

Lukashenka's last line of defence The Belarusian security apparatus in a time of crisis

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The political crisis which has been raging in Belarus since August 2020 and the growing public discontent with the regime have become the greatest challenge to the current government in recent history. Lukashenka has not considered the possibility of stabilising the situation by means of at least superficially holding a dialogue with society. He has resorted to repressive methods to crush the crisis and adopted a model of state management that resembles a state of emergency. The state's internal security institutions have become the most important pillar of Belarusian authoritarianism, to a degree holding Lukashenka hostage to their vision of the world. The ever-expanding legal instruments allowing for the radical ramping up of repression against the regime's opponents have reinforced the police state system in which all spheres of activity, not only social, but also economic and educational, have been placed under strict supervision by the KGB, the Ministry for Internal Affairs or the prosecutor's office. This has led to the marginalisation of the civilian *nomenklatura's* role, making it easier for representatives of the ministries of state power to consolidate their position in the administration. The position of the Belarusian security institutions has also been strengthened by their good relations with the Russian state power sector, especially with regard to coordinating activities against the West.

The state power sector as the regime's foundation

The authoritarian model of power in Belarus provides the law enforcement authorities with extensive powers. They are not subject to daily external supervision by other state institutions such as the parliament or the Council of Ministers, but only by Lukashenka, his administration, and the Security Council, which is under his control.¹ The systemic inclusion of the ministries of state power under the direct authority of the head of state, a process which has been ongoing since the beginning of his presidency, has strengthened their institutional position, effectively placing them in the role

¹ The Belarusian internal security sector, comprising the Committee for State Security (KGB), the Ministry for Internal Affairs and the Internal Troops subordinate to it, as well as the Operations and Analysis Centre under the President of the Republic of Belarus and the Presidential Security Service, is the least frequently described element of the Belarusian political system. The security institutions of the Republic of Belarus also include the structures of the State Border Committee, the investigative division of the State Control Committee, the State Customs Committee, and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Belarusian Armed Forces (the foreign intelligence service division is part of the KGB's organisational structure).



of supervisors of the other state administration bodies. As a pillar of the regime, the security and law enforcement bodies exercise control over the *nomenklatura* and the business elite, as well as over the citizens, the opposition and the third sector, whose activities are perceived as anti-regime. Under current legislation, the president can modify the security structures by decree, without actually consulting other authorities, needing only the formal approval of the puppet parliament. Lukashenka determines the staffing of all key executive positions, including department heads; the personnel assessments provided by heads of ministries and supplemented by the Presidential Security Service and Ihar Syarheyenka, the head of the Presidential Administration and a general with a KGB background, are taken into account in the personnel decision-making process.²

One characteristic phenomenon affecting how the state power sector operates is the continuity of Soviet patterns. After gaining independence – in contrast, for example, to Ukraine – the authorities in Minsk introduced only minor adjustments, such as establishing the Operations and Analysis Centre responsible for monitoring the Internet. In this context, it is significant that the name of the main special service – the Committee for State Security (KGB RB) – was kept alive, and the name ‘militia’ was retained for the police. The Ministry for Internal Affairs, the State Control Committee, the State Border Committee and military intelligence are also based on Soviet models. Thus, the security system of Belarus was built on the basis of a totalitarian state system in which the basic segments of the BSSR security apparatus (the KGB, the Ministry for Internal Affairs with its internal troops) remained unchanged.

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Personnel changes, rising budgets

The activities of the security institutions operating under the control of the presidential inner circle are subject to special information protection. Attempts to learn more about their specificity come up against the barrier of the questionable credibility of the available data. To a great extent, the information disclosed about the activity of the so-called ministries of state power is part of the official information policy justifying Lukashenka’s domestic policy. One should not overlook the element of the message formulated by the special services and addressed to the Belarusian public, especially to the representatives of political and economic elites. It stresses the vigilance and omniscience of the institutions responsible for state security, which is intended to maintain a sense of being cornered, and to discourage any actions that might undermine the regime.

Prior to the presidential elections, Lukashenka believed that the participation of high-ranking officers of the security structures in domestic politics would be effective and ensure the loyalty of some representatives of the *nomenklatura*. Back in December 2019 Ihar Syarheyenka, the former deputy head of the KGB in charge of counterintelligence, became head of the Presidential Administration. After the elections, in September 2020, there was a change in the position of the head of the KGB: it was taken over by Ivan Tertel, who was given the task of suppressing any hint of public dissent and fabricating materials to indicate an increased security threat from Western secret services. Subsequently, the position of the KGB was strengthened; if needed, it was permitted to use structures

² Since 2005, Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s son Viktar has performed the duties of presidential advisor on security issues. On 1 March 2021, he was released from this post in connection with his appointment as chairman of the Belarusian Olympic Committee. Lukashenka did not appoint a new person to this position, which may indicate that the supervision of the security sector is being exercised by himself alone, or jointly with the heads of the KGB, the Ministry for Internal Affairs and the secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus.

such as the Ministry for Internal Affairs, the army and other security bodies to carry out its tasks. Presidential proxies from the KGB and the Ministry for Internal Affairs were appointed in the Brest, Grodno and Minsk oblasts, which Lukashenka considers particularly threatened by destabilisation from Poland, Lithuania and other NATO states. They are in charge of the local security structures in the event of public protests. Lukashenka has also raised the status of the Security Council, which includes the heads of the KGB and the Ministry for Internal Affairs. It has become a collegiate body headed by the president and coordinating the activities of the state power ministries; in the event of Lukashenka's death, it is to take over the reins of power in Belarus until new presidential elections are announced.

For years now, security spending has been higher than expenditure on national defence, which means that internal security takes precedence over external security for

” **A characteristic phenomenon influencing the functioning of the state power sector is the continuity of Soviet organisational patterns and the ‘Chekist’ tradition.**

the Belarusian regime. The increase in spending on this sphere over the past year, given the country's difficult economic situation, testifies to the importance Lukashenka attaches to securing the loyalty of the security sector, including the special services. Military outlays account for a third of total budget expenditures: according to official data for 2019 and 2020, about US\$550 million a year was spent on defence, while security consumed US\$1.1 billion. In the budget adopted for 2021, despite the growing deficit, spending on security bodies was increased further, to \$1.3 billion.³

The domination of the Chekist perspective of the world

By counting on the loyalty of the security apparatus, in exchange for ensuring that he maintains an attractive financial status and has guaranteed immunity, Lukashenka has paradoxically become its hostage in terms of the perception of real threats to the regime. It is in the interest of the services to provide information, often false, about growing dangers, in order to ensure the ministries of state power retain their domination of the state system. The increasing influence of the message formulated by the KGB or the Ministry for Internal Affairs is evidenced by the language Lukashenka uses in public. He presents Belarus as a ‘fortress under siege’, and emphasises that the hostile actions of foreign governments (including Poland) are aimed at supporting circles interested in undermining Belarus, and bear traces of a hybrid war.⁴

Lukashenka has thus changed his long-standing strategy of preventing the security sector from becoming an entity capable of independently structuring the country's internal policy. Strengthening this sector in the conditions of a closed state administration system has forced Lukashenka to accept the solutions suggested by the heads of the KGB or the Ministry for Internal Affairs. This is evidenced by the fact that since August 2020 he has not publicly criticised their actions (which had previously been part of the ritual of his personnel policy), and has increasingly promoted officers who advocate repression and have directly participated in violent actions against demonstrators. This is evidenced by the decision of 19 November 2020 to promote Mikalai Karpiankou, the director of one of the Ministry

³ A. Wilk, *Russia's Belarusian army. The practical aspects of Belarus and Russia's military integration*, OSW, Warsaw 2021, osw.waw.pl; ‘Сколько денег государство тратит на силовиков’, 5 October 2020, ex-press.by.

⁴ Lukashenka's statement of 26 May 2021 is an example of this kind of rhetoric. He stated that “those who wish Belarus ill (...) have changed their methods of attacking its statehood. They have crossed many red lines, they have lost their minds and sense of human morality. This is no longer an information war. It is a hybrid war (...) Everything must be done to prevent it from turning into a hot war”. See К. Хачатрян, ‘Лукашенко: “Это гибридная война”’, Euronews, 26 May 2021, ru.euronews.com.

for Internal Affairs' departments, to the position of deputy head of the ministry, commanding the ministry's internal troops, as well as to give him the statutory guarantee of impunity for officers.⁵

The increased importance of the armed forces is justified in terms of the rising number of cases involving the prosecution of manifestations of so-called political extremism (any activity deemed to be anti-regime) or the preparation of terrorist acts. The detection of the organisers of a 'military putsch' supposedly aimed at the physical liquidation of Lukashenka and his family, as well as the thwarting of an alleged attempted assassination of the regime journalist Ryhor Azaronek, are examples of such actions. Both cases – promulgated by Lukashenka himself – are based on fabricated materials provided by the KGB and the Russian FSB.

The strong interdependence with the security sector means that the president is forced to constantly consider the issue of neutralising the threat posed by the ambitions of the heads of the ministries of

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state power in his personnel policy. However, the tactics he has adopted are neither too original nor new. It is limited to actions of a disciplinary nature: even if they have to be dismissed, the same senior officers are quickly transferred to other responsible positions. One typical case involved the resignations of Valery Vakulchik, the Belarus Security Council's secretary and former head of the KGB; Yury Karayeu, the head of the Ministry for Internal Affairs; and the deputy interior minister, Alyksandr Barsukou: in the autumn of 2020 they took up the posts of presidential representatives in the Brest, Grodno, and Minsk oblasts respectively. It is difficult to assess whether their demotions were due to Lukashenka's dissatisfaction with the way they conducted their duties during the escalation of protests in Belarus, or whether they stemmed from suspicions of disloyalty. Lukashenka has pointed out that all three have not definitively been removed from the ranks of the power *nomenklatura*.

Risky relationship with the ally Russia...

The adherence to Soviet and Russian patterns is partly necessitated by the need to achieve coherence and interoperability with the Russian security sector. Due to Moscow's strategic interests and its wide array of instruments for exerting influence over the authorities in Minsk, Belarus remains subject to incessant interference by Russia. The Moscow government is constantly taking steps to limit Belarus's sovereignty in the political, military and economic dimensions, and is striving to include Belarus and its state bodies ever more closely in the integration process under the formula of the Union State. The common military and defence space is Lukashenka's political concession to the Kremlin in exchange for freedom in managing the internal situation and maintaining his dominant role in the state's political system. Cooperation between the secret services of Russia and Belarus is protected by strict secrecy, and selectively disclosed information indicates that relations with the Russian services include aspects related to the protection of the borders with NATO and EU countries, intelligence and counterintelligence cooperation, and the protection of the joint grouping of the two countries' armed forces.

Most of the officers currently holding leadership positions in the security sector of the Republic of Belarus acquired their skills in Soviet and Russian specialist universities, which is a result of the

⁵ On 17 May 2021 Lukashenka approved amendments to the Security Law, whose provisions include the expansion of the right to use firearms and other measures involving the use of force, as well as allowing the use of objects that do not belong to the standard equipment of security bodies against those who resist. Weapons and other special means may now be used against persons committing administrative offences. Another regulation that may encourage the abuse of violence is the provision on the lack of liability of officers and soldiers for losses or damages caused by them.

institutional interoperability requirement described above. A typical example of this was the imitation of the Russian organisational pattern in the creation of the Presidential Security Service, the equivalent of Russia's Federal Protection Service. The same happened with the creation in autumn 2011 of the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Belarus, which started functioning less than nine months after the creation of a similar institution in Russia. It should be noted, however, that the domination of the Russian pattern is not total: in Belarus the separate border guard service functioning as the State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus has been left in place, the internal troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs still exist, and in 2008 the Operations and Analysis Centre under the President of the Republic of Belarus (a special service responsible for the control of the Belarusian Internet and the operator of the national domain .by) was created. However, the differences in the two countries' security systems have not affected the maintenance of their interoperability.

One aspect that is difficult to assess is the secret influence of Russian services on Belarusian institutions. The dynamics of bilateral relations, their periodic crises in economic cooperation, or emerg-

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ing concepts concerning the accelerated integration of the two countries in Russia raise the question about the influence of 'Russian agents' embedded in key Belarusian institutions, enterprises and media. It is a fact that Lukashenka treats any manifestations of Moscow's activity with caution and concern. A clear example of this was Minsk's disapproval of the Russian ambassador Mikhail Babich's activities in 2018–19. His attempts to build a favourable environment for Russia among representatives of the *nomenklatura* eventually led to his dismissal. This coincided with the KGB arresting Andrei Utsiurin, the deputy secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus, and previously head of the Presidential Security Service. According to unofficial sources, he was detained on suspicion of accepting a bribe of US\$150,000 from a Russian businessman. His arrest, which took place with the president's knowledge, shows that Lukashenka considers unofficial contacts between representatives of the *nomenklatura* and Russian businessmen or officials to be a sign of disloyalty threatening the stability of his government.

The situation changed after the 2020 elections. The crisis in relations with the West and Lukashenka's increasing dependence on the Kremlin (which supports the policy of repression) forced him to increase his tolerance for contacts with Russians by representatives of the Belarusian *nomenklatura*.

...and their further tightening

The conflict with Ukraine and Russia's entanglement in protracted military operations in the Donbas have increased the importance of Belarus as a potential area for the Russian Federation to plan its military activity. Possible actions against Ukraine, Poland or the Baltic states could be launched from Belarusian territory. Proof of the great importance of Belarus is provided by the regular meetings between the head of the KGB of the Russian Federation and the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, the director of the FSB, or the secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. Brief announcements feature a recurring theme of "developing the partnership of the intelligence services of both countries and countering threats to the State Union of the Russian Federation and the FSB", which signals the possibility that joint operations against Western countries could be held by the special services of both states. An important factor indicating that Russian interests are being taken into account in this process is the activity of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Federation. If one takes into account the fact that the

Belarusian armed forces are a part of the joint Belarusian-Russian grouping, the Belarusian military intelligence service is, in effect, a part of Russian military intelligence.

Another impulse for closer cooperation with the Russian power sector was Lukashenka's pro-Moscow turn after the presidential elections of August 2020. The escalation of protests in Belarus was accompa-

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nied by informal visits by representatives of the Russian special services to Minsk, where FSB-owned aircraft landed several times. It may be assumed that in the most intense phase of the post-election crisis, advisers from Moscow were maintaining direct contact with the heads of the Belarusian KGB and the Ministry for Internal Affairs, and gave instructions on how to pacify the protests. As a result Lukashenka, concerned about the dynamics of the events, publicly asked the Russian president for possible assistance from Russian forces, and Putin complied. This was a signal to the West suggesting that Moscow would not allow a 'colour revolution' to succeed in Belarus. Subsequently, the issue of support from the ministries of state power was normalised at the departmental level: the agreement of 8 December 2021 on cooperation between the internal troops of the Republic of Belarus and the National Guard of the Russian Federation (FSGN) does not exclude the development of all forms of cooperation, which may mean that it also includes the possibility of the FSGN operating on the territory of Belarus.

A spectacular example of such cooperation, this time between the KGB and FSB, was the operation carried out in April 2021 (which according to the KGB lasted six months) to expose the organisers of an alleged military coup in Belarus.⁶ Such operations are conducted on the basis of bilateral agreements, including those on legal assistance and combating terrorism. On the basis of reciprocity, both sides may submit requests for operational assistance in order to detain a person suspected by one of the parties of having committed a crime. The publicity about the interaction of the KGB and FSB on the territory of the Russian Federation should be seen as a warning signal from the special services to those involved in the fight against the regime in Minsk. Some opposition representatives considered that travelling to Russia would be a way to avoid arrest in Belarus and possibly get to the West, but the operation carried out in Moscow is intended to discourage Belarusian activists from pursuing their activities in Russia, making it clear to them that they will find themselves under the supervision of the FSB there.

In defence of a police state and its own interests

It is of paramount importance to observe how the state is managed when assessing the position of the Belarusian special services in the system of power. In the systemic view, these services are a separate sector of the state administration, with practically unlimited possibilities of influencing not only the functioning of the state apparatus but also the sphere of the Belarusian people's economic and social activity. The observed increase in budget expenditures on law enforcement bodies is a visible sign of the intention to continue repressions and curb civil liberties. These bodies are acting as the foundation of a 'police state'. It remains an open question whether such a systemic construction, which is directly linked to Lukashenka, will be sustained in the event of another political crisis. This is because the loyalty of the security bodies of the Republic of Belarus to the president determines the stability of the country's political system, and the vulnerability of these structures to Russian

⁶ For more information see. K. Kłysiński, P. Żochowski, 'FSB ujawnia próbę „zamachu” na Łukaszenkę', OSW, 19 April 2021, osw.waw.pl.

influence is a threat to it. The implementation of bilateral obligations related to the functioning of the common security area with Russia has weakened the president's ability to shape his policy in this sphere with full independence.

The question of how significant the impact of the public mood on the morale of the security services' officers remains open. The Belarusian security institutions cannot be treated as a monolith. The weakest link in the system is the militia, where an outflow of personnel to the civilian sector is observed. An unprecedented event was the creation of the BYPOL platform in exile, which brings together officers of the security forces, who undertook the task of publishing data on the employees of the Ministry for Internal Affairs participating in the repressions. These officers have declared that their strategic goal after Lukashenka's departure will be to reform the security institutions and vet their personnel. This initiative, a first in the history of the Belarusian security organs, indicates the possibility of a slow disorganisation of the power structures due to a decrease in trust in the regime, especially among militia officers. Russia's view of cooperation with Belarus on military, intelligence and counterintelligence issues as a way of keeping the country as an ally supporting its anti-NATO policies is of great importance for the militia officers' morale. As a result, officials of security institutions find themselves under double pressure. On the one hand, the internal factor obliges them to be loyal to the president; on the other, dynamic contacts with Russia and disputes over what form integration between the two countries might take could weaken their unconditional defence of the current government.

The possible decomposition of Belarus's security institutions is the greatest threat to the Minsk regime. This process may be influenced to a certain extent by the growing public resentment towards the perpetrators of repression and doubts regarding the future of Lukashenka's system of power. Therefore, by continuing the policy of repression and granting more privileges to the state power ministries, Lukashenka hopes that they will remain fully loyal to him. Entrusting the power bloc with the tasks of managing the 'police state' is intended to guarantee its loyalty to the regime. Maintaining a strong systemic position will be a challenge for the leadership of the KGB and the Ministry for Internal Affairs, which knows that prolonging Lukashenka's rule is essential for them to maintain their current standing. For this reason, the Belarusian power bloc will, in its own interest, reinforce the feeling of internal and external threat, and repression against the citizens will increase as a consequence. At the same time, presenting Belarus as a 'fortress under siege' will promote the implementation of tasks which are in line with the interests of Russian security policy.