



The International Strategic Action  
Network for Security

# THE BELARUSIAN NUCLEAR MYTH



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*“Our firm conviction is that there is no place for nuclear blackmail in international politics!”* – A. G. Lukashenka

The threat of using nuclear weapons has become part of the everyday diplomatic and expert rhetoric of authoritarian regimes. This concerns conflicts not only between states possessing nuclear weapons, but also with countries without them. The most striking confirmation of this is the nuclear rhetoric accompanying Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

Russia’s failure to comply with the terms of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the subsequent withdrawal of the United States from it accelerated the erosion of the regional security system. As a result of Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s actions, Belarus found itself involved in the confrontation taking place in the region. After the political crisis of 2020, nuclear threats have become part of the state policy of the Lukashenka regime, which extends the Kremlin’s efforts to remake the global nuclear security system.

This report is not a complete collection of all statements from all possible sources. It aims to establish the main stages and analyze the context of statements made. The primary source is statements made by the head of Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka. It is worth noting that in most cases it is not possible to confirm the veracity of his statements, so they should be considered rhetoric, not facts. As necessary, statements made by other individuals are used if their statements help to reconstruct a picture of events.

## SUMMARY

### I. Key ideas:

- Since the beginning of 2020, amending Belarus' nuclear status has become a consistent path for the Lukashenka regime, integrated into Kremlin strategy. The goal of this strategy is to revise the European security system on terms in Moscow's interest.
- Lukashenka's worldview is compatible with nuclear escalation. He has repeatedly spoken with regret about the withdrawal of Soviet nuclear warheads from Belarus, hinting at nuclear threats during moments of aggravation of relations with the West.
- Lukashenka's rhetoric is characterized by a duality, combining aggressive statements in the spirit of the Kremlin agenda with defensive and peaceful motifs. He tends to frame the deployment of nuclear weapons as a coerced measure, even admitting his doubts about the necessity of it Belarus. Still, his real steps are coordinated with the Russian agenda.
- Lukashenka's main arguments in favor of stationing tactical nuclear weapons include the following: 1) a response to sanctions and the West's "hybrid aggression"; 2) countering U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe; 3) the threat of Poland joining the NATO nuclear weapons exchange program; and 4) containing NATO's reaction in response to complicity in Russia's aggression against Ukraine.
- Lukashenka seeks to strengthen his status by declaring that he is the one who initiated the return of nuclear weapons to Belarus and that he will make decisions on their use on an equal footing with Putin. Moreover, he voices the primary condition for their use – a military invasion crossing the border. Still, Lukashenka's sovereignty in the chain of decision-making on the use of tactical nuclear weapons remains symbolic and the role of the Belarusian military is as an implementer.
- For the Kremlin, Belarus is important in this context as part of the simulated and mirroring of the NATO nuclear weapons exchange program. In a similar way, the Kremlin is creating copies of international institutions and integration formats.
- If Moscow is pursuing geopolitical goals, then Lukashenka's interests are connected with the strengthening of his regime. For Lukashenka, this situation is a way to assert his international legitimacy in Europe, receive security guarantees, and ease the pressure of sanctions.
- Statements about the deployment of "several dozen nuclear warheads" in Belarus remain unconfirmed. All assumptions on this issue are mostly hypothetical, which allows us to assume that a significant part of the rhetoric may be an element of strategic bluffing.
- The overall goal of the operation is to increase pressure on NATO and reduce support for Ukraine, creating an atmosphere of military threat and psychological tension. The Lukashenka regime is playing the role of an ally of Russian nuclear diplomacy.
- Belarus' nuclear policy then is a combination of strategic instrumentalization by the Kremlin and tactical attempts by Lukashenka to strengthen his regime. It leads to an escalation of tensions in Europe and the creation of a threat of further escalation, possibly associated with the deployment of hypersonic weapons in Belarus.

## II. Main stages of escalation:

- 1) **2019–20.** The first non-public information about the intention to change Belarus' nuclear status began to arrive in late 2019, which was promoted under the guise of constitutional reform. After the 2020 crisis and Lukashenka's turn towards Moscow, this course became steady.
- 2) **November 2021.** Lukashenka began making regular statements about the possibility of stationing nuclear weapons in Belarus against the backdrop of the adoption of the Military Doctrine of the Union State. Lukashenka justified his interests as a response to NATO's "hybrid aggression" and the U.S. nuclear arsenal in Europe. The first public requests to receive nuclear-capable weapons (Iskanders).
- 3) **February 2022.** In December 2021, a draft of the updated constitution of Belarus was published, from which the article on non-nuclear status and the desire to make the state neutral was excluded. Along with the creation of a new body, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, these articles were the only substantive element of the so-called "constitutional reform." The draft constitution was adopted in a referendum falsified by the regime on February 27, 2022.
- 4) **June 2022.** Putin publicly proposed to Lukashenka to retrofit Belarusian Su-25 attack aircraft to carry nuclear weapons and announced the decision to transfer Iskander missile systems to Belarus.
- 5) **March 2023.** Putin announced his intention to station nuclear weapons in Belarus at Lukashenka's request. The deployment of American nuclear weapons in Europe was cited as justification.
- 6) **May 2023.** The start of the process of stationing tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus was announced. Prior months were spent in military-technical preparation for this decision (training of Su-25 attack aircraft and Iskander OTRK crews, modernization of aircraft, etc.). This decision was accompanied by a constant rhetorical offensive by Lukashenka.
- 7) **October 2024.** Lukashenka voiced his ultimatum on a new security architecture in Europe. This process has been accompanied by changes in Russia's nuclear doctrine, which states its determination to also protect Belarus. In addition, in December 2024, the Treaty between Russia and Belarus on Mutual Security Guarantees will be signed accompanied by a second update of the Military Doctrine of the Union State.

### The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Minsk Policy 1991-2020

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus retained a significant nuclear arsenal. Belarus had both mobile and silo-based nuclear-capable weapons and bomber aircraft. The authorities of the independent republic signed the Lisbon Protocol in 1992, and in 1994 Belarus joined the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who came to power in the 1994 elections, did not denounce the signed agreements and allowed the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Belarus. He publicly regretted this on numerous occasions.

"I believe that the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Belarus under the conditions that were once carried out by our nationalists was a grave mistake. I had to sign this agreement because there was nowhere to go. Both Russia and the Americans pressured me to withdraw them because we had promised. It shouldn't

have been. This is a great treasure and an expensive commodity, which we, in the end, had to sell.” This is a classic example of Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s rhetoric.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this, Belarus has been actively involved in the global dialogue and programs on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. And the special services, in particular the KGB, have repeatedly participated in preventing the illegal trade in radioactive substances.

All this time, Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s rhetoric regarding nuclear materials, however, demonstrated a tendency to use this subject as a tool of blackmail. Two episodes are typical here – in 2010 and 2021, respectively – which occurred during periods of significant aggravation of relations with Western countries following the presidential elections falsified by the authorities.

The first episode concerned several hundred kilograms of enriched uranium, including nuclear fuel left over from the liquidation of the Pamir mobile nuclear power plant project. In December 2010, the Martynov-Clinton agreement on the export of highly enriched materials to Russia was concluded.

This agreement coincided with a period of warming relations with the West, when many thought that Lukashenka had the opportunity to carry out sustainable liberalization and reforms. But soon Lukashenka’s relations with the West deteriorated sharply when, on December 19, 2010, protests after the falsification of elections were violently dispersed and a subsequent wave of repression ensued. The warming gave way to a crisis and serious economic sanctions.

As a result, Minsk tried to threaten with the issue in August 2011, when the press secretary of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry Andrei Savinykh announced the “freezing of projects being developed jointly with the U.S. on the exchange of highly enriched nuclear fuel.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it was emphasized that Belarus would continue to ensure the physical security of nuclear fuel.

This statement was supported on the same day by a comment from the head of the Joint Institute for Energy and Nuclear Research Vyacheslav Kuvshinov that “in accordance with the so-called Martynov-Clinton memorandum, we have exported about 10% of the highly enriched uranium we have to Russia.”<sup>3</sup>

But the point is that the threats and rhetoric had no effect on the real state of affairs. The removal of nuclear fuel began even before the agreement was signed, and most likely continued after the announced demarche. In any case, no further public threats were made.

The subject of blackmail with the transit of nuclear materials was essentially not further used. The second notable episode, dated June 2021, is notable for the fact that it appeared against the backdrop of the incident with the forced landing of the Ryanair plane in Minsk and the beginning of the migration crisis on the borders of the EU.

“They demand that we protect them from contraband, from drugs. The signal is heard from across the Atlantic: help like before and keep nuclear materials from getting to Europe. I just want to ask them, are you completely crazy? You have unleashed a hybrid war against us and demand that we protect you as before? You

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<sup>1</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/14-aprelja-aleksandr-Lukashenka-posetil-mozyrskij-raion-v-xode-rabochej-poezdki-po-juzhnyim-regionam-strany-5123>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.mfa.gov.by/press/news\\_mfa/af49a9427b6fb379.html](https://www.mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/af49a9427b6fb379.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2011/8/19/41776/>

are strangling us with media, methodically and collectively. Destroying us, trying to kill our economy and expect that we will spend hundreds of millions of dollars, like before, to protect your geopolitical interests? Only madmen can think like that and count on our support.”<sup>4</sup>

This time, the rhetoric took on a stronger character, where the topic of nuclear materials was no longer used as a bargaining chip, but as an element of a broader political confrontation. Lukashenka essentially linked the issue of control over nuclear materials to the general context of relations with the West, presenting it as a service that Belarus is no longer obliged to provide under the conditions of a “hybrid war.” Subsequently, the topic of nuclear materials was no longer raised, giving way to nuclear weapons.

### **From the political crisis of 2020 to preparations for the deployment of nuclear weapons**

The remainder of Lukashenka’s statements can be classified as routine statements regarding the voluntary surrender of nuclear weapons and security guarantees.

“We handed over these weapons for free, as the Americans, Russians and the entire world community demanded of us... In exchange, we were promised the inviolability of borders, territorial integrity, and a nuclear umbrella. That is, we were supposed to be covered with nuclear weapons by who? Russia. I signed this document... If suddenly, well, for example, the Poles or Lithuanians attacked us, then this would be an attack on Russia. If we were attacked, then this would be an attack on Russia. Russia took on the obligation to provide this nuclear umbrella (with our own nuclear weapons). This is what I assumed.”<sup>5</sup>

The events of the subsequent period should be placed in external and internal contexts. First, there is Russia’s withdrawal from the INF Treaty in 2019 and their efforts to undermine the existing international security system to create a new, more “just” one from the Kremlin’s point of view. Already at that time, Russian and Belarusian experts were quietly voicing the possibility of deploying short- and medium-range missiles in Belarus in response to the deployment of American missiles in Europe. Since they are nuclear-capable weapons, this is directly related to the issue. But at that time, the information was not widely publicized.

Lukashenka himself at that time warned about the risks of the collapse of the INF Treaty and spoke about potential retaliatory measures. It is important to note here that he had already spoken about the possibility of deploying missiles in Ukraine, which later became one of the Russian narratives of justification for aggression.

“But I am afraid that the Americans will take advantage of the moment to disrupt this treaty and deploy missiles in Europe. This is where these will not seem like little things to us either. Therefore, we will have to think about countermeasures together with Russia. There is no getting around this if this happens. And it will be worse if these missiles are stationed in Ukraine. Therefore, my answer is unequivocal: I am categorically against this [ed. – breaking the INF Treaty].”<sup>6</sup>

The second aspect is the political crisis in Belarus after the falsification of the 2020 election results. The brutal suppression of protests, mass repressions, and the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/ceremoniya-vozlozheniya-venkov-v-memorialnom-komplekse-brejskaya-krepost-geroy>

<sup>5</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-predstaviteljami-ukrainskix-smi-22081>

<sup>6</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/poseschenie-voennoj-akademii-20549>

hybrid migration crisis organized by the Putin and Lukashenka regimes led to Minsk ending up under a strict sanctions regime which it remains under to this day.

In the pre- and post-election period, Lukashenka repeatedly pointed out that Belarus is a non-nuclear state.

"But we are not a nuclear power. We cannot take a nuclear warhead, wave it around and shout, or talk about hypersonic weapons with which we will respond. We are an ordinary Central European country, peace-loving and focused on a quiet life. And we simply cannot threaten anyone in this regard." (June 25, 2020)<sup>7</sup>

"There is no dictatorship in our country, as I have already said. I do not have nuclear weapons, I do not have cyber hackers and so on, where I can press a button somewhere and the whole world turns upside down. What do they mean by dictatorship?!"<sup>8</sup> (August 20, 2021)

But he regularly used the topic of nuclear weapons in the context of the threat from NATO to escalate the situation and create an atmosphere of a besieged fortress, which is also characteristic of his rhetoric.

"They transferred them here. A15- to 20-minute flight to our territory. For me, as the commander-in-chief, this is a question. 18 aircraft. It is not clear what they are carrying. Maybe nuclear weapons. I assumed the worst-case scenario. Therefore, I had to react."<sup>9</sup> (August 28, 2020)

Another significant political track of internal conflict was the constitutional reform, preparations for which began even before the elections. In closed discussions was voiced the possibility of amending Article 18, which stated that "[t]he Republic of Belarus aims to make its territory a **nuclear-free** zone and the state neutral."

This is worth paying special attention to. Even before the elections, in the spring of 2020, as a justification for the removal of nuclear weapons, it was stated that if there is a nuclear power plant in Belarus, then the nuclear-free status is no longer relevant. The first significant statements regarding the backing away from neutrality were made in February 2021 at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. This was stated explicitly by then Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei in his speech at the Assembly.

"In my opinion, Belarus' desire for neutrality enshrined in the Constitution does not correspond to the current situation. In a modern globalized world, permeated with internationalization, neutrality in its classical understanding no longer exists. It is proposed that this aspect be taken into account when working on amendments to the Basic Law of our country."<sup>10</sup>

Deputy Chief of the General Staff Pavel Muraveiko:

"The conditions that ensure a neutral status have not yet been created. To achieve them, the choice of collective defense as a strategic guide is necessary and requires enshrining in the constitution."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/rassmotrenie-kadrovyyh-voprosov>

<sup>8</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vruchenie-gosudarstvennyh-nagrada-predstavitelnyam-silovyh-vedomstv>

<sup>9</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/rabochaya-poezdka-v-orshu>

<sup>10</sup> <https://mfa.gov.by/press/statements/d23c4c259dc8de7f.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/live/mg3LGOKdHUs?si=RkmIIUyeIrZrvZvQ&t=21935>

The next episode, indirectly related to nuclear weapons, again concerned nuclear-capable weapons, specifically aircraft. In early March 2021, on the eve of a statement made by the defense ministers of Belarus and Russia, Lukashenka made a statement regarding the supply of aircraft for Belarus' Armed Forces. The emphasis here was that there was no talk of nuclear weapons.

“Naturally, we must then ask for weapons for these aircraft. And the most modern weapons must be there. We are not talking about nuclear warheads. We are talking about conventional weapons. This element was probably the most extensive in our negotiations.”<sup>12</sup>

In August 2021, Lukashenka made another statement in which he denied the very possibility of stationing nuclear weapons. It is worth noting that the statement was made against the backdrop of a spiral of escalation caused by the crisis with the landing of the Ryanair flight and the use of migrants in a hybrid conflict on the borders. Despite this, he did not resort to the threat of nuclear weapons. But it was also said that in the event of a world war, he would agree to deploy Russian troops.

“Russia will never move nuclear warheads here, especially because they will be under direct fire from the territory of Poland and Lithuania.”<sup>13</sup>

If we rely on Lukashenka's words, then in this period we can draw the following conclusions:

- the rhetoric around nuclear weapons did not go beyond the usual, with the exception of a hint of blackmail around assistance with non-proliferation of nuclear materials
- amendments to the constitution served a dual purpose of amending the system to confront the West and the war in Ukraine
- until the fall of 2021, Lukashenka publicly denied the possibility of deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus

### **The growing role of the regime in Russian nuclear deterrence**

During the autumn of 2021, the situation escalated, and the Russian military presence in Belarus began to increase. Combat training centers began to operate, and the deployment of a group of troops began to invade Ukraine under the guise of exercises. It would be helpful here to divide the rhetoric into 4 topics:

- Statements in the context of strengthening military cooperation with Russia
- Rhetoric in the context of the escalation of the migration crisis on the borders
- Direct admission of the possibility of deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus
- Escalation before a direct invasion to prevent retaliatory actions by NATO countries

In November 2021, a new Military Doctrine of the Union State was adopted. The Russian propaganda publication Sputnik (part of the Rossiya Segodnya holding) published an article on this subject with the headline “Military Doctrine

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<sup>12</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-voprosu-belorussko-rossiyskogo-sotrudnichestva-v-voennoy-sfere>

<sup>13</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-zhurnalistami-predstavitel'yami-obshchestvennosti-ekspertnogo-i-mediynogo-soobshchestva-bolshoy-razgovor-s-prezidentom>



Guarantees: Belarus Will Receive Tactical Nuclear Weapons.” It examines in detail the conditions under which this would be possible. It also lays out the main narrative that this is a response to the American nuclear sharing program deploying nuclear weapons in Europe and which will be used as a justification.

“Belarus has as many rights to deploy and use tactical nuclear weapons as non-nuclear Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Turkey, whose pilots regularly practice in European Armageddon exercises,” the article said.<sup>14</sup>

When discussing the escalation the initiative, allegedly coming from Lukashenka, to begin joint patrolling the borders using Russian strategic aviation should be noted. On November 9, he had a telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin devoted to the situation on the Belarusian-Polish border. It was emphasized that of particular concern was “evidence of the concentration of regular Polish troops on the border.”<sup>15</sup>

It is worth noting that all this was taking place against the backdrop of a migration crisis organized by two regimes, where thousands of migrants were concentrated along the Polish border. A version has been floated that it was organized to elicit a reaction from Poland and Lithuania and to indicate that NATO, in increasing its presence, was being threatening and to use it as a pretext for the deploying of nuclear weapons. On November 11, Lukashenka said that he had asked Putin to patrol the border with the participation of Russian Tu-22M3 strategic bombers, which carry nuclear weapons.

“Yes, these are bombers that are capable of carrying nuclear weapons. But we have no other choice. We must see what they are doing there beyond [our borders].”<sup>16</sup>

On November 13, an interview was published for the Russian publication National Defense, in which Lukashenka publicly stated that he was asking Putin for Iskander missile systems.

“Right now I’m bothering your President, saying I need our 500-kilometer missile launchers here... I need several divisions in the west and the south. Let them stand there. That’s 500 kilometers, because our Polonez goes up to 300.”<sup>17</sup>

Such an established pattern of interaction will be used as well in the future, where initiatives inspired by Moscow are presented by Minsk as decisions they’ve made on their own. At the same time, the Belarusian leadership, aware of risks in the event of potential aggression, is using the situation to obtain additional security guarantees from Russia while serving as a close ally of the Kremlin in opposing the NATO nuclear sharing program.

On November 30, in an interview with the director of the holding company Russia Today Dmitry Kiselev, Lukashenka said that he would allow the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus. This was said in response to a question about the deployment of American nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe. At the same time he remarked, already in a more aggressive vein, that he preserved the infrastructure for strategic nuclear weapons, again recalling the Budapest Memorandum.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://sputnik.by/20211110/voennaya-doktrina-garantiruet-belarus-poluchit-takticheskoe-yadernoe-oruzhie-1057836284.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/telefonnyy-razgovor-s-prezidentom-rossii-vladimirom-putiny-m-1636461354>

<sup>16</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-s-rukovodstvom-soveta-ministrov-1636621364>

<sup>17</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/intervyu-prezidenta-respubliki-belarus-a-g-Lukashenka-rossiyskomu-zhurnalu-nacionalnaya-oborona>

"I would never have done this if it were not for our previous authorities before me, this was my first year as President. If not for these authorities, who created this international treaty. [...] Moreover, after that, I did not withdraw nuclear weapons from Belarus for several years. Do you know why I withdrew them? You will not believe it, not only at the request of the Americans. But first of all, under the harsh pressure of Yeltsin and the entire team that was then."<sup>18</sup>

"Why I became an enemy for the West: not because I am a dictator and so on. Because all the sites where the Topols were located, except for one, are completely preserved and are still ready for use. You know how the West reacts to nuclear weapons and other things."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov responded to this statement, saying, "I would take this statement as a very serious warning, which is determined primarily by the reckless policies that the West is pursuing."<sup>19</sup>

A peculiar exchange of signals continued further when, on December 18, the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus Vladimir Makei repeated this idea about readiness to deploy nuclear weapons in the event of a NATO threat. This was again supported by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the level of the deputy minister and department spokesperson Maria Zakharova. On December 27, a draft of Belarus' new constitution was published, from which non-nuclear status and neutrality were excluded.

Before the start of the war, beginning at the end of January 2021, the nuclear issue became actively discussed again. On January 21, while visiting military facilities near the border with Poland, Lukashenka again threatened to use force. "If they start deploying armies against the Union State, putting it on the brink of survival with various kinds of sanctions, intimidating and threatening, then Belarus and Russia will 'break them so hard that it will not seem like a little thing.'"<sup>20</sup>

A few days later, on January 24, he returned to this subject again, declaring there was pressure from the West on the nuclear weapons issue. "Literally a day ago, I was informed of the threatening position taken by the U.S. State Department. They came to our diplomats in New York and threatened us, saying that if we allow Putin and Russia, allow this and that, then we will introduce sanctions. If you return these nuclear weapons to Belarus, this and that will happen. Some kind of mentoring tone taken towards Belarus." And again, he threatened that "[i]n the context of the development of the situation around us, here in the region, and Washington's circle, it will not be easier for us. We will have to defend the borders of our country as necessary. We know how to do it, and we will do it."<sup>21</sup>

On January 28, in a message to the Belarusian people, Lukashenka again emphasized that "neighboring countries – meaning Poland – are talking about deploying nuclear-capable weapons."<sup>22</sup> On February 4, in an interview with Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, a warning was again voiced: "They understand that it is futile to fight with us, especially with Russia. We are not talking

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<sup>18</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/intervyu-mezhdunarodnomu-informacionnomu-agentstvu-rossiya-segodnya>

<sup>19</sup> <https://tass.ru/politika/13077885>

<sup>20</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/rabochaya-poezdka-v-brestskuyu-oblast-1642754835>

<sup>21</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/utverzhenie-resheniya-na-ohranu-gosgranic-organami-pogranichnoy-sluzhby-v-2022-godu>

<sup>22</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/aleksandr-Lukashenka-28-yanvarya-obratitsya-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-belorusskomu-narodu-i-nacionalnomu-sobraniyu>

about nuclear weapons or anything else. But it is better not to touch us. Don't touch us.”<sup>23</sup>

On February 17, at the Allied Resolve joint exercises that served as cover for the invasion of Ukraine from Belarus, he again turned to the subject of threats from the West. “If necessary, if such senseless, stupid steps are taken by our opponents and rivals, we will deploy not only nuclear weapons, but also super-nuclear, advanced ones, to protect our territory... But if Belarus does not face any threats from unfriendly countries, then nuclear weapons will not be needed here for a hundred years.”<sup>24</sup> And there he again stated that he would like to receive Iskander systems as a gift or purchase them.

In this way, Lukashenka solved the joint task with Russia of ensuring security after the aggression, since it remained unknown how NATO would react to the start of the war against Ukraine. In essence, he was balancing between integration into Russia's nuclear deterrence strategy and maintaining (simulating) elements of autonomy in decision-making.

On the external side, the potential deployment of nuclear weapons was positioned as a purely retaliatory measure. Internally, the threat from NATO was demonstrated along with Lukashenka's ability to ensure security. Moreover, the characteristic feature of mixed messaging was again revealed as a combination of aggressive rhetoric and constant reservations about the defensive nature of possible measures.

This strategy reflected the desire to minimize the risks of a retaliatory strike in the event of aggression, while maintaining the subordination of the Lukashenka regime's nuclear agenda to the general context and interests of the Kremlin.

In the first month after the start of the war, Lukashenka reiterated the narrative several times that he was against the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus and that they would appear only if nuclear weapons materialized in Poland or other neighboring countries. The first time was when reporting on his contact with Emmanuel Macron and the second time was in an interview with the Japanese television channel TBS. Moreover, during the interview, two contradictory statements were made:

“In order to prevent Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Belarus, so that this never happens and there is not even such a threat to Belarus, I said that if the Americans, France, Britain station nuclear weapons in close proximity to Belarus – for example, in Poland, Lithuania or in Ukraine – then I will demand that Putin return to us the nuclear weapons that we once transferred to Russia.”

“That is, I do not plan to station nuclear weapons here, produce nuclear weapons here, or create and use these nuclear weapons against anyone. This has never been in the plans of the Belarusian leadership or in my plans.”<sup>25</sup>

In addition, he emphasized that the changes to the constitution had nothing to do with nuclear weapons, attempting in this way to demonstrate that the nuclear escalation was not a pre-staged step and to reduce his degree of involvement in Russian aggression.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/intervyu-zhurnalistu-vgtrk-vladimiru-solovevu>

<sup>24</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/uchastie-v-sovmestnom-operativnom-uchenii-vooruzhennyh-sil-belarusi-i-rossii-soyuznaya-reshimost-2022>

<sup>25</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/intervyu-yaponskomu-telekanalu-tbs>

## Step-by-step escalation and a decision on nuclear-capable weapons

Despite statements made that nuclear weapons would appear in Belarus only if they were deployed in EU countries where they had not been before, the tension on the nuclear weapons issue continued to escalate. The next step was Lukashenka's statement at a meeting with Putin in St. Petersburg in June 2022, on the eve of the NATO summit in Madrid. There, Lukashenka spoke about reciprocal measures against NATO aircraft.

"We are very concerned about the flights of U.S. and NATO aircraft that are training to carry nuclear warheads. This is very stressful for us. Therefore, I ask you to consider the issue of a reciprocal response to these things, without going overboard. They are training to carry nuclear warheads. Please help us at least adapt the aircraft that we have so they can carry nuclear weapons. I am not asking that we will transport (or you will transport) nuclear weapons there tomorrow."

In response, Putin spoke about American nuclear warheads in Europe, complaining that Russia does not have a single such base. In response to Lukashenka's request, he proposed re-equipping Belarusian Su-25 attack aircraft to use nuclear weapons and also announced a decision to transfer the Iskander-M missile system, "which, as is known, can use both ballistic and cruise missiles, both conventional and nuclear."<sup>26</sup>

A few days later, Lukashenka returned to the same topic during a visit to Minsk by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The talk was again about a nuclear sharing program, which essentially laid bare the ultimate goal of the pressure, namely the withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe.

"There was no staging there. And about nuclear weapons and so on. We have only taken half a step. They fly, they train. Why train, why carry nuclear-capable warheads? So that tomorrow they can put a nuclear bomb on a plane and drop it where it is needed. That is why we have not yet responded in kind. Any nuclear munitions depots are in Russia. We do not have them. And, as Putin correctly said, their nuclear warheads are located in six places, in six countries," he said.<sup>27</sup>

In his address to an audience in Belarus on July 2 for Independence Day, the emphasis was somewhat different, referring instead to Poland's possible intentions to deploy nuclear weapons on its territory, and that Lukashenka's actions were only a retaliatory measure.

"This is not nuclear blackmail. I and the Russian President are not going to blackmail anyone, especially with nuclear weapons. But I want to emphasize once again that in negotiations this subject came up with the Russian President immediately after the Poles (you probably didn't notice) turned to the Americans and asked them to bring them nuclear weapons to Poland. Then I said to President Putin, 'Why are we pretending that nothing is happening?' We consulted for a long time and came to the conclusion that we must be ready to respond in kind within 24 hours. To do this, we must prepare. And we will prepare. We are not threatening anyone, we are not blackmailing anyone."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/peregovory-s-prezidentom-rossii-vladimirom-putiny-m-1656170620>

<sup>27</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-ministrom-inostrannyh-del-rossii-sergeem-lavrovym-1656578769>

<sup>28</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/torzhestvennoe-sobranie-po-sluchayu-dnya-nezavisimosti-belarusi>

In the same address, Lukashenka made two more contradictory statements. The first concerned how he had blocked the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Belarus back in the 1990s but was forced to agree to it under pressure from Moscow. “I sent them there and told them that we will say whatever we want externally but will keep the nuclear weapons and will not withdraw them. And when they were just about ready to shut off our natural gas and cut off oil supplies, these weapons were withdrawn to Russia.” The second statement, directly contradicting this and made in the context of the possibility of returning nuclear weapons to Belarus, was a claim that this was done through his own initiative. “They [ed. – the media] are trying to pull my leg. ‘But Lukashenka wasn’t even there, he does not make decisions.’ Remember, not a single step in Belarus, especially today, is taken without the consent and demand of President Lukashenka.”

This series of statements demonstrates the first time the issue of obtaining special nuclear-capable weapons and buildup of corresponding capabilities was discussed. In addition, an attempt was made again to convince audiences that it was Lukashenka, not Putin, who initiated this process. The timing of the statements is also important, with the first made on the eve of the Madrid NATO summit. However, no significant movements of nuclear weapons closer to the borders of Belarus and Russia were made.

On July 21, in an interview with the France Presse agency, Lukashenka again linked the decision to deploy nuclear-capable weapons to NATO exercises: “So we agreed that we will equip our aircraft so that they can carry nuclear weapons... And we will train. If you (NATO members, Americans) stop doing this, we will not do this. We do not need this.”<sup>29</sup>

This was again declared on August 26, in the context of the Atlantic Resolve mission to rotate American troops: “They must understand that no helicopters or planes will save them if they escalate. Putin and I said at one point in St. Petersburg that we would re-equip Belarusian Su planes so that they could carry nuclear weapons. Do you think we are just talking nonsense? Everything is ready! So let them bring them.”<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, Belarusian diplomats have asserted that the “insinuations are baseless.” This was stated explicitly at a conference on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in New York by the head of the international security and arms control department of Belarus’ Ministry of Foreign, Vasily Pavlov.

“Belarus’ contribution to nuclear disarmament is clear and indisputable and has been repeatedly confirmed in numerous bilateral and multilateral documents. All insinuations about Belarus changing its non-nuclear status and regarding non-compliance with NPT obligations are baseless.”<sup>31</sup>

## **Ukrainian successes and a new enemy – Poland**

In the fall of 2022, Lukashenka burst out a series of statements to the effect that the main aggressor in the region and the cause of his own actions is Poland’s intention to obtain nuclear weapons. He had spoken about this before, but this

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<sup>29</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/intervyu-informacionnomu-agentstvu-frans-press>

<sup>30</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/poseshchenie-minskogo-mehanicheskogo-zavoda-imeni-s-i-yavilova>

<sup>31</sup> <https://belta.by/politics/view/mid-zajavil-o-bespochnosti-insinuatsii-po-povodu-izmenenija-bezijadernogo-statusa-belarusi-517052-2022/>

period is marked by an increased frequency, coinciding with successful Ukrainian operations in the Kharkiv region and Kherson. According to American media, it was during this period that there was an increased risk of the use of nuclear weapons by Russian troops.<sup>32</sup> The heightened nervousness of this period was reflected in Lukashenka's speeches.

October 6. "Yesterday, Duda [ed. – President of Poland] talked about this. This was worked out a long time ago. We discussed this with Putin when we were talking about planes in relation to nuclear weapons. They agreed long ago with the Americans that the arsenals will be in Poland. What does this mean? That we are really facing an attack with tactical nuclear weapons. We need to take measures and we don't have them."<sup>33</sup>

October 7. "You've heard statements to the effect that they've supposedly already agreed to move nuclear weapons arsenals to Poland. We will think about it. We've already decided, but we'll think again about how to respond to this. Don't worry, everything will be fine."<sup>34</sup>

October 10. "...[T]he military-political leadership of the North Atlantic Alliance and a number of European countries is already openly considering options for possible aggression against our country, including a nuclear strike."

"And given the desire of the Polish leadership to saber-rattle nuclear weapons, this is no longer simply a threat. This is a danger to our country's defense capabilities."<sup>35</sup>

October 14. "A sociological survey was published in Poland... [T]hey say that more than 50% are in favor of having nuclear weapons in Poland and want the Americans to move them there. I don't think the majority of Poles hold this point of view. But it's the leadership that's escalating the situation. The people are already supposedly asking for Polish weapons. That's why we introduced a counter-terrorism operation and began deploying a regional group consisting of Belarus and Russia."<sup>36</sup>

On the same day, on the sidelines of the summit, he gave an interview to the American channel NBC<sup>37</sup>, where he outlined the key themes at that time – as usual, combining threats with assurances that there was no threat. Here also the synchronization with Russian ideas on red lines is evident.

"The most important thing is not to drive the person your negotiating with or even your opponent into a corner. Therefore, do not cross those lines, or as the Russians say, 'red lines.' They cannot be crossed."

"As for the subtext of your question, never, including President Putin, has the Russian leadership set a goal of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine. There is no need."

"It's the end of the planet if nuclear weapons are used by even one state, because they will cause a chain reaction. In Russia, they understand this perfectly well. And

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/02/us/politics/russia-ukraine-nuclear-weapons.html>

<sup>33</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-s-ekonomicheskim-blokom-pravitelstva>

<sup>34</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/aleksandr-Lukashenka-7-oktyabrya-sovershit-rabochiy-vizit-v-rossiyskuyu-federaciyu>

<sup>35</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-po-voprosam-bezopasnosti>

<sup>36</sup> [https://t.me/pul\\_1/7121](https://t.me/pul_1/7121)

<sup>37</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/intervyu-amerikanskoy-telekompanii-nbc>

no one, I emphasize once again – I know this for sure – no one poses the question this way or is aiming to use nuclear weapons. I tell you absolutely for certain.”

Once again, Poland was mentioned.

“You know who the main instigator is who is betting on the use of nuclear weapons...? Can't guess who? I'll tell you. Poland. They are provoking you – the U.S. – to make some moves in terms of nuclear weapons. Don't fall for this trick.”

“These nuclear weapons, let them stay in the warehouses where they are. Because if the nuclear weapons move, say, to Poland, there will be a chain reaction. There will be retaliatory steps from the other side. Therefore, we should not do it. We need to calm down and sit at the negotiating table.”

The intensity and frequency of statements in October only underscore how critical the situation was at that moment, as far as Lukashenka was concerned. On the one hand, the constant escalation added an element of deterrence to minimize retaliatory actions against Minsk. On the other, the constant singling out of Poland as a “legitimate” target for a strike is important in the context of the Kremlin's generally hostile plans regarding neighboring countries.

The following statements were made only in November, during the withdrawal of Russian troops from Kherson.

“The Americans are the only ones who are afraid of nuclear weapons, because they can reach there. Nuclear weapons will not be used, which means they will fight with conventional weapons. Where? They will fight here. We will be here in this cauldron.”

“The Europeans need to come to their senses and stop the war. But they can't. They are not allowed. The Americans have used them. Are these people leaders who allowed the Americans to bring additional nuclear weapons there?”<sup>38</sup>

On November 23, at the CSTO summit, Lukashenka spoke about the risks of using nuclear weapons, again accusing the American and Polish leadership.

“This is something that was unimaginable 2-3 years ago. The nuclear rhetoric of some Western leaders is off the charts. The Polish leadership has declared its readiness to deploy nuclear weapons. It's good that the Americans, to their credit, still have sensible people who understand the dangers of nuclear games, especially with unpredictable partners.”

“Our firm conviction is that nuclear blackmail should have no place in international politics!”<sup>39</sup>

Against the backdrop of successful Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in the Kharkiv region and near Kherson, a sharp intensification of Lukashenka's nuclear rhetoric was observed. The central element of his speeches was the accusation that Poland was seeking to obtain nuclear weapons, which was presented as the main threat and justification for his own actions.

At the same time, Lukashenka's rhetoric again showed obvious contradictions. On the one hand were assertions about Russian not having any plans to use nuclear

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<sup>38</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/poseshchenie-chempionata-po-kolke-drov-sredi-zhurnalistov>

<sup>39</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/aleksandr-Lukashenka-23-noyabrya-primet-uchastie-v-sammite-odkb-v-erevane>

weapons, and on the other were constant references to a chain reaction and possible escalation.

### **Open blackmail: demand for a new security architecture**

In February 2023, Lukashenka again raised the issue of withdrawing nuclear weapons from Belarus at a meeting with journalists, stating that the security guarantees included commitments not to impose economic sanctions. This provides another narrative to justify the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus while expressing interest in a new security architecture that takes into account the interests of the authoritarian bloc.

“We withdrew them in exchange for guarantees from the Americans, Europeans, and Russians that they would never encroach on our sovereignty and independence and would never apply economic sanctions against us. That’s what it says there. They (ed. – the West) didn’t give a damn about this, trampled on it, and are now applying sanctions against us. They are strangling us wherever possible, in violation of that treaty. If we had these nuclear weapons, they wouldn’t talk to us like that. This means that people only understand force.”

“That’s why we don’t need strategic nuclear weapons. We are not going to strike America or even European countries. And what we’re talking about are tactical nuclear weapons, so that these aircraft that can carry tactical nuclear weapons are prepared.”<sup>40</sup>

Here he noted that the planes and trained crews were ready to use special ammunition. A few days later, on February 21, Putin announced his intention to suspend Russia’s participation in START-3. The corresponding law was signed on February 28.<sup>41</sup>

A month later, on March 25, Russian President Vladimir Putin made a statement about the decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. According to him, this was at the request of Lukashenka. He said, “We are basically doing the same thing that they have been doing for decades,” meaning the deployment of American nuclear weapons in Europe. Putin also said that the transfer to Belarus will occur “[w]ithout violating – I want to emphasize this – our international obligations on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.”<sup>42</sup>

It is worth noting that a couple of days before this, Lukashenka stated in response to the supplying of tank shells with depleted uranium to Ukraine, “Russia will supply us with ammunition with real uranium.”<sup>43</sup>

Following Putin’s statement, Lukashenka addressed the people on March 31, making a number of claims:

- the initiative to return nuclear weapons came from Lukashenka: “I have urgently intensified negotiations with Russian President Putin on the return of nuclear weapons.”

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<sup>40</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-predstaviteleyami-zarubezhnyh-i-belorusskih-smi>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/28/02/2023/63fe18f29a794705133ccf62>

<sup>42</sup> <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/17369429>

<sup>43</sup> <https://belta.by/president/view/Lukashenka-rasskazal-o-vozmozhnyh-posledstviyah-postavki-ukraine-snarjadov-s-nizkoobogaschennym-uranom-556815-2023/>



- the West's violation of security guarantees and promises: "[There are] no sanctions against those who withdrew. No pressure, no planning of an offensive or revolution."

- the condition for using nuclear weapons is a threat to the existence of the Belarusian state [read – regime], with accompanying contradictions: "We will not allow the boot of a foreign soldier or foreigner who is unfriendly to us to cross our border. We will respond in kind."

However: "But if we see that this means the destruction of our country, we will use everything we have."

- Statements made in the context of strategic nuclear weapons:

"A week ago I gave the military an order to immediately restore the sites where the Topol nuclear warheads were deployed."

"If necessary, Putin and I will decide this and introduce strategic weapons here." (Keeping in mind that a month before he said that strategic nuclear weapons were not needed in Belarus.)

- He also did not give a clear answer to the question about nuclear weapons management: "This is a completely closed topic, how we will use them here and so on. Everything will be done according to the law and the rules. As for the management, control, and other things concerning nuclear weapons, you have known me for a long time. There are no uncontrolled weapons and other things in Belarus and there cannot be. Therefore, we will manage everything here that is in Belarus."<sup>44</sup>

It is worth noting here that this and subsequent actions were made against the backdrop of increased arms supplies to Ukraine, specifically the decision to transfer armored vehicles and tanks along with preparing Ukrainian brigades for a new counteroffensive. Narratively, Belarus and Russia tried to frame their nuclear actions as a response to conventional weapons in an attempt to contain Western aid supplies and as serve insurance in case of Ukrainian success. The deployment of nuclear weapons in Poland was not voiced at all during that period.

Based on this, we can conclude that the preparations were made in advance and that, therefore, this is a planned step-by-step escalation for containment. The reason itself can shift, as shown by the jettisoning of the rhetoric about Poland.

Further rhetoric concerned the technical aspects of the preparation for deployment and signing relevant agreements. The demand to curtail the nuclear sharing program was repeated when commenting on French President Emmanuel Macron's statement that no country may deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of another country. "I agree with him. Therefore, it is necessary to withdraw all nuclear weapons to the Americans from the five or six countries where they are deployed. Period."<sup>45</sup>

At the end of April 2023, the accusation was repeated that the West was not fulfilling its obligations on security guarantees and imposing sanctions, meaning that nuclear weapons were necessary. "This meant economic security, among other things. What kind of economic security can there be if they impose sanctions

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<sup>44</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/poslanie-aleksandra-Lukashenka-belorusskomu-narodu-i-nacionalnomu-sobraniyu-sostoitsya-31-marta>

<sup>45</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/zasedanie-vysshego-gosudarstvennogo-soveta-soyuznogo-gosudarstva>

against us and Russia?! That is why I raised this issue in negotiations with the Russian President. He totally supported me in all areas.”<sup>46</sup> And here he noted that Putin proposed revising the legal acts concerning Belarus’ security.

On May 25, the defense ministers of Belarus and Russia signed an agreement on the storing of non-strategic nuclear weapons in Belarus.<sup>47</sup> On the same day, at the Eurasian Economic Forum, Putin informed Lukashenka that he had signed a decree on the transfer of nuclear weapons to Belarus. As Lukashenka later explained, “he informed me that he had signed a decree on our actions to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus... A decision was made to follow up on what was said orally. We needed to prepare storage sites there (in Belarus), and so on. We did all of this. Therefore, the deployment of nuclear weapons began.” But he did not give a definitive answer to the question of whether the deployment had begun.<sup>48</sup>

On June 9, at a meeting in Sochi, Putin once again raised the issue of deploying nuclear weapons. “On the most sensitive issues that we agreed on, everything is going according to plan. On July 7-8, preparation for the relevant structures will be completed, and we will immediately begin activities related to the stationing of the relevant types of weapons on your territory. So, everything is according to plan, everything is firm.”<sup>49</sup>

A few days later, on June 13, Lukashenka again addressed the issue, assuring that his actions were not Russian blackmail for the upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius and that it was his own initiative. “First, I asked Putin. Then I insistently demanded in a friendly way that he give me back these weapons for now. They will be enough.” Interestingly, Lukashenka said that he first asked Russia to make nuclear warheads for the Belarusian Polonez missile system. But allegedly this idea was considered too complicated and they proposed deploying tactical nuclear weapons.

Lukashenka again raised the issue of strategic nuclear weapons, reiterating that he does not need them, but is ready to deploy them if necessary. “Although we are currently preparing sites for these weapons. They are all alive and well, except for one. Therefore, if necessary, we could at any time...”<sup>50</sup>

There he will also give an interview to the Rossiya channel, where he will state that there will be several storage facilities. “As soon as we bring everything in, it will be dispersed throughout Belarus. We have as many of these storage facilities as dogs in a village. Seriously. We had a lot of them. We have already restored five or six of them. We will restore more. And we will disperse them. We will not keep them in one place.” He also commented on the order of use. “Listen, if a war starts, will I look around? No, I won’t. I picked up the phone, wherever he was. He called (Putin) - I picked up the phone at any moment. Even right now. So, what's the problem here - to agree on some kind of strike? That's not a question. There's nothing to argue about here. We've already agreed on this.”

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<sup>46</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-ministrom-oborony-rossii-sergeem-shoygu-1681119493>

<sup>47</sup> <https://belta.by/society/view/hrenin-i-shojgu-podpisali-dokumenty-o-porjadke-hranenija-nestrategicheskogo-jadernogo-oruzhija-v-568450-2023/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/zasedanie-vysshego-evraziyskogo-ekonomicheskogo-soveta-1685006115>

<sup>49</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/rabochiy-vizit-v-rossiyskuyu-federaciyu-1686307526>

<sup>50</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/rabochaya-poezdka-v-minskuyu-oblast-1686640871>

And there Lukashenka again voiced the narrative that “No one has ever fought against a nuclear country, a country that has nuclear weapons.”<sup>51</sup>

Further, despite Putin’s statement that the nuclear weapons would be deployed after July 8-9 (the NATO summit in Vilnius was scheduled to be on July 11-12), on June 27 Lukashenka said that the weapons were already in Belarus.

“The Poles and others believe that Wagner will guard nuclear weapons and so on. Wagner will not guard any nuclear weapons. They will be guarded, and they are guarding them today, since most of the nuclear weapons have already been brought to Belarus. It is surprising they did not track them. The Russians and Belarusians are guarding them.”<sup>52</sup>

He again repeated that “[n]o one has ever fought against a nuclear power,” and added that the military leadership, together with the KGB, has been tasked with determining the plan for using these weapons. He also attempted to refute the idea that the nuclear weapons are under the control of Russia.

“Let’s say we can use them with Russia’s consent. All this idle talk about how we are being used and so on – it’s all nonsense. This does not exist and cannot exist. These are our weapons, and we will use them.”

In his address on June 30, 2023, on the eve of Independence Day, he repeated that it was his initiative. And in a conversation with the press on July 6, he announced again that the warheads were already in Belarus and that everything that was planned would be delivered by the end of the year. Among the new details was that the nuclear weapons were supposedly delivered by air so that no one could track them. And he added that Belarus did not and does not conduct negotiations with China regarding nuclear weapons. At that time he did not give a clear answer as to who exactly would make the decision on the use of nuclear weapons.

“Regarding the use of nuclear weapons, even if Russia decided to do it, I am sure they would consult with their closest ally. And even more so would we.”<sup>53</sup>

### **Raising the stakes: changes to the Russian nuclear doctrine**

In the subsequent period (the second half of 2023-24), Lukashenka repeatedly said that he was not going to use them first, that no one attacks countries with nuclear weapons, etc. The main narrative was that this was a response to American nuclear weapons, and he essentially did not mention threats in Poland. As for the mechanism for using them, no specifics were announced.

“The mechanism is not spelled out. This is our business with Putin. Moreover, we consult not only on tactical weapons, but also on conventional weapons; on how, when and where to use them. Therefore, where necessary, it is spelled out.” – From a speech at the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly in April 2024.

“I once let it slip that I approved a decree spelling out the formula for using both missile nuclear tactical weapons and bombs that are suspended under aircraft. All

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<sup>51</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/intervyu-telekanalu-rossiya-1-1686679487>

<sup>52</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vruchenie-pogon-vysshemu-oficerskomu-sostavu>

<sup>53</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-predstavitelnyami-zarubezhnyh-i-belorusskih-smi-1688629644>

this is spelled out, and it is clear how to act and what to do. But I talk less about it now, because it is probably not very good when we talk about nuclear weapons.”<sup>54</sup>

There he again stated that returning to Belarus was his idea. According to him, at that time, several dozen nuclear weapons were deployed in Belarus.

“Maybe there is no need to return strategic weapons here. We are not going to fight America... And there can be no talk of tactical weapons, as they must be on Belarusian territory. And since we have been listed as co-aggressors, as Putin and I are the main enemies in the world and aggressors, the Russian leadership, comparing all the facts, made a decision (I emphasize once again, at my insistence, and not because they wanted to create a nuclear weapons base here), to return a certain quantity to us. I will not name the numbers; I have already said that these are several dozen of the most modern nuclear weapons.”<sup>55</sup>

Of subsequent episodes, three are worth highlighting. The first is the joint exercises on the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons in May 2024. The second is how Lukashenka equated the pressure of the artificially created migration crisis with the deployment of nuclear weapons. The third is the change in Russia’s nuclear doctrine, which includes the protection of Belarusian territory.

As for the exercises, they were accompanied by Lukashenka’s statements that nuclear weapons play a role of strategic deterrence and another statement that it was done on his initiative. “It was my initiative. Putin said this. I called him and said, ‘Listen, we need to coordinate on this.’ And we had one goal. We wanted to see how the leading nuclear powers do this. We are learning.”<sup>56</sup> (May 9)

“I admitted honestly that this is our third training since the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus. The Russians probably have had dozens of such trainings. This is not surprising. We are doing everything that they [ed. – Western countries] did before us and are doing now,” Lukashenka said at a meeting with Putin on May 25. What is important is that the Russian president again stated that he is not violating any agreements by deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus.

“There is nothing here to violate. And there is nothing unusual compared to the work of the NATO bloc. The same exercises are regularly held there, in which NATO countries are involved, on whose territory tactical American nuclear weapons are located, with the involvement of their military personnel. Combat aircraft and other means of delivery.”<sup>57</sup>

The second point is related to the conflation of two artificial crises, to which Lukashenka referred on August 15, 2024:

“They imposed sanctions, ceasing cooperating with us on the borders. We said thanks, there is no readmission agreement, and we ended it. They stopped building these centers [ed. – temporary accommodation of migrants in Belarus], and we said that we will not house migrants here. And they went there in a steady stream. And for them, for the entire European Union, this is a disaster. Am I wrong?”

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<sup>54</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vystuplenie-na-zasedanii-vii-vsebelorusskogo-narodnogo-sobraniya>

<sup>55</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vtoroy-den-zasedaniya-vii-vsebelorusskogo-narodnogo-sobraniya>

<sup>56</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/torzhestvennye-meropriyatiya-v-chest-dnya-pobedy-1715271127>

<sup>57</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-prezidentom-rossii-vladimirom-putiny-m-1716550347>

“The second disaster for them was when we agreed with Vladimir Vladimirovich that he would station tactical nuclear weapons here.”<sup>58</sup>

The third aspect is the change in Russia’s nuclear doctrine, which includes the possibility of a nuclear strike in the event of aggression against Belarus. The changes made coincided with leaks about the readiness of Western countries to allow Ukraine to strike at Russia using long-range missiles. But de facto, obligations for the common defense of borders existed prior to these changes.

“It is enough for us that Russia has nuclear weapons. If necessary, Russia will defend Belarus as its territory under the treaty. Such a treaty exists.”<sup>59</sup>

Putin returned to this topic on May 25, 2024, in Minsk:

“We treat the security of Belarus in exactly the same way as the security of Russia. This is a key element of our interaction in this area.”

Two weeks later, on June 7, 2024, Putin said he would not rule out changes to the nuclear doctrine.<sup>60</sup> The changes themselves were announced on September 25.<sup>61</sup> Two days later, on September 27, Lukashenka responded:

“I said at the Forum (September 17) that an attack on Belarus would mean a third world war. Thank you to Putin for recently confirming this, amending the nuclear doctrine so that an attack on Russia and Belarus would mean using nuclear weapons. He confirmed my assertion, which was the essence of my statement. As soon as they attack us – NATO is NATO, the Americans and Poles have already lined up along the border, especially the Polish border, and we know that the Polish leadership is already getting ready – we will use nuclear weapons. And Russia will get involved as a result... If we use nuclear weapons, they could respond in kind. And against Russia as well. Therefore, Russia will use its entire arsenal. And that would already be a world war. The West does not want this either. They are not ready for this. But we tell them openly that the red line is the state border. If they step over it the response will be swift.”<sup>62</sup>

Later, he repeated several times that the red line would be the crossing of the border, which is a reaction to the Ukrainian operation in the Kursk region. He also mentioned that the use of nuclear weapons would be impossible without the approval of the Russian and Belarusian authorities.<sup>63</sup>

### **Lukashenka’s ultimatum**

"First, to truly defuse the situation and create conditions for dialogue, American nuclear weapons must be removed from the territory of Eurasian countries. This deadly arsenal is an anachronism of the Cold War, and we will not remain on the sidelines.

Second, the practice of applying illegal sanctions without decisions of the UN Security Council must be eliminated and an effective mechanism of international

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<sup>58</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/interv-u-telekanalu-rossia>

<sup>59</sup> <https://belta.by/president/view/Lukashenka-esli-nado-rossija-budet-zaschischat-belarus-kak-svoju-territoriju-514879-2022/>

<sup>60</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74234>

<sup>61</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75182>

<sup>62</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/posesenie-belorusskogo-gosudarstvennogo-universiteta-informatiki-i-radioelektroniki>

<sup>63</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/interv-u-zurnalistu-bi-bi-si-stivenu-rozenbergu>

legal guarantees that do not allow the use of such a method of pressure needs to be created.

Third, a new contractual and legal mechanism must be developed to create a transparent, clear regime of control over new deadly technologies capable of destroying all of humanity without nuclear weapons: including lasers, hypersonic weapons, quantum and electromagnetic systems, and other advanced developments with capabilities that have not been thoroughly studied.

Fourth, in the cyber sphere an entire industry is also developing unchecked, aimed at creating and implementing malicious solutions that result in consequences on a global scale. No nuclear weapons are needed. An international legal act on cyber non-aggression that includes a rejection of the use of these weapons against each other and the creation of a system of control over their development and use must be developed."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/ii-minskaa-mezdunarodnaa-konferencia-po-evrazijskoj-bezopasnosti>

## Conclusions

The proposed deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus is part of Russia's operation to re-divide the world and create a new security architecture for the Kremlin. Lukashenka is attempting to obtain a secondary benefit in the form of legitimization, security guarantees, and lifting of sanctions.

Preparations for the deployment were conducted in advance and unilaterally. Russia did not react to the actions of the West, but on the contrary, consistently and proactively, with the full support of the Lukashenka regime, implemented its escalation strategy.

The reasons and justifications for the deployment of nuclear weapons have changed over time. Although much attention was initially paid to hypothetical nuclear weapons in Poland, these never materialized. Despite this, however, the decision to transfer the nuclear weapons to Belarus was still made. The real goal – the withdrawal of American nuclear weapons from Europe – was framed as a justification.

At the same time, Russia is using Belarus' sovereignty purely in an instrumental way, exploiting the formally independent country to create the appearance of mirroring their nuclear sharing program. In reality, however, the real scale of the NATO program and the announced deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus are incomparable.

All the statements being made are essentially demonstrative. Every action is stretched out into separate steps, each of which is covered in detail (the possibility itself, getting nuclear-capable weapons ready, the transfer of weapons, preparing storage facilities, etc.), thereby providing an opportunity to sustain tension over the long term.

The rhetoric around nuclear weapons is also an element of Russian deterrence to prevent or reduce the concentration of assistance to Ukraine. This is evidenced by the synchronization with NATO summits and periods of decision-making on the allocation of support.

The main driving force of the two regimes, in addition to ensuring survival, is revanchism and the desire to amend the outcomes of the Cold War. Potentially, one of the next pressure scenarios could be the deployment of Russian hypersonic missiles in Belarus. Vladimir Putin hinted at this, speaking about "reciprocal measures" following after the US decision to deploy long-range missiles in Germany in 2026, as well as hypersonic missiles.<sup>65</sup> There are currently no other countries aside from Belarus where Russia can deploy such weapons. This means that escalation and nuclear blackmail will continue with the active complicity of the Lukashenka regime.

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<sup>65</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74651>