

Belarus arrests 33 Russian military contractors ahead of presidential elections

By Jason Melanovski
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Belarus last week arrested 33 Russian military contractors just outside the capital Minsk, in what it claims was a Moscow-backed plot to carry out terrorist activities and foment unrest in the country just prior to presidential elections to be held on Sunday, August 9. Moscow has denied these allegations.

This week, President Alexander Lukashenko, who has served as President of Belarus since 1994, used bellicose language to denounce Moscow, calling the Kremlin's statements "all lies." Lukashenko also claimed that he also planned to apprehend another group of Russian mercenaries who had been sent to the south of the country.

The arrested have been identified as members of the Wagner Group, a private military contracting firm that has reportedly sent mercenaries to other countries, such as Venezuela, Syria and eastern Ukraine, in order to protect Russian military and economic interests. The mercenaries themselves have denied any involvement in terrorist activities within Belarus and claimed to be on their way to see the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey.

In the same speech in which he accused Russia of being "liars" and claimed that instability in Belarus "will explode in such a way that it would reverberate all the way to Vladivostok," Lukashenko also paradoxically stated: "Russia has always been and will remain our close ally, irrespective of who takes power in Belarus or Russia."

Lukashenko's arrest of the alleged mercenaries was welcomed by the US-backed Ukrainian government. Kiev has called on Minsk to send 28 of the 33 arrested to Ukraine for prosecution on charges of fighting on the side of separatist rebels in the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk.

Speaking to Lukashenko by phone, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated, "I hope that all those suspected in terrorist activities on Ukrainian territory will be handed over to us for prosecution in accordance with the existing international norms."

While the specific details surrounding the actions and arrests of the Russian military contractors within Belarus are

murky, the incident marks a new nadir in relations between the two countries. Unlike other former Soviet Republics, such as Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania, which have morphed into NATO-backed self-proclaimed enemies of Moscow since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus established a "union state" with Russia in 1997, including a somewhat integrated economic zone.

The previous plans for a fully integrated "union state," including a shared military, currency, and legal system, never materialized. However, both Russian and Belarusian citizens are freely able to travel, work and study in both countries. Under these conditions, the arrest of Russian citizens on Belarusian territory just days before the presidential elections is an obvious signal to Moscow, as well as the US and EU, that the Belarusian ruling class is actively considering a much stronger orientation to American and European imperialism.

The Lukashenko regime is heading into Sunday's elections amidst a profound crisis. Reports have suggested that Lukashenko, who has easily won previous elections with 75 percent of the vote or more, may be facing the toughest challenge yet to his regime.

In recent months, Lukashenko has alienated much of the population with his claims that the COVID-19 pandemic is nothing more than a "psychosis." He has done virtually nothing to stem the spread of the virus. Unlike many neighboring countries, Belarus had not even a temporary shutdown of the economy.

According to John Hopkins University, with a population of just 9.5 million the country has reported 68,000 Covid-19 infections and 567 related deaths. Neighboring Poland, which had a limited lockdown, has reported 48,789 cases and 1,740 deaths with a population of approximately 38 million. Lukashenko himself reportedly also contracted the virus.

Moreover, in the past year the Belarusian economy has suffered fall-out from a prolonged spat between Russia and Lukashenko over Russian-subsidized energy supplies to Minsk. The scaling back of Russian subsidies combined

with the coronavirus pandemic has created a \$700 million deficit in the state budget.

Workers in the country have long been unable to make a living on their wages. As in neighboring Ukraine, many younger workers have been leaving the country to work in Russia or the EU. Last year, Lukashenko admitted that Belarus had lost 8 percent of its population due to labor migration.

Exploiting the growing economic and social crisis, US imperialism and the EU have aggressively intervened in the current elections in Belarus, openly backing and encouraging Lukashenko's main rival from the pro-Western opposition, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.

Tikhanovskaya announced her candidacy after her husband, a well-known opposition blogger, was arrested last May and barred from running. She has presented virtually no political program other than opposition to Lukashenko and empty calls for "democracy" and "free" elections. In recent weeks, the pro-Western opposition has organized several demonstrations that have drawn thousands of people in Minsk.

The Belarusian state has responded by jailing over 1,000 protesters since the beginning of the presidential campaign. Predictably, the United States government, which has been busy jailing, beating and kidnapping protesters off its own streets, hypocritically denounced the Belarusian government. The spokesperson of the U.S. State Department, Morgan Ortagus, tweeted, "We are deeply concerned about the reports of mass protests and detentions of peaceful activists and journalists."

The United States has had no diplomatic representation in Belarus since 2008, when Lukashenko cracked down on western-backed nationalist and liberal opposition parties.

However, over the past few years, the relations between Belarus and the US have become much closer, as the Washington has sought to exploit and deepen the growing rift between Lukashenko and Moscow in order to turn the strategically important country into another NATO-backed ally. Lukashenko and his defense minister have repeatedly indicated readiness to hold joint exercises with NATO.

Lukashenko publicly supported the US-backed coup in 2014 in Ukraine, and established close relations with the Poroshenko and the subsequent Zelensky governments.

In February of this year, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Belarus for a two-hour long conversation with Lukashenko on the country's dispute with Moscow over energy supplies. It was the first visit of a US Secretary of State to Belarus since 1993. At a press conference after the meeting, Pompeo effectively reversed over a decade of American foreign policy towards the country, stating that the United States could offer Belarus all the oil it needs. He

said, "All you have to do is call us."

Lukashenko's precarious balancing act between Russia and Western imperialism has been closely followed by American think tanks, which are debating whether backing Lukashenko might be a viable path for pursuing US interests in the region.

The Atlantic Council, one of the most bellicose think tanks in Washington D.C., warned that Lukashenko could be facing a "Minsk Mайдan" after the presidential election. This reference to the heavily US- and German-backed and funded protest movement in Ukraine in 2013-2014, which culminated in a far-right coup that installed a regime that has been totally compliant with the interests of US imperialism, is a clear indication of the strong involvement of the US in the current anti-Lukashenko protests.

Earlier this year, *Foreign Affairs*, the journal of the Council on Foreign Relations think tank, published an article entitled, "Will Belarus be the next Ukraine?" Emphasizing the key geostrategic significance of Belarus for Russia, it noted: "... if Belarus were to pivot westward, Moscow would lose a potential military staging ground and risk seeing Western political and economic influence extend over a population that many Russians regard as part of their own nation." The piece concluded by urging Western governments to back Lukashenko.

Whatever the outcome of Sunday's elections, recent events have made clear that Belarus, like neighboring Ukraine and the Baltic states, is at the center of a growing imperialist drive towards war against Russia, a drive which has only been accelerated by the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

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