

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.

Olga Karatch

Olga Karatch is a Master of Arts in Political Sciences, European Humanitarian University, Vilnius, Lithuania (2012). For 2003-2007 she was a member of Vitebsk City Council (only oppositionist elected). Now she is a director of International Centre for civil initiatives "Our House".

Why Belarusians Refuse to

Work in Agriculture

Post-Soviet mass discourse often portrays Belarus as a country of villagers. A big deal of that comes from the image of president Lukashenka himself. He has been director of a farm in Eastern Belarus before going into high politics and is famous for his obsession with agricultural issues. This, however, did not help Belarus farming to turn into a thriving industry.

On 28 November, Belarus parliamentarians hosted deputy prime minister Michail Rusy. He presented plans for agricultural development and voiced some major problems of the sector. It becomes evident that the absence of reforms turned agriculture into a very unattractive place work destination.

An Everlasting *Kalhas*

Belarus agricultural sector remains largely unreformed since Soviet times. Collective farms, or kalhas (kolkhoz in Russian), is the main production unit in agriculture. Kalhas operates as a state-owned enterprise which usually employs workers from nearby villages.

In the Soviet Union, kalhas was not only the centre of rural economy, as practically all social life of rural community revolved around it. Belarus leadership chose to preservation the Soviet rural economy and community. However, it turned absolutely unattractive for Belarusians today.

Initially Lukashenka regime was not supporting private farming and today it makes less than 2% of Belarus agricultural production. The kalhas system, on the contrary, have been considerably subsidised despite significant losses. With the decline of Belarusian economic model, traditional support of Soviet-style collective farms becomes virtually impossible.

In recent years Belarus attempted to implement some regional policies to support rural development. The government launched a number of national programmes: State Complex Program for Development of Regions, Small and Medium Urban Settlements (2007-2010) and State Program for Revival and Development of Rural Areas (2005-2010). The programmes aimed at fostering economic development and attracting workers to the countryside.

Although some sound measures were introduced, like tax reductions for firms operating in rural areas, little hope for real changes. Two decades passed since the need for transformation became evident, and the current policy tools are unable to change deeply entrenched negative trends.

Growing Problems of the Sector

On 28 November, Belarus deputy prime minister Michail Rusy reported to the newly selected parliament. The subject of discussion was Belarus agricultural sector. Rusy presented ambitious plans for modernization of the sector by 2015.

Meanwhile, he admitted a number of serious problems that exist in agriculture today. Notably, he mentioned that "the problem of personnel able to implement large-scale transformations in agricultural sector has become crucial in recent years".

Indeed, for Belarus youth agriculture seems the least desirable sector of employment. First, farming offers lowest salaries compared to other sectors of employment.

It makes only 65% of the average national salary, while in industry it averages 120%, finances – 190%, public administration – 125%, education and health – 75%. Of course, the rates depend on the economic condition of various kahas. While richer ones (which are not a common case) can afford paying higher wages, the poor kalhas practically keep their workers in poverty. A monthly salary lower than \$200 is not

rarity in Belarusian villages. People cope by managing small kitchen gardens of their own or raising a couple of pigs.

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Second, most kalhas have poor managerial capacity. Soviet-style management, rudeness, contempt for initiative keeps young graduates and specialists away from kalhas. Moreover, farms offer very unattractive labour conditions. For instance, sometimes workers do not have day-offs, because they have to replace their drunk colleagues or simply because the staff is scarce.

Third, rural settlements offer very poor infrastructure of culture and entertainment. Libraries with a dozen of old books present the sole element of cultural and social life. Village club serves as the only entertainment place for youth, where they can relax after a hard workday engaging in drinking and fighting. Often though, the culture exists only around the local store, where villagers buy [cheap alcoholic beverages](#) and usually consume them right on the spot.

No wonder the youth move to urban centres looking for education, employment and fun. A special policy of mandatory two-year employment in public sector for graduates does not work either. Most of them leave villages after finishing the period and often use various tricks to escape it altogether.

But the problem concerns not only the youth. As Rusy admitted, agricultural workers started to seek employment and migrate to neighbouring states, particularly to Russia.

Paradoxically, in many villages of Eastern Belarus most men work in Russia and not in the local economy. They come home for a while to see their families and provide them with money,

and then head for another period of work in Russia. This mode of economy favours neither households nor Belarusian economy in general. The government, however, seems unable to resolve the problem and prefers not to raise it publicly.

Globalisation Pushes for Reform

Addressing the parliament last month, Michail Rusy announced a rather ambitious goal of the program of rural development till 2015. According to it, government is planning to invest \$7.5 bn in modernization of agricultural sector till 2015.

The policy of financial support of collective farms will shift from general subsidies to loans by business-plans. Average salary in agriculture will rise to BYR 8 m (almost \$1,000) by means of rapid increase in economic effectiveness of production. Today's salary in the sector varies from \$200 to \$400 depending on profitability of klahas.

This modernization rhetoric comes from an obvious fact, which Belarus leadership tried to deter for so long. Belarus becomes more and more involved in global economy through integration projects and therefore has to engage in stronger competition. The situation turned especially nasty when Russia joined WTO this year, being in Customs Union with Belarus simultaneously. Belarus [was not ready for such developments at all](#) and now has to catch up fast.

Russia consumes more than 80% of Belarus farming production. While other Belarusian production loses traditional markets, food remains a stable due to enormous needs of Russian megalopolises. Now and then, farming products appear in the middle of trade scandals between Belarus and Russia (["milk and sugar wars"](#) for example).

Such an export strategy advantages Belarus producers, as they export at prices several times higher than domestic market can offer. However, it is Belarus population who end up being disadvantaged, because better quality products are going

abroad and what remains is sold locally.

The plans of government are costly and ambitious, officials operate with numbers and figures and promise unprecedented growth. Yet the thing is that without a complex regional policy which targets all aspects of human life people will not come to work on the land.

Vadzim Smok