

# **Belarus authorities uncover a 'putsch' to deter mass protests**

On 22 March, Alexander Lukashenka revealed an extraordinary discovery – the authorities had arrested armed fighters who were planning to overthrow the government on 25 March, the day when the Belarusian opposition traditionally celebrates Freedom Day with mass rallies.

The fighters allegedly had training camps inside Belarus and in neighbouring countries. The official media also reported on a series of related incidents, such as gunmen in a car attempting to force their way through a border checkpoint in Ukraine. This all comes in a context of mass arrests of oppositional activists protesting the 'social parasites decree'.

While some observers claim that the threats were fabrications from a pro-Russian party within the Belarusian security services and Lukashenka had been a victim of disinformation, others say he is simply wary of mass protests and is using the tale to justify renewed repression.

Meanwhile, external actors – namely the West and Russia – are silently observing the developments, waiting to see what happens on 25 March.

## **All of a sudden, armed fighters inside Belarus**

Everything started on 19 March when someone hacked the Facebook account of Miraslaŭ Lazoŭski, the former leader of

youth patriotic organisation Biely Liehijon (White Legion), and posted a call 'to take arms and show the authorities who is the real boss in the country. Our friends from Russia and Ukraine have already arrived'.

The next day, the official media reported that a car of armed men in possession of an explosive had attempted to break through a Belarusian border checkpoint from Ukraine. Ukrainian authorities responded that no such car had crossed the Ukrainian border. On 21 March, Lukashenka announced another 'sensation' – the authorities had arrested dozens of fighters who were training in camps inside Belarus, as well as Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland.

On 21-22 March, the KGB arrested at least 17 people, some of whom were serving in Belarusian security bodies while participating in the military and nationally-oriented Patriot Club based in Babrujsk. The club has existed since 2003. Notably, not only was it officially registered, it also had a 'curator' from the security apparatus. Currently the detainees are charged with 'training, preparing or financing mass riots'. The KGB has not revealed any details but says it will 'soon make them available'.

Siarhiej Čyslaŭ, a former leader of Biely Liehijon, informed Euroradio that security services had filmed 'Patriot's' entire summer camp in 2016. Apparently, the authorities planned to use these materials in case of emergency to fabricate compromising evidence on the opposition.

These accusations come just at the right time – 250 people have so far been arrested around Belarus, including many oppositional leaders and activists, following [protests against the 'social parasite tax'](#).

# Who initiated the crackdown?

It beggars belief that these Ukrainian fighters and military camps have anything to do with reality. However, opinions vary as to the initiators and motives of this provocation.

Some experts, such as [Jury Caryk](#) from the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, believe this drastic method of protest deterrence was launched by a pro-Russian group from within the Belarusian security forces. According to this version, *siloviki* gave Lukashenka false reports on extremist groups who were planning to turn protests violent and provoke a Belarusian Maidan.



Others, such as [Aliaksandr Fiaduta](#), the former head of the information office of the Presidential Administration, argue that Lukashenka is not so stupid as to trust his appointees' every word and would have verified the information from various sources.

The crackdown resulted from Lukashenka's own fears of growing protests coupled with economic pressure from Russia and the West's reluctance to offer unconditional financial support. Belarusian authorities cannot find any way of pacifying growing social discontent, and have thus returned to their favourite tool – repression of the political opposition.

# The opposition's plans and the people's mood ahead of 25 March

Opposition leaders, as usual, had been disputing the details of the march for a long time, but finally agreed that it should start at 14:00 near the Akademiya Navuk metro station and move along Niezaliežnasci Avenue to Kastryčnickaja Square. [Mikalaj Statkievič](#) insisted that the march should proceed further to Niezaliežnasci Square, taking all responsibility for the march upon himself.

Many people in Belarus seem to be frightened by the authorities' coming crackdown on 25 March. Popular blogger [Anton Matołka](#) asked his readership on Facebook why they do not plan to join the protests on 26 March; many admitted that they are afraid of being beaten, arrested or losing their jobs. Others stated that they consider oppositional leaders generally untrustworthy and incapable of organising a safe protest. Nevertheless, many activists are ready to join the Freedom Day celebration and say no to repression.



Meanwhile, the authorities use a variety of tricks to reduce the number of potential protesters on Freedom Day. Many schools and companies are organising compulsory events at the

same time as the protests.

The pro-government Federation of Trade Unions has invited citizens to come together and clean up Kurapaty – the location of mass executions during the Stalin regime, which was also the subject [of a recent protest action](#). Moreover, the authorities have permitted Freedom Day meetings in regional centres around Belarus – apparently to prevent locals from joining the main action in Minsk.

## **The reaction abroad: still watching and waiting**

Russia seems to be biding its time and observing from the side, at least publicly. It has not made any statements regarding the protests or repressions. Notably, a Belarusian delegation is currently in Moscow for another round of negotiations on oil and gas agreements, over which the sides [have failed to reach an agreement](#) for over a year now.

The authorities' return to mass repression of the opposition has provoked [a muted reaction](#) from Western democracies. An EU external action spokesman released a careful statement demanding that 'Recently detained peaceful protesters, including journalists covering the events, be immediately released.' Obviously, the EU is reluctant to revert to confrontation mode with Minsk after several years of normalisation.

However, if repressions continue, the West will be pressured to take a clear position. Russia, it seems, would be happy to see a renewed cooling cycle between Belarus and the EU, which would probably result in more influence over the country from the Kremlin and broader support for Russia's foreign policy on behalf of Belarus.

According to Kamil Kłysiński from the Polish Centre for Eastern Studies, a window of opportunity still remains, and European diplomats hope that a sane approach to foreign and domestic policy will prevail in Belarus.

This might yet prove to be the case – with the bulk of opposition leadership and activists in jail, the authorities can let the crowd march freely on 25 March and release activists shortly after. However, if a feeling of insecurity persists within the leadership, Belarus may see a backslide to December 2010-style crackdowns with many sad consequences.