

# **Opinion: four Russian instruments of control over Belarus**

Many observers have noted that Belarus is slowly drifting towards the West and away from Russia.

This is corroborated by experts, results of independent opinion polls, and the intensity of contacts between Belarus and the European Union.

Russia retains four convincing arguments which effectively act as instruments of control over Belarus including economic, public opinion, and defence.

## **Belarus's economic dependency on Russia**

Since the late 1990's, Belarus has been regularly receiving subsidies from the Russian Federation to the tune of about \$10bn per year. This aid takes a variety of forms: direct investments, intergovernmental credits, reduced rates on fuel, etc., but the amount of money provided from year to year is more or less constant.

Moreover, Russian subsidies have become such an integral part of Belarus's economy and of the state budget that the main duty of one deputy prime minister consists of obtaining economic preferences and subsidised energy from Russia.

This brings us to our first conclusion, that the economic independence of Belarus is a myth. The same is thus true of the "Belarusian economic miracle". One should also be cautious

when talking about Belarus's political independence, for what sort of political independence is possible when there is no economic independence?

## **Shaping public opinion: trust in the Russian media**

The Belarusian Analytical Workroom, headed by Andrei Vardomatsky, presented their findings in Warsaw regarding the influence of the Russian media on viewers in post-soviet countries, including Belarus.

According to this research 73.1% of respondents from Belarus responded in December 2014 that they trusted (to a varying degree) the Russian Media. This means that Russia shapes (or at least significantly influences) the public opinion in Belarus. This also means that politically, Russia can promote or bring down any politician they choose, including Alexander Lukashenka.

The Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, another independent national public opinion pollster in Belarus, conducted a study in June 2016 demonstrating that 33.6% of respondents were ready to side with Russia should an armed conflict break out between the Russian Federation and the West on the territory of Belarus.

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Three times less people – 13.4% – were ready to stand with the West. Moreover, 26.1% of Belarusians viewed Russia as a protector against potential aggression from NATO. It is hard to believe that despite the Russian media's influence, even 10.6% of respondents in Belarus supported NATO. In March 2016, when asked plainly: “with whom do you want to unite” 48% of

respondents preferred uniting with Russia; whereas 31.2% of respondents preferred joining the EU.

Thus the second conclusion is as unfavourable as the first: public opinion in Belarus is shaped by Vladimir Putin, not Alexander Lukashenka. This means that in the event of a serious conflict between Belarus and the Russian Federation, the majority of the population may not side with Lukashenka.

## **Russia's influence on Belarus's non-profit organisations**

There has lately been an outburst of activity from various previously dormant organisations in Belarus. These include Cossack organisations, unions of Afghan war veterans, Orthodox youth camps, patriotic military clubs, and others.

The Russian-language social network *Odnoklassniki* hosts many such groups and the number of their subscribers is estimated in the thousands or even tens of thousands. A peculiar feature of these groups is that they are often administrated by individuals with experience of armed conflict.

The way the state has been treating Afghan war vets recently has been very unfair: the veterans have lost their well-deserved benefits after a recent and hugely unpopular social reform. What's more, the state does not provide any form of re-habilitation programme for former soldiers suffering from war related trauma. As a result veterans have turned into a societal delayed-action bomb that is more dangerous than the Belarusian state would like to believe.

Moreover, there is an emerging group of new 'veterans' – vets of the Donbass war. These are people who travelled to the

Donbass in Ukraine to participate in the on-going armed conflict between Ukraine in Russia over the past several years.

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Compounding the problem is the fact that there is no actual border between Belarus and Russia: anyone could hypothetically bring weapons across the border. In the current geopolitical context, the presence of a group of disenfranchised people who know how to use arms is an unpredictable element which could be employed with a completely unpredictable effect during times of social unrest.

Thus, the third conclusion is also pessimistic: any large manifestation or political rally attracts all sorts of active individuals in the country. This means that the above mentioned groups could be involved as well, which may lead to armed conflicts and confrontation.

## **Defence and law enforcement agencies**

Military and security enforcement services – *siloviki* – are a very influential group: these are after all the people who are permitted to carry guns. In the event of a coup, revolution, uprising, or confrontation with a neighbouring country their decisions may be a deciding factor. They determine whether or not to fire.

Closer examination reveals that a large number of Belarus's *siloviki* have ties to Russia. Let us start with the Defence Ministry of Belarus and its leaders. The Minister of Defence, Andrei Ravkov, graduated with honours from the Moscow Higher Combined Arms Command School, and he later graduated from the

Russian General Staff Academy. All of his four deputies studied in Russia; two of them were citizens of the Russian Federation by birth.

The leaders of various forces and troops must also be scrutinised. There are twelve such leaders in total, eleven of whom studied military science in the Russian Federation at institutions such as Gagarin Air Force Academy, the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, Khroulyov Military Academy of Logistics of the Ministry of defence of the Russian Federation. By the way, three of the above mentioned leaders are Russian citizens by birth. This trend holds true in other areas of *siloviki* leadership as well.

Thus, the fourth conclusion is also worrying: nobody knows what the Belarus(s)ian *siloviki* would do should disagreements between Russia and Belarus escalate to a serious conflict.

It is intriguing to see how Alexander Lukashenka will be able to cope with these "instruments" in the coming years.

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