

The 2016 Belarusian People's Congress: the Illusion of Democracy

The Fifth Belarusian People's Congress will take place in Minsk on 22-23 June. The event will bring together 2,500 carefully selected participants from all over the country representing the branches of the government, industry and business, science, health and culture.

This Soviet-styled Belarusian institution is President Alexander Lukashenka's preferred means of communicating with the electorate. The president convened the first Congress in 1996 to rally support for a constitutional amendment that would strengthen the powers of the executive. Over time, this institution has become the centrepiece of presidential election campaigns.

At this year's Congress, the president promised to present a strategy on how to overcome the economic crisis. Lukashenka may be hoping to use Congress as an opportunity to improve his public image. However, the Congress seems to have lost its charm with most Belarusians. Few will take the president's promises seriously this time around.

The origins of the People's Congress

The People's Congress, despite an awe-inspiring name, has little to do with real decision-making. Its main purpose is to help the regime to communicate its policies to the Belarusian public. In fact, the constitution does not even mention the Congress.

Lukashenka convened the first People's Congress in 1996, on the eve of the referendum on the expansion of presidential powers. Having the constitutional amendments approved by the People's Congress prior to the referendum helped Lukashenka to override the objections of parliament and the Constitutional Court. Not surprisingly, the president has hailed the Congress as "the highest form of the Belarusian democracy."

The 1996 Congress gathered five thousand people from different parts of Belarus. Subsequent events brought only half as many delegates. As part of the nomination of Congress participants, the government elects loyal representatives of all professions. At the end of each Congress, these people rubber-stamp the president's five-year program.

The Belarusian People's Congress played an important role in Lukashenka's electoral campaigns in 2001, 2006 and 2010. On each occasion, the president gave a long speech in front of the delegates. The speech typically summarised the events of the previous five years and outlined the priorities for the following five years. Lukashenka's speech at the 2010 Congress lasted more than three hours.



The Belarusian People's Congress is sometimes compared with

the Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Just like its Communist prototype, the Belarusian People's Congress is celebrated with great pomp and lacks serious discussion.

What is the point of the People's Congress?

This time Lukashenka broke with tradition by waiting to convene the People's Congress until after the presidential election. One possible reason is his reluctance to discuss the dire state of the Belarusian economy before the votes were cast and counted.

On 5 April, parliament rubber-stamped the government's new socioeconomic plan for 2016-2020, formerly one of the main tasks performed by the People's Congress. What is the point of holding the People's Congress this year?

First, convening the Congress this year will allow the president to convince the public that holding the Congress in 2016 rather than 2015 has nothing to do with his policy failures, but rather the authorities decided to postpone the People's Congress on technical grounds.

Second, the president may be reluctant to break the tradition of holding Congresses. Lukashenka himself may be "mentally imprisoned by Soviet rituals," as political analyst [Alexander Klaskouski](#) argues.

Third, the Belarusian People's Congress will help rally support for the president. In the presence of several thousand people and in front of the whole country on television, the president will try to shift the blame for the crisis onto the government. In fact, Lukashenka enjoys public speaking. Oratorical talent helped him to win the first (and last) democratic election in 1994, and even though elections are no

longer free and fair, regular speaking engagements remain important for maintaining his approval rating.



Two and a half thousand delegates will attend the Congress in June, and the authorities are trying to prepare for the meeting. State media has issued grandiose proclamations in anticipation of the event. For instance, the Belarusian Telegraph Agency wrote that "the People's Assembly will give a new impetus to the development of the country", that "the current five-year plan will focus on improving the living standards of the nation", and that "the central idea of the Belarusian People's Congress is the people's unity."

What to watch for at the next Congress

On 26 April, Lukashenka promised to present the Congress with "a realistic program for future activities that will serve as a guide for society."

The previously announced programmes, including Lukashenka's 2015 electoral platform, have already [partly failed](#). For instance, the platform promised that the government would not introduce any new taxes over the next five years, but the

authorities have reneged on this and already passed several laws introducing new taxes.

The president's approval rating [is falling](#) together with Belarus's economy. According to official figures, the economy declined by 3.6 per cent in the first quarter of 2016 and according to the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, 47 per cent of Belarusians blame the country's leader for the crisis. So, Lukashenka may hope that his next Congress performance will make the people more optimistic about the future.

Lukashenka will not be the only dignitary to speak at the next Congress. Other officials invited to speak at the Congress will be those who hold some influence within the bureaucracy. The anti-reform and pro-reform camps remain in conflict and the time allotted to speakers from each of these two opposing camps will show which group Lukashenka favours.

The Belarusian People's Congress remains in stark contrast with the Belarusian National Congress organised by several opposition groups. Pro-democratic forces organise their event almost without funds and are still facing problems finding an appropriate venue for the Congress, although it is scheduled to take place on 14-15 May. As former political prisoner [Mikalai Statkevich](#) recently stated, the Congress can even be held in the park. At the same time, the authorities spend sufficient money to organise their event.

But one thing unites both Assemblies. Although they use such titles as People's or National, few ordinary people take such words seriously. As Aliaksandr Klaskouski recently stated, the Belarusian authorities, the opposition and people live in parallel realities.

Public Administration in Belarus: A Story of Dysfunction

On 29 March, President Alexander Lukashenka held a meeting dedicated to the accession of Belarus to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Belarus has enjoyed observer status in the organisation since 1993, and every few years proclaims it will speed up the accession process.

However, as Belarus's economic reforms falter, a final deal remains elusive. The March meeting was intended to expedite accession, but it also served as a solemn reminder that Belarus may never join the WTO at all.

WTO accession is just one of many issues that Belarusian authorities have wrestled with for decades, without any clear outcome.

Certainly, Belarus as a country has made some progress. When visiting Minsk today many foreigners discover that the Belarusian capital is not that different from other Eastern European capitals. One can dine at a good restaurant, visit an art gallery, and call an [Uber](#) to return to a comfortable hotel.

The city is suited for a middle-income economy, authoritarianism notwithstanding. Comparisons to increasingly dysfunctional post-Soviet neighbours Russia and Ukraine make Belarus seem like a part of Europe.

And yet when it comes to public administration, Belarus remains in many respects just as dysfunctional. According to the 2014 Indicator of Quality of Governance, public governance in Belarus ranks lower than in Ukraine and only slightly

better than in Russia.

Of zombie enterprises and abandoned school reforms



Belarusian authorities have sustained a litany of unprofitable enterprises when it would be more economical to simply halt their activity. For instance, the state budget has financed JSC [Kamvol](#), a loss-making synthetic fibre producer, for more than 15 years, when the cheaper option would be to shut it down and issue a 10-year salary to its employees.

Process often takes precedence over outcome. If a loss-making company continues to operate, officials can continue drawing funds from the budget.

In another example, the state invested over \$1 billion [into "modernising"](#) cement and woodworking industries, but these businesses continue to generate losses. Recently, a flax factory in the small town of Liakhavichy used public funds to purchase new equipment, only to discover that it did not fit into the factory building.

Many officials refuse to accept the reality that state programmes fail no matter how much public largesse is poured into them. According to Deputy Prime Minister [Uladzimir Siamashka](#), in 2005-2010 alone, Belarus spent \$42 billion on

the revival of Belarusian villages, with little to show for it. Research by the National Academy of Sciences reveals that more than two-thirds of the rural population do not want their children to live in a village.

In Belarus's chaotic system of public administration, it is never entirely clear who makes decisions or how those decisions are implemented. For example, in the area of education reform, the number of school years was briefly raised from 11 to 12 years, but within just one generation was reverted to 11 years.

At the beginning of 2015, the Minister of Education recommended that Belarusian history be taught in the Belarusian language because "talking about our own history in another language is wrong." And yet, his proposal was never implemented, possibly because the idea caused a nervous reaction in the Russian-speaking media.

Who is to blame for dysfunctionality?

Belarus and Its Neighbours in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2015		
Country	Score	Rank
Poland	62	30
Lithuania	61	32
Latvia	55	40
Belarus	32	107
Russia	29	119
Ukraine	27	130

Data: Transparency International

During the 2000s, immense [Russian energy subsidies](#) helped smooth over Belarus's structural flaws. That is not the case anymore – last year Belarus's GDP contracted by 4%, and the

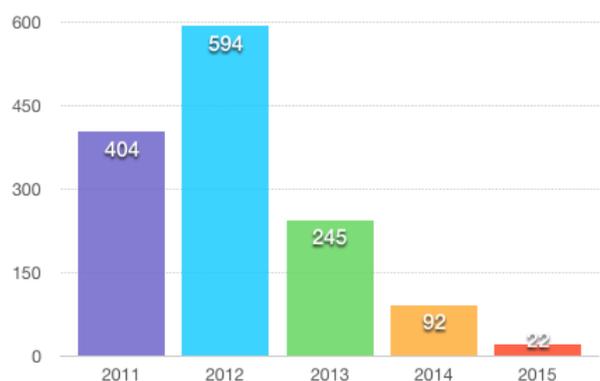
slide has continued into 2016. Now it is becoming clear that few steps were taken in relatively good times to lay a foundation for the future.

As Lukashenka's economic advisor [Kiryl Rudy](#) puts it, "there is always some wishful thinking embedded in the economic plans. An unexpected rise in oil prices or a sudden strengthening of the Russian rouble." Current government programmes that are supposed to deal with the crisis are just iterations of previously ineffectual programmes. And despite the inordinate power concentrated in Lukashenka's hands, the authorities remain inert even in times of crisis.

Indeed, in the absence of free elections, there are few newcomers to the ruling class and unelected officials can afford to make unrealistic promises. The head of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, Uladzimir Husakou, recently suggested that the Belarusian economy will expand by 8-8.5% this year, although the general consensus is that the recession will continue unabated. The poor quality of government elites is a key reason why Belarus in its current state stands little chance of a brighter future.

Where will the current system lead?

Manufacture of television apparatus, thous. units



Due to the government's paralysis, its response to the recession has been slow and inadequate. There is [a widening gap](#) between Minsk, the relatively prosperous capital, and the rest of the country.

Some manufacturing enterprises, such as television monitor production plants, recently disappeared after years of wasted government funding, while many of the industries that remain, such as [machine building](#), are unprofitable.

Trust in the government is also low. According to a recent poll by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, only 20.6% of respondents said they prefer to deposit their savings in Belarusian roubles, and a majority said they mistrusted the main state institutions.

Without reform, Belarus risks wasting its economic potential as the young generation grows older. It will become a country of despair, where low-paid people do not see any future and emigrate. In fact, that process is already underway.

Young Officials Get Positions, Old Crowd Waits for New Appointments – Belarus Profile Digest

Belarus Digest with its sister project [Belarus Profile](#) is launching a new series of publications primarily devoted to changes in the Belarusian nomenclature. Every two months, Belarus Profile Digest will cover the most important recent appointments and dismissals and examine emerging trends in

Belarus.

In November, [Lukashenka](#) made a number of appointments which show a new trend is developing. Many of the new appointees are young and all of them were born in Belarus. Another noticeable trend can be seen in the appointment of the first vice-ministers as ministers, as happened with the ministers of finance and housing and communal services as well as the previous appointment of the Minister of Information.

The former Minsk mayor, the Chairman of the Customs Committee and the Minister of Defence belong to an older generation of officials and are likely to get new appointments soon. The Belarusian bureaucratic system usually keeps even failed officials. This is due to the isolation of the nomenclature and the reluctance of young people to join it.

New Appointees



[Andrej Raŭkoŭ](#) became the new Minister of Defence after the dismissal of [Juryj Źadobin](#) earlier this month. He lacks work experience in the ministry – according to Lukashenka “that can be an advantage”.

Previously he commanded the troops of the North-Western Operational Command. Raŭkoŭ comes from Belarus. This is a break from the typical pattern in the country where people born outside of Belarus and educated in Russia have traditionally [dominated the leadership](#) of the military, police and the KGB.



[Andrej Šorac](#) replaced the previous head of the Minsk City Executive Committee, [Mikalaj Ladučka](#). Šorac is 41 so he is younger than a majority of senior officials. Over the past three years he served as minister of housing and communal services and prepared reforms in this arena. The civil society group 'Group on Housing Reforms', which included Šorac, exposed [a lot of weaknesses](#) in the housing and communal services of Minsk and his recent

appointment may be tied to their work.



[Aliaksandr Cierachaŭ](#) became the Minister of housing and communal services and the youngest minister in Belarus. Cierachaŭ is 36, he worked in the Homel Region Executive Committee and served as the first deputy of Šorac in the Ministry of Housing and Communal Services for the last three years.



[Uladzimir Amaryn](#) became the new Finance Minister. He is an insider in the ministry: Amaryn has been working in the financial system in Belarus since 1983, and from 2008 till 2014 he played the role of the First Deputy Minister of Finance. During the appointment Lukashenka advised Amaryn to follow the law and be careful: "Under no circumstance should you do what you must not do, under the order of a prime minister or deputy prime ministers as that destabilises the relationships in the ruling hierarchy."



[Jury Siańko](#) replaces [Aliaksandr Špilieŭski](#) now leads the State Customs Committee. Starting as an inspector in the Hrodna Region Customs, he rose to become the boss there, and over the last three years, led the Minsk Region Customs. According to Lukashenka, "Belarus has become the only transit corridor from east to west, so be ready to work in a new environment." Lukashenka also spoke about the need to increase customs revenues.



[Natallia Ejsmant](#) became press secretary of Alexander Lukashenka. Ejsmant worked as a journalist for the state broadcasting company and recently turned 30. For several years the post of press secretary has remained vacant. It should be noted that [Natallia Piatkievič](#), an influential assistant to the president, launched her own career through this very post.

Although officially Alexander Lukashenka cannot elect the head of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, of course, he makes final decision.



[Michail Orda](#) became the head of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus in October. Orda led the [Belarusian Republican Youth Union](#), a pro-Lukashenka youth organisation – under his leadership the BRYU conducted protests at the Western embassies. He served as a member of the House of Representatives and got under the EU visa restrictions. Following the appointment of the head of the Federation of Trade Unions, the EU removed Orda from the "black list".

Unemployed Officials

As a result of new appointments a number of former top officials remain in the "reserves".

[Juryj Žadobin](#) headed the Ministry of Defence since 2009 and has long had a reputation of being an old-timer in the Belarusian political system. Previously he led the Presidential Security Service, the Committee for State Security and the State Secretary of the Security Council. In 2009 Lukashenka said to Žadobin that was worse than all of the previous State Secretaries and appointed him instead to become the Minister of Defence.

[Mikalaj Ladučka](#) officially supervised Minsk City Executive Committee for four years, although he actually performed this duty even more due to the illness of the previous mayor. People will remember him for increasing housing density and demolition of historic buildings. Lukashenka also repeatedly criticised Ladučka for excessive bureaucracy in relations with investors.

[Aliaksandr Špilieŭski](#) headed the State Customs Committee for 13 years. However, in recent years, the income from the collection of duties saw basically no growth, a phenomenon

that can be linked with Špilieŭski's resignation. Špilieŭski is known for his conflicts with the Belarusian media and his Russian counterpart, with whom he had a running dispute concerning the Customs Union. When the head of the Russian customs service asked Shpileuski why Russia should 'feed' (subsidise) Belarus, the Belarusian head of the Customs Service advised him to be accurate in his assessments.

Circulation of the Bureaucrats

The future of Špilieŭski, Ladučka and Žadobin remain unknown, but it appears that they will remain in the ruling elite. Moreover, even a disgraceful dismissal does not preclude someone from getting a governmental post in the future. Many stories confirm this thesis.

[Piotr Prapakovič](#) remains the best example. During his reign at the National Bank the financial crisis of 2011 unfolded. However, soon after his dismissal Prapakovič became an assistant to the president, and now holds the post of deputy prime minister. In 2003, Lukashenka dismissed [Michail Rusy](#), Minister of Agriculture, for the falsification of accounting data and according to Lukashenka a "mockery of the peasants". But now Rusy holds the post of deputy prime minister in charge of agriculture.

The isolation of the nomenclature remains one of the reasons for the recycling of bureaucrats. People in the nomenclature should be loyal to the president, so many professional and democratic people left the bureaucracy in the 90s. Opposition politicians [Aliaksandr Milinkievič](#) and [Andrej Sannikaŭ](#) serve as examples. The truth is, Lukashenka simply lacks new people to replace incompetent bureaucrats.

Bureaucratic work in Belarus enjoys little popularity among people in their 30s and 40s. As economic analyst [Siarhiej Čaly](#) said "nobody wanted to be a minister." Moreover, the salary is low, and on average ministerial employees in Minsk

earn about \$1,000.

The recent appointments of at least a few young people to ministerial positions became a sign that the Belarusian elite may be capable of regeneration.

Belarusian Government: Getting Older and Less Capable of a Reform

Belarus has one of the oldest governments among all of the post-Soviet nations. The average age of the high level state officials has reached 56 years. The average age of the Council of Minister's members alone equals 55 years.

This is 6-8 years higher than in Russia and Ukraine and about 20 years higher than in some advanced post-Soviet reformist governments. The average age of the most senior officials in Belarus also becomes higher than in the neighbouring states.

As the majority of the high-ranking officials, who have been in top positions for the last 10-15 years get older the average age grows. With some exceptions, instances of young officials joining the top governing elite remain rare. This raises serious concerns about how Belarus could go through the challenges of the declared economic [modernisation](#).

How Old Are Belarusian Top Level Officials?

This [table prepared by Belarus Digest](#) shows the years of birth and current age of the high-ranking Belarusian officials. The table does not rank the officials in accordance with their

formal or informal roles in the political process. Their placement in the table is quite random but it makes the age point quite clearly.

The average high-ranking Belarusian official was born in 1956 and his/her age today reaches 56 years. This nearly equals Alexander Lukashenka's age. And the average member of the government (the Council of Ministers) is just one year younger – 55.

The oldest persons in the Belarusian political hierarchy remain the Speaker of the parliament's upper house Anatol Rubinau, Chairman of the Supreme Court Valyancin Sukala and Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Prakapovich. They have reached the age of 70. The youngest one, Andrei Shorets (40 years old), heads the Ministry of Housing and Utilities.

Among Oldest in the Post-Soviet Space

Comparisons with other former Soviet states reveal that the Belarusian governing elite becomes more senior than the region's average.

For example, the average age of the members of the Russian government stays at 49 years. However, if we add the other top-ranking officials (to make it comparable with the entire Belarusian list) then the average age of the Russian leadership goes up to 56 years, which looks the same as in Belarus.

The average age of the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers (as of December 2012) equals 47 years. The government of Kyrgyzstan – 53 and the government of Kazakhstan – 49.

Top-level officials in Belarus and neighbouring countries

	Belarus	Russia	Ukraine	Latvia	Lithuania	Poland
President	59	61	63	69	57	61
Prime Minister	63	48	66	42	55	56
Speaker of the Upper Chamber	74	64	-	-	-	64
Speaker of Lower Chamber	64	59	67	50	54	57
Average	65	58	65	54	53	60

Comparing the age of the most senior state officials in Belarus and the neighbouring countries also shows that Belarusian top officials are rather old.

Gerontocratic Rulers Incapable of Reform?

Can we call the present-day Belarusian government and ruling elite in general a gerontocracy?

Perhaps, not yet. This despite the fact that the average age of the top-ranking officials significantly exceeds the average age of the Belarusian population. According to the 2009 census, the latter equals 39.5 years old.

While the top Belarusian officials get older the majority of the public servants stay in their 30s and 40s. According to the Belarusian statistics agency, as of the beginning of 2013, 53,7% of all state officials were born between 1963 and 1983. And only 11.2% of them have already reached the pension age.

However, the latter have far better positions in the decision-making system. And here one more aspect seems crucial to this discussion: intuitively, the age of the high-ranking officials has to impact their ability to think and act innovatively. In particular, the ability to design and carry out effective systemic and sectoral reforms that Belarus definitely needs. This seems particularly topical in the framework of the declared modernisation plans.

The examples of such reformers as Estonia in the 1990s or Georgia in the 2000s suggest that the younger the government

the more likely it is to achieve groundbreaking results in modernising a country.

The average age of the Estonian post-Soviet government that Prime Minister Mart Laar formed in September 1992 was slightly above 30. And the premier himself only celebrated his 32nd birthday. Mart Laar names the young age of his government as one of the factors of the successful reforms: “we did not know what was real and what was not and thanks to that managed to accomplish unreal results”.

On the contrary, when the 71-year old Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus Piotr Prakapovich becomes responsible for the program of economic modernisation we can hardly have high hopes in him. Especially after his time as Chairperson of the National Bank and the [financial turmoil of 2011](#) that followed Prakapovich’s term at the National Bank.

Slow Generation Change

Overall, younger officials find it difficult to enter the highest echelons of power. Several factors could explain it.

First, the Belarusian bureaucratic machine follows rather specific selection rules. Connections seem to be a core criterion. The interviews with public servants that the Liberal Club conducts within [its study](#) on the public administration reform clearly confirm this.

And the higher an official climbs the career ladder the more his/her age becomes important. The corporate logic does not normally welcome “wunderkinds”: one has to earn the right to get high.

Second, top officials in Belarus are appointed by the authoritarian president rather than elected by a popular democratic vote. Regular elections only have to legitimise the leader’s decision in the eyes of Belarusians and foreigners. And in this situation a long record of good and loyal service

becomes more important than talent and competence.

In addition, Lukashenka might find more psychological comfort working with the old cadres he knows well. As the saying goes, no one prefers to change horses in midstream.

However, exceptions happen from time to time. The latest examples include the minister of utilities and housing Andei Shorets (40 years old) and the president's economic affairs aide Kiryl Rudy (35 years old). Each such case becomes resonating news within the state apparatus and society at large.

Moreover, there has been a lasting story of the so called "young wolves" in the government led by the president's oldest son [Viktar Lukashenka](#). But no one knows when and if these "young wolves" manage to gain full control and whether they will still be young by that time.

In the meantime, the old generation continue to rule the way they deem proper. They would love to preserve the political and socioeconomic status quo in the country and for that try to prevent any serious reform as long as they can. And even if the situation forces them to go for reforms one can hardly expect any innovative thinking there.

Analytical Paper: Who Rules Belarus?

Belarus Digest and the Centre for Transition Studies are launching a series of analytical papers offering in-depth analysis of various aspects of Belarus often overlooked by Western experts and press.

The forthcoming papers will deal with personalities within the Belarusian regime, national identity of Belarusians, the system of education in Belarus, reforms of bureaucracy, business climate and other topics.

The first paper prepared by Siarhei Bohdan analyses the Belarusian political and economic establishment, its features and potential and prospects for change. While the government's authority is concentrated in President Lukashenka, he needs a sophisticated state structures to run the country and has retained his retinue for years. While Lukashenka as a politician has been analysed quite extensively, his close comrades have scarcely been studied.

The paper annex contains personal portraits of key figures in the Belarusian regime, including Lukashenka's older son Viktor, Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich and Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey.

Belarusian ruling elites emerged as a result of an effective power-sharing deal between Soviet-era bureaucrats and new supporters of the Belarusian president who have risen from the depths of the provinces to the very top due to their talent and unscrupulous ambitions.

This liaison has proven successful both in terms of its cohesion and performance. There has been just one failed mutiny, occurring in the late 1990s amongst the nomenclature, while the consolidated regime-linked elites have run Belarus rather successfully in terms of its governance and economy.

Politically, Belarusian ruling elites of whatever origin have opted for an original path of development which has contradicted Western ideas about democracy and human rights, However, the opportunistic opposition to the West is not based on any profound ideology. The ruling establishment in Belarus can act as responsible and reasonable partner for the West if offered a pragmatic deal.

While pragmatically working with the ruling elites for the sake of preserving Belarusian independence and working towards an eventual smooth transformation, the West should simultaneously demonstrate to the Belarusian people realistic prospects of cooperation with Europe at the same time placing firm demands on the government.

- [Read Analytical Paper "Who Rules Belarus"](#)
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How Decisions are Made in Belarus

In less than two weeks, the Secretary of the Security Council Leanid Maltsau has to submit his proposal on the optimisation of the law enforcement agencies ("siloviki"). This follows the Presidential [Decree No. 168](#) aimed at reforming the public administration in Belarus.

This will again raise questions about the role of the "siloviki" and, ultimately, about how the country is governed and who makes the decisions. The obvious easy answer goes that, of course, Alexander Luakshenka does. In the personalistic authoritarianism he indeed makes all important decisions himself. However, it would be an extreme oversimplification to see only Lukashenka behind any single decision or piece of legislation.

The bureaucratic machine undoubtedly plays a decisive role in shaping policy alternatives that Lukashenka considers. It governs Belarus as much as its highest official does. Therefore, understanding the mechanics of this machine is crucial. A recent study of Minsk-based Liberal Club helps

shade some light on it.

It shows that the state decision-making process looks like a cycle with four different stages. It is strictly top-down and, therefore, highly reactive. The study also reveals poor communication between different ministries and other governmental bodies.

The public administration system in Belarus, in a way, resembles a Papal conclave: the outcomes of its work immediately become public and there are always rumours about, but generally the decision-making process remains non-transparent to outsiders.

Off-record interviews with state officials present the only opportunity to get an overall picture of the world inside the Belarusian state apparatus. The Centre for Analytical Initiatives of the Liberal Club has conducted a series of such interviews as part of its study on the reform of Belarus' public administration system. This article is based on their findings.

20 semi-structured interviews were conducted in April-May 2013. The interviewees represent the Presidential Administration, Council of Ministers, 5 ministries, 2 state concerns, 2 Voblast Executive Committees and 3 City Executive Committees.

Four Stages of State Decision-Making

The recent interviews reveal that the established decision-making process has four major stages and no single legal enactment which regulates it. Of course, the four stages do not apply to extraordinary cases where Lukashenka decides on the spot – like, for example, the cases of the confectionery factories [Kommunarka and Spartak](#) or the recent case of the private medical centre [Ecomedservice](#).

At the first stage officials identify problems that need

addressing. This normally results from various forms of monitoring the socioeconomic and political situation in the country: opinion polls, household surveys, analysis of citizens' complaints, inspections, etc.

Initiatives to address a problem are the responsibility of either the relevant government bodies (ministries or state concerns) or supreme governmental bodies (the Council of Ministers and the Presidential Administration). These bodies produce all sorts of annual legislative plans and state programmes that prioritise issues for the state.

At the second stage, once the priorities are set, thematic government bodies are assigned the task of drafting decrees or other legislative acts. According to the majority of the interviewees, ministries and those whom are assigned the tasks have enough competence to develop decent quality drafts.

However, the quality often suffers **at the third stage**, when drafts are circulated for discussion among all interested bodies. Among other things, each institution involved pursues its own corporate goals. The resulting balance of interests may significantly undermine the ideas of the original drafters.

Finally, **at the fourth stage** it will end up in the Presidential Administration. There they go through another round of balance-of-interests discussions. Influential officials have every chance to amend drafts the way they want (if high-ranking officials themselves do not clash over certain issues). Importantly, the Presidential Administration's governing principle is political expediency. As a result, here the contents of some drafts become further modified and streamlined in comparison with their technocratic original drafts.

Only after these four stages Alexandr Lukashenka reviews the drafts (if they need his signature) and makes his own

decision. No doubt, his opinion is heavily affected by the previous stages of decision-making and also by the people who present the drafts to him.

Implications

Socioeconomic plans serve as typical examples of this four-stage process. At a government meeting last year Lukashenka famously exclaimed: "Why do you submit these plans to me to sign and then fail to fulfil them?"

The answer is easy: because in the existing decision-making short-term political goals and populism often prevail over any reasonable analysis and long-term planning.

Another important implication of the findings is that state decision-making remains highly reactive. The majority of problems fall in the government's focus only after they become very serious. This results from the top-down hierarchical approach to identifying problems and making decisions.

This partially explains why Lukashenka has to interfere personally in all sorts of problems: the system of governance often remains inactive without an impulse from him. Of course, it was precisely Lukashenka's own political style that resulted in the consolidation of this very system. It is still important to remark that Lukashenka's personal involvement in every matter is often the only way to get things done by the bureaucratic machine.

Poor Inter-Institutional Communication

Finally, the interviews reveal another problem: the lack of proper communication among separate governmental bodies. If one ministry needs some data from another one, there is every chance that it will not get it. Or will not get it on time.

This strange situation primarily results from competition of powerful officials and state agencies. Sometimes they would

rather be happy to learn of the bad performance of their colleagues than the country's progress. The crisis-hit year of 2011, when certain [cracks](#) inside the government became obvious, serves as a good example of their disjointed relations.

In addition, Belarusian bureaucrats like to classify everything. Even harmless decrees can bear the "for internal use only" label. More sensitive documents get higher protection, which complicates the transfer of information even within the state machine.

Simply put, the state decision-making process in Belarus looks like a closed cycle broken into four main stages. The initial impulse comes from the supreme governmental bodies or even Lukashenka himself. Then it transforms into a draft that returns to the supreme level in a form suitable for the balance of interests and political expediency.

The natural drawbacks of this super-centralized system are poor inter-institutional communication and reactive actions instead of proactive strategic thinking.