

Belarus in conflict with Sweden following the “teddy bear drop”

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The action conducted on 4th July by a Swedish advertising agency, whose staff flew a civil plane from Lithuania over Belarus and dropped nearly 900 stuffed teddy bears with anti-government leaflets, caused a serious diplomatic conflict between Belarus and Sweden. It will result in a further deterioration of relations between Minsk and the EU. On 3rd August the Belarusian government withdrew the accreditation of the Swedish ambassador. Following the escalated tension on 8th August Minsk decided to recall all Belarusian diplomats from its embassy in Stockholm (which also serves Norway and Denmark) and ordered all Swedish diplomats to leave Minsk.

This incident involved entering Belarusian air space and has had its implications for Belarus's internal policy. On 31st July the president dismissed the heads of the border and air forces and reprimanded the three top level managers of the defence ministry, the head of the KGB and the head of the Secretariat of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus. He also announced changes in the functioning of the border forces and a return to the Soviet-era model where the border forces performed above all functions of a military nature, related to the defence of the borders. This will be a move away from a model more similar to that of the police, which Belarus had been so far attempting to implement. It is likely that this incident will also prompt the border services of Belarus to limit their co-operation with the EU.

The Swedish advertising agency's stunt

On 4th July civil aircraft piloted by the staff of a Swedish advertising agency flew from Lithuania over Belarus and dropped over the town of Ivyanets and suburbs of Minsk nearly 900 stuffed teddy bears which had leaflets attached to them which criticised the Belarusian regime and called for the respect of human rights.

This incident proved to be a high-profile failure of the Belarusian air force (which alongside Russia form the joint regional air defence system) and security services. It seems that the air forces identified the aircraft but did not respond to the violation of air space due to paralysis in decision making. The weakness of the Belarusian decision making system at the highest level has thus been exposed. The failure of the security forces was their inability to prevent this incident.

Initially, the Belarusian military services tried to cover up the incident and denied that it had occurred at all. However, given the publicity the event received (videos showing the whole incident were placed on the Internet, and foreign and independent Belarusian media covered the story) the Belarusian government was compelled to respond. On the one hand, the measures they took were aimed at Sweden which is one of the EU's most active critics of the Belarusian regime. On the other hand, President Lukashenko, irritated by the ineffectiveness of his security structures, used this incident to discipline them.

The diplomatic conflict with Sweden

On 3rd August the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declined the renewal of the accreditation of the Swedish ambassador, meaning he was forced to leave Belarus. Stefan Eriksson, who had been the head of the embassy since its opening in 2008 (and who earlier was the head of the office of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Minsk), was actively involved in supporting Belarusian democratic circles. This was probably the main factor which determined his expulsion from the country. At the same time the Belarusian state-owned media have started an anti-Swedish media campaign. This campaign follows the pattern of traditional measures undertaken by the regime which uses the search for an external enemy as an instrument to mobilise society (a similar model of action was employed in February this year, when the Polish ambassador was forced to leave Belarus).

In response to the actions undertaken by Minsk, Sweden immediately ordered that two Belarusian diplomats leave Sweden, including the *charge d'affaires*, and denied the new ambassador access to the country. In reaction to this Minsk recalled all its diplomats from Sweden on 8th August and demanded that all Swedish diplomatic personnel leave Belarus by 30th August.

By stepping up its measures, the Belarusian regime is trying to demonstrate its determination. It is seeking to put pressure on those EU countries which are actively involved in defending human rights. The regime is trying to prevent any actions which are aimed at supporting democratic circles and civil society (one of the expelled staff of the Swedish embassy was a representative of SIDA, the government agency which is committed to supporting non-governmental organisations). With all this Belarus is trying to use the divisions within the EU to its advantage, assuming that the EU countries which are more interested in economic co-operation with Belarus will prevent the active involvement of the EU countries which see the promotion of democracy as a priority in their policy towards Belarus. At the same time the escalation of the conflict proves that the government in Minsk is not interested in improving its relations with the EU.

The EU has so far not responded to the increased tension in relations between Belarus and Sweden, besides issuing a statement from the head of EU diplomacy Catherine Ashton on 3rd August in which she criticised the expulsion of the Swedish ambassador. However, the closure of the Swedish embassy in Minsk seems to be forcing the EU to adopt a firmer position and a further tightening of the sanctions imposed on the Belarusian regime should not be ruled out (currently, the visa sanctions extend to 243 officials and economic sanctions are imposed on 32 companies).

Lukashenka is disciplining the security structures

The failure to prevent an incident involving the violation of air space has irritated the Belarusian president due to the lack of effectiveness of well-developed security structures. The security services strengthened their position in the balance of power in December 2010, when they increased repressions against society. Dismissals and reprimands for the heads of these institutions are meant to discipline and mobilise them. At the same time the president is demonstrating his dominant political position in the country and complete control over the security structures. The dismissed commander of the State Border Committee Ihar Rachkousky and the reprimanded KGB chairman Vadim Zaitsev were both linked with Alyaksandr Lukashenka's son Viktar who is considered the second most influential person in the country. This proves that the president is able at any time to marginalise representatives of any of the groups linked with the regime.

While appointing the new commander of the state border guard, Lukashenka criticised the policy pursued by the former management which (with his consent, as Lukashenka himself admitted) sought to modernise border services, moving away from a military model towards a model more similar to that of the police and which had become involved in technical co-operation with the EU. The president said the current priority was the defence of borders, which may mean a return to the militarisation of the Belarusian border services. The appointment of a new head of the border guard and his first deputy who were both educated in Russia reveals that Minsk will to an increasing degree implement Russian solutions in the functioning of these forces and will integrate its border forces with those of Russian. For example, there are rumours about a possible subordination of the border forces to the KGB (as is the case in Russia). At the same time it may be expected that the involvement of the Belarusian border forces in co-operation with the EU will decline, particularly their participation in EU-funded projects (e.g. one of the flagship initiatives of the Eastern Partnership is border management).