

Why Belarusian Diplomats Leave Foreign Service

In the last month the issue of diplomacy was the focus of the Belarusian authorities several times.

On 20 August Alexander Lukashenka appointed a new foreign minister, Uladzimir Makey, and on 1 September he inaugurated the brand new building of the Faculty of International Relations of the Belarusian State University. Although the building looks glamorous, the president spoke with great concern about the human resources situation in the Belarusian diplomatic service.

What worries Lukashenka is that today, unlike in the previous decades, fewer and fewer talented young people want to pursue diplomatic careers in Belarus. Moreover, more and more qualified and experienced diplomats eagerly leave their posts in the foreign ministry for more rewarding jobs elsewhere.

This situation is a natural result of Minsk's self-isolating foreign policy and the tiny salaries that Belarusian diplomats receive. And there is hardly anything that can be done to seriously improve the situation.

UN Founding Member without a Real MFA

The present-day Belarusian diplomatic service traces its origins back to 1945. The leadership of the Soviet Union wanted to have as many votes as possible during discussions at the United Nations. Therefore, the USSR insisted on including both the Belarusian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics as independent founding Member States of the UN.

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Thus, since the very inception of the UN in 1940s, Belarus has had its own diplomatic representation there. Of course, it only performed decorative functions and all the decisions were really made in Moscow. But at least the Soviet rulers had to raise the perception of independent foreign policy making in the BSSR and established a separate foreign ministry in Minsk. They appointed Kuzma Kiselev (a doctor by education) as the first Belarusian minister of foreign affairs.

As the task of the Belarusian diplomatic mission during the Soviet era was just to vote the way the Kremlin decided, the ministry in Minsk was very small. Its staff did not exceed 20 people. Nonetheless, some diplomatic traditions began to take root even under those conditions.

The Newly Sovereign State in Search for its Foreign Policy Elite

When Belarus gained independence it already had a small foreign ministry and some diplomats with experience in international affairs. But, of course, the new situation required a fully-functional ministry. And the government started to look everywhere for people who could handle the difficult task of promoting Belarusian interests in the international arena. They even placed job adverts on national radio.

The main requirement for new diplomats was a knowledge of foreign languages. Belarus did not have an undergraduate or graduate school that taught international relations. So the majority of newcomers were graduates of Minsk State Linguistic University (then known as Minsk Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages).

Diplomacy started to attract the most talented and ambitious young people who wanted to pursue beautiful lucrative careers. Like in the Soviet Union, male candidates had far greater employment opportunities than female. As a result, today there

is huge gender imbalance in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Gradually the MFA became a sanctuary for the children of top officials. Walking along the corridors of the ministry, one would see innumerable door signs with easily recognisable surnames. At some point it became almost impossible for a young man without proper connections (*blat*) to get a job in the ministry no matter how qualified he was.

Poor Relations with Academia

Apart from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the newly sovereign Belarus needed its own diplomatic school. In 1995 the leading university – Belarusian State University – established the Faculty of International Relations. Its primary purpose was to prepare cadres for the MFA.

In the beginning almost all the graduates of the Faculty automatically got into the ministry. It is likely due to this fact that it became one of the most popular and prestigious schools in the country. Enrolment competition skyrocketed. For example, in 2004 about 400 applicants competed for twenty tuition-free places in the field of International Relations.

But as acceptance to the MFA began to depend not only on merit but on proper connections, the role of the Faculty of International Relations started to diminish. It turned into a school that prepares specialists that the Belarusian labour market has no demand for.

Moreover, the Faculty of International Relations and MFA did not manage to establish good cooperation. Scholars from the faculty are never invited to contribute to strategic thinking in the ministry. And MFA representatives rarely participate in academic discussions at the university. As a result, all sides lose. The scholarly work has become detached from the realities on the ground, and the ministerial foreign policy strategies less carefully thought through.

From Elitism to Defection

The past couple of years have seen a serious decline in the prestige of diplomatic careers in Belarus. Several devaluations of the Belarusian rouble have made the salaries in the MFA unbelievably low. For example, an attaché who is just starting his career gets roughly \$300 per month. The head of a department with the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary earns around \$1000. Of course, during foreign placements diplomats get considerably more. But given the huge workload that they have this is almost peanuts.

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Jobs in the private sector can offer many times over this salary. And there one does not have to feel embarrassed because of the self-isolating and freakish behaviour of the Belarusian government. Many diplomats disagree with the regime's policies but have to defend them as a part of their work. It is no wonder then why so many young professionals often prefer careers in business to the diplomatic service. Good evidence of this is the fact that fewer and fewer top officials try to ensure a place for their children in the MFA.

Thus, Lukashenka's worries are not in vain. The current state of the economy will not enable the state to raise diplomats' salaries to a competitive level. Like those working for [other government institutions](#), the same old officials migrate from one position into another or abandon government jobs altogether. The foreign ministry is losing talent who defect from the prospects of humiliating pay for an extremely difficult job where they are representing the most repressive government in Europe.