

Lukashenka Entertains Loyal Russian Journalists

Last week, almost one hundred journalists from Russian regions came to Belarus to enjoy a carefully staged show.

The most important component of it was Lukashenka's performance at his press conference on 16 October. Belarusian authorities use free trips for Russian journalists as an instrument of propaganda targeted at journalists from various parts of Russia, the Russian government and Belarusian electorate.

Lukashenka expects the Russians to buy his image of effective Soviet-style ruler. He tries to contrast the problems of Russia, such as social inequality and poor governance, with Belarusian "socialism and order". Meanwhile, the Russian government is blamed for all major problems in Belarus. Lukashenka uses this tactics to persuade Belarusians that he is not guilty for the worsening problems under the Belarusian model. But as time goes on, the old propaganda methods seem to lag behind and lose their effectiveness.

A Major PR Investment

2012 was the tenth anniversary of these organized trips for Russian journalists to Belarus. 90 journalists represented 80 Russian media from 48 regions – quite a number for a propaganda campaign.

This event is much more than a press-conference. It also includes a week of travelling around Belarus and visiting enterprises, organisations, and historical and cultural sites. Of course, authorities include only the most successful sites on the list, as the aim of the journey is not to paint a real picture of Belarus but to create a positive image.

It is not easy to become a guest of this week-long tour around Belarus. The Presidential Administration carefully screens all potential candidates. As a result, one will not find representatives of federal TV channels and major newspapers among the participants.

All journalists come from regional media, as Russian regions show much stronger support for the Belarusian ruler. They present a more conservative side of Russia, and therefore like the authoritarian style of the Belarusian president coupled with myths about Belarusian order and respect for common people, which reminds them of Soviet times.

The Belarusian authorities usually act very generously during these visits: they cover all expenses, provide journalists with nice accommodation and meals. In addition, after visiting any enterprise the guests usually receive its products as gifts. No wonder that after such visits Russian journalists have sweet memories about rapidly developing little Belarus and its strict but fair leader.

The journalists understand the price they must pay in exchange for such generosity. The regime expects them to report to their audience a standard set of [myths about Belarus](#). Some of the most popular myths include the following: they did not ruin the Soviet legacy, they did not let the oligarchs rob the ordinary people and privatise national property, and they maintain everything in good order.

Slavic Brothers that Swindle Belarus

Another goal of these conferences are to reach the Russian elite and Lukashenka's own electorate in Belarus.

Such conferences provide a good opportunity for Lukashenka to tell his Russian colleagues things that are not easy to tell in personal meetings. In other words, Lukashenka can criticise the Russian government without facing them. The conference is also a good opportunity to blame Russia for Lukashenka's own

political failures.

Support for the regime is in constant decline, and turnout at the recent parliamentary elections proved it. Lukashenka badly needs justification for his failures and Russia is very convenient for that purpose.

This year, Lukashenka sounded offended. Throughout the conference, the Belarusian president complained about the Russian government constantly swindling poor Belarusians. He blamed Russia for not letting Belarusians produce gas and oil from Russian subsurface like western countries do. Russia obviously wants to control Belarus through minerals supply, as its own production will increase Belarus independence from the energy empire.

Lukashenka also criticised the Russians for recently joining the WTO. According to the Belarusian ruler, Russia declared EurAsEC (Eurasian Economic Community) its main integration priority, but in reality joined the WTO without Belarus. Now Belarus has to “struggle” in the unexpected economic environment of the WTO without having made any special preparations.

He openly blamed Russia for the 2011 economic crisis in Belarus. Lukashenka repeated his favourite myth that the crises occurred because of the introduction of duties on second-hand cars. The duties were Russia’s initiative to protect the Russian car industry.

According to that myth, Belarusians bought huge amounts of foreign currency and rushed to neighbouring EU countries to buy used cars. This resulted in financial distortion and the subsequent [sharp devaluation of the Belarusian rouble](#). Of course, he did not elaborate that the national currency was printed before the 2010 elections to reach the electoral promise of a \$500 per month average salary.

Lukashenka also revealed some interesting facts

from Belarusian backstage politics. He mentioned that he once received a luxurious Maybach car as a present from a foreigner (it could indeed be a form of bribe for the dictator's favours).

He also announced that some Russian oligarch offered him a \$5bn kickback for the privatisation of the largest Belarusian enterprise, Belaruskali. Of course, the defender of the common people rejected that generous offer.

Is the Old Game Over?

Such a PR campaign needs substantial funding, but will this investment bring the expected profit? If we look at the three main target audiences of the conference, the answers vary.

The only audience where Lukashenka can definitely succeed is the Russian regions. Ordinary Russians that live in remote places where freedom of media is restricted will likely believe the reports of local journalists that were properly brainwashed in Belarus. However, with the other two target groups the situation looks more difficult.

Russians have extensive leverage on Lukashenka and seem to actively use it while publicly expressing proper and polite rhetoric. Belarus for its part has nothing to counterbalance this leverage, since it cannot turn to the West without radical changes inside the regime. Lukashenka is trapped and is now trying to shake off responsibility, But as he confessed at the conference, Belarusian negotiators are "already laughed at" in Moscow.

The Russian establishment do not take Lukashenka seriously, like they did some 15 years ago. They fully understand the situation that Belarus has ended up and will use that situation to their advantage. Short-sighted politics of the Belarusian president are indeed worth laughing at: he becomes he is totally dependent on his "Slavic brothers".

Meanwhile, in Belarus trust in the authorities is gradually falling. An October poll conducted by the IISEPS shows that support for Lukashenka is at around 30 per cent. After last year's notorious devaluation, people do not believe any assurances on economic policy. They behave according to rumours and insider information from relatives and friends. Lukashenka's pleading not guilty in front of the electorate is also likely to fail.

It looks like the regime is running out of substantial arguments for propaganda. The reality turns out completely different and becomes too obvious to not be accepted. So, the Belarusian regime faces a major challenge with an unknown outcome. Playing by the old rules is impossible, but the new rules will destroy the game.

Vadzim Smok

The Secret of Lukashenka's Popularity in the Former Soviet Union

Alexander Lukashenka's high ratings in the post-Soviet space are far less publicised than his disapproval in the West. But the fact remains: the President of Belarus is rather popular in the former Soviet republics. He is liked for appearing to create law and order and for keeping the Russian subsidies flowing. For states like Moldova and Ukraine, Lukashenka's approval is also a vote of no confidence in their own leadership.

In the absence of fair elections and restrictions on independent opinion polls it is difficult to find reliable statistics on Lukashenka's popularity in Belarus. It is all too easy to assume that the president has fallen out of everybody's favour. One can make no claims about the leader's fame within the borders of his own republic: conducting a representative survey on such a sensitive subject in Belarus is next to impossible.

However, evidence from a more democratic post-Soviet society may be instructive. And understanding Lukashenka's ratings in Eastern European states may hold a key to finding a better European approach to the region.

"Batka's Iron Hand Would Restore Order in Moldova"

Only Russian president Vladimir Putin was able to beat Lukashenka in popularity among Moldovans. But for the Belarusian leader standing next to Putin in a popularity contest is an achievement by itself. Moldovans cannot be unaware of these leaders' authoritarianism, and especially of Putin's partiality toward Transnistria in the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict. So what explains Lukashenka's popularity among Moldovans?

According to an online survey conducted by www.kp.md, Moldovans would like to borrow Lukashenka to bring law and order to their country. They are aware of "batka's iron hand" and willing to try it. Putin could be useful in fighting their oligarchs and bandits.

One could dismiss the survey results as telling little about the rest of the post-Soviet space: after all, Moldova is the poorest country in Europe and suffers from a frozen conflict. Since the spring of 2009, the political climate in Chisinau has been polarised, and for some Moldovans, almost any ruler may seem better than their current leaders.

At the same time, Moldova is on the best terms with the EU among the post-Soviet states, enjoys the most EU assistance per capita and has an exceptionally high internet penetration rate. In short, its citizens are by no means vulnerable to the lack of information about Lukashenka's sins.

Winning the Minds of Ukrainians, Georgians, Russians

Lukashenka is even popular in Georgia, an extremely pro-Western state that likes to tout its democratic credentials

Lukashenka's rating is also high in neighbouring Ukraine. The most recent albeit dated 2009 [survey by Razumkov Centre](#) found that 56.8 per cent of Ukrainians approved of Lukashenka, and only 3.9 per cent disapproved of him. Lukashenka is even popular in Georgia, an extremely pro-Western state that likes to tout its democratic credentials.

He is praised by the ordinary Georgians not so much for not recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but for keeping unemployment low – or at least for creating such an [impression outside Belarus](#). While few outside Belarus know how unprotected a Belarusian employee is *vis-à-vis* the state, the state-engineered full-employment façade is easily reaching the foreign audiences.

Even in Russia, where the population has had its own share of strongmanship and economic success, Lukashenka is popular. According to one [survey](#), his approval in Russia was highest in 2000 and 2008 at 40 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively, but dropped during the Belarus-Russia information war. One cannot imagine any other non-Russian post-Soviet leader scoring points with the Russians.

Lukashenka: a Good Manager?

People in many ill-stared post-Soviet countries look up to a leader who can restore law and order in their countries.

Stability for them comes before democracy and freedom of speech. The people's choices are telling because citizens of the states that look up to Europe (e.g., Moldova) have heard the sharp Western criticism of Lukashenka's authoritarianism.

Those who visited Minsk remember its safe clean streets and friendly hospitable people

Unlike a typical Western European, many citizens of post-Soviet states have actually been to Belarus. Those who have visited Minsk remember its safe, clean streets and friendly, hospitable people. They hear that the President takes care of pensioners and the working class. It is not that the visitors are unaware of the political prisoners or have not heard about the rigged election, but they accept the price paid for the law and order in Belarus.

Even policy specialists acknowledge the attraction of Lukashenka's style in the interviews. In an interview with Belarus Digest, Moldovan political scientist Igor Bocan pointed out that Lukashenka's rule is a particular type of political order with authoritarian institutions that perform their functions well. Moldovan economist Galina Selari called Belarus "the only post-Soviet country where the state fulfils its functions".

In other words, Lukashenka's secret is getting things done better than his counterparts in Moldova and some other states. The Belarusian leader's managerial skills and his frequent usage of the phrase "market socialism" were even [noticed by the European left.](#)

Belarusian Economic Miracle?

Among ordinary people the Belarusian leader is turning into something of a hero thanks to his dexterity *vis-a-vis* Russia. People in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine believe Lukashenka has swindled Moscow into providing his country with cheap energy

and a welcoming market. Most are unaware of the arguments that Belarus has lost some of its independence or will have to sell its entire heavy industry to Moscow. They wish their own politicians did not burn the bridges with the former empire.

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During Lukashenka's lengthy rule, thanks to Russian subsidies Belarus survived the stormy 1990s and the subsequent crises, foregoing economic restructuring which would have brought some losers and a share of pain. The Belarusian people did not live through substantial privatisation or marketisation. Until the recent currency crisis, for which Lukashenka's fans hold the West or Moscow accountable, the average wages in Belarus were steadily climbing.

But of course, the uncomfortable truth remains: the Belarusian economy (read: the Belarusian state) is completely dependent on Russia and Russian oil. The longer the structural reforms are postponed, the greater the costs will be. Until then, Lukashenka's style will remain popular.

Favoured Thanks to Other's Faults

Ultimately, a president should be loved by their domestic, not foreign, electorate. Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev, Western darlings for parts of their careers, wound up deeply unpopular domestically. Russia's favourite Eduard Shevardnadze was hated by the Georgians at home.

Support for Lukashenka in the post-Soviet space is a vote against local politicians, not so much a vote for him personally.

Lukashenka's New Information War with Russia

During a recent press conferences, Belarusian TV propagandist Yury Prakopau asked Belarusian President a question: "Why Russia conducts unfair policy towards Belarus, and doesn't help it in the time of crisis, as the EU helps Greece?" Lukashenka answered: "Yury, don't provoke me. I have enough as it is. Everybody understands it anyway. We'll overcome it".

After the presidential election of December 19 Lukashenka temporarily stopped the anti-Russian information campaign and accused the West of supporting a coup d'état in Belarus. During that period the main topic of Yury Prakopau's shows was devious intentions and actions of the West. Lukashenka simmered for a long time when Moscow was making demands to sell enterprises to Russian companies and make other steps towards genuine integration, as the Kremlin sees it. Now, Lukashenka "lets off the steam". Once again, an anti-Russian information campaign unfolds in Belarus.

Yury Prakopau is a presenter of the evening news on the First Belarusian State Television Channel. He can be called a mouthpiece of the Presidential Administration. Lukashenka calls Prakopau by first name only: "Yury", as a close collaborator.

Lukashenka gave Prakopau the opportunity to say in plain language what he was thinking himself of the relations with the eastern neighbor: "The Kremlin ideologists gave an order to their media: say either bad or nothing about Belarus". "All claims of the Russian side to the president of Belarus are explained by the fact that he does not agree to sell out

the country. The goal of the Russian policy is to force selling enterprises to oligarchs. They robbed their own country and now they are eager to get to Belarus".

According to Prakopau, the 'silent protest actions' in Minsk and other large cities of Belarus on June 15 and June 22, 2011 were "stage-managed in Moscow, like all other anti-Belarusian deeds." According to him, "the Kremlin experts believe that the Belarusian authorities will lose their ground, facing modern web-technologies." Prakopau established a linkage between the insidious plans of Russia, the silent protest actions, and the stirred up 'Tell the Truth!' civil campaign. He was trying to convince the audience that these were the parts of the same system.

Dwelling about a recent silent protest action, Prakopau noted that several hundreds of drunken youngsters participated in the event. "The leader of 'Tell the Truth' civil campaign Neklayev was there. Having got out of jail, he fell back into his old ways," he added. Prakopau was trying to drive the audience at the notion that Uladzimir Neklayev and other leaders of 'Tell the Truth' civil campaign might be sent back to prison, since they act in the interest of Russia and its oligarchs.

Actually, the on-line announcements and news stories of "Revolution through the Social Network" civil campaign, calling the Belarusian people to take part in the silent protest actions, must have been created by professionals. Hardly could bloggers deal with production of such materials.

However, there is little chance the silent protest actions will grow into large manifestations against the Lukashenka regime. Several thousands of protest action participants in Minsk and several hundreds of people in the regional centers are quickly dispersed by Lukashenka's security agents. The silent protest actions will not cause the change of power in the country. Still, they can lead to the appearance of new

political prisoners in the Belarusian jails.

Obviously Russia is eager to drive Lukashenka into a corner and catch him by the throat there. The Kremlin is interested in filling the Belarusian jails with new political prisoners. The news programs of Russian TV channels pay serious attention to the crisis in the Belarusian currency market and the silent protest actions nowadays.

“The Belarusians go out to the streets,” the Russian ‘REN-TV’ reported on June 28, 2011. “The Belarusian rubles have turned into “funny money” and people spend days and nights in queues for the foreign currency. The people stormed into stores. The situation became uncontrolled,” the Russian “NTV” TV channel’s news announcer noted on June 29, 2011. “Russia’s subsidies to Belarus have amounted to USD 60 billion over the recent years. The Belarusian economy will not survive without the Russian assistance,” a Russian political scientist Andrei Suzdaltsev said. “Now, the only remaining chance for Lukashenka is to appear under Russia’s wing. Should Belarus introduce the Russian ruble as its monetary unit, the Belarusian economy will become stable all at once and get rid of quite a few current problems immediately,” another Russian political scientist Viacheslav Nikonov summarized the general idea at the end of the program.

Lukashenka expressed his stern will to stand up to the pressure from the West and the East in his speech, dedicated to the Belarus’ Independence Day, delivered on July 1, 2011:

we are attacked and tested for hardness nowadays. Somebody hates us for failing to march in the common formation and dance to the Brussels tune. Others regard us as an unpleasant example, thrown in their teeth. The country hasn’t been plundered. We don’t have a gap between the provocative luxury and the flagrant poverty. Somebody feels infuriated at the impossibility to buy and sell public positions and spend billions of money from public funds to offshore zones here.

Our enemies treated certain problems we faced in the financial and economic field as a signal to action. Some types, who name themselves politicians through a misunderstanding, inside Belarus and abroad keep relishing the emerged difficulties so enthusiastically, as though they have taken their hand in creating the plight. Calm down! You won't manage to catch the desired golden fish in the troubled waters. Even more so you won't be able to force us to our knees.

He continued the topic of resistance to the West and Russia in his speech at the ceremony of opening the military parade in Minsk on July 3, 2011. Particularly, Lukashenka [addressed](#) the following words to Russia: "Someone intends to use the weapons of mass informational destruction against us and impose their will on us."

Lukashenka treats the demand of the West to release the political prisoners as a much smaller danger to independence of Belarus in comparison with Russia's demands to sell the industrial enterprises, unify the monetary systems, and take other steps towards the 'real' integration, as seen by the Kremlin.

Andrei Liakhovich

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The Weapons of Mass

Information

In his Independence Day speech today, Alyaksandr Lukashenka described "information intervention" as the main danger to independence of Belarus. According to him, external enemies of the country deploy the weapons of mass information to manipulate public opinion in Belarus. He has a peculiar understanding of independence. For Lukashenka, independence of Belarus means the same as his personal independence from other institutions and forces.

At the military parade today, the authorities should have also demonstrated the modern tools which help them remain independent. At least three important things were missing – giant police trucks designed to transport detained protestors, plain-clothed security service agents who grab people in the streets and Internet warfare specialists, who block web sites and combat protesters on social networks. But these units were busy today fighting for independence of Belarus rulers from their people.

The police trucks were patiently waiting for their passengers who were delivered to them in hundreds by plain clothed security agents during the day. Men in black promptly detained those who looked suspicious or tried to clap. The state IT specialists were busy with denial of service attacks on independent internet media. They also succeeded in blocking all large Belarus protest groups on the Russian social networking service Vkontakte.

Despite their rhetoric and military parades, Belarusian authorities understand that controlling the spread of information is the key to their political survival. In today's Europe, using military force to unseat a ruler of another country is very unlikely. Fortunately, these times are long gone. Even Russia stopped short of using its army to

unseat Georgia's president Saakashvili in 2008. The main threat for autocratic rulers comes from their own people who need to be kept either loyal or at least fearful. Mass media is the main instrument to achieve that.

The protests organized by means of Internet only engaged a limited number of people. Most in Belarus gather their information from television and radio. Nothing can beat their hypnotic effect. State television and state radio are available in virtually every Belarusian flat. As a result, people learn political news from these easily available sources. They may also prefer not to watch the news at all or watch Russian channels, which are available in Belarusians a part of the standard package.

Russia often criticizes and even offends Belarus authorities. However, the official Minsk learned how to filter such broadcasts. This filtering is not always effective, which undermines the state's nearly complete TV and radio monopoly. Russian media have their own agenda. For instance, they like to hint that if Belarus replaces its national currency with the Russian ruble, the economic problems of Belarusians will soon be over. They do not mention that it will also be the end of the country's independence too. Many analysts agree that Russia wants to weaken Lukashenka, but not interested to unseat him.

The only alternative television channel for Belarusians is Poland-based Belsat. This satellite channel is primarily financed by the Polish Government, is structurally a part of the Polish public television but employs many Belarusian journalists. The channel's reach in Belarus is limited. Because of the lack of finance, they can only prepare less than an hour of daily Belarusian news coverage and cannot be watched without a satellite dish. Because of the economic crises, the satellite dish became a luxury unaffordable to many in Belarus. Belsat still does not have live internet broadcast. An effective improvement of its reach could be

trans-border broadcasts to cover at least large border towns such as Brest and Hrodna. However, this has not yet been done.

The role of Internet in Belarus is steadily increasing, but it is far from being the dominant source of information. According to a May survey of the Independent Institute for Sociological and Political Studies, 33% of the adult population in Belarus received information from the Internet and only 2.2% – from social networks. This 33% include those who never read any political news on Internet as well as strong supporters of the authorities. And the 2.2% using the social networks, even assuming if they all want to protest, cannot do much against the army of security agents. The state security services block social networks and fill Twitter and Facebook feeds with false and misleading information to disorient and intimidate protesters.

As a result, the authorities are winning the information battle and Internet does little to dilute the effect of the state propaganda machine. As long as state propaganda succeeds in making Belarusians either loyal or fearful – it will take a long time before real changes will take place. However, if the economic decline continues, even the most aggressive brainwashing and sophisticated security services may fail.

YK