

Belarus is about to begin the second month of protests

Piotr Żochowski

More anti-regime demonstrations were seen in Belarus on 6 September. According to various estimates, up to 100,000 people protested in Minsk. Rallies with attendances in the thousands were also held in major regional capital cities (the largest one was seen in Hrodna, with around 10,000 participants) and in some smaller towns. The brutality of law enforcement agencies has noticeably increased. They have adopted the tactic of isolating smaller groups of protesters and are again resorting to direct coercion measures (over 200 people were detained). Demonstrators were arrested and beaten up in Minsk, Hrodna and Vitebsk (among other places). According to data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 633 people were detained on Sunday. In Minsk, the authorities are continuing the tactic of intimidating and restricting the freedom of the demonstrators' movement by bringing heavy armoured equipment to the streets. This is at the disposal of the army and the internal troops' units reporting to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. At the same time, the KGB has intensified its operational activity to intimidate the student community, who were especially active last week.

The government is continuing to paralyse the work of the presidium of the Coordination Council (CC), the opposition's main forum. According to unconfirmed information, Maria Kalesnikava was detained in Minsk on 7 September. Volha Kavalkova, who had been held in custody since 24 August, was forced to leave for Poland on September 5. Another member of the CC, Pavel Latushka, had left for Warsaw three days earlier. Only two out of the seven presidium member remain at large: Sviatlana Alexievich and Maksim Znak. On 1 September, Kalesnikava announced on behalf of Viktor Babaryka that a political party named Together would be established. Babaryka was Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rival in the presidential election and is now in detention. The party is intended to become a political platform that brings together advocates of political and economic reforms.

On 3 September, Lukashenka appointed Valery Vakulchik, who had served as the head of the KGB, to lead the Security Council. Ivan Tertel, who had until recently served as the head of the State Control Committee and who had been in charge of the criminal case against Babaryka, was appointed the new KGB chief. Tertel joined the KGB in 2008 after serving in the USSR's airborne troops and the Belarusian border troops. Later during his career he was in charge of supervising the government's economic security section.

Belarusian-Russian relations are becoming increasingly active. On 3 September, a Russian government delegation headed by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, two deputy prime ministers and five ministers (including those in charge of energy, industry and trade), paid a visit to Minsk. As previously announced, the topics of the talks included plans to deepen the

integration of the two countries, financial support for Belarus (the refinancing of a Russian loan of US\$1 billion is being discussed) and co-operation in combating coronavirus. Prime Minister Mishustin stated (amongst other things) that significant progress had been achieved in the discussion on the future of the Union State of Russia and Belarus based on the principles of independence and new economic agreements. Lukashenko thanked Russia for its support, quoted Prime Minister Raman Halouchanka's opinion that significant progress had been made in settling the "pressing problems", and announced that "all the i's will be dotted" during his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin (this is expected in the coming days).

Commentary

- Although anti-regime demonstrations were held every day in the streets of Belarusian cities last week, their dynamism has decreased. This was due to public fatigue with the month-long protest and the lack of a clear political strategy on the part of the Coordination Council, which has so far not been able to force the government to make any concessions. Although law enforcement forces have not decided to use large-scale pacification measures (fearing a radicalisation of the crowd's behaviour and provoking street fighting), the brutality of individual interventions is growing.
- The regime is gradually paralysing the activities of the CC's presidium. Latushka, against whom the government had threatened to launch criminal proceedings, left the country. The same scenario as previously was the case with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, has been applied to Kavalkova, i.e. she was blackmailed to force her into leaving Belarus. Their opposition activities in exile will allow the government to accuse them of treason and call them 'puppets' of foreign governments.
- The effectiveness of the protest movement will also fall due to the emerging differences in the views represented by the opposition leaders. The initiative to establish the Together party is a sign that there is a disagreement inside the Coordination Council over the further institutionalisation of the protest movement. The lack of consensus among the opposition leaders will have a negative impact on the effectiveness of its actions and will be used by the regime to provoke further dissent among its leaders. The suppression of the industrial strike movement should be viewed as a success for the government – at present, only sporadic demonstrations of small groups of workers and equally modest campaigns to support them can be seen in front of the entrances to some plants.
- The regime has consistently strengthened the position of those in charge of state security. The recent reshuffle inside the KGB proves that the government's priority is to maintain control of the security apparatus over the *nomenklatura* and large industrial plants. The nomination of Tertel, known for his brutal methods of action, is a sign that Lukashenko does not intend to enter into any form of public dialogue to calm the situation, but rather hopes for a gradual decline in the number of protests.
- The intensification of Russian-Belarusian contacts shows that Russia is trying to quickly take advantage of Lukashenko's political weakening and his dependence on Russian political, economic and information support. The main goal of the Kremlin is to push through the Russian plan for the in-depth integration of Belarus and Russia as part of the Union State. This attempt is apparently meeting with no resistance from Lukashenko and

stands a good chance of success.