

**Analytical report:  
National security and defence  
of Belarus  
(February 2021)**

**Minsk**

**The most important events of the month.** The repression of the regime continued unabated throughout February. On 16 February 2021 alone, 90 searches were carried out at journalists, human rights defenders, trade union and public activists. At the same time, demonstratively tough convictions were passed by the courts. It is reported about the dismissals of employees of state organizations and structures for participating in protests in August-October 2020. At the same time, they are dismissed according to some secret lists allegedly made up by State Security Committee. This is quite unlikely, since the bases of those who participated in the protests are maintained by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Especially it is necessary to note the trial related to the murder of Henadz Shutau, who participated in the protests against election fraud. On August 11, 2020 in Brest he was killed by an officer of an elite unit of the Belarusian army with a shot in the back of the head. The reason was alleged attack by him and Aliaksandr Kardziukou of this officer and another serviceman. During the investigation, both servicemen were recognized as victims, while Kardziukou and the murdered Shutau became the accused. At the same time, contrary to the requests of the “victims”, the trial was held in an open format, the data of both servicemen of the army special forces were announced publicly. As well as the grounds for their participation in the suppression of popular protests, including the names of the generals who made the relevant decisions.

At the same time, in court proceedings where employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs appear, the practice of keeping their personal data secret, interrogation out of sight, or generally exemption from appearing in court is widely used.

**The developments within the month.** On February 8-12, 2021, a training session of the Joint Command of the regional grouping of troops (forces) of Belarus and Russia took place. One of the options for using forces in the operation of a regional grouping was trained. The training was part of the preparation for the joint strategic exercise “West-2021”, which will take place in September this year.

On February 11, 2020 during the so-called “All-Belarusian people’s assembly” there were proposals to abandon the country’s aspiration for neutrality, enshrined in the Belarusian constitution, and to constitutionally consolidate the principle of coalition building of military security. We devoted a [special material](#) to this issue.

On February 18, 2021, a traditional annual meeting on territorial defense issues was held. The chairmen of the regional and Minsk city executive committees, their deputies for territorial defense and military commissars of the regions were involved in the event. It is planned that in June a command-staff exercise of the territorial troops will take place. Territorial troops will also take part in the strategic maneuvers “West-2021”.

On February 20, 2021, the command of the Investigative Committee (IC) of Belarus reported that since August 9, 2020, 2,300 politically motivated criminal cases have been initiated. Already at the beginning of March 2021 there were more than 2,500 of them, in which about 800 people were involved as accused/suspects. 557 criminal cases and episodes were transferred to the prosecutor for referral to court. The political crimes became the main focus of the IC’s efforts in 2020. This situation will continue this year as well.

On February 22, 2021, the Ministry of Defence held its traditional annual briefing on the results for 2020 and plans for 2021. It is stated that Belarus is studying options for

inclusion in peacekeeping activities and is waiting for proposals. The coronavirus pandemic did not have a noticeable effect on the army of Belarus, the incidence rate of military personnel is comparable to the incidence rate of the civilian population, vaccination of military personnel has already begun (obviously, we are talking about military doctors). The expenditures for the Army issues in 2021 are envisaged at the level of 1.03% of GDP, which "... allows for guaranteed financing of mandatory expenditures".

On February 22, 2021, negotiations between Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin were held in Sochi. On February 23, 2021, a telephone conversation between Lukashenka and Putin took place. During which the issues of cooperation between the two countries in the field of security were discussed.

On February 25, 2021 Lukashenka met the State Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus Aliaksandr Valfovich. The Belarusian ruler announced the need to restructure the work of the Security Council. As far as can be judged, it is planned to expand the number of its permanent members, establish regularity of meetings, and possibly introduce elements of collective decision-making. Although it is difficult to imagine that any of the officials would dare to publicly oppose Lukashenka's position, especially on security issues. Moreover, it is planned to introduce innovations in the activities of the Security Council in the near future.

Lukashenka also showed his readiness to confer general ranks. In whole, he is extremely scrupulous about the assignment of higher ranks. The willingness to be more generous in this regard is dictated by only one thing - the need to ensure the loyalty of the power nomenclature by distributing general's stars, among other things.

The issues of the internal political situation were also touched upon. Everything is unchanged here: some insidious external forces are to blame for everything. Lukashenka himself, as usual, is not guilty of anything. The policy of suppressing protest activity remains unchanged.

In February, Moscow announced the start of negotiations with Minsk on the extension of the use of two military facilities on the territory of Belarus: the 43rd communications centre of the Russian Navy and the radio-technical unit of the missile attack warning system. Russia plans to prolong their use for 25 years at once.

The epic with equipping the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (hereinafter referred to as the CSTO CRRF) with modern weapons and military equipment is continuing. This time, the constraining factor is the need to ensure the compatibility of weapons of the participating countries. There is an agreed plan for arming the CSTO CRRF, but it has yet to be adopted.

In February, the Belarusian Defence Ministry confirmed plans to conclude a contract for the supply of another batch of Russian Su-30SM multipurpose fighters this year. This is the third batch of 4 aircraft under the contract for the supply of 12 fighters from 2017. The first four aircraft of the Belarusian Air Force were received in November 2019. Delivery of the second batch is scheduled for October 2022. Earlier, we devoted a [special material](#) to the background of the purchase of the Su-30SM. It was originally planned that all 12 aircraft will be delivered to Belarus by the end of 2020. The postponement of the delivery dates is most likely due to the financial difficulties in

Belarus. Although earlier, Belarusian military officials also reported difficulties associated with restrictions on the Russian manufacturer's access to Western avionics.

In February, the first stage of the traditional annual check of the army's combat readiness was completed. Notable events of which were:

- The exercise of the 120th mechanized brigade tank battalion. Along with the active servicemen, conscripts called up from the reserve took part in the event. In particular the crews of the T-72B3 tanks were made up from reservists.

- March of the 19th mechanized brigade tanks overcoming water obstacles. The pontoon crossing was fulfilled at night.

- Exercises with the involvement of the servicemen called up from the reserve in the 103rd Vitebsk airborne brigade.

The State Border Committee of Belarus reported on some of the results of its activities in 2020:

- 12 drug trafficking channels were destroyed, more than 952 kg of drugs were seized from illegal traffic, which is 1.5 times more than in 2019;

- 45 persons who may be involved in extremist activities were identified;

- more than 33.3 thousand violations were prevented, 300 crimes were detected, while 45% of violators of the border legislation were detained with the participation of the population of border areas;

- demarcation of the border with Ukraine is being carried out. The units of direct border protection are being created and equipped with modern technical means.

In Belarus the crime rate has been growing for two years in a row. Moreover, in 2020 it grew at once by 8%. There is an increase in the number of grave violent crimes against the individual. We have devoted a [special material](#) to this trend.

**Conclusions.** The reason for the repressions in February was the need to maximally intimidate the people in anticipation of the protest actions announced by the opponents of the regime in the spring. In addition, the pressure on human rights structures and independent trade unions is due to the fact that the regime does not take seriously the ability of the people to organize themselves and views the protests precisely as centrally organized and controlled activities. Thus, the goal is to intimidate the society and destroy the system of organizing and managing protests existing in the imagination of the Belarusian regime.

Obviously, the issue of a new wave of protest is extremely important for the regime. The reason may be that Lukashenka is not confident in the ability of the system to withstand new large-scale pressure from the people. The situation for the authorities is aggravated by the state of the country's economy: a number of the country's largest industrial enterprises are in a state close to default.

The refusal of the court in the "Shutau-Kardziukou case" to take measures to change the personal data of the "victims" and to consider the case in a closed court session would have been impossible without the appropriate decision of the country's political rulers. As a result, public opinion perceives certain army generals as organizers of the use of the army in suppressing mass protests in Belarus. Moreover, this fact was established in court. As a result, these specific generals found themselves in the role of

hostages of the regime: their personal perspectives and freedom are directly linked to the stability of the existing system. The reason for this behavior is not clear: whether there are doubts about the loyalty of the army generals or whether it is planned to expand the use of the army to suppress popular discontent.

In general, the idea of using the Belarusian army to suppress popular discontent is not new. Lukashenka spoke about this openly 6 years ago. On February 23, 2015, speaking to representatives of the security agencies of Belarus, he pointed out that in connection with the upcoming presidential elections (November 2015), destabilization of the situation in Belarus should not be allowed, which depends, first of all, on the military (not the police, not the special services).

It is worth noting that after the start of popular protests in August 2020, it became common practice to involve the widest possible range of both state and public institutions and their heads in punitive activities.

The inexplicable increase in the number of registered political crimes (200 additional criminal cases were allegedly initiated in two weeks) is most likely due to the fact that no real records are kept, the numbers are voiced in order to intimidate the people.

Despite the state of public finances, there is no doubt about the ability to pay the costs of maintaining the army. But the issues of army development are a special issue. It is planned to allocate BYN 363.6 million for the purchase of new equipment, modernization and R&D in 2021, compared to BYN 350.1 million a year ago. So, even in BYN terms, taking into account inflation, the costs for these purposes will decrease. In addition, there are doubts about the stability of the BYN exchange rate this year. This directly affects the prospects for the procurement of weapons, the needs for which are covered mainly by expensive imports. The total budget of the Ministry of Defence in 2021 is planned in the amount of BYN 1,626 million against BYN 1,645 million in 2020: the reduction is observed even in nominal terms. Speaking about the prospects for rearmament of the Belarusian army, it is worth recalling that back in February 2015 Lukashenka stated that by 2020 the main measures to modernize the army should be completed. He promised to allocate the necessary financial resources for this in order “... until 2035-2040s ... to have a decent army, which will not need to spend such funds as we spend today”.

Speaking about the talks between Putin and Lukashenka in Sochi, it is worth noting that the promised meeting between the Belarusian ruler and the Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council, the ex-prime minister and ex-president Dmitry Medvedev did not take place. Allegedly, due to the busy schedule of both. In fact, Lukashenka had enough time in Sochi, so the initiator of the cancellation of the meeting was clearly the Russian side. Medvedev's importance is explained by the fact that this year the long-term head of the Russian Security Council and the leader of the anti-Western “mobilization” party in the Russian nomenclature, Nikolai Patrushev, is going to resign. Medvedev may become his successor.

The parties gave very metered information about the agenda of the Sochi talks. Nothing intelligible about the results of the talks was reported. From the known information, it can be concluded that the Belarusian ruler made desperate attempts to draw Putin into a dialogue on issues of interest to him, using the topics that are

interesting (in Lukashenka's opinion) to Russia. On February 22 Lukashenka spoke about deepening integration on the basis of the so-called road maps; and the next day, on security issues, the admission of Russian companies to the privatization of enterprises of the military-industrial complex of Belarus and the unification of the tax systems of Belarus and Russia. Judging by the silence of the Belarusian state propaganda, these attempts were unsuccessful: the fact that Lukashenka's proposals "did not cause rejection" by Putin is presented as a success.

Regarding Russian military facilities in Belarus, it is necessary to recall that they are not military bases and do not have a strike potential in their current format. Russia uses them in exchange for providing other services to the Belarus. The cost of these services is not known for certain. The military facilities themselves are an important element for the local economy at the location, as they create jobs and provide effective demand from personnel.

On the one hand, the extension of Russia's use of its military facilities in Belarus for 25 years at once deprives Minsk of a hypothetical instrument of pressure on Moscow for a favourable resolution of other issues not related to the military sphere. On the other hand, this is the consolidation of the Russian presence in Belarus not only in the military, but also in the political dimension. It is also a challenge for the post-Lukashenka authorities: they will have to form an attitude towards the fact that the illegitimate regime decided to formalize the Russian military presence for an unacceptably long period. This could become a point of serious tension in Belarusian-Russian relations.

The story with the uniform armament of the CSTO CRRF has long roots: back in 2009, the intention to re-equip them by 2015 with modern weapons (mainly Russian) was announced. The reason that this issue has not been resolved for years is money: the CSTO countries would like to receive weapons at Moscow's expense while Russia is ready only to sell the necessary weapons on favourable terms. We are talking about an amount of about USD 1 billion. So, the approval of the CSTO CRRF rearmament plan does not in itself mean the beginning of this rearmament.

The first stage of checking the combat readiness of the army this year has very limited coverage. This can be explained equally by the desire to avoid accusations of "militarization", and the attempt to draw attention to the official Minsk by the excessive secrecy of the event.

