

Belarus' KGB Gets New Powers

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A young woman applauding as police officers watch on during a silent opposition protest in Minsk this summer. **Sergei Grits**

MINSK — Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko is maneuvering to tighten his grip on the former Soviet nation with new legislation that boosts the already sweeping powers of the secret police, still known as the KGB.

As well as lifting restrictions on the KGB's use of weapons, the legislation gives officers the authority to break into residences and offices and makes it even easier for Lukashenko to put his political opponents behind bars.

A new ban on receiving foreign funds carries a two-year prison sentence, while simply calling for an anti-government protest can send someone to prison for three years. The government is also expanding the definition of treason in such a way as to cast possible suspicion on anyone working for a foreign organization.

Oleg Gulak, head of the Belarussian Helsinki Committee, a leading human rights watchdog, said the nation's law enforcement agencies are being given "the same rights that the Soviet secret police had in Stalin's times."

Rights activists and opposition politicians said Friday that the move reflected Lukashenko's fear of rising public anger over the nation's worst financial crisis since the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union. The Belarussian ruble has collapsed, and inflation is running at a staggering 60 percent.

The economic meltdown has shaken the power of Lukashenko, whose iron-fisted rule over more than 17 years has prompted the United States and European Union to impose economic and travel sanctions. A recent poll showed that Lukashenko's approval rating has plummeted to an all-time low of 20 percent.

"Lukashenko has run out of money, and he is now selling fear to an angry and hungry population," Belarus' first post-Soviet leader, Stanislav Shushkevich, said Friday.

The poll by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Research indicated that support for Lukashenko was falling among farmers, blue-collar workers and retirees — the social groups that have previously backed him most thanks to his efforts to preserve a Soviet-style social safety net and maintain relative economic stability.

"Lukashenko has had a social pact with society for the past 17 years that assumes he provides pay and the public stays away from politics," said Valery Karbalevich, an analyst with Strategia, an independent think tank. "Lukashenko now has no money to pay, and the pact is broken. The threat of economic collapse is now prompting Lukashenko to use an iron fist."

The past summer saw a wave of demonstrations against Lukashenko's regime by people who clapped their hands, stomped their feet or simply smiled. Initially caught by surprise, police quickly started rounding up demonstrators even though their actions did not violate any law because they chanted no anti-government slogans and carried no signs.

The set of legal amendments, passed at a closed session of parliament earlier this month and posted on a government web site Thursday, now give police formal justification for clamping down on those taking part in the protests despite the absence of any political demands. Gatherings for "active inaction" will now be banned.

The presidential administration said it would not comment on the new measures, which were submitted by Lukashenko. He still needs to sign them into law.

A separate legal amendment expands the definition of treason to include "assisting a foreign state, a foreign organization or its representative to the detriment of Belarus' national security," which is punishable by a prison sentence from seven to 15 years.

"They want to scare society, to demonstrate that this KGB monster can do whatever it wants," said Anatoly Lebedko, leader of the opposition United Civil Party. "Involvement in political activities is now effectively equal to a crime in Belarus."

Further turning up the heat on opposition groups, the new legislation makes it illegal for political parties and movements to receive any funds from abroad or keep their money in foreign banks. It introduces a two-year prison term for those violating the ban.

This may further hurt the case of Alex Belyatsky, the jailed leader of Vesna, the most prominent human rights group in Belarus. He was arrested in August after Polish and

Lithuanian prosecutors gave Belarussian police information about Vesna's bank accounts in their countries. He has been charged with tax evasion, a crime punishable by up to seven years in prison.

In office since 1994, Lukashenko has consistently suppressed opposition, cracked down on independent journalists and kept the country's broadcasters under tight state control.

He won another term in December in an election that sparked massive street protests against alleged vote fraud. The protests were violently dispersed by riot police, and seven of the nine candidates who ran against Lukashenko were arrested, along with some 700 others. Two of the arrested candidates remain in prison, serving sentences of five to six years.

With relations with the West at freezing point, Lukashenko has sought financial aid from Belarus' main ally and sponsor, Russia. But Moscow has used the situation to increase pressure on Belarus to sell its state-run industries, something Lukashenko has long refused to do.

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