

**Analytical report:**  
**Situation in the field of**  
**national security and defence**  
**of Belarus (March 2020)**

**The most important events of the month.** On March 30, 2020 Aliaksandr Lukashenka met the Secretary of State for the Security Council Andrei Raukou, the Minister of Defence Viktor Khrenin and the head of the main intelligence department of the army Pavel Tsikhanau. They discussed the response to the exercises of the NATO countries Defender Europe - 20, which should take place near the borders of Belarus in 2020.

In the open part of the meeting, Lukashenka said that response measures should not be excessive, since this is also a financial issue. The Belarusian ruler made it clear that the response measures should be taken as part of the planned preparation of the army without going beyond the approved budget.

**The developments within the month.** The month started with a joint training of the Belarusian paratroopers and the British Marines. The event was envisaged in plans for bilateral cooperation on the training of Belarusian peacekeepers. The training had a company scale. But political dimension is more significant: for the first time in history, NATO troops were in Belarus with their own military weapons.

On March 3, 2020 Minister of Defence of Belarus Viktor Khrenin met with Russian Ambassador Dmitry Mezentsev. They discussed the issues of military cooperation.

On March 3-6, the troops of the North-West Operational Command of Belarusian Army during the headquarters training practiced conducting a defensive operation by the army as a whole in a complex, rapidly changing environment.

On March 5, 2020, meeting CSTO Secretary General Stanislau Zas, Lukashenka said that Belarus would remain committed to integration processes in the post-Soviet space, but only in case this does not contradict the interests of the country and does not create problems for its neighbours.

On March 9, 2020 the second stage of the traditional comprehensive readiness check of the army started. During the event more than a thousand people were called up from the reserve. In total, readiness check involved about 6,000 military personnel and 200 pieces of equipment. The ability of troops to operate in a changing environment under various conditions has been tested. At the same time, the condition of weapons and military equipment, including those in storage was examined. The troops made marches, trained deployment in new places and the tasks of fortification, the organization of security, combat and special operations. Protection against precision weapons has been tested in the conditions of widespread use of electronic warfare and UAV means. The methods of bilateral confrontation were used for the training of troops.

The main part of those called up from the reserve was sent to the 2nd Engineering Brigade (130 people) and to the 83rd Air Force Separate Engineering and Airfield Regiment (400 people to form the battalion). One of the divisions of the 120th anti-aircraft missile brigade and the engineering battalion of the 557th engineering brigade were also deployed.

On March 13, 2020 Lukashenka met the Minister of Internal Affairs of Belarus Yury Karaeu. The Belarusian ruler touched upon topics that he considers relevant for himself: the coronavirus epidemic, as well as the fact that certain individuals, mainly from among the citizens of Belarus, are subversive against the state and social stability. The MIA must protect this stability. It is worth recalling that on February 25, 2020, when

appointing new leaders of the State Security Committee (SSC) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Lukashenka focused on preventing destructive influence on Belarus from outside (for the SSC) and combating extremism (for the MIA), which is often understood as youth politicized subcultures.

On March 16, 2020 Lukashenka met with Head of his Administration Ihar Siarheyenka and Secretary of State of the Security Council Andrei Raukou in connection with Russia's partial closure of the border with Belarus due to a pandemic of the Chinese coronavirus. During the event, the Belarusian ruler stated the need to respond to Moscow's actions, which in fact destroy the regime of transparency of the border between the two countries. However, no decisions have been formally adopted. Nevertheless, there is information about the deployment of Belarusian border guards on the border with Russia under the pretext of containing the coronavirus pandemic. Formally, this is a temporary measure. But the temporary measures often develop into permanent ones.

On March 23, 2020 Lukashenka met the Chairman of the State Committee of Judicial Expertise (SCJE) Andrei Shved. During the event, the Belarusian ruler let slip that he was being asked to deprive the SCJE of an independent status and include it in one of the law enforcement agencies.

On March 25, 2020, the joint training of the Belarusian and Polish air forces on the exchange of information on aircraft flights took place for the first time. Officially, the event is linked to the need to ensure safety in the air during major international sporting events.

In March, Belarus held a series of measures on territorial defence.

On March 11, 2020 in the Kleck district of the Minsk region the headquarters of the territorial defence district and a separate battalion of territorial troops (in a reduced staff) started to be formed. It is reported that all the measures "took less than 10 days". In the course of subsequent training activities, the tasks of protecting and defending important facilities, combating illegal armed groups, and ensuring martial law were trained.

The exercises in Kleck were visited by the military commissars of the districts of the Minsk region who are the chiefs of the territorial defence staffs, as well as the chairmen of the district executive committees of the region - the chiefs of the regions of territorial defence. They observed the work of the headquarters, the organization of the protection and defence of important facilities, the fight against illegal armed groups, the provision of martial law, and performance of other tasks.

In March, headquarters training on the territorial defence of the city of Viciebsk, the Viciebsk and Liozna regions (they form one area of territorial defence) was held. Local officials, military commissariats, departments of internal affairs and emergency situations participated in the event.

On March 31, 2020 the upcoming exercises on territorial defence in Astraviec were announced. It is planned to deploy a headquarters and form a battalion of territorial troops, train the protection and defence of important facilities, combat sabotage and reconnaissance groups, ensure martial law and other tasks.

In March, Belarus' the issues of energy security were on the agenda: it was not possible to establish stable oil supplies in previously planned volumes. Belarus twice discussed this topic in contacts with Western countries:

- On March 13, 2020 during a telephone conversation between Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Uladzimir Makei and US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, issues of bilateral cooperation, including in the field of energy security, were discussed;

- On March 20, 2020 Mr. Makei held a video conference call with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Poland Jacek Czaputowicz and the Polish Government Plenipotentiary for Strategic Energy Infrastructure Piotr Naimski. The officials discussed the prospects of diversification of oil supplies to Belarus and possible cooperation between the parties in this area.

The prosecutor's office continued to work to strengthen the rule of law in the troops:

- in the 15th anti-aircraft missile brigade, a meeting of prosecutors with military personnel was held, an anonymous questioning of soldiers of military service was conducted;

- the monitoring and anonymous questioning in the 740th anti-aircraft missile regiment for discipline and maintaining law and order was conducted;

- in the units of the 7th brigade of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA IT) in Viciebsk, Orša and Polack, prosecutors met and questioned military personnel;

- in the 65th automobile and 36th road and bridge brigades, prosecutors explained responsibility for war crimes and other corruption offenses;

- in the 25th arsenal of missile and artillery weapons, a meeting of prosecutors with the military was held, an anonymous questionnaire was conducted;

- in the military commissariat of Mahilioŭ and the Mahilioŭ region, prosecutors addressed the draftees, explaining to them the responsibility for evading the draft;

- verification of compliance with the legislation on military service in the MIA IT special forces brigade was carried out. Prosecutors familiarized themselves with the living conditions and catering of military personnel, explained to the servicemen the consequences of conducting military crimes.

**Conclusions.** According to the results of the national economy for the first quarter of 2020, one can see a number of negative trends, including a decline in exports, a devaluation of the national currency, and an increase in the negative balance of foreign trade. The prospect for this year is a drop in GDP to 10%. In the context of the upcoming presidential election amid the economic crisis, the authorities will continue to prioritize financing of social spending and support for employment. This will require sequestration of budget expenditures, and first of all - due to the import of non-productive goods. It can be expected that by the end of 2020 there will be a noticeable reduction in the budgets of all the country's military and law enforcement agencies due to the decrease of capital expenditures and the import of goods in their interests. The largest consumer of such goods is the army. So, for 2019, a kind of record was set: 8 units of military and combat training aircraft were purchased, with a total value of USD 200-260 million (not taking

into account the need for other weapons systems and military equipment that are either fully imported or have significant import component in the price).

The Belarusian-British training and the training of the air forces of Belarus and Poland should be evaluated as a search by the parties for points of convergence of interests in various fields for the development of a sustainable dialogue and cooperation. This is also a part of the general desire of official Minsk to develop a dialogue with NATO and the United States in the field of security.

Lukashenka's statement on the commitment to integration in the post-Soviet space but not to contradict the neighbours' interests is a manifestation of the official Minsk's strategy for equidistance from all sides of the confrontation in the region. Which implies the need to demonstrate the ability to pursue the security policy independent from Russia as well as the willingness to develop relations in this area with Ukraine and NATO. But in any case, Minsk clearly sees the "red lines" drawn by Moscow and doesn't intend to "step over" them. Moreover, they are still very far away.

Although authorities demonstrate confidence in the ability to conduct the upcoming presidential election in a relaxed manner, economic problems and an unsatisfactory response to the coronavirus pandemic already serve as a basis for growing discontent among the population and private business. In this regard, we expect the political order to the security forces on their readiness to neutralize the discontent of citizens with the situation in the country and the results of the election campaign. At the same time, many people deny the fact that the ground for shocks is created as a result of miscalculations of the Belarusian authorities. External economic factors are superimposed on the failures of their economic policies. Thus, tight budget constraints are expected. That, in turn, will intensify competition between state departments and institutions for access to financial resources. Given the current election campaign, the command of some law enforcement agencies may be tempted to use minor/virtual threats to the political regime in Belarus as a tool to meet their current financial needs. Altogether, this dramatically increases the likelihood that the regime will use harsh repressive practices in 2020.

SCJE conducts almost 2/3 of the examinations in the interests of the Investigative Committee and almost a third in the interests of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. At the same time, Belarus' experience in creating an independent forensic department is extremely unique: it has not been repeated in other countries and there is no information that anyone plans to follow this path. Meanwhile, a separate department requires a set of governing bodies and support activities. Which leads to excessive spending of resources for administrative purposes. In the context of limited budget capabilities and in order to optimize managerial processes in the law enforcement sphere, the unification of SCJE and Investigative Committee into a single department seems rational.

It is interesting to note that riot police assigned to participate in the territorial defence exercise in Kleck used a new Belarusian armoured vehicle "Asilak" (a localized version of the Russian prototype "Buran"). For the first time, these vehicles were demonstrated at the Milex-2019 exhibition. Later it became known that the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus is studying the issue of purchasing these armoured vehicles for their own needs. Judging by the colouring, we can state that at least one exhibition sample was handed over to the department for study.

In March, one traditionally could see increased activity in terms of territorial defence training. This is largely due to the cycles of agricultural work. Territorial troops are formed from local residents, some of whom work in the village. The transport for the needs of territorial defence training is also taken from local state organizations and enterprises. In previous years, March preceded spring agricultural work and it was possible to painlessly distract people and equipment from economic activities.

In addition, in February 2020, the new chief in the administration of the territorial defence of the General Staff of the army was appointed. So the March and April territorial defence exercises are a kind of revision of the previous commander performance.

It should be noted that in all military units of the army, where prosecutors spoke in March, they explained the responsibility for trafficking in narcotic drugs among military personnel. This is not a coincidence: the problem of drug use is also relevant for the army.

