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Belarus: a blow to the candidates wanting to take on Lukashenka

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On 15th June Belarus's central bank placed Belgazprombank (which is 99% owned by Russian shareholders) under temporary forced external supervision. The long-time chairman of the bank's management board was Viktar Babaryka who is seeking to become a candidate in the presidential election scheduled for 9th August. The decision was preceded by inspections in the bank's main office and in several private companies managed by Babaryka's former aides. The inspections were carried out by officials of the State Control Committee which oversees public finance and is entitled to investigate economic crimes. As a result of this, 15 people were charged with large-scale tax evasion and and money laundering . The repression also hit representatives of Viktar Babaryka's election committee. Alyaksandr Lukashenka justified these measures by stating there was evidence of corruption that committed by Babaryka and of illegal transfers of the bank's assets to foreign accounts. The president also challenged the legality of Babaryka's fortune, including his property in Cyprus.

A popular blogger, Siarhei Tsikhanousky, who had been in detention since 29th May (he was arrested when he was collecting signatures of support for the candidacy of his wife), on 9th June heard charges that he had organised actions which seriously disrupt public order; this is punishable by a prison sentence of up to three years. Then the charges were extended to include hampering of the organisation of the presidential election. In response to this wave of repression against her husband, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya decided to confine the action of collecting signatures to smaller-sized towns.

Commentary

- This year's presidential election is a great challenge for Lukashenka who is seeking re-election. A deepening recession and the fact that the government is downplaying the COVID-19 epidemic have led to increased dissatisfaction among Belarusian citizens, seeking an alternative for a president who has been in power for 26 years. For this reason, Lukashenka, who has been concerned about social mood, has dealt a blow against the most popular of those other candidates who are not part of the compromised old opposition. After the campaign led by Tsikhanousky was muzzled, Babaryka, less radical but also popular, became the main target of the attacks from the government. Launching the investigation into Babaryka's former aides was intended at weakening

Babaryka, who is Lukashenka's strongest contender and has already collected over 330,000 signatures of support, according to information provided by his election staff. This is an unprecedented result in the context of Belarusian authoritarianism.

- From what Lukashenka says, it can be inferred that the state propaganda will present Babaryka as a dishonest banker who has illegally made a substantial fortune and should not be the president of 'ordinary citizens'. It cannot be ruled out that Babaryka will be registered as a presidential candidate in order to act as a negative contrast to Lukashenka. Lukashenka wishes to come across as a leader who understands social needs. In his rhetoric, the president has therefore given up accusing the West of supporting the opposition and instead often points to Russian pressure on the Belarusian government. Against this backdrop, Babaryka is portrayed as the 'Kremlin's candidate', due to the function he had before he decided to stand in the election. On Belarusian state television the suggestion was made that there is Russian interference in the election. In this way Lukashenka is trying both to provoke the sensation among Belarusian citizens that they are under threat, and also to strengthen his image as a defender of sovereign Belarus. The scale of the criticism of Russia is considerably exceeding the level that was observed during the last presidential election in Belarus.
- Attacking Belgazprombank (whose shareholders are Gazprom and Gazprombank) presents Minsk with the risk of an escalation of tensions in its relations with Russia, which are already strained by the dispute about further integration within the Union State of Russia and Belarus. It appears, however, that the Belarusian government will seek to compromise in regulating the issue of the further oversight of the bank. This question will certainly be discussed during the visit of Sergey Lavrov, the head of Russian diplomacy, to Minsk on 19th June and during Lukashenka's expected visit to Moscow for Victory Day (which this year has been moved to 24th June).