Is Lukashenka about to introduce martial law?

On 13 August, the Belarusian authorities stopped deploying special riot police against presidential election protesters. This move appeared to be a step toward a peaceful solution. Yet in two phone conversations with Vladimir Putin this weekend, Belarusian president Alyaksandr Lukashenka returned to militant rhetoric. He announced that in the event of further escalation, Putin had promised him assistance, including military support. Today, Russian mainstream media reported of Russian troops being moved to the Belarusian border.

Minsk has mobilised all of its security agencies to counter the election protests as never before, including deploying the army for the very first time. It oscillated between arresting Russian mercenaries, blaming Russia for the trouble and requesting Russian assistance; between making gestures to the West (such as returning the ambassador to Washington) and accusing the West of everything. As Belarusian security agencies begin to overstretch, the introduction of martial law seems probable. After all, the loyalty of state security apparatus decides the fate of all governments.

Election as a War Campaign

In recent years, the Belarusian leadership has increasingly viewed domestic issues in terms of security. Speaking on 16 July in Vitsebsk, state secretary Andrei Raukou announced that the deployment of armed forces within the country would be carried out in accordance with the new military doctrine adopted in 2018.
Mr Raukou revealed that the army now follows not the published 2016 doctrine, but another secret document. Apparently reproducing its contents, Raukou warned that present day armed conflicts start with street demonstrations. Addressing the Special Operations Forces of the Belarusian army, he explained:

*we are [all] one security tool. Not only the armed forces but also the police, the riot police, the internal troops, border guards and other security agencies. Our task is to prevent the death of the state. Prevent bloodshed. ... all this will begin (if it starts) secretly, quietly, with the organisation of mass riots, which you are now noticing and observing. Moreover, external forces are involved in this.*

Indeed, as early as May this year, two mid-level Belarusian government officials speaking independently to *Belarus Digest* told of plans to deploy the army if needed for the election. Such hard-line scenarios began to appear ever more realistic as the campaign proceeded. The arrests of leading opposition candidates Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Viktar Babaryka, even before their registration, showed that Lukashenka would take no chances.

This trend became more obvious in June-July after the Belarusian president toured all special operations units: the 38th brigade in Brest, 103rd brigade in Vitsebsk, and 5th Brigade near Minsk. He also visited the key 3214th Unit of Internal
troops usually deployed in Minsk. After Belarus has reformed its army, special forces, alongside some other units — in total, about 15,000 men — were chosen to become a core of a new, compact and mobile military and received better financing and equipment.

These activities of Belarusian leader stood in stark contrast to his minimal campaigning among the population this time: not even the favourite Lukashenka’s public event before every election — an “All-Belarusian Congress” was held. In his focus on military he looked as an odd epigone of Mao who once proclaimed “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” The goal was to ensure troop loyalty and engender their support in following orders after the election, as was made clear in his speech on 28 July to the 3214th Unit. For example, Lukashenka promised the soldiers:

The priorities in providing housing in the next five years will be as follows: a) families with three and more children; b) military personnel. We shall do everything to make your life better.

**Learning from the 2010 Election**

It was the Belarusian leader himself who revealed most of his war preparations. While meeting on 24 July with the 5th Special Forces Brigade, Lukashenka announced:

When I had to determine, which armed forces do we need, especially after 2010 [the election accompanied by massive protest actions — author], I realised that we need to have as a reserve some qualified fighters and units in our armed forces. It is undesirable that we resort to armed forces. But everything is possible. The US provides an example.
Celebration of Paratroopers Day in Minsk, 1 August.

On 30 July, Minsk took an unusual step – ordering border guards troops to strengthen border control and to tighten control regime on all borders, including those with Russia – though the latter remained porous. On the border with Ukraine, more personnel were deployed. In all probability, these measures were also directed at preparing border guards for deployment in case of trouble after the vote. That much is evident from the actions of the border guards to secure administrative buildings in Pinsk, a larger city in the south, after the election.

Probably with the intention of making the point about possible army intervention in political confrontation even more pronounced, on 1 August Special Operations Forces celebrated their traditional Paratroopers day with an impressive show of force in the centre of Minsk. This even caused rumours that a part of 103rd Brigade had been deployed from Vitsebsk to Minsk for the election.

On the Verge of Martial Law?
Minsk began considering the deployment of armed forces in the streets of Minsk after its finer security tools failed miserably. On 6 August, after mercenaries from the notorious Russian Wagner private military company were detained in the vicinity of Minsk, Lukashenka lashed out during a conference between the heads of security agencies at ‘provocateurs’ planning to disrupt the election. He sounded militant but desperate:

> We do not know what they are up to. We do not even know who they are. Whether they are Americans and NATO, or somebody from Ukraine or our Eastern brothers are showing their ‘love’ this way – we do not even know … we shall expect nasty things from any side.

Despite preparations, following the election, the government has so far avoided mass military deployment. Only a few soldiers of the 38th Brigade were deployed to protests in Brest. Last week police and other security agencies were largely withdrawn, with eyewitnesses reporting that they have ceased many of their usual functions in urban areas. This has led many to be concerned over a potential rise in crime. The withdrawal probably was a forced step, but it could potentially pave the way for the government to use the resulting chaos as a pretext to introduce martial law.
One crucial decision reinforces this idea. On Saturday, Lukashenka ordered the 103rd brigade to move from its base in Vitsebsk, where the protests were relatively small, to Hrodna, which became one of the centres of opposition activity during the election. Officially, the relocation was justified as a measure to close the border, despite the fact that the western borders of Belarus are well fortified and hardly need more personnel.

Finally, given the continuing strikes and street demonstrations, the Belarusian authorities are conspicuously silent on a possible compromise, although they cannot continue business as usual either. Hence, introducing martial law becomes a very probable move in the next week or two.

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