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The propagandist congress of Lukashenka's supporters: putting the formal finishing touches to the new system

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On 24–25 April, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA) convened in Minsk for its seventh congress since the establishment of the independent Republic of Belarus, and the first since the ABPA was given the status of a constitutional body under the amendments to the Basic Law that were adopted in 2022. In line with these changes, the Assembly has become an important subject of the state's executive power: its competences include ruling on the validity of elections, adopting strategic documents on internal, social, economic, foreign and security policies, taking decisions to impose states of emergency or martial law, and electing the president and judges of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court as well as the members of the Central Election Commission (for more on the ABPA's new powers, see '*Transformation of Lukashenka's system of government: the draft of Belarus's new constitution*'). The ABPA is composed of 1162 delegates elected by pro-regime social organisations and local councils of all levels, as well as deputies of both houses of parliament and members of the government.

On the first day, Alyaksandr Lukashenka was almost unanimously elected as chairman of the ABPA's permanent presidium. On the second day, the delegates unanimously approved the latest versions of the country's military doctrine and national security concept. The two documents identified the allegedly aggressive policies of the US, UK, Poland and the Baltic states towards Belarus as factors that could trigger an armed conflict. They also stressed that the use of military force in peacetime is possible as part of the strategy of deterring other countries from aggression against Belarus and preventing internal destabilisation and 'provocations' on the border. Lukashenka also employed similarly 'warlike' rhetoric: he accused the West of "seeking destabilisation and confrontation" and alleged that Belarusian volunteer units fighting in Ukraine were planning to gain a foothold in Kobryn, close to the border with Ukraine, in a bid to seize power in Belarus.

Commentary

- The ABPA's inauguration in its new role marks the culmination of the so-called constitutional reform that the regime has been implementing since the political crisis of 2020. Its official aim was to decentralise power by transferring some of the president's prerogatives to the Assembly. However, both Lukashenka's election unopposed as its president and the extremely propagandistic coverage of the congress have exposed the sham nature of these changes to the country's political system. Lukashenka still wields full power in the country, and is likely to seek re-election in 2025 to combine the two

positions. The ABPA will thus become a bogus representative body intended to convey the message that the leader continues to enjoy widespread public support.

- The security concept and military doctrine adopted by the delegates demonstrate that Belarus is continuing to strengthen its pro-Russian and anti-Western orientation. The identification of several Western countries, including Poland, as the main sources of threat is consistent with Lukashenka's confrontational rhetoric, which also featured prominently at the ABPA's congress. The government's main objective is to rally society in the face of the manufactured risk of armed conflict which allegedly arises from the West's 'aggressive' policy and 'subversion' by Belarusian political exiles. The strong anti-Polish overtones in the updated military doctrine suggest that Belarus will stick to its confrontational course towards Poland.