

Sheiman: The Last Soldier of President Lukashenka

Last month Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka appointed Viktor Sheiman as head of the President's Property Administration, the biggest state-owned business empire and the financial backbone of Lukashenka's regime. Barely any other officials of the Belarusian regime are demonised by its opponents as much as General Viktor Sheiman.

Most media and oppositional politicians ascribe his involvement in every alleged nasty doing of the ruling clique and call him the grey eminence of the regime. But some opposition activists remember him from early 1990s and cannot grasp that this can be the same person they knew back then.

Like most of Lukashenka's men, he had no hopes of making it very high up in the Soviet system as he was quite ordinary until he joined forces with Lukashenka. And still it has been this very man: a paratrooper from a provincial garrison who together with the Belarusian ruler has created today's Belarus.

Village Boy

Viktor Sheiman (54) was born in a village in a remote rural district on the border with Lithuania, the only one in Belarus dominated by an ethnic minority – the Voranava. With such a humble background he managed to enter only a military school in the deeply provincial Soviet Far East called Blagoveshchensk Tank Command High School. He graduated in 1979 as Soviet troops began campaign in Afghanistan. Sheiman went to that war as an officer of Soviet Airborne Troops, the most intensively deployed group of Soviet forces during the conflict.



By 1990, he became a major and luckily got an assignment to a garrison in his native Belarus. Perestroika was already succeeding and Sheiman joined the political struggle. He got elected to the then vibrant parliament of Soviet Belarus and took part in establishing a nationalistic Belarusian Alliance of Soldiers (BZV).

Former colleagues which remain in the opposition remember him as a sincere patriot, openly supportive of the Belarusian language and national symbols abolished later by Lukashenka.

Siarhei Navumchyk of the Christian Conservative Party of Belarusian People's Front recalls Sheiman in positive terms as an open minded and pleasant man. Have the games of power with Lukashenka destroyed him, wondered recently Navumchyk speaking on the Radio of Liberty?

Throwing in his Lot with Lukashenka

In post-Soviet Belarus, however, the military was clearly a bad place to make a career. For a while, Sheiman worked in parliament where he befriended many current opponents of Lukashenka and was elected as the secretary of the parliamentary Commission on National Security, Defence and Crime Control. In addition to this he studied law. His time came in 1994. That year he joined the ambitious team of the future Belarusian president.

A young decorated veteran with political experience was a valuable asset to Lukashenka who built his election campaign by fiercely attacking ruling Soviet nomenclatura elites. A director of a collective farm, Lukashenka was despised by most professionals, and as a result, he initially had few qualified people in his team. In August 1994, as soon as Lukashenka won the presidential election, he appointed Sheiman to a top position: State Secretary of the newly formed Security Council

of Belarus.

Many members of Lukashenka's team very soon fell out with him. But not Sheiman. He firmly stood behind the boss. In December 1995, as Lukashenka embarked on his struggle to weaken and dissolve the parliament and ultimately establish an authoritarian regime, he appointed Sheiman to lead the key Ministry of the Interior.

They won the fight together by crushing street protests, organising a constitutional coup d'etat and destroying any meaningful opposition in the late 1990s. The stern-looking former paratrooper Sheiman, who never gave interviews, did his best to create the sterile political landscape of today's Belarus.

On the other hand, Lukashenka's men in these years successfully struggled not only with political opponents but also with criminality. Contrary to Russia with her terrible criminal chaos of 1990s, in Belarus criminal activity was reined in very quickly.

Working under the unscrupulous president, Sheiman helped to revive again all security agencies – police, special services and the military – severely battered and effectively paralysed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In November 2000, Lukashenka moved him to the office of Prosecutor General where Sheiman worked for the next four years. Those were the fat years of the regime which already had given up the plans of conquering Kremlin but still had generous Russian subsidies. In 2004-2006, Sheiman held another key office – Head of the Administration of the President – probably the most important power centre of the Belarusian regime.

Retirement Impossible

He then apparently left the political frontline and is said to

have switched to conducting murky deals. In 2006, he was again appointed the secretary of the Security Council only to be sacked after being accused of negligence after the July 2008 bombings in Minsk.

Yet Sheiman was too useful to be forgotten and in January 2009 he was appointed assistant to the President for Special Tasks. That was a very uncertain job – but it was not just honorary retirement, it was apparently an office to carry out tasks too sensitive to sort out through normal government channels. The general's comeback as a head of the President's Property Administration confirms his unfading relevance.

Sheiman has sacrificed for Lukashenka much more than most of other in president's retinue. It is Sheiman who was accused of involvement in the disappearance of three political opponents in 1999-2000. Since 2004, he has been banned from travelling to the US and EU – one of the first Belarusian officials to land on the list. He was one of the very few who were not even temporarily removed from it at the time of the warming up in relations between Belarus and the EU.

✘ Furthermore, Sheiman has worked for the Belarusian regime in developing countries since the mid-1990s, for example going to Sudan as early as 1996 or 1997. He has been a very important figure in Belarusian relations with Venezuela from the late 2000s.

Because of his frequent visits to the third world, Sheiman is regularly accused of involvement in arms deals. A real scandal broke out around him in 2008 when the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* accused him of complicity in Venezuelan attempts to help Colombian guerrillas. The documents published, however, were too ambiguous to corroborate the charges and did not name Sheiman directly.

The Belarusian leader appreciates the faithfulness of his soldier. Lukashenka gave the Soviet-era major the highest

military rank existing in Belarus: colonel general. Sheiman seems to enjoy such distinctions.

Recently he appeared publicly with an immense number of medals. Having a couple of real ones which he received in the Afghanistan war and from known special occasions (e.g. from the Venezuelan government), the general could have resisted adding to them dozens and dozens of doubtful decorations – affordable for everyone with some money.

Is He Really So Powerful?

Sheiman's career shows the new social mobility Lukashenka created to bring to the top people like himself. They are shrewd and not without talents but quite unscrupulous and sometimes narrow-minded. The general epitomises this group and to a certain extent the regime itself, alongside such regime officials as foreign minister [Makey](#) or head of Presidential administration [Kabiakou](#).

On the other hand, many other top bureaucrats only serve the regime yet, very likely, they do not consider it as their own. Prime Minister [Myasnikovich](#) seems to represent this group.

Lukashenka needs them all. He is as opportunist in domestic as he is in foreign policy. He has never stuck to any political line and has never given all the power to any single group, and Sheiman is an example of the uncertain fate of courtier-like Belarusian officials.

Presumably the powerful Sheiman had to accept a political setback and, of course, cannot be the grey eminence of the regime. Rather than being an independent politician, he is just one of the last soldiers remaining in Lukashenka's guard – a man to be deployed when and where necessary.