MOD to the enterprises of the Russian military-industrial complex are related to the issues of supplying arms and other military products. Thus, a visit to the Kazan Helicopter Plant was timed to coincide with the completion of the contract for the delivery of 12 Mi-8MTV-5 helicopters to Belarus.

Speaking about the prospects of cooperation between the Belarusian MOD and “Rostvertol”, it’s necessary to note that a significant part of the park of Belarusian helicopters remembers the war in Afghanistan. Obviously, the purchase of the Mi-35M, which is an advanced modification of the Soviet Mi-24, can be interesting to Belarus. Mi-24 are still in service in the Belarusian Air Force, there is all the infrastructure and personnel necessary for their maintenance. In addition, Mi-35M is more affordable in comparison with the Mi-28NE.

During the visit to the Izhevsk Mechanical Plant “Kupol”, further supplies of the Tor-M2E anti-aircraft missile system could have been discussed.

Small arms shipments for the Special Operations Forces of the army and special forces of the Interior Ministry troops could have been discussed with “Kalashnikov” concern. However, the interest couldn’t be limited only to small arms. “Kalashnikov” is a manufacturer of high-precision artillery ammunition with laser semi-active homing for the destruction of fixed and maneuvering targets from 152mm (Krasnopol) and 122mm (Kitolov-2M) artillery systems.

Both pieces of ammunition ensure the defeat of targets from above. This is especially important in the city in order to exclude indiscriminate fire. Artillery strikes against cities were trained during the command and staff exercise of Belarusian army in September 2016 ([source](#)).

