

The Split Between Belarusian Elites and Society on Ukraine Widens

On 17 July, Belarusian state media tried to strike a balance between Russia and Ukraine's respective positions when reporting on the MH17 crash.

Russian media clearly stated that it was Ukraine which had shot down the plane and the majority of Belarusians seem to believe it.

The Russian war against Ukraine has shown that the Belarusian elite and society see the world very differently.

Nearly all members of the Belarusian elite (both the authorities and the opposition) have a negative perception of the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine. It seems that Lukashenka's position is the closest it has ever been to that of pro-European democrats and the business elite of Belarus.

However, the majority of ordinary people seem to support Russia's narrative. The Kremlin's propaganda has found fertile soil for its world view in a Soviet mentality that has been perpetrated and cultivated over the years by Lukashenka's regime.

As of late, it appears that the authorities are trying to strengthen Belarusian identity, but despite their efforts, it is clearly not enough to turn back the tide of 20 years of propaganda. Whether they realise it or not, the only way to remedy the issues facing Belarusian society is for Lukashenka's regime allowing society an opportunity to develop intellectually and co-operate other groups of elites.

Otherwise, the gap between the political decision-makers and

the people will only continue to widen.

Elites Support Ukraine

The conflict in Ukraine has become perhaps the singular issue in which the entirety of the Belarusian elite hold virtually the same opinion.

Though the Belarusian authorities have made [several concessions](#) to the Kremlin, they managed [to maintain neutrality](#) in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and be supportive of the Kyiv leadership.

As a gesture of Belarus' commitment to Ukraine, [Lukashenka](#) came to Kyiv as the only president from the Commonwealth of Independent States to be [in attendance](#) at Piotr Poroshenko's inauguration.

Lukashenka calls on Ukraine to wipe out the militants in Eastern Ukraine

Moreover, the Belarusian head of state has time and again shown that he has a much more pro-Ukrainian stance than many politicians from the European Union. While Angela Merkel advises Poroshenko to call for another ceasefire and negotiate with the separatist forces, Lukashenka calls on Ukraine to wipe out the militants in Eastern Ukraine.

[Pavel Yakubovich](#), editor in chief of Soviet Belarus, the main propaganda newspaper of the regime, criticised [Russian media](#) for warmongering in one of his latest columns. Belarusian state media has maintained a certain level of balance in its coverage of the events in Ukraine, while many independent media outlets like Belgazeta, previously neutral, took the side of Ukraine.

The business elite in Belarus are typically silent in public, but unofficially many of them are very upset with Russia's actions, actions that have been to the detriment of the

private sector throughout the whole region. For example, shares of the US-Belarusian IT corporation EPAM Systems fell by a third due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The company has many offices, but its largest ones are located in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia.

All of the significant opposition politicians have been supporting Ukraine since the conflict began, although some marginal figures have been trying to flirt with Russia. For example, Ihar Drako of the Tell the truth campaign said Ukraine's division into three parts is in the best interest of Belarus.

The similarity of the entirety of the Belarusian elite has its roots in their common interests. They view Belarus as an independent, united nation and realise that by protecting Ukraine, they are also protecting themselves.

Society Supports the Kremlin

While the elites are preoccupied supporting Ukraine, a large section of the society is doing quite the opposite. Sociological data made available from the Belarusian Analytical Workshop show that 65.7% of Belarusians support the Russian annexation of the Crimea.

Only 15% of Belarusians consider it illegal. It seems logical to believe that that their views on the Donbas may be much the same. The vast majority of people have a negative attitude towards the new Ukrainian authorities.

Russian media dominates Belarus' airwaves, presenting only the Kremlin's views on the events in Eastern Ukraine

This is the result of aggressive Russian propaganda and the absence of any adequate attempts to bring about some form of informational balance from the Belarusian authorities. Russian media [dominates Belarus' airwaves](#), presenting only the

Kremlin's views on the events in Eastern Ukraine. As the Russian media is much better funded and offers higher quality products, most Belarusians choose them over their Belarusian counterparts when given a choice.

A restricted-access sociological study to which the author has access to shows that the programme 'News of the Week with Dmitry Kisilev' remains the most popular informational television programme of its kind in Belarus. This Russian television program has become one of the main mouthpieces of the Russian information war against Ukraine.

The Belarusian authorities have been cultivating a Soviet way of thinking for a considerable period of time, an issue that they are now having to contend with. The regime has systematically [weakened Belarusian national identity](#), reducing the value of its national history and symbols, and as a result Belarusians tend to perceive the world through the lens of Russian interests.

At that moment, as Western scholars are almost entirely absent from Belarusian academic institutions, universities host guests like hardcore Russian nationalist Alexander Dugin. Other similar phenomenon have long been accepted in most arenas of public life. As a result of this isolation and identity maintenance, even the authorities are finding that they lack qualified and capable people for public service.

How the Elite Can Fix Belarus' Problems

The Belarusian authorities grew afraid of the war in Ukraine not only for a fear of Putin, but also because the Belarusian public appear much more pro-Russian than their own elites. Hence, the regime has recently begun to quietly work on developing Belarusian national identity.

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On 3 July, Independence Day, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, for the first time in many years, spoke Belarusian in public. This month Vitsebsk officials erected a monument to Algird, the Grand Lithuanian Duke. The Mahiliou city authorities announced the renaming of their Soviet Square, reasoning that the name was now obsolete. But these gestures all appear to be too little, too late.

Every year, the Kremlin every strengthens its role in Belarus and Lukashenka seems to be unable to stop curb its growing influence, though he does try to slow its growth as much as he can. The Belarusian economy hums along largely [thanks to Russian money](#). The Kremlin controls Belarus in almost every aspect of its existence, including its culture. Belarus remains the only country from the former Soviet Union where the Russian language was given official status.

If the state elites want to have public opinion be closer to their own, they should support the national identity of the people and the intellectual development of society to greatest extent possible. The regime, over time, could find ways to cooperate with other elites, at least on a basic level, to help develop the nation's identity and bring it out of isolation.

Previous efforts in this direction can be found in the creation of the Advisory Board at the Presidential Administration, which functioned between 2008-2010, and could be a means to open up societal dialog once more. Another idea would be to invite members of the business elite to high positions in the government of Belarus. Improved relations with the West would also bring no harm.

On the one hand, the authorities would have to carry out their new policy quietly in order not to draw the wrath of the Kremlin for a pivot west. On the other, they need to do so quickly, as no state can function if the elite and society maintain largely opposing perceptions about their national and

civic identity.

Viber, World of Tanks, EPAM – Belarusian IT Companies Conquer the World

The Belarusian game World of Tanks has become one of the most profitable in the world, earning \$372m in 2013. The game, with 60 million users, is only one instance that shows how Belarusian IT business is achieving considerable successes and becoming global.

Viber, the smartphone messaging and calling client, has become one of the most popular applications in the AppStore and Google Play, and EPAM Systems creates software for the largest companies in the world. These are just some of the world's leading companies with their roots in Belarus.

Belarusian highly qualified specialists with a robust technical education and favourable business conditions in the industry have made □□these achievements possible. Success in this field should be an important lesson for the Belarusian authorities.

Belarusian Skype`s Killer

Smartphone application Viber can become perhaps the biggest Belarusian brand on the global market. More than 200 million people use the program, with some hundred thousand people every day becoming new users of the service.

Though the founders registered a company in Cyprus, the

application developers work in Israel and two Belarusian cities: [Minsk](#) and [Brest](#), a city in the west of the country. Minsk office employs about 60 people.

Currently Viber's is mostly popular in the countries of the former USSR, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The company has a global aspiration and often appears in the news from those regions.

This year, the company made its services in the Philippines free of charge to help victims of the typhoon to connect with one another. Also this year, Saudi authorities have demanded that they decrypt the services traffic, as they are unable to monitor it. Viber Media refused. As a result, Saudi Arabia has blocked the programme from being used within its borders.

It is noteworthy that the company's paid services in Belarus remain much more expensive than in other countries. For example, a one minute call to the U.S. phone costs 2 cents, while for a one minute call with a Belarusian number people should pay 39 cents. However, this price does not depend on the creators of the Viber, but on the telephone operators. Beltelekam, the state monopoly in this Belarusian market segment, sets such a high price.

IT-Leader in Eastern Europe?

Viber's case is not an exception. Some other companies with Belarusian roots have become global players.

According to the Global Outsourcing 100® List EPAM Systems, an American company with Belarusian roots, became a leading provider of software in Central and Eastern European region. The market capitalisation of the company at the New York Stock Exchange even reached a billion dollars at one point. Microsoft, Barclays Capital, London Stock Exchange, Aeroflot, Gazprom, The Coca-Cola Company were among the clients of the company.

Pennsylvania hosts EPAM`s headquarters. [Arkadz Dobkin](#), Belarusian National Technical University grad, moved to the U.S. from Belarus in 1991 and was washing dishes at the time, founding EPAM Systems in 1993. Now more than 9,000 people work for the company, half of them in Belarus. Apart from Belarus and the United States, EPAM Systems has offices in 10 countries.

It seems that every computer game addict knows the game [World of Tanks](#), a tank simulator set in the time of World War II. This game appears to be the biggest game made by Belarusian developers with over 60 million people registered in it.

Wargaming Public Co Ltd.'s official company registration is in Cyprus. In addition to offices on the island and in Belarus, the company has offices in nine countries and pursues quite an aggressive development strategy. Wargaming is a phenomenon for Belarus where all the big businesses are directly or indirectly linked to the bureaucracy – current or former officials, security officers and oligarchs controlled by Lukashenka.

The company constantly launches new online games and swallows up Western game studios. During the last two years Wargaming bought two American and one Australian firms. Moreover, Wargaming diversified its own portfolio and on 31 October acquired a controlling stake in Hellenic Bank, a large bank of Cyprus at a cost of € 50 million.

How Belarus Achieved IT Success

The poor reputation of Lukashenka`s regime casts a shadow over the whole country, including Belarusian innovators. However, Belarus has enough talented businessmen who can play the game on the global market. Success in the IT sphere has primarily to do with two factors.

Although the Belarusian [education system](#) is clearly deteriorating, [Belarusian programmers](#) remain able to compete

with their counterparts from the Silicon Valley.

At the Belarusian State University the scores of programmers' alma mater – the Faculty of Applied Mathematics – were considerably higher than in any other natural science faculty: 321-345 (depending on speciality) out of 400 possible points. Passing scores for most other natural science majors remained well below 300.

Marvin Liao, a former commercial director for Yahoo!, said in November 2013 that "Belarus in technical talent is excellent. Perhaps one of the best in the world."□

The authorities seems reluctant to be a hindrance□ to this sector. Many joke that they behave this way because they do not understand this branch of business. Moreover, the Belarusian [High Tech Park](#) offers its residents a preferential tax regime and favourable legislation. The companies registered in the technology park pay a fixed income tax of 9% and receive exemptions from corporate and capital gains taxes, VAT and custom duties.□ Few Belarusian business people have similar conditions.

However, Viber Media, EPAM Systems or Wargaming prefer to have their registration abroad. Not only do economic conditions influence their decisions, but political risks as well. On the one hand, businessmen are afraid of possible problems that the authorities could create. On the other hand, IT companies want to avoid economic sanctions by the U.S. and the European Union.

IT's success proves that Belarusian business is alive. Highly qualified personnel and favourable conditions from the state authorities can secure the constant growth of the industry and its global success. This is a good lesson for the Belarusian authorities.