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## The role of provocative-deceptive actions in neutralizing the Belarusian opposition

### Abstract

The author analyzes the actions of the Belarusian authorities in the situation of the social rebellion triggered by the rigged elections in 2020. He puts forward a hypothesis that a significant role in extinguishing the protest potential was played by agent deception games conducted by the Belarusian KGB, as well as parallel repressive actions and the regime's information offensive, which resulted in a synergy of propaganda and disinformation-agent activities.

### Keywords

protests in Belarus, pacification of protest moods, repressions, KGB, deception operations, agent games.

## KGB and Chekist methodology of deception games

Belarusian KGB (Russian Комитет государственной безопасности, bel. Камітэт дзяржаўнай бяспекі Рэспублікі Беларусь) is a service that cultivates the Chekist traditions<sup>1</sup>, preserving the methods and forms of activity of the Soviet predecessor (not even the name, which evokes negative connotations, has been changed). This was possible due to the stunted development of civil society as a result of Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian rule, so the methodology developed during the Bolshevik dictatorship could be used without major modifications.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. history of the service on the official KGB website, <http://kgb.by/ru/istoriya-sozdaniya-ru/> [accessed: 9 IX 2021].

An additional analytically important element is the re-Russification of this service caused by the coming to power in the mid-1990s of Lukashenko, who initiated a rapid re-sovietization of the administration, which manifested itself, among other things, in the rejection of national symbols in the form of the coat of arms (Pahonia) and the white-red-white flag. In the KGB, this led to officers with pro-nationalist attitudes leaving the service and officers from the Soviet KGB returning to their positions. They were often Russified people or ethnic Russians who did not emigrate to the Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR. There is a lack of information on the extent to which the KGB is actually subordinate to the Russian special services<sup>2</sup>. However, while in formal-legal terms the KGB remains a service of independent Belarus, given the level of real possibilities of influence over it by Russian services from an analytical point of view, it should be treated as a delegation of the Federal Security Service (FSB)<sup>3</sup>. This is due both to the officers' familial and collegial relationships and to the extremely likely high degree of agent infiltration of the Belarusian KGB<sup>4</sup>.

From the operational point of view, the preservation (or, more precisely, the regaining after 1995) of personnel and competence continuity by this service made it possible to use the methods and forms of operational work developed by the Soviet special services. This was also facilitated by the conservativeness of Belarusian society in the political and mental sphere (for this reason, the KGB's methods did not meet with fierce resistance from opposition parties, NGOs and the media) and the specific geopolitical situation of Belarus. This situation meant that the country's policy had to be a fragile balancing act due to the extreme asymmetry of economic and military potentials vis-à-vis the political actors surrounding Belarus<sup>5</sup>. One of the most effective methods of achieving domestic

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<sup>2</sup> It can be assumed that due to the weakness of the KGB intelligence division and the fact that the FSB has ceded operational control over the so-called „near abroad” to the FSB, it is this service that is the main partner (de facto curator) of the Belarusian KGB.

<sup>3</sup> Such an assessment is publicly expressed, among others, by Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs. Cf. *Lukashenka's last line of defense. The Belarusian security apparatus in a time of crisis*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2021-08-05/lukashenkas-last-line-defence-belarusian-security-apparatus-a> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; M. Budzisz, *Kryzys migracyjny czy nowoczesna wojna?*, „Sieci”, 13 IX 2021.

<sup>4</sup> An example that illustrates the extent to which the Russians have weaponized the near abroad services was the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), which played a key role in organizing *opolcheniya* (i.e. troops formed from local FSB agents and activists of pro-Russian organizations) in the Donbass, by gathering and handing over weapons to the insurgents and disinforming the Kiev headquarters about the real threat.

<sup>5</sup> From Belarus' point of view, the Baltic States or Poland are representatives of the so-called collective West.

and foreign policy goals in a situation of asymmetry of potentials, similar to the Belarusian one, were disinformation operational games developed and perfected by the Cheka (transformed into the GPU in 1922) in the 1920s.

### **Methodology of the “Trust”**

The symbol of the aforementioned methods and forms remains Operation Trust<sup>6</sup>, which the GPU carried out between 1921 and 1927, effectively disinforming the West, infiltrating Western intelligence, and disintegrating and compromising emigrant white organizational centers. In reality, however, the “Trust” was neither the first nor the most successful operation carried out by the Soviets<sup>7</sup>. Its importance in historiography comes from the scope of this operation<sup>8</sup> and the fact that the Soviets publicized it with propaganda, thanks to which fragmentary information about the operational methods used became known. In a nutshell, the “Trust’s” methodology consisted of establishing contact with enemy organizations (intelligence services, emigration centers, underground organizations) by carefully prepared agents who usually represented alleged underground opposition structures to Soviet power (underground organizations, illegal parties, conspiracies of Red Army officers or special services, etc.). The offeror’s initiation of contact was accompanied by a number of actions to lend credibility to the version it presented. Victims of the operation were constantly receiving information from numerous and seemingly unrelated sources, lending credence to the agent legend. The key to getting the attacked organization to accept the offeror was to place an agent in the organization in advance. Its task was to reduce the fear of provocation and to legitimize the envoys from the USSR, as well as to provide Moscow with information allowing it to modify those elements of the legend that interested

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<sup>6</sup> Detailed discussion of the history of this operation and the methodology used by GPU in: M. Świerczek, *Największa kłeska polskiego wywiadu*, Warszawa 2020; M. Świerczek, *Jak Sowietci przetrwali dzięki oszustwu. Sowiecka decepcja strategiczna*, Warszawa 2020.

<sup>7</sup> From a geopolitical perspective, the greatest operation accomplished by the Soviets was to cripple Hitler’s attempts to form a broad coalition of Western states to overthrow the Bolshevik regime so that the Washington order could be preserved and the world economic crisis could be recovered. Currently, there is only circumstantial evidence to suggest that such an operation was carried out, as the materials concerning it remain classified. Cf. M. Świerczek, *Krucjata 1935*, Warsaw 2021.

<sup>8</sup> The GPU managed to reach with its disinformation practically all the main actors of the political scene at the time.

the victims or aroused their distrust. When foreign organizations established cooperation with alleged underground structures in the USSR, disinformation at the operational, tactical, and strategic levels was transmitted through the channel thus created, and further agents were placed and candidates for recruitment and persons potentially dangerous to the operation and the USSR itself were identified. The termination of such operations served tactical purposes, e.g., in the form of luring particularly dangerous members of hostile organizations to the USSR, or strategic purposes - in the form of using the operations for wide-ranging propaganda and political activities, discrediting governments, special services, and emigration activists and at the same time (because of the distrust aroused) disintegrating these circles.

For the purpose of systematization of research, these agent-disinformation operations should be called deceptive operations to distinguish them from disinformation activities carried out mainly through the mass media (propaganda, fake news, PR, political provocations, etc.)

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviets carried out dozens of such operations. Only a small number of them are known, and knowledge about them is fragmentary<sup>9</sup>.

**Table.** Duration of selected deception operations performed in the 1920s and 1930s by the Soviet services.

Name of operation	Start of operation	End of operation
The Lockhart Conspiracy	1918	1918
Sindikat-1	1920	1923
Krot	1920	1923
Trust	1920	1927
Sindikat-2	1922	1924
D-7	1923	1927
Sindikat-4	1924	1930
Zamorskoye	1924	1933
Tarantella	1930	1934

Source: Own elaboration.

An approximation of the actual scale of such operations is the disclosed number of 250 radio games (i.e., deception operations carried out with the help of flipped agents or offerers suggested to the enemy using a non-personal

<sup>9</sup> Mainly through the memories of the participants and the propaganda enunciations of the Soviets.

communication channel) carried out by Smersh between 1943 and 1945<sup>10</sup>. In contrast, the duration of deception operations perfected through practice can be inferred from an operation carried out under KGB supervision by Cuban counterintelligence that deceived the CIA for 26 years<sup>11</sup>.

Summarizing the above, it should be stated that the Belarusian KGB has at its disposal Soviet *know-how* that allows it to implement multifaceted deception games enabling it to achieve political goals without risking open conflict in a situation of asymmetry of potentials of the disinformant and the victim of disinformation. In the face of mass protests after the 2020 elections, the weakness of the Lukashenko regime, and the existence of an organized opposition with the financial and political support of the collective West, the use of agent games as a way to gain control over the dynamics of social rebellion was a rational move.

### **Stages of operations to incapacitate the opposition**

It can be assumed that the first step of the KGB was to put the opposition circles under operational control in order to identify the main threats and develop methods of counteraction. During the quarter-century of Lukashenko's rule, the KGB, in fighting the opposition, had to expand its agent resources in all circles considered hostile or potentially dangerous to the regime. In Belarus, which lacks a strong free market, civil society, independent judiciary and media, inducing or forcing people to cooperate with special services in a situation of non-alternativeness should not, as historical examples confirm, be a serious problem<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, it can be assumed that in the electoral staffs of opposition

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<sup>10</sup> *Война в эфире*, in: *Великая Победа*, t. 10, С.Е. Нарышкин, А.В. Торкунов (ed.), Москва 2015, p. 177.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests*, Minneapolis 2005; J. Preston, T. Weiner, *A Document by Cuban Spy Talks of Acts Against CIA*, „The New York Times”, 8 X 2000; E. Volkman, *Największe operacje szpiegowskie XX wieku*, Warszawa 2000, p. 31–42.

<sup>12</sup> Research of the Institute of National Remembrance concerning the number of secret collaborators of the Security Service of the People's Republic of Poland confirms this dependence: people (with the exception of a few individuals) faced with the choice between losing their jobs and administrative and criminal problems or giving help to the secret police usually choose the latter option. Making such a decision is made easier by the ego's psychological defense mechanisms, which allow to hide the true motives for one's actions from oneself. A good example is the memoirs of Lesław Maleszka, pseud. „Ketman”, who - having already exposed his past - wrote, among other things: „Sometimes the absurd thought occurred to me that maybe what I was doing wasn't so bad. Maybe the authorities should know that

candidates there could (even had to) function numerous KGB agents, who informed about campaign plans, made it possible to install devices for operational control and provided KGB members with contacts to telephones and Telegram channels used by politicians and activists. This can be proven by the recording made available by the Belarusian secret service of a meeting between Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and her closest associates four days before the election (5 August 2020), during which plans for the violent seizure of administration buildings by demonstrators after the announcement of the results were discussed<sup>13</sup>. Evidence is also provided by Igor Tur's propaganda programs, during which intercepted phone calls and chats of opposition activists are regularly presented, including those made during the pre-election preparations, which are supposed to confirm the theses promoted by the regime<sup>14</sup>.

Operational reconnaissance was accompanied by punitive and administrative actions aimed at weakening the opposition. On May 15, 2020, Sergei Tikhanovsky was denied registration of candidacy, and on May 29, 2020, the militia arrested him. The circumstances of the arrest indicate provocation<sup>15</sup>. On July 14, 2020, the Central Election Commission refused to register the candidacies of Viktor Babarika and Valery Tsepkala. On July 18, Babariko

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on the other side of the barricade there are also patriots, reasonable and calculating people who care about the gradual political evolution in this country. Once, without any top-down suggestions (as a rule, the Security Service talked to me first, and then told me what to include in my notes), I wrote a text in which I explained that the opposition could not be treated as a conspiracy of a handful of people, because a broad social movement was forming in Poland, which was leading to a fundamental evolution of civic attitudes - also among people who were far from the opposition circles". See L. Maleszka, *Byłem „Ketmanem”*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, November 13, 2001. Regime journalist Andrei Krivoshev during the *Попытка госпереворота в Беларуси* program. *Операция «Тишина». Работа спецслужб. Понятная политика ПЛЮС* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tu7lBn9fnfY> [accessed: 14 IX 2021]) claimed that a minimum of one third of the oppositionists collaborate with the KGB.

<sup>13</sup> *Встреча Светланы Тихановской с доверенными лицами*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x01MTapIMLg> [accessed: 8 IX 2021].

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Aleskandr Feduta's statement about Olga Karach, which indicates that Karach notoriously lies and steals money received for opposition activities. *Зоб. Федута, Зенкович и другие о Тихановской, Карач, Латушко, новых беглых. Игорь Тур – «Будет дополнено»*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oITv7ytnFU> [accessed: 10 VIII 2021].

<sup>15</sup> *Светлана Тихановская о задержании мужа на пикете в Гродно: «Пикет носил законный и мирный характер. Имеет место провокация». Возможная кандидатка в президенты заступилась за главу своей инициативной группы*, <https://www.kp.by/online/news/3891128/> [accessed: 12 IX 2021]. Video recording of the arrest confirming that it was the result of provocation: *Задержание Тихановского в Гродно*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFITZFAif-8> [accessed: 11 IX 2021].

was arrested on charges of bank embezzlement<sup>16</sup>, and compromising footage surfaced online of Cepkala showing a man similar to him having sex with two prostitutes<sup>17</sup>. On July 16 the electoral staffs of Cepkala and Babarika united with the staff of Tikhonovskaya, whose candidacy was put forward after the Central Election Commission refused to register her husband's candidacy. This initiated the election tour of Svetlana, Tepkala's wife Valeria and Maria Kolesnikova who heads Babarika's staff around Belarus. These meetings have attracted crowds of supporters.

Belarusian political scientists assume that the authorities allowed Tikhonovskaya to participate in the election because they were convinced that patriarchal and rural Belarusian society would not accept a woman as president. This was said publicly by Lukashenko himself<sup>18</sup>. However, this explanation contradicts several facts. First, despite the alleged disregard for Tikhonovskaya, the authorities prepared in advance to rig the election, leading to riots on the night after the election. Second, military and militia reinforcements with heavy equipment were drawn to major cities for Election Day to quell unrest<sup>19</sup>, expecting massive post-election protests. Third, on August 5, the KGB recorded the aforementioned meeting between Tikhonovskaya and her associates, during which the plan for the forcible seizure of power was openly discussed. Despite obtaining evidence that she had committed a serious crime, she was not arrested before the election. Then, in the course of mass protests, she was forced to leave Belarus, although it was known that this would be used by the opposition, which, in the face of electoral fraud, would declare Tikhonovskaya president-elect and Lukashenko a usurper. This in turn could have been used by the West to put political pressure on the regime. The author will return to this issue later in the article.

Immediately after the election, the authorities began to suppress protests in a violent manner. As noted above, contrary to the regime's propaganda assertions, footage shows that significant police and OMON forces were on standby on the day the results were announced to prevent an escalation of the unrest. Interestingly, however, the preparation of the coercive apparatus

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<sup>16</sup> Allegedly based on material received as part of legal aid from Cyprus related to an investigation ongoing since 2016.

<sup>17</sup> *Схемы Бабарико и девушки Цепкало. Компромат*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4rGxWGyBo> [accessed: 5 VII 2021].

<sup>18</sup> *Александр Лукашенко: В Беларуси Конституция не под женщину. Я убежден Президентом будет мужик*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR6BwAB2wL8> [accessed: 10 IX 2021].

<sup>19</sup> *Сф. 6 дней протестов за 6 минут. Как развивались события в Белоруссии*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHoaOIW7RGU> [accessed: 19 IX 2021].

that anticipated the street protests did not harmonize with the apparent nervousness of Lukashenko himself. He behaved in a surprising way - he shouted to the street OMON forces that they were pretty boys<sup>20</sup>, flew over Minsk in a helicopter to watch the crowds of protesters, and even appeared in public in a bulletproof vest with a Kalashnikov without a magazine, but accompanied by his 15-year-old son Kola dressed as a movie commando<sup>21</sup>. Lukashenka's unserious behavior, indicative of his emotional turmoil, cannot be explained by a real threat, because despite the crowds in the streets, nowhere has there been a seizure of administrative buildings, arms depots or police headquarters, which could indicate that the revolution is entering a hot phase of confrontation with the authorities. This is all the more significant because - contrary to the propaganda claims of the opposition about the exclusively peaceful nature of the protests<sup>22</sup> - there is ample footage showing fierce fights between the omonovists and the demonstrators in the first days of the protest, during which the protesters used stones, sticks, pepper gas, blinded the militiamen with lasers, threw firecrackers and bottles at them<sup>23</sup>.

Given the aggressive potential of the crowds, with such a large number of demonstrators (between 100,000 and 230,000 people gathered in Minsk on August 23, 2020<sup>24</sup>) the scenario of a forcible seizure of power was real. And yet, despite the intense street fighting with the militia in the early stages of the protests, no concrete actions were taken in any of the Belarusian cities by the opposition, which was, after all, planning to occupy government buildings (as discussed during the already cited meeting of Tikhanovskaya's staff on August 5, 2020). There was also no attempt to gain access to weapons anywhere, no storming of the Palace of Independence (in 2010, with incomparably fewer protesters,

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<sup>20</sup> Лукашенко: Вы красавцы! Мы с ними разберёмся! Рабочий день Президента, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ZPYb3pbYHA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZPYb3pbYHA) [accessed: 7 IX 2021].

<sup>21</sup> Лукашенко с автоматом и его сына в бронежилете сделали мемом, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zkrjp4aBE4> [accessed: 7 IX 2021].

<sup>22</sup> „In Belarus, the demonstration stops at a red light on the roadway - it only takes up half of it. Pictures of the protests show people getting on the benches, but taking off their shoes beforehand. After the demonstration is over, Belarusians collect garbage.” See *Z przerwą na czerwone światło, czyli jak protestują Białorusini*, <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2020-08-16/z-przerwa-na-czerwone-swiatlo-czyli-jak-protestuja-bialorusini/> [accessed: 11 IX 2021].

<sup>23</sup> See the propaganda film of the Belarusian television which, however, contains police footage of the events: *О протестах в Беларуси, неудавшейся революции, силовиках и радикалах. Противостояние. Фильм АТН*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfqQZ9PR7Cg> [accessed: 15 VIII 2021].

<sup>24</sup> *Dziesiątki tysięcy ludzi na proteście w centrum Mińska*, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Bialorus-Wielki-protest-w-centrum-Minska-7948615.html> [accessed: 11 IX 2021].

the Government House was attacked). The maximum emotional mobilization of the huge number of protesters, which according to crowd psychology should easily turn into collective aggression, has nowhere led to behavior that could create a serious threat to power<sup>25</sup>. One can venture the hypothesis that the opposition - originally planning a forceful scenario - even blocked the spontaneous actions of the crowd. And when they did occur (as in the first days after the elections), instead of directing the energy of the masses towards goals that were a real threat to the regime (for example, as in 2010, the occupation of government buildings), it was channeled and discharged in fruitless street brawls that later only served the government's propaganda to justify its own violence<sup>26</sup>.

After suppressing the street demonstrations, the authorities proceeded to punitive and administrative repression. At the same time, they facilitated (or even forced) the escape of oppositionists from the country, who were criminals under Belarusian law. It was therefore necessary to arrest and convict them, while at the same time making public the operational materials obtained confirming the violation of the law. This was accompanied by an information offensive, which this time was carried out not by the nepotism-contaminated and mentally primitive pre-election regime propaganda, but in a professional manner by young, extremely persuasive propagandists. Their style of being, language and moderation of the message appealed to the Belarusian youth and young intelligentsia. In doing so, programs and facilitators were tailored to specific target groups. Grigorij Azarionok (program "Паноптикум", Eng. "Panopticon") in a Goebbels-esque style comparing the oppositionists to rats and warning Tikhanovskaya that her alleged lover Franak Wiczeorek is a syphilitic who exploits her<sup>27</sup>, is a way to reach the uneducated social strata ready to accept the emotional message of insults and insinuations reinforced with images of insects and rodents and a musical background that arouses anxiety. Igor Tur (programs "Будет дополнено", Eng. "It will be added", "Антифейк", Eng. "Antifake") - stylized as a model student with a metrosexual appearance - is supposed to appeal to high school students and young adults, appealing to youthful cynicism and the belief that the oppositionists are a group that dreams only of power and money (his programs constantly feature

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<sup>25</sup> For comparison: in 2014, Lugansk was overrun by pro-Russian militias, despite the fact that - even after annexing the headquarters of the SBU and the region's administration - the rebels originally had a maximum of 500 people ready to take their places at the so-called block-posts (i.e. improvised checkpoints for entry into the territory).

<sup>26</sup> This issue will be discussed by the author in a separate article.

<sup>27</sup> *Любовник Тихановской. Кто такой Франак Вечорка? «Паноптикум» Григория Азарёнка*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twP2VXu-P5Q> [accessed: 11 IX 2021].

sentences like: they all steal, it's just a fight for money<sup>28</sup>). Siergiej Gusaczenko (program “Понятная политика”, Eng. “Understandable Politics”) - stylized as a Europeanized, cultured intellectual - is in turn meant to appeal to young, college-educated people, who are left to draw their own conclusions based on the supposedly reliable information conveyed in the program. In doing so, the propaganda messages take into account the cognitive abilities of the younger generation: they are short (to match the limited ability to concentrate), contain unambiguous assessments and (supposedly) indisputable information. The narrative is dynamic, punctuated by photos, short clips, sometimes animations and diagrams, highlighted by expressive music. These programs are then put online, where they are constantly positioned to appear first on YouTube. In a surprising way, the regime's propaganda was able to tailor its message to specific audiences and effectively infiltrate the information space in traditional media and on the Internet, rejecting the coarse Soviet-partisan narrative from before the election<sup>29</sup>.

The final element, combining information warfare with the pursuit of political objectives, was the provocateur-deception operations conducted between fall 2020 and spring 2021.

### **Operational games used in media and political offensive**

There is a lack of verified information on the actual conduct of such operations; they are known only from government propaganda media. However, based on the study of the methodology developed by the Soviet services, the model of operation used and the objectives of these operations at the operational-tactical and strategic levels can be approximated, even with the knowledge of the manipulative nature of these messages.

In the following part of the article, the main operations of the Belarusian KGB will be discussed, which were used to neutralize the most active oppositionists and to discredit and divide the opposition circles in order to deprive them of Western support and support among the Belarusian society. Since the only available sources of information at this stage remain Belarusian

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. a miniseries of Tur programs under the collective title: „Ложь беглых”, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2gT1TZoYvk&list=PLuGCnujoOtrdgC0O4ZS\\_Q\\_izmKYfCaUJ\\_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2gT1TZoYvk&list=PLuGCnujoOtrdgC0O4ZS_Q_izmKYfCaUJ_) [accessed: 18 IX 2021], during which, in classic Soviet fashion, Tur cites independent sources from within the opposition and discredits oppositionists as crooks and thieves.

<sup>29</sup> It can be presumed that this is due to professional support from Russian propagandists.

government channels and media information (certainly manipulated), previous deception operations of this type have been taken into account to be able to isolate the main elements of the KGB's *modus operandi*, along with its continuation in the form of an information and political offensive using operationally acquired data.

## Operation “Tishina”

According to official information<sup>30</sup>, the operation was initiated in August 2020, when it seems that the KGB realized that the structure of the opposition group, consisting of both old and new opposition of different political provenience, was beginning to crystallize. At this stage, we do not know whether there was already a formalized hierarchy and division of tasks, or whether (as the opposition now maintains) it was an informal opposition circle forming something like a think tank to work out the best tactics to fight the Lukashenka regime. Judging by the KGB's operational materials presented by the Belarusian media, this could be a phenomenon known, for example, in the field of combating extremist movements, i.e. a closed forum grouping people with similar views, which becomes an amplifier (the so-called echo chamber<sup>31</sup>) of radical attitudes. This often leads to full radicalization of the participants of such a body, who move from online declarations to real actions.

Whatever the nature of the forum actually targeted by the KGB, the scarce data provided by the government media suggest that there were at least two

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<sup>30</sup> Based on sources: *Убить Лукашенко. Как готовили захват Беларуси? Вербовка военных, подкуп и ликвидация. Фильм 1*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v52t1DINYA> [accessed: 17 IX 2021]; *Убить Лукашенко. Расследование ОНТ – как готовили покушение на Президента и его сына. Фильм 2*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMGdUU8-vsI> [accessed: 17 IX 2021] - despite the evidently propagandistic nature of this film, it contains a lot of KGB operational and investigative material, allowing to roughly reconstruct the course of events and the ways of action of the KGB itself; *Провал операции «Тишина». О чем спорят в Конституционной комиссии. История как поле боя*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7m-MU1ZDKDs> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; *Операция «Тишина». Кто и как готовил переворот в Белоруссии и убийство Лукашенко*, <https://ukraina.ru/exclusive/20210419/1031166109.html> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; *Кодовое название «Тишина» - подробности покушения на Лукашенко и попытки вооруженного мятежа в Беларуси*, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/kodovoe-nazvanie-tishina-podrobnosti-pokusheniya-na-lukashenko-i-popytki-vooruzhennogo-mjatezha-v-437699-2021/> [accessed: 20 IX 2021].

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Radicalisation in the digital era. The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism*, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND\\_RR453.sum.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.sum.pdf) [accessed: 10 IX 2021].

relatively organized subgroups within it at the time the KGB terminated the operation, one of which could be described as political-conceptual and the other as forceful. None of the propaganda enunciations indicated that there was a formal leader to whom these subgroups would report. Thus, one can assume that the KGB managed to carry out a provocation and anticipate the moment when the informal forum (something like a quasi-confederation of opposition activists) could transform into an efficient organization, linking opposition politicians with former representatives of the force sector, the so-called siloviki.

This group was to include:

- Yuri Zienkovich<sup>32</sup> - supposed representative of the Belarusian Democracy Institute (BDI) and the illegal opposition organization called *Кибепартизаны* (KP, Eng. Cyber Partisans). Together with him, the KP was to be represented in this body by Pavel Kulazhenko, a former Omonov activist of the Internet platform opposition organization “Супраціў” (Eng. Resistance), which like other such organizations<sup>33</sup> declares readiness to actively fight the regime by force. In exile, Zienkovich supports himself by fighting in MMA under the alias “Viking”<sup>34</sup>.
- Aleskandr Feduta - literary scholar<sup>35</sup> and politician, who started his career as an associate of Lukashenko, but in 1995 moved to opposition positions.
- Grigory (Ryhor) Kostusiov<sup>36</sup> and political scientist Vitaly Makarienko, who resides in Lithuania, are activists of the Belarusian National Front (Беларускі Народны Фронт).
- Dmitry Shchigelskiy - a psychiatrist in exile in the US who became famous for giving Lukashenko a psychiatric diagnosis without examining the patient<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> He was to be assisted by his employee Olga Galubovich.

<sup>33</sup> *Буслы летят* (Eng. The storks are flying), *Дружины народной самообороны* (Eng. People's Self-Defense Units).

<sup>34</sup> *Бывший омоновец Павел Кулаженко претендует стать радикальным политическим лидером. Что о нем известно?*, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=273867&lang=ru> [accessed: 16 IX 2021].

<sup>35</sup> He received his PhD from Jagiellonian University in 2017. See *Александр Федута получил докторскую ступень в Ягеллонском университете*, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=193396&lang=ru> [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

<sup>36</sup> Presidential candidate in 2010, leader of the Belarusian National Front since 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. interview with Shchigelskiy: *Мозаичная психопатия. Александр Лукашенко глазами психиатра*, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30789452.html> [accessed: 15 IX 2021].

- Aleksandr Perepeczko - opposition political scientist, living in the USA since 1992.
- Igor Makar - a former officer of the special branch “Almaz” of the Belarusian Interior Ministry; lives in Lithuania, from where he is active as a political blogger<sup>38</sup>. It is interesting to note that he kept the other opposition activists convinced that he was in ongoing contact with FSB director Aleksandr Bortnikov<sup>39</sup> (sic!).

According to the regime’s reports, in addition to the above-mentioned political forum (to which should be added Olga Karach<sup>40</sup> acting indirectly and Tikhonovskaya herself, allegedly represented by Roman Protasiewicz<sup>41</sup>) there were to be two “force” subgroups. One was headed by Vyacheslav Sidorakin<sup>42</sup> (a former officer of “Almaz”, a specialist in explosives), and it was to include, among others: Yuri Gorkacz and Sergei Starchenko, the other - Nikolai Avtuhovich<sup>43</sup>, and it was to be formed, among others, by: Dmitry Poloyko, Pavel Sawa, Galina Dierbysh, Victor Sniegur, Adam Akulich<sup>44</sup>.

Some of the participants in this forum were abroad, which meant that conversations and arrangements took place over the Internet, in the form of closed chats. The information presented by the government media shows conclusively that the KGB gained operational access to these online meetings.

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<sup>38</sup> Makar’s YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCO\\_3WZbwnTo9zUvKkQ6t6UQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCO_3WZbwnTo9zUvKkQ6t6UQ).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Ольга Карач: про Игоря Макара, слив в КГБ, арест Федуты, связь с ФСБ, агентов Кремля и День X*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGZTopxLM98> [accessed: 7 IX 2021].

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> *Протасевич о Nexta, Лукашенко, кураторах из спецслужб, протестах и Тихановской, Ryanair*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-PmITXlkGU> [accessed: 2 IX 2021].

<sup>42</sup> He was arrested in February 2021. See *Ветеран спецподразделения «Алмаз» Вячеслав Сидоракин пропал в начале февраля*, <https://naviny.online/new/20210330/1617127222-veteran-sпецpodrazdeleniya-almaz-vyacheslav-sidorakin-propal-v-nachale> [accessed: 17 IX 2021]. After his detention, Makar’s accusations that he - being a KGB agent - „handed over” Sidorakin appeared among the opposition. Cf. *Ольга Карач: про Игоря Макара...*

<sup>43</sup> Avtuhovich is a Belarusian dissident who entered politics through conflict with a corrupt system. He too, like Sidorakin, was arrested by the KGB as early as December 2020. Cf. *Кто такой Николай Автухович, которого задержали за «терроризм»? Его биографии хватило бы на десятерых — война, бизнес, политика, голодовки, тюрьма*, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=264999&lang=ru> [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

<sup>44</sup> However, it cannot be ruled out that the Belarusian propaganda linked Avtuhovich’s and Sidorakin’s cases to the coup attempt in order to further discredit the suspects by showing their links to active terrorist activities.

According to the well-studied psychodynamics of extremist forums, the group quickly became dominated by the most radical participants who, against the initial resistance of the moderate faction, pushed through the thesis that regime change was not possible through constitutional means, namely elections. According to Feduta, the *spiritus movens* of the radicalization process was supposed to be Shchigelskiy, who used Zienkovich, who was in direct contact with the U.S. secret services, as well as with Nicholas Heltzel, the U.S. consul in RB<sup>45</sup>, and Michael Carpenter, an advisor to President Joe Biden<sup>46</sup>. It can be presumed that from August 2020 to the beginning of 2021 there was a process (probably initiated by KGB agents) of self-radicalization of the said forum, which resulted in the adoption of a decision to carry out an attempted violent coup in Belarus. Apart from the propaganda enunciations of the Belarusian authorities, there is no information on the detailed plans for the putsch, but - in light of the documented KGB operational materials - it seems that the idea of assassinating Lukashenko was indeed considered<sup>47</sup>, kidnapping key figures of the regime (including Lukashenko's sons) in order to obtain information and paralyze the activities of the state administration, and seizing the main administration buildings, communication hubs and information transmission centers, blocking internal units and OMON, as well as internment of dozens of people linked to the regime. A list of institutions to be seized first and a proscription list of persons to be interned were presented at an online meeting on January 21, 2021, which was recorded by the KGB.

The weapons necessary for the attack were to be obtained in Ukraine, thanks to Avtuhovich's contacts there, including a representative of the Right Sector Semyon Semyenchenko<sup>48</sup> and a representative of the "Belarusian Maidan" foundation (Rus. Белорусский Майдан) Yelena Visilyeva<sup>49</sup>. The coup was to be

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<sup>45</sup> <https://by.usembassy.gov/embassy/minsk/key-officers/> [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

<sup>46</sup> In fact, Carpenter is the U.S. ambassador to the OSCE. See *President Biden Announces 17 Key Nominations*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/23/president-biden-announces-17-key-nominations/> [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

<sup>47</sup> The statements of the detainees and government officials differ in detail. As it seems, the planning stage considered both the idea of knocking down the presidential plane with a rocket during its landing approach and an assassination attempt during a military parade, and a rally of dozens of jeeps with heavy machine guns to attack Lukashenko's summer residence.

<sup>48</sup> Founder and commander of the battalion „Donbas”, deputy to the Supreme Council of the Ukraine of the 8th term. Interestingly, he is an ethnic Russian. See *Командир батальона «Донбасс»: Сейчас сепаратисты возьмут столько, сколько мы им дадим взять*, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2014/05/30/7027556/> [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Основатель «Беларуского Майдана» Алёна Васильева: белорусская оппозиция транслирует русские смыслы*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOVB5a2AU4k> [accessed: 18 IX 2021].

financed on the one hand by the Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Ahmetov (through Makar), and on the other hand by the Americans (Zienkovich declared the support of the US State Department and the American Jewish Committee<sup>50</sup>).

There is a lack of information about the moment of inclusion in the game conducted by the KGB of its members acting from the outside as alleged conspirators from the army (the television broadcast mentions only the alias of the agent - "Ivan", but in the video of the arrest you can see several alleged officers). One can presume that from the very onset the agents inside the forum used contact with a "conspiracy organization comprising high-ranking army officers" as an argument for opting for the force option. This is because the talks involved politically and intellectually mature people (Feduta, Kostusiov, Perepechko) who would not have agreed to the risky ideas of the radical wing without being convinced that there was a real chance of their realization. Cooperation with the officers' conspiracy (which was to include even a general) was a guarantee that even the most daring ideas of a putsch could be realized. Especially since both Feduta and the other moderate members must have been convinced that the army "conspirators" were acting in concert with the Russian government. For no one in the Belarusian power sector would choose to take any extra-legal action against Lukashenko without being convinced that it would not result in an immediate invasion by the Russian army. Official reports lack information about this thread, but it is obvious given the geopolitical situation of Belarus and the family-friendly relationship between the officer corps of the two countries<sup>51</sup>. In favor of this supposition is the fact that the meeting between the military "conspirators" and Feduta and Zienkovich, which took place in Moscow on April 11, 2021, took place in the restaurant "Taras Bulba". Although the details of treason in the form of a coup were discussed, the participants did not choose a location and circumstances that would make audio and video recording difficult (private dwelling, hunting, use of jamming devices, etc.), but a commonly accessible restaurant. And this in a situation when in almost every country of the former Eastern Bloc there were media coverage of scandals related

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<sup>50</sup> The American Jewish Committee (AJC) states its mission on its website as follows: The AJC „is the leading global Jewish advocacy organization. From city halls to Capitol Hill, at the UN and in world capitals, AJC works to impact policy and opinion on some of the most important issues facing the Jewish people: fighting antisemitism and all forms of hate, strengthening Israel's place in the world, and defending democratic values”, <https://www.ajc.org/whoweare> [accessed: 18 IX 2021]. Zienkovich, in turn, maintained that the AJC brings together the wealthiest and most influential Jewish families in the US, allegedly interested in investing in the Belarusian economy.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *A friend in need. Russia on the protests in Belarus*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2020-08-20/a-friend-need-russia-protests-belarus> [accessed: 19 IX 2021].

to the recording of politicians<sup>52</sup>, which was often linked in the Eastern press to the activities of Russian intelligence. This may mean that Feduta and Zienkovich believed that the Russian special services were forewarned about the meeting and accepted it. Only the belief that contacts with the “military” take place under the auspices of the FSB would explain the lack of elementary conspiracy in such an experienced political player as Feduta. Incidentally, this was an obvious assumption of the talks with the Belarusian army. Belarusian elites are convinced that for geopolitical reasons Russia will not allow Belarus to leave its sphere of influence. The strategic importance of the Smolensk Gate<sup>53</sup> means that the loss of Belarus would mean a serious weakening of Russia’s western flank and a potential threat to Moscow. The Russians have unequivocally warned Belarusians against such a scenario, e.g. by holding the 2020 “Slavic brotherhood” military exercises<sup>54</sup>, aimed at making Belarusian elites aware of what would happen to Belarus if it were a hostile or even merely neutral state in the event of a conflict<sup>55</sup>. For this reason, despite pro-Western sentiments, no symbols of the European Union appeared anywhere during the protests held in the summer and autumn of 2020, and the Belarusian opposition was wary of making slogans that could be interpreted by Russia as a threat to the geopolitical *status quo*.

It seems that the game of officer conspiracy must have been played between August 2020 and April 2021, with the “conspirators” probably presenting a classic trick for Soviet operations in the form of a dispute between a faction of activists and rationalists warning against a putsch. This would explain Galubovich, who was Zienkovich’s assistant, giving them funds to bribe resistant people<sup>56</sup>.

During the above-mentioned meeting in Moscow, the FSB (allegedly acting at the request of the KGB<sup>57</sup>) recorded the specific demands of the opposition activists who demanded that the army “conspirators” seize symbolic buildings

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<sup>52</sup> The tape scandal in Poland, as well as similar incidents in, among others: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Macedonia and Lithuania.

<sup>53</sup> A geostrategic term used to describe the isthmus between the upper Dvina and upper Dnieper rivers through which passes the shortest and easiest (for large masses of troops) route leading from western and central Europe to central Russia.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *Во время учения «Славянское братство - 2020» отрабатывается защита границ Союзного государства*, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/vo-vremja-uchenija-slavjanskoe-bratstvo-2020-otrabatyvaetsja-zaschita-granits-sojuznogo-gosudarstva-407881-2020/> [accessed: 2 XI 2021].

<sup>55</sup> R. Szoszyn, *Rosja demonstruje, że nigdy nie odda Białorusi*, „Rzeczpospolita”, 13 IX 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Dollars in waterproof packets were transferred using a dead box at the gravesite in the cemetery.

<sup>57</sup> As Belarusian propaganda maintained, the KGB was said to have requested FSB assistance 12 hours before the conspirators met, allegedly to prevent them from being forewarned.

in the center of Minsk, as well as communication nodes and headquarters of the mass media (especially television, through which it was planned to address the nation), blockade OMON troops and internal troops and prevent the transfer of military reinforcements to the capital, as well as the internment of persons from the prepared proscription lists. Civilian conspirators offered military assistance in the form of shutting down the power system of Belarus. Officers in turn declared that they were able to use five army battalions for this operation<sup>58</sup>.

After the putsch, a “collective president” consisting of seven army representatives and opposition activists was to take power. Zienkovich demanded for himself the post of Minister of Justice (who was to carry out judicial reform and a constitutional referendum), while Feduta wanted to be Minister of Culture, responsible for education, the press and ideology.

Having in hand a recording indisputably documenting treason, the FSB (allegedly at the request of the KGB) operationally detained Feduta and Zienkovich. During the arrest, Zienkovich behaved like an unbalanced person, threatening FSB representatives with the US State Department.

Opposition activists detained in Russia and Belarus admitted their guilt on camera<sup>59</sup>, holding each other responsible (although Shchigelskiy was most often named as the initiator of the putsch idea<sup>60</sup>). On April 28, 2021 (just 17 days after the end of the operation), state television released a propaganda video entitled *Убить Лукашенко*<sup>61</sup> (Eng. *Kill Lukashenko*), which describes the course of Operation Tishina. It showed KGB operational material (intercepted chats of conspirators, operational recordings of meetings with alleged military officers) and material from the investigation in the form of recordings of confessions of oppositionists. This was accompanied by insinuations by the regime and

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<sup>58</sup> Thus, it can be assumed that the putsch was to take place with the participation of less than 5,000 soldiers, who were to block the Minsk militia and OMON, as well as internal troops. This would only be possible under the assumption that the „army conspirators” convinced the oppositionists of Russian support. Five battalions in a city of two million people would have had to be concentrated in a tight government center, making them unable to control the actions of thousands of militia-military units in the capital and in the provinces, and a possible Russian special forces landing would have ended the coup within hours.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *Федута: Я действительно даю показания, меня не пытаются*, <https://belmarket.by/news/2021/05/18/news-45693.html> [accessed: 16 IX 2021].

<sup>60</sup> He was accused on camera by Feduta and Zienkovicz.

<sup>61</sup> *Убить Лукашенко. Как готовили захват Беларуси? Вербовка военных, подкуп и ликвидация. Фильм 1б*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v52t1DINYA>; *Убить Лукашенко. Расследование ОНТ – как готовили покушение на Президента и его сына. Фильм 2*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMGdUU8-vsI> [accessed: 14 IX 2021].

the Russian media that the West, including the Republic of Poland, was behind the coup attempt<sup>62</sup>. In the action of accusing Poland of subversive activity, in accordance with the methodology developed as early as in the 1920s, the Belarusian propaganda uses the statements of Polish “experts”, mainly Mateusz Piskorski<sup>63</sup> and “Sputnik” columnist Tomasz Jankowski<sup>64</sup>, which are then incorporated into aggressive and insinuation-laden films of a propagandistic, anti-Polish character<sup>65</sup>.

Operation Tishina (or at least the publicized part of it) is over.

## Operation “Mankurty”

The operation was initiated by the KGB more or less at the same time as operation “Tishina”, i.e. in the late summer/early autumn of 2020.<sup>66</sup> In the version promoted by the regime’s propaganda, it was supposed to be a reaction to information indicating that a traitor had been found in the KGB ranks, who was offering

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. *Операция «Тишина»: молчание Запада / Где берут деньги на переворот? Клуб редакторов*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVjDhWcJuK4> [accessed: 2 IX 2021]; *Операция «Тишина» на Соловьев Live. Подробности госпереворота в Белоруссии*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqXujBNaLuA> [accessed: 2 IX 2021].

<sup>63</sup> Polish politician detained in 2016 by the Internal Security Agency on charges of spying for the Russian Federation and China, released from detention in 2019.

<sup>64</sup> [https://pl.sputniknews.com/author\\_tomasz/](https://pl.sputniknews.com/author_tomasz/) [accessed: 18 IX 2021].

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *Польша против Беларуси: двойные стандарты, репрессии, спецслужбы, экстремисты*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2OF8NCpAF8> [accessed: 21 IX 2021]; *Кто спонсировал мятеж в Беларуси? Польская партия «ПиС»: коррупция и зачистка СМИ. Понятная политика*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sndc-72o3JU> [accessed: 21 IX 2021].

<sup>66</sup> Based on sources: «Манкурты»: секретная операция КГБ. Как беглые и иностранные спецслужбы вели двойную игру. Фильм 1, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z0AQSqd4s0> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; «Манкурты». Подполковник КГБ оказался предателем и работал на иностранную разведку. Фильм 2, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BGHgrcQSK4> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; «Манкурты. Постскриптум». Кого ещё втянули в громкий шпионский скандал? Спецоперация КГБ, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5bEuEjbfqk> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; «Операция Манкурты» деморализовала стан беглых предателей и их зарубежных кураторов, [https://www.tvr.by/news/obshchestvo/rassledovanie\\_operatsiya\\_mankurty\\_demoralizovalo\\_stan\\_beglykh\\_predateley\\_i\\_ikh\\_zarubezhnykh\\_kuratoro/](https://www.tvr.by/news/obshchestvo/rassledovanie_operatsiya_mankurty_demoralizovalo_stan_beglykh_predateley_i_ikh_zarubezhnykh_kuratoro/) [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; В Минске заявили о раскрытии агентурной сети по сбору информации для иностранных спецслужб, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/11043737> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; КГБ Белоруссии вынул фильм о своём предателе, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3230850.html> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; Шрайбман: «Не все так гладко в датском королевстве», <https://ex-press.live/rubrics/obshhestvo/2021/04/01/shrajbman-ne-vse-tak-gladko-v-datskom-korolevstve/> [accessed: 20 IX 2021].

the emigration centers classified KGB materials allegedly compromising Lukashenko's regime in exchange for financial compensation and assistance in fleeing the country. The traitor was said to be Colonel Alexei Hralovich<sup>67</sup>, whom the KGB was to quickly identify, arrest and get him to cooperate in deceiving the emigrants and the Western secret services behind them. This version can, it seems, be ruled out. It is discredited<sup>68</sup> both by emigration sources<sup>69</sup> and by Hralovich's behavior during the operation<sup>70</sup>. Hralovich was most likely a classic offerer, offering interesting information to the enemy on behalf of his own service. This is indicated by his behavior during the operation and its entire course, which has all the features of Soviet *staging* (a game for the needs of foreign services conducted by agents and cadres of their own service).

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. *Задержан подполковник КГБ, который передавал информацию телеграм-каналамю*, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=270738&lang=ru> [accessed: 18 IX 2021].

<sup>68</sup> Confirmation of the veracity of Hralovich's betrayal was to be shown in the propaganda film „Mankurty”, a weeping KGB captain Denis Urata, who in March 2021 was compromised after photographing a secret letter to hand it over to the NEXTA editorial board. Thus, the authors of the film, in an attempt to authenticate the version of Hralovich's betrayal, paradoxically discredited it by proving that the Belarusian procedures for the safe circulation of documents allow for easy identification of the author of the leak. Hralovich was alleged to have offered classified KGB recordings of the most important people in the country - the rhetorical question is how many people in the service could have been allowed to have such knowledge. And a small circle of trusted people must have been aware that making the recordings public (as happened in the case of the conversation between Dmitry Baskov and Natalia Ejsmont) would immediately narrow the circle of suspects to the maximum. It is difficult to suppose that the KGB colonel was unaware of this and was so irresponsible as to give Makar a photo of his ID card. Especially since the recordings made by the KGB show that Hralovich was a smart and experienced officer.

<sup>69</sup> Makar maintains that Hralovich is a Belarusian counterintelligence agent who never worked for the KGB, except for a brief period when he was shown to officers who were uncertain, that is, who could confirm to Makar that Hralovich was indeed in the service. His official documents, including his electronic entry pass, were supposed to have been produced by the KGB as cover documents and then immediately destroyed by commission after the operation. Makar maintains that none of the deputies of KGB chief Ivan Tertel dared to sign the fake ID, and therefore the signature was forged by a KGB technician. See *Ольга Карач Лукукурты. Допрос не состоится, товарищ Тертель!*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_1Hfk9REUtE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1Hfk9REUtE) [accessed: 19 IX 2021].

<sup>70</sup> The film presents numerous operational recordings during which Hralovich contacted oppositionists by phone (with Putilov and Makar). Nothing in his behavior indicates anxiety, compulsion or tense. Hralovich behaves calmly and professionally, consulting the answers to his KGB colleagues using sign language. Not even a minimal amount of tension can be seen in facial expressions and body kinetics.

Hralovich contacted Stepan Putilov - editor of “Belsat”, blogger and creator of opinion-forming channels on Telegram NEXTA and NEXTA Live<sup>71</sup>. According to the Belarusian KGB, Putilov was supposed to be an agent of the Polish secret services and that was the reason why Hrapovich offered him the alleged secret materials. As a form of encouragement, Putilov was given a recording of a conversation between Lukashenko’s spokeswoman Natalia Ejsmont and the chairman of the Belarusian Hockey Federation, Dmitry Baskov, who was allegedly responsible for the fatal beating of Roman Bondarenko on November 11, 2020.<sup>72</sup> Leaving aside the content of the conversation (which undermines government propaganda), it was supposed to be evidence of KGB wiretapping of people in Lukashenko’s most trusted circle. It was therefore potentially possible to obtain information of strategic importance, as well as materials compromising persons remaining in the interest of foreign secret services and politicians in exile. Thus, the alleged source in the KGB was of great interest to both the émigré media and the Western intelligence services behind them, according to the KGB.

This calculation turned out to be correct. Putilov immediately began preparing a plan to smuggle the alleged traitor across the border. In the first version, reportedly presented by Putilov, Hralovich was to leave in January 2021 for St. Petersburg, where he would receive a humanitarian visa at the Estonian or Latvian representative office. With it, he was supposed to cross the border or be transited in a car with diplomatic plates. In the end, it was decided to smuggle Sidorakin and his associates Garkach and Starchenko through the green border with Lithuania, which was to be organized by those taking part in the “Tishina” operation (not yet arrested by the KGB). Hralovich was to cross the border without the materials from the archive, which were to arrive in Lithuania only after the successful transfer and Hralovich’s payment.

Putilov put Hralovich in contact with Makar, who - in an attempt to deceive Putilov - tried to gain access on his own to a secret KGB archive allegedly in Hralovich’s possession, containing compromising materials at the highest levels of government. In exchange for these materials Makar offered Hralovich

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<sup>71</sup> On YouTube, NEXTA has 644 thousand subscriptions (as of September 14, 2021). On the other hand, on Telegram NEXTA has 502 thousand subscriptions, and NEXTA Live has more than 1 million (source: *Telegram-каналы Беларусь*, <https://by.tgstat.com/> [accessed: 14 IX 2021]). Videos produced by Putilov have multi-million views, e.g. *Лукашенко. золотое дно* by September 14, 2021 was viewed by 2 million 251 thousand people on YouTube.

<sup>72</sup> *Предварительная проверка ВУПОЛ по факту смерти Романа Бондаренко*, <https://aperturescience.ru/threads/predvaritel'naja-proverka-bypol-po-faktu-smerti-romana-bondarenko.566222/> [accessed: 14 IX 2021].

a position on Tikhanovskaya's staff and later a high position in the Belarusian KGB (after the opposition would seize power). In order to discourage Hralovich from cooperating with Putilov, Makar warned him that Putilov was an agent of the Polish services and that he was also stealing money from the funds he was receiving (implicitly from Western sponsors and services), which was supposed to suggest to Hralovich that the salary he would receive for the archive would be reduced by Putilov.

The KGB made the original plan more difficult by breaking up Sidorakin's group, presumably to bring in new agents or to force Makar to reveal more contacts in Belarus. The detention of Sidorakin and his associates was accompanied by searches at residences and the discovery of caches containing weapons and explosives, allegedly prepared by the opposition for diversionary and terrorist activities.

Information on how Olga Solomenik was brought into the game by the KGB is missing. However, due to the fact that in the past she was accused of seducing as a KGB agent an officer of the Białystok Internal Security Agency Delegation<sup>73</sup>, it can be assumed that her participation was directed from the beginning by the KGB, which suggested its agent to Makar. It is worth noting the arrogance and cavalier attitude of the KGB members, who did not even change the agent's personal data, despite the fact that the Polish press published information about her being an agent, and she herself was wanted in Poland with a wanted notice<sup>74</sup>. At the same time, the KGB officers believed that Putilov and Makar were agents of the Lithuanian and Polish services, so the information about the appearance of a known KGB agent should have been immediately sent to the alleged KGB curators<sup>75</sup>. The version presented for propaganda purposes that

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<sup>73</sup> *Apelacja w sprawie „romansu agentów”*. *Białoruska Mata Hari nadal nieuchwytna*, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/bialystok/apelacja-w-sprawie-romansu-agentow-bialoruska-mata-hari-nadal-nieuchwytna/8tw0pxp> [accessed: 15 IX 2021]; *Niezła agentka z tej Olgi*, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,76842,7696584,niezla-agentka-z-tej-olgi.html> [accessed: 15 IX 2021]; *Należała do reżimowego ZPB, zwerbowała agenta ABW*, [https://www.rmfm24.pl/fakty/polska/news-nalezala-do-rezimowego-zpb-zwerbowała-agenta-abw,nId,242192#crp\\_state=1](https://www.rmfm24.pl/fakty/polska/news-nalezala-do-rezimowego-zpb-zwerbowała-agenta-abw,nId,242192#crp_state=1) [accessed: 14 IX 2021]; *Białoruska Mata Hari?*, <https://www.wprost.pl/przegląd-prasy/189805/bialoruska-mata-hari.html> [accessed: 15 IX 2021]; *Białoruska Mata Hari zwerbowała funkcjonariusza ABW?*, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/406672,bialoruska-mata-hari-zwerbowała-funkcjonariusza-abw.html> [accessed: 15 IX 2021].

<sup>74</sup> *Były oficer ABW skazany. Agentka KGB Olga Solomenik ciągle ścigana*, <https://poranny.pl/byly-oficer-abw-skazany-agentka-kgb-olga-solomenik-ciagle-scigana-zdjecia/ar/11514491> [accessed: 15 IX 2021].

<sup>75</sup> Either this had an - as yet unknown - purpose, or the KGB holds Western services in such low esteem.

Solomenik was detained and forced to cooperate by the KGB, is illogical both in the light of Solomenik's behavior documented on film (who very efficiently carried out the task of deceiving Makar, which was confirmed by her thorough training) and due to the lack of any natural connection between Solomenik and the Belarusian emigration active in Lithuania<sup>76</sup>. The agent was probably introduced by the KGB through agents located in expatriate organizations, and the detention of Sidorakin's group was probably part of a combination designed to make it possible to place her in the game.

Solomenik was to smuggle Hralovich across the green border with the help of professional smuggler Vyacheslav Trifonov<sup>77</sup>. Then, after receiving confirmation from Hralovich that he was safe, she was to hand over the archive to Makar's envoy. Solomenik, at the behest of the KGB, dragged out the operation. She informed Makar about the supposedly intensified border control, pretending to be afraid of the consequences. She told Makar that she wanted out. She eventually demanded 50,000 euros up front from Makar over potential risks, to which Makar responded with frustration and threats<sup>78</sup>. After this scuffle, Solomenik did not take calls from Makar for some time, after which she informed him that she was in the hospital and feared criminal liability. All of these actions were intended to put Makar in a state of intense emotional tension, fostering a narrowing of his cognitive horizon and errors in decision making. When a frustrated Makar, on March 25, 2021, posted a "statement to the chairman of the KGB of Belarus" on YouTube<sup>79</sup>, during which he threatened Tertel with the disclosure of allegedly compromising information and showed a picture of the cover of a KGB officer's ID card number 001909 (most likely belonging to Hralovich or Sidorakin), the KGB decided to terminate this stage of the operation. Probably never before has any special service so perfectly coordinated the end of an operational game with its media follow-up.

Solomenik informed Makar that Hralovich had nevertheless crossed the border, and that the archive he had left behind would be collected in Grodno in an apartment at 13 Popovicha street, where Trifonov was to wait for Makar's envoy (but only until the early evening in order to force a quick reaction from

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<sup>76</sup> Solomenik is banned from entering the EU after the aforementioned spy scandal in Poland.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. ОНТ: КГБ задержал своего сотрудника и еще шесть человек за госизмену и незаконный оборот оружия, <https://mediazona.by/news/2021/03/31/spy-in-kgb> [accessed: 18 IX 2021].

<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, Makar threatened Solomenik with denunciation to the Belarusian authorities.

<sup>79</sup> Председателю КГБ Беларуси, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d4likYVPbc> [accessed: 14 IX 2021].

Makar). However, it was not Trifonov, but a cadre counterintelligence officer who was waiting in the KGB contact apartment and handed the package with the documents to Olga Chuprinskaya<sup>80</sup>. After the courier was detained by the KGB, it turned out that she was a random person, asked by a related resident of Minsk, Natalia Lubetska, to collect papers of an acquaintance living abroad. Lubetska was said to have known Makar through her mother, who was his teacher at the Grodno high school. Chuprinskaya was to transfer the documents to Minsk by marshrutka<sup>81</sup>. The authorities' propaganda film does not explain who was supposed to pick them up from the marshrutka to later hand them to Lubetska, but at midnight on March 31, 2021, Lubetska was stopped in Minsk on Partizantskom Prospekt while trying to pick up a package with documents. Most remarkably, four hours earlier, state television had aired the propaganda film "Mankurty" (Part I<sup>82</sup>), in which the story of Hralovich's alleged betrayal and the game played with him by the KGB was told accurately and in full detail. Thus, this was probably the only case of realization of the provocation already after it was revealed to the opponent. Lubetska was interrogated throughout the night, after which she was placed in the KGB detention center in a single cell with Svetlana Kupriyeva, a friend of the Babarik family<sup>83</sup>. During interrogation, a KGB officer allegedly gave her psychotropic drugs in her coffee<sup>84</sup>. Although Lubetska was charged with aiding and abetting an act of terrorism (for which she faces between 7 and 15 years in prison in RB), she was released from custody and then left the country on April 24, 2021, presumably to stay in Germany. In the meantime, it turned out that Lubetska was supposed to be the wife of the well-known maxillofacial surgeon Andrei Lubetski, who was detained by the police during anti-government demonstrations on October 11, 2020<sup>85</sup> and once again on May 4, 2021, when he

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<sup>80</sup> *Продолжение сенсационного расследования «Манкурты. Постскриптум»*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVOBrN1UaQo> [accessed: 19 IX 2021].

<sup>81</sup> Marshrutka - a collective cab that runs on fixed routes.

<sup>82</sup> *«Манкурты»: секретная операция КГБ...* [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

<sup>83</sup> *Подруга Макара из «расследования» ОНТ рассказала о допросах в СИЗО КГБ*, <https://reform.by/220738-podrugа-makara-iz-rassledovanija-ont-rasskazala-o-doprosah-v-sizo-kgb> [accessed: 15 IX 2021].

<sup>84</sup> For an interview with Lubetska, see *«Пасыльная» Макара рассказала, як яе апрацоўвалі ў КДБ/Ночные допросы, странные капли, скрытая камера*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oI28GBmsUA> [accessed: 15 IX 2021].

<sup>85</sup> *Вчера задержали известного челюстно-лицевого хирурга, который делает уникальные операции. У него четверо детей*, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=260612&lang=ru> [accessed: 15 IX 2021].

was accused of insulting the president of RB<sup>86</sup> and arrested for two months. There is no information on how his wife managed to leave Belarus on a regular scheduled plane<sup>87</sup> despite the ongoing investigation, which should routinely be accompanied by the revocation of her passport. The ambiguity of the situation is compounded by the fact that Natalia, who is supposed to be a dentist with four children, has left no trace online of her medical practice<sup>88</sup>, and from photos on Facebook and those taken during interviews she has given, it appears that the mother of many has the face and figure of a professional model.

### Associated operations

Another operation that was in a way auxiliary to the above described was a smaller-scale agent game conducted in relation to the Internet forum evolving towards the creation of a real existing organization under the name of the Civic Self-Defense Units of Belarus (Rus. Отряды гражданской самообороны Беларуси, OGSB)<sup>89</sup>. This forum was created in the months leading up to the election, on the wave of the creation of independent, opposition channels on Telegram. The KGB, in an attempt to seize the initiative, brought its agents into the opposition forums almost from the beginning, which quickly turned its attention to the OGSB forum. Its administrator was supposed to be a man living in Germany, nicknamed “Dis”, who selected the most radical members of the chat rooms and slowly formed the basis of a quasi-partisan commando operating in the real world. The KGB determined that Denis Vasilievich Hromov<sup>90</sup>, who emigrated from Ukraine to West Germany but continued to maintain contacts in the post-Soviet area, was hiding behind the alias “Dis”. This included a well-known KGB opposition activist, Zienkovich, to whom “Dis” allegedly offered contact with Ukrainian oligarch Kolomoisky through Kolomoisky’s

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<sup>86</sup> According to the Belarusian Center for Human Rights „Spring,” <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/andrei-ljubecki> [accessed: 15 IX 2021].

<sup>87</sup> *Подруга Макара из «расследования»...* [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

<sup>88</sup> The only entry is available at: *4-я городская клиническая стоматологическая поликлиника*, <https://4stomatolog.by/o-nas/spetsialisty/spetsialisty-stomatologicheskogo-terapevticheskogo-otdeleniya-1/lyubetskaya-natalya-valerevna> [accessed: 14 IX 2021].

<sup>89</sup> Relationship based on: *Спецоперація КГБ: поджог, взрив, Азаренюк. Фільм ОНТ «20 TERROR 21»* p. 1, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA3SQ7zuqLU>, p. 2, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oz6GN0IqKpw> [accessed: 9 IX 2021].

<sup>90</sup> In Germany he was to change his name to Hoffman.

PR man Vladislav Rogimov<sup>91</sup>. "Dis", whom the KGB recognized as a foreign service agent, was covered by KGB monitoring. A propaganda film devoted to this operation showed people who allegedly allowed themselves to be recruited by "Dis" but who, after being arrested by the KGB, in fear of the consequences, cooperated (Natalia Matveyeva, pseud. "Octavia" and Yegor Dudnikov). However, the course of the operation suggests that these people may have been carrying out a provocation against "Dis" from the very beginning, who wanted to use them to carry out diversionary and terrorist acts against the Belarusian authorities. On June 8, 2021, "Octavia" was supposed to set fire to heavy forestry equipment. The video of the sham attack (carried out by KGB agents) was then sent to "Dis" who published it online as evidence of active opposition in the RB. Another proof of the quasi-military activity of the opposition were the training videos of the "partisans", provided to "Dis" by the KGB agent. Another "Dis" operation was to be the blowing up of a telecommunications mast used by the Russian armed forces on RB territory. The explosives, weapons, and night vision equipment necessary to carry out this attack were to be delivered from Ukraine and were received at the border by OGSB member Alexei Glotov. Another OGSB activists, Vadim Gulevich and Kirill Ashurak, were to be responsible for carrying out the operation<sup>92</sup>. The latter was to withdraw from the operation after seizing and concealing the explosives and weapons. It was continued by the rest of "Dis's" group, with Ashurak ordered not to attract the attention of the authorities. The final attempt to blow up the mast was to be made by Glotov and Gulevich, who wanted to flee the country after the target was mined. The KGB defused the explosives<sup>93</sup> and arrested them both. The most recent operation against "Dis" was an alleged assassin's trap, commissioned by "Dis" to kidnap one of the regime's propagandists<sup>94</sup>, in order to broadcast his eating crow. This operation was supposedly the responsibility of Lida resident Dmitry Sosnovskiy, who was reportedly detained by the KGB as a result of an ambush in which

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<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, Zienkovich, who was originally interested in contacting Kolomoisky, gave up the idea when Kolomoisky demanded that he undergo a polygraph examination, making cooperation contingent on it.

<sup>92</sup> Ashurak in chats with „Dis” convinced him that he represented a group of several hundred activists. In fact, he acted alone.

<sup>93</sup> Given the obviously provocative nature of the entire operation, one can assume that in reality either the mines were inoperable or, even more likely, no one had ever mounted them on the mast in question.

<sup>94</sup> The assassins were said to vacillate between Tur, Azarionok and Markov. In the end, they decided on the most aggressive Azarionok.

the aforementioned propagandist Azarionok was supposed to be the bait<sup>95</sup>. After these actions were completed, the KGB publicized them in the media, discrediting in the process the opposition blogger Olga Karach, who allegedly knew about the plans to assassinate Azarionok. The Foreign Ministry of the RB has officially forwarded a request to Germany, Lithuania and the US for legal assistance in the “Dis” investigation, while threatening to raise the issue at the UN.

The liquidation of Avtuhovich's group<sup>96</sup> was another agent game, connected with the two main operations but on a purely operational level.

Avtuhovich was the leader of a small, radicalized group allegedly responsible for setting fire to the cars and homes of militia officers. This formation allegedly attempted to obtain weapons in Ukraine by taking advantage of the acquaintance of one of its members, Dmitry Poloyko, with Semyon Semyonchenko (and through him, allegedly, with the SBU). In the operation of buying and smuggling weapons Avtuhovich was to be assisted by, among others: Victor Sniegur, Adam Akulich, Olga Majorova, Yelena Vasilyeva and Artur Papok. The latter was shown with his face blurred in a propaganda film about the operation, which may suggest that he was a KGB operator planted by Avtuhovich to carry out the provocation. The KGB detained Avtuhovich and his group upon their return from Ukraine on November 13, 2020, for alleged possession of weapons and 1,600 grams of TNT.

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<sup>95</sup> KGB officers on television spoke of the journalist's „heroic attitude,” which was probably intended to improve his image among Belarusians.

<sup>96</sup> The following sources were relied upon: «Тротил протеста»: 1 СЕРИЯ. Как банда Автуховича хотела взорвать страну? Цель - милиция и все мы, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDdx4csUkhw>; «Тротил протеста». 2 СЕРИЯ. Откуда банда Автуховича взяла оружие? Кто мог стать жертвой террористов?, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXMrIh6VcMg> [accessed: 21 IX 2021]; Белорусского экс-политзаключенного обвинили в контрабанде оружия из Украины, <https://www.dw.com/ru/belorussskogo-jeks-politzakljuchennogo-obvinili-v-kontrabande-oruzhija-iz-ukrainy-a-56061291/a-56061291> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; Николай Автухович перенес коронавирус в тюрьме, <https://reform.by/192584-nikolaj-avtuhovich-perenes-koronavirus-v-tjurne> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; Бывший политзаключённый Николай Автухович — подозреваемый по делу о терроризме, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/byvshiy-politzaklyuchyonnyu-nikolay-avtuhovich-podozrevaemyu-po-delu-o-terrorizme> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; Действительно ли существовала «террористическая группа» Автуховича? Анализируем громкое дело, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/26-02-2021-dejstvitelno-li-sushhestvovala-terroristicheskaya-gruppa-avtuhovicha-analiziruem-gromkoe-delo/> [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; «Мерзавцы последние»: Лукашенко рассказал о нападавших на милиционеров, [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/12/25\\_a\\_13414844.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/12/25_a_13414844.shtml) [accessed: 20 IX 2021]; Пенсионерка, священник, блогер: кого власти Беларуси считают террористами?, <https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/1496600/pensionerka-sviashchennik-blogger-kogo-vlasti-belarusi-schitaiut-terroristami> [accessed: 20 IX 2021].

## **Impact of implemented operations**

The provocateur-deception operations carried out could produce results at the operational-tactical and strategic levels.

First, the KGB succeeded in identifying and neutralizing the most radical opposition activists, blocking their channels of communication with foreign centers and recognizing the modus operandi of radicalized opposition circles at home and abroad, as well as Western organizations providing them with logistical and financial support.

Second, the operations described have made the opposition and the broader West aware of the degree of agent infiltration of opposition-minded organizations and circles, which must promote the disintegration of these groups.

It is clear that none of the operations described above could have been carried out without agent support. These are not agents introduced into the game after its initiation, but rather agents who have been active in the target groups for a longer period of time and who were able to gain access to information necessary to prepare the provocation and to modify its course based on the victims' reactions. From the standpoint of the theory of deception operations, it must be assumed that there must have been agents of influence and mole agents operating in and on the periphery of the attacked organizations who prepared the ground for acceptance of the bait dropped by the KGB. Indeed, the victims of deception were either experienced officers of the force sectors (Makar) or politicians with a long tenure in the RB, so it is difficult to attribute naivety to them. It is therefore reasonable to assume that there may have been people around them who dispelled their doubts and suggested that they make the decisions desired by the KGB.

Awareness of the risks of infiltration could theoretically lead to counterintelligence and verification activities in the structures under attack. However, history proves that due to the frequent positioning of the agent high up in the hierarchy of the organization under attack, any grassroots attempt to unmask it is difficult and often doomed to failure. Thus, in the absence of viable verification and defense capabilities, attacked organizations lose internal cohesion. Their members develop extreme suspicion and form subgroups of supposedly vetted comrades, usually suspecting the rest of having agent ties. The resulting disintegration impedes decision-making processes and

the undertaking of any real activity<sup>97</sup>. An additional element is the loss of trust on the part of Western sponsors, who can never be sure that the funds provided for opposition activities<sup>98</sup> do not in fact feed into secret KGB funds, and that the organizations they support are not just legends prepared by the enemy.

Thirdly, thanks to the media offensive using operationally obtained data, the regime has largely succeeded in discrediting the opposition among the Belarusian public. The image of a democratic and peaceful opposition, demanding only that fair elections be held to determine genuine popular representation, has been replaced in public consciousness by an image of people bribing army officers to stage a putsch, which in densely populated Minsk would necessarily lead to numerous civilian casualties during the inevitable fighting between putschists and internal troops and OMON. Equally deadly for the political image of the opposition was to show that its representatives (both civilian politicians and former siloviks) have, according to the KGB and government propagandists, ties with foreign powers and their special services. Zienkovicz's reference to (alleged) connections with the U.S. State Department and the American Jewish Committee must have made a negative impression on the anti-NATO and anti-Semitic<sup>99</sup> disposed Belarusian society. Especially in light of the anti-Semitic myths propagated by Belarusian propaganda<sup>100</sup>. In turn, Makar's public suggestions of connections with high officers of the Russian FSB must have equally discredited the opposition in pro-national Belarusian circles.

To sum up, one can assume that the operations carried out by the KGB may have the same effect on the Belarusian society as the tsarist provocation in the Kingdom of Poland in 1865. It was then when - by creating the National Government calling for another uprising - any underground opposition was discredited in the eyes of the average Poles. This resulted in apathy and self-Russification of the Kingdom's society, phenomena that lasted almost until

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<sup>97</sup> Who will undertake underground activities in the country with the knowledge that the security service may know about his mission even before it begins in earnest?

<sup>98</sup> This purpose was also served by publicizing by the regime's propagandists information painful for the opposition about the financial machinations of the creator of the BYSOL, BYHELP aid funds - Andrei Strizhak, coming from alleged sources inside the opposition (among others: Ilya Biegun, Shtab Onoskho, Liubov Shebarshina, Svetlana Galich).

<sup>99</sup> Cf. *Антисемитизм на постсоветском пространстве*, <https://archive.jpr.org.uk/download?id=3369>, s. 294–295 [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

<sup>100</sup> Cf. „*Этот поц сломался*”: белорусская пропаганда не брезгует антисемитизмом, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/etot-poc-slomalsya-belorusskaya-propaganda-ne-brezguet-antisemitizmom> [accessed: 17 IX 2021].

the outbreak of World War I<sup>101</sup>. The deepening economic crisis in Belarus will show in the coming months whether the KGB has indeed succeeded in crippling the popular revolt against the Lukashenko regime.

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<sup>101</sup> More broadly: J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Wielka prowokacja. Rzekomy rząd narodowy 1865 roku*, Warszawa 1928.

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