

The latest Putin-Lukashenka meeting: continuing the policy of confrontation with the West

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The main topics of Vladimir Putin's visit to Minsk on 23–24 May were economic relations and security issues in the region. However no agreements were signed, and the visit was limited to general statements about the good results of bilateral cooperation. Putin stressed that in light of the tense situation on the external borders of the Union State, the issue of "creating a unified defence space" was discussed. He also announced Russian exercises on the use of the tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) deployed in Belarus. Lukashenka for his part indicated that these were in response to increasing NATO military activity near the Belarusian border, and that they would be the third exercise of this type.

Putin reiterated that peace talks with Ukraine could only begin if Russia's interests were taken into account, and he regarded the planned peace summit in Switzerland in June as a propaganda exercise. He also questioned the legitimacy of Volodymyr Zelensky as Ukraine's legal president.

Commentary

- The Putin-Lukashenka meeting was a piece of political theatre during which no overt decisions were taken (although its host emphasised that several rounds of confidential talks were held). It confirmed the subservient role of Belarus in the implementation of Russian military policy, as well as the fact that Minsk and Moscow are in detailed agreement on key issues such as military cooperation and the involvement of the Belarusian regime in the confrontational actions being taken towards NATO countries.
- The highlighting of issues relating to the pursuit of a common security policy and the protection of the border with NATO countries once again demonstrates that Belarus will continue its destabilising activities (including supporting the migration crisis) against Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Another important element of Belarus and Russia's joint moves will be the continuation of disinformation operations indicating that it is the countries of NATO which are pursuing an aggressive policy that could lead to armed conflict with them. The announcement of exercises envisaging the use of tactical nuclear weapons is part of a psychological operation intended to deter Belarus's neighbours from strengthening their own security.
- Putin's statement on the prospects of resuming peace talks with Ukraine shows that the Kremlin is not changing its position on the concessions it expects of Kyiv, such as the demilitarisation of the country, a change of government and Russia retaining *de facto*

control over it, among other things. Moscow also does not foresee any chance of the conflict ending even if it retains its existing territorial gains. By undermining the legitimacy of the Ukrainian president, Russia will seek to undermine the June peace summit in Switzerland, where the participating parties (some 160 countries have been invited) are expected to discuss Volodymyr Zelensky's so-called 10-point Peace Formula, which envisages an end to the war on Kyiv's terms.