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## LUKASHENKA'S FRIENDS AND FOES IN RUSSIA

Even though no one would argue with the fact that Lukashenka is fully pro-Russian, in the context of Russia's undeclared war with Ukraine he tried to prove himself as an independent actor and a possible moderator between the West and the East. In other words, understanding the risks of aggressive Russia's foreign policy, Lukashenka searches for a safe role to preserve the status quo.

There are many debates about the channels of Russia's influence in Belarus, most of all – who of the political elite stand behind them. A deeper look is needed to better understand the relations between Lukashenka's regime and Russia's political elite. Therefore, the last issue of the *Bell* in 2014 is dedicated to analyzing the friends and foes of Lukashenka in Russia.

In the first article, Yury Chavusau examines the channels of Russia's influence in Belarus. He argues that after all the most important is the stance of Lukashenka himself, as he does not let any possibility for influence in Russia at the political level bypass him. However there are many "soft power" tools that Moscow uses to keep control over Minsk.

In the second article, Alena Daneika proposes her analysis of Lukashenka's friends and foes in Moscow. She argues that he has lost many of his allies from the 90s and currently he is supported by *ad hoc* arrangements and pragmatic calculations.

*Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor*

## THE FRAMEWORK OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN BELARUS

*Yury Chavusau*

Lukashenka's Belarus is traditionally seen as fully responsive to the interests of Moscow. Belarus is a member of all economic integration projects, a military ally of Russia in the Collective Security Treaty Organization and even a part of the so-called supranational Union State with Russia.<sup>1</sup>

There are no openly pro-Russian political actors in Belarus, except Lukashenka himself. The common opinion is that no politician in Belarus is more pro-Russian than the President is.

The key reason for the abovementioned viewpoint is the way Lukashenka came to power in 1994 on the wave of people's nostalgia for the Soviet Union and stability. To consolidate his autocratic rule, Lukashenka had to fight democratic and predominantly nationalistic opposition, primarily the Belarusian Popular Front, in 1995 and 1996. He replaced the national state symbols by quasi-Soviet ones via

a referendum, enforced Russian as a second official language, and let Russian Pan-slavists feel like welcome guests in Minsk.

Lukashenka looked like a good potential successor against the background of Russia's unpopular Yeltsin. The integration process seemed to lead to a merger, with Lukashenka at the top of the reunited state.

This trend was broken in the early 2000s when Russian elites nominated Putin. Tougher than Yeltsin, Putin abolished the old "oil in return for kisses" scheme. Not satisfied with the pro-Russian rhetoric of Lukashenka, he demanded actual incorporation of Belarus. On the other hand, Putin exploited a topic of Russia's revival as an empire on a higher scale.

As a result, frequent trade wars emerged between Lukashenka's regime and Russia. The Belarusian leader became less keen on Pan-Slavism in his statements. He initiated the development of the so-called "state ideology" in 2003 to find an alternative to post-Soviet nostalgia and Pan-Slavism. This project was not successful, but pro-Russian attitudes became unfashionable

<sup>1</sup> Two Decades of the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy in the Commonwealth of Independent States: The Cases of Belarus and Ukraine by Helena Yakovlev Golani, European Forum at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2011)

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**The common opinion is that no politician in Belarus is more pro-Russian than the President is.**

for Belarusian elites anyway. This resulted in a vacuum of ideas, as the pro-Russian stance lost its relevance, but there was nothing to replace it. Observers increasingly agree that Lukashenka and Putin are far from being soul mates now, after the recent events in Ukraine. Rather than being dependent on the Kremlin, Lukashenka tries to position himself as a mediator between East and West.<sup>2</sup> Russia's support for armed separatism in Ukraine pushed Minsk toward "re-Belarusisation"; old clashes with pro-democratic and pro-nationalist opponents have now been forgotten. Having defeated the opposition, the regime no longer sees anyone who speaks Belarusian as an opponent, but as a patriot, a kind of a supporter rather than a threat to Lukashenka's power.

This is the background for the changing framework of pro-Russian influences in Belarus. All attempts to establish pro-Russian political parties are now pointless, despite attempts of some politicians to offer their services during visits to Moscow. The Belarusian political system is not competitive. It is not reasonable for Moscow to invest in electoral battles of pro-Russian parties in Belarus, contrary to other neighboring Eastern European states where elections work as a mechanism of change via either ballots or a "colored revolution". The authoritarian regime in Belarus leaves little space for political activities as opposed to civil society.

The environment is still favorable for the development of Russophilist civil projects in the country. The domination of the Russian language in the media and public administration is a powerful factor.

Those whom Moscow can particularly count on are pro-Russian officers in the security services, tied to the Kremlin ideologically or even professionally. The failure of the "state ideology" project resulted in the security services staying overwhelmingly pro-Russian, no matter how they try to imitate an idealess technocracy. They constitute the number one resource for Russia in Belarus and a threat to the national security of the Belarusian state.

This factor is especially important given the fact that Lukashenka's regime relies heavily on its repressive machine. Events in December 2010 testified that this machine could play its own game and stand up for Russia's interests.

As a result, key components of the state machine

stay exposed to Eastern influences, with current imperialistic and chauvinistic moods in Russia affecting their loyalties negatively. It is worth noting that former bosses of the Interior Ministry and KGB of Belarus used to find jobs in Moscow after resigning, e.g. ex-Minister of the Interior Navumau, ex-Head of the KGB Yeryn, and ex-Chairperson of the Presidential Administration Latypau.<sup>3</sup> This trend has diminished somewhat during recent years.

Covering a large segment of the population, the church is another tool of Moscow's influence. In Belarus, it is formally called the Belarusian Orthodox Church, but Moscow considers it just a branch of the Russian church. Churches expose believers to ideological indoctrination with a Moscow-centrist focus or even elements of xenophobia and Russian chauvinism. This does not apply to all parishes, but the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill in 2009 reinforced this policy of ideological justification of Russian domination.

Naturally, the lack of control over the church concerns the regime. Lukashenka made his first cautious statements about church reform last summer. Metropolitan Pavel, the Head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, stated the intention to initiate self-government of the Church, so as to enable local bishops to elect their denomination leader as opposed to the current appointment from Moscow.<sup>4</sup>

NGOs constitute another significant bulk of ideological influences, with a variety of think tanks, youth initiatives, gyms, culture societies, charities and other powerful muscles of "soft power". Cossack camps for youth, sport competitions, cultural events and academic celebrations dedicated to remarkable dates of Russian history as well as analytical efforts of think tanks can create a network to play against Belarusian statehood at a crucial point in time.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, security services monitor such initiatives and have their agents there. The repressive machine is capable of destroying the most violent groups, such as the Russian National Unity in the early 2000s or the Autonomous National Bolsheviks, whose leader was prosecuted in 2012 for acting on behalf of an unregistered organization. Pro-Russian neo-Nazi groups exist in Belarus, but they tend to remain invisible and hide behind legal NGOs

<sup>2</sup> Belarus's Russian Problem / Wall Street Journal, 24 December 2014

<sup>3</sup> ТОП-10 самых высокопоставленных белорусских «эмигрантов» в России

<sup>4</sup> Bishops want more autonomy for Moscow-governed Belarusian Church

<sup>5</sup> Пятая колонна: кто готовится к встрече «зеленых человечков» в Беларуси

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dealing with sports or culture. Many activists from these groups are now fighting in the Eastern Ukraine to support the separatists.

However, the KGB cannot control all these groups. It is also true that some KGB officers are sympathetic to Rusophilist activities and can help them.

Youth groups deserve the closest attention among the structures of Russian soft power, with a high potential for disruptions in society. *Rus Molodaya* (Young Rus, or *Rumol*) is the most visible. The group has excellent relations with both the government and the Embassy of Russia in Minsk. They do not consider Belarus a nation. Leu Kryshtapovich can be seen as a mentor of *Rumol*. He was deputy chairperson of the Information-Analytical Center under the Administration of the President until autumn 2014, when he was dismissed.

Funds are necessary to uphold the infrastructure of “soft power”. The Kremlin has chosen a centralization model of support for “compatriots” abroad recently. The budget of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the Russian agency for foreign cooperation, is constantly growing, with the Embassy in Minsk turning into a focal point for money distribution. The office of *Rossotrudnichestvo* in Minsk is responsible for initiatives such as the distribution of St. George ribbons in Belarus, a symbol of pro-Russian separatists, which are prohibited by the Belarusian government from being displayed during formal celebrations.

Intergovernmental agreements release Russian foundations from having to get permission from the Belarusian government for their programs in Belarus. This fact is an institutionalized threat for the national security of Belarus. Western foundations are obliged to register all aid projects, under a threat of penal prosecution. The Belarusian security services monitor and filter money from Western donors very thoroughly; but they turn a blind eye to Eastern funds. “*Russkiy Mir*” (Russian World), the Institute of the Russian Expatriate Community,

the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, the Gorchakov Fund of Public Diplomacy, and the Institute of CIS Countries (the Institute of Diaspora and Integration) are the donors supporting Russophilist groups in Belarus. These funds have intensified their efforts vis-à-vis the analytical community recently, amid the launch of the Eurasian Union.

Lukashenka’s regime is likely to take steps to reduce threats from the pro-Russian influence groups. These might include:

- step-by-step replacement of officers with direct links to Russia by locals and loyal pro-regime personnel in government institutions and security services;
- reform of the Belarusian Orthodox Church to give it more autonomy, in particular in appointing leaders;
- establishing control over donations by Russian foundations and agencies to NGOs;
- tolerating patriotic non-political initiatives (distribution of patriotic-style clothes free of ideologies; Belarusian language training courses);
- measures to reduce the share of Russian media in the media market of Belarus, including TV and the Internet, in parallel with other steps to restrict freedom of expression;
- control measures vis-à-vis members of Russian nationalist groups with links to the so-called “people republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk, crossing the Belarus-Russia border.
- The country’s leadership has already voiced certain intentions in each of the abovementioned points, or has already taken concrete actions.
- One should not expect the Belarusian leadership to become less pro-Russian. They will continue their maneuvering between West and East. However, pro-Russian sentiments in society will have to stay under the regime’s control. Lukashenka will remain the only person entitled to be Moscow’s friend in the Belarusian political system, along with his direct appointees.

## LUKASHENKA'S FRIENDS AND FOES IN RUSSIA: WHO CAN BACK THE BELARUSIAN REGIME?

Alena Daneika

**Belarusian regime enables people from the Kremlin's entourage to use Belarus as a "grey zone" for any machinations.**

*Speculation is rife regarding possible supporters of the Belarusian regime and Lukashenka personally in Russia. His background obviously suggests ties with left-wingers of all kinds, the army and the military industry as well as businesses connected with Belarus. Analysts, experts and observers disagree on the details, but they share the same opinion on the major points.*

### No friends, but lobbyists available

Lukashenka has no friends in Russian political communities. However, his supporters and possibly, lobbyists in the Russian political establishment, in particular, can be found in the military industries sector and affiliated businesses, as well as among state officials with direct links to the military, thinks Raman Yakauleuski, a political analyst from Minsk.

To name a few who are definitely not against the Belarusian leader are the top managers of a list of state corporations, such as Sergey Chemezov, CEO at Rostec. Uladzimir Navumau, general lieutenant and a former minister of the interior of Belarus, is one of his closest allies.

Yakauleuski also assumes that Lukashenka also has allies at the Russian Railways (RZD). The corporation has ties with the military sector, "especially now, when Russia is reconsidering the idea of using the railways as platforms for strategic nuclear-tipped missiles". Leanid Yeryn, general lieutenant and a former head of the Belarusian KGB, is one of the most trusted advisors of Vladimir Yakunin, the chairperson of RZD.

Yakauleuski believes that these two generals still have good connections with Lukashenka. He also mentions Mikhail Gutseriev, Russia's top businessman, ranked 33 in the 2014 Forbes List with a fortune of USD 3.3 billion, who is seen by some as almost a personal friend of Lukashenka.

The influence of these personalities might not be huge in the Kremlin; however, it is likewise wrong to underestimate it. Certainly, they are interested in keeping Lukashenka in power, while he is trying to use such "friends" to promote his own interests. Yakauleuski thinks it is not easy nowadays, since Putin has managed to eliminate the so-called pro-Lukashenka pillar in Moscow led by ex-mayor Yury Luzhkov and his businesses. Therefore, Lukashenka has some personalities and institutions in Russia to support him. However,

his recent statements on trade rows, sanctions and embargoes as well as other Ukraine-related contradictions between Minsk and Moscow show that the Belarusian leader can no longer rely on his strongholds in Russia.

"Professional patriots" are his traditional supporters in Russia, but today they lean toward the Kremlin's new idea of "the Russian world", points out Yakauleuski. The Belarusian leader clearly does not fit this "world".

Lukashenka's friendship or at least warm feelings with Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Russian Communists, are hardly a trump card for the Belarusian President. It is true that both Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the so-called "Russian Liberal Democrat Party", sometimes support Lukashenka rhetorically. However, they both voice they Kremlin's positions rather than shape them.

### Russian governors, oligarchs and military industries

Uladzimir Karahin, the chairperson of the Presidium of the Belarusian Republican Confederation of Entrepreneurship, has a slightly different view of the situation. In his opinion, Lukashenka has strengthened his pool of supporters by engaging with governors of the Russian regions and introducing working cooperation programs between regions of Russia and Belarus.

Having repeatedly participated in such working meetings, Karahin guarantees that they are not about ceremonious professions of friendship. He claims, "45 out of 160 Russian oligarch groups have ties with Belarusian regions and have plans for business in Belarus or partnerships with Belarusian enterprises, as well as goals to cooperate with third countries".

Karahin thinks that these ties reinforce Lukashenka's position, no matter what some people might think about him as a person.

### Ad hoc friends

Yury Khashchvatski, a well-known Belarusian investigative film director and an author of many documentaries about Belarus and Russia, has his own explanation as to why some Russian businesses can be labeled supporters of Lukashenka.

**The majority of the Russian power elite and the Presidential administration has always been pragmatic about Lukashenka.**

**As for Lukashenka's friendship with Russian governors, history has repeatedly shown that this lasts as long as the Kremlin tolerates it.**

In his opinion, the Belarusian regime enables people from the Kremlin's entourage to use Belarus as a "grey zone" for any machinations. As opposed to Russia, a machination is always a success if agreed with just one man called Lukashenka.

In certain conditions, Putin is one of Lukashenka's supporters, too, thinks Khashchavatski. Yet, the old scheme of support is unprofitable or impossible for Putin. All observers agree that the current leaders of Russia and Belarus are not particularly friendly on the personal level. Khashchvatski believes that Lukashenka always sees Putin as someone who took his seat in Kremlin.

Russian businesses are also quite pragmatic in their pro-Lukashenka sentiments. They do not like the situation in Russia where Putin is claiming businesses of his former allies, notes Khashchavatski. They would love to work in a situation similar to the current Belarusian one. Khashchvatski does not rule out that Russian big businesses might come up with an idea to bring Lukashenka to power in Russia under certain circumstances, "because he is negotiable".

What Khashchavatski finds particularly sad is that some white-ribbon intellectuals in Russia are also sympathetic to Lukashenka. They are against Putin's regime, but too naïve about Lukashenka's one.

#### **Dramatic change**

Leanid Mindlin, a media analyst from Minsk and co-author of a two-part documentary *Trap for the President* and *Trap for the Opposition*, compares today's situation to the one in the mid-90s. In his opinion, Lukashenka has effectively lost all the faithful friends and influential lobbyists in the Russian elites that he had in the 90s. Those he still has are *ad hoc* friends who can support the Belarusian regime if Russian interests, as seen in the Kremlin, demand it.

The Communists used to be a very Lukashenka-friendly group. The military were the second group, more influential under Yeltsin than under Putin. The current Russian leader has created a system with stronger influence from security services rather than the military.

Mindlin also supposes that certain oligarchs with business links to Belarus might be supportive of Lukashenka, too. However, it is a stretch of the imagination to call them influential in Putin's Russia.

In Khashchvatski's opinion, Lukashenka cannot be as reliant on support from Russian generals and

military industries as he was in the 90s, either.

#### **Ad hoc foes**

Russian liberals have never tolerated Lukashenka by definition. However, liberals in Russia now constitute a vanishing fraction. Being a minor group, they stay pro-Kremlin in relations with Lukashenka if they want get a position in public office, regardless of their personal attitude to Lukashenka, says Mindlin.

The majority of the Russian power elite and the Presidential administration has always been pragmatic about Lukashenka, including Anatoly Chubais, a well-known liberal and a former Head of the Administration. He spoke against letting the Belarusian opposition speak on Russian TV in 2001, before the presidential elections.

It was he who stated that Russia must be an energy empire. Empires need good defense, something that makes Belarus a sphere of Russian influence. Moscow sees no alternative politician to Lukashenka or one who could guarantee a reliable defense of the 700 km area between Brest and Orsha; this fact determines its attitude vis-à-vis the current Belarusian leader.

Both Chubais and German Gref, another important player in Russian power elites, are in favor of supporting Lukashenka financially rather than ideologically, if it meets Russian interests. If the Belarusian leader goes against Russian interests, he must feel the power of Russian propaganda turned against him, stresses Mindlin. As a rule, this helps to force him toward the decision Moscow wants.

As for Lukashenka's friendship with Russian governors, history has repeatedly shown that this lasts as long as the Kremlin tolerates it. In his time, Yeltsin restricted Lukashenka's visits to Russian regions. Ever since, Lukashenka has invited Russian governors to his country.

Russian businesses work in Belarus for as long as Lukashenka allows. The recent arrest of Vladislav Baumgartner, the ex-CEO of Uralkali, is a good illustration.

Russian politicians, both pro-Lukashenka and anti-Lukashenka ones, are not autonomous players. Any party in today's Duma is ready to support the Kremlin, if needed. The opposition is marginal.

Putin's personal feelings towards Lukashenka are not worth discussing in this regard. The Russian leader has demonstrated many times that his treatment of his Belarusian counterpart depends on circumstances.

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