How the Belarusian Political System Works

Last year the Ostrogorski Centre launched its Belarus Profile web site. Since then the database of the most influential Belarusians has become an increasingly popular source of biographical information.

However, not many people in the West know what the Belarusian political system looks like under the Constitution. This article intends to fill that gap.

**State of the Super President**

Alexander Lukashenka was not joking in 1995, when during an interview to Handlesblatt magazine he praised the concentrated official powers of Hitler. One year later, a rigged referendum made him something akin to a super President.

At the time, many people compared the competencies of the President of Belarus with those of the President of France, although Lukashenka was authorised to do much more.

The Presidential Administration is much more powerful than the Council of Ministers and the Parliament

Since 2004, the President has had the right to run for office an unlimited number of times. The term of office is 5 years. According to the Constitution, the President of Belarus not only has very broad executive powers, but legislative ones as well.

Lukashenka has the right to issue decrees that automatically assume the power of being law and override existing laws. Contrary to the Constitution, the President has significant competencies in the judicial field: he has the power to exempt
individuals from criminal culpability for some crimes and can even pardon people for economic crimes.

The Presidential Administration is much more powerful than the Council of Ministers and the Parliament, with considerably more power. The Presidential Administration's 'legislators' effectively make the nations laws. Some departments of the Administration duplicate the work of the ministries. They make any number of key decisions that determine the policy of the state.

The President also chairs the Security Council, which is probably the most important institution in the Belarusian political system. This body brings together the country’s top leaders and the main security agencies. Lukashenka keeps security officials in very close, as he does not trust them.

The top security staff basically unchanged over the past 19 years, with Lukashenka occasionally shuffling the same deck of cards in the nation's law enforcement agencies. It should also be noted that his oldest son – Viktar Lukashenka – is a member of the Council.

Puppet Government

Belarusian political scientist Uladzimir Rouda describes the value in terms of the government being an economic and administrative agency that subordinate to the Head of State.

The President appoints and dismisses the prime minister and all other ministers. He also often leads the Council of Ministers' meetings which usually devolve into public humiliation sessions – or "a beating of the boys" – i.e. the ministers.

The Council of Ministers oversees several state organisations

The government itself remains little more than a functionary, destined to execute the decisions of the President and his
administration. Ministers in Belarus are not prone to quick turn over, yet despite the apparent job security afforded them, as a former employee of the Lukashenka`s team Siarhei Chaly said, "no one wants to be a minister."

The Council of Ministers has 24 ministries and seven committees, such as the Committee for State Security. The Council of Ministers oversees several state organisations, such as the Belarusian State Concern for Oil and Chemistry. This concern includes the largest enterprises in Belarus, such as "Belaruskali" and oil processing plants.

**Pocket Parliament**

Belarusian parliament has two chambers: the House of Representatives (lower chamber) and the Council of the Republic (higher chamber).

The Parliament has independently drafted only one law

110 deputies elected in direct elections constitute the House of Representatives. 64 deputies constitute the Council of the Republic. Members of local councils from each region and Minsk elect eight members. Lukashenka appoints another eight personally.

The Parliament plays a very insignificant role. It has no real executive functions and the main task of the Parliament is basically rubber stamping laws whose content has already been drafted and finalised before it reaches them. According to Andrej Jahorau, over the course of its last four-year term, the Parliament has independently drafted only one law.

The House of Representatives or Council of the Republic do not hold any debates and MPs often just pass a given law unanimously. The Chamber Speakers or Chairmen of the parliamentary committees play a marginal role in Belarusian politics. Even Parliament property is managed by the Office of
Presidential Affairs.

**Dependent Judicial System**

The judicial branch, as well as the legislative, remains almost entirely dependent. The executive branch organises the courts, appoints its judges and even determines the size of the bonuses that Court officials receive. The Constitutional Court is composed of 12 members, the President and the Council of the Republic appoint six judges each.

Since 1996, the Constitutional Court has not considered or renounced any legal act passed by Lukashenka to be unconstitutional. Moreover, the Constitutional Court is not able to start a case by their own, but instead must seek approval from the head of state.

**No Local Self-Government**

Although Belarusian traditions of local self-government have roots stretching back to the 14th century, these days Belarusians do not even have the possibility of electing their own mayors. The President himself appoints the heads of local executive bodies, so they remain primarily loyal to him, and not to its local citizens.

A few members from opposition political parties were elected at the local elections in 2010. Belarusians call this system the "executive vertical". The President can dismiss ordinary officials of the local executive committees and even revoke their decisions.

The local councils are made up of 21,288 deputies, but their official competencies remain pitifully narrow. Only a few members from opposition political parties made it through the sieve of fraud at the local elections in 2010. In 2014 Belarus will hold new elections to its local councils with what would appear to be rather predictable results.
The Final Count

Belarus remains a country with super-presidential system. Lukashenka controls the executive and legislative branches of government. The President also significantly influences the judicial branch, despite the fact that this is a clear violation of the fundamental Law of the country.

The Council of Ministers is doing little else but working to make sure Lukashenka`s policy objectives are met. Parliament is a body is a rubber stamp institution that is charged with approving legislation created by the Presidential Administration. Local executive bodies, as well as the Council of Ministers, implement Lukashenka`s policies, but only at the lowest level.

It is inconceivable that the judicial system will confront the President, as it remains almost entirely dependent on him.

The rigged referendums in 1995, 1996 and 2004 brought great changes to the Constitution and gave the President unlimited powers. Thus, Lukashenka's dictatorship has roots not only in his political practises, but also in the fundamental laws of Belarus.

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