

Belarus May Introduce Forced Labour to Fight Sponging

On 20 October the government announced a plan to introduce punishment for sponging ('tuneyadstvo'). It was practiced in Soviet times and it may return to Belarus again. About 10% of population able to work do not pay taxes although the official unemployment rate is only 0,5%.

Belarus has one of the largest shadow economies in the region. Over the last years the Belarusian authorities often tolerated illegal economic activity in return for political loyalty. But as the state finances become thin and political situation seems under control, the authorities seek to exploit the huge shadow sector.

The government suggests various options to resolve the problem, from a fixed fee on spongers to forced employment, but decision is yet to be taken. Such measures may create a legalised violation of human rights, but the regime looks very determined to extract new funds at high political price.

The War on Spongers Is Coming

On 20 October Aliaksandr Lukashenka held a meeting with the government to discuss current problems of the labour market in Belarus. The country is facing the same demographic problems as practically all European countries: the number of able-bodied population decreases, which results in the lack of labour force and pressure on social system, especially pensions and healthcare.

Moreover, about 500 000 Belarusians either do not work at all, or do not work officially according to the governmental data. This equals to more than 10% of the population able to work. They use free education, healthcare and pay reduced price for

public services, but do not contribute to the state budget.

Lukashenka looked unusually emotional and determined during the sponging discussion: “It is high time to stop the sponging! In the name of revolution 400,000 of Belarusians must be involved in work!”

Finally, Lukashenka appointed the head of Presidential Administration [Andrej Kabiakoŭ](#) and State Secretary of Security Council [Aliaksandr Miažujeŭ](#) responsible for developing measures against spongers. As both of them occupy highest positions in the regime's hierarchy, it looks like they regard the problem as very serious. And the solution must be found fast – Lukashenka ordered to start the implementation of new policies from the new year.

What Belarusian leader did not mention is that Belarus has one of the largest shadow economies among the post-socialist countries. According to World Bank estimates, in 2010 Belarus had a shadow economy amounting to 46% of GDP.

During the years of stability in 2000s, when economy boosted due to high Russian subsidies, the regime [tolerated the shadow activity](#) of the citizens in exchange for political loyalty. But as economic situation worsened in recent years, the government seeks new sources of filling the budget.

Who are Belarusians Spongers

Several groups of citizens are most likely to be targeted under the new law. The government officials usually talk about [alcoholics who do not work](#) because of addiction. In this case, however, administrative measures will hardly work, as they do not work currently. For instance, local authorities force state enterprises to employ parents, who were deprived of parental rights, and have to pay for their children's care in orphanage.

Usually being alcoholics, they barely show up at work. Even

forced delivery of such citizens to their workplaces by the policemen does not help. Needless to say, the employers, who have to employ them, strongly oppose such measures.

More sober citizens, who consciously evade taxes, work either abroad or in the shadow economy. A considerable number of people [work in Russia](#), visiting their families in Belarus from time to time. Most of them descend from eastern Belarus and work in construction.

Another group comes [from the EU borderland](#). They smuggle cigarettes, alcohol and fuel to the EU and all kinds of goods from there. Online earners, like freelancers and Internet-gamblers, will also suffer from the new law, as will do many small businesses that operate illegally.

However, some social groups indeed face unemployment and it is unclear how the problem can be solved in their case. In many villages and small towns few jobs usually exist and they are badly paid, while being officially unemployed [looks rather a burden](#) in Belarus. With a monthly benefit of only \$12, people have to do dirty jobs and later they receive job offers with minimal wages. No wonder the majority of the unemployed seek other ways of earning for their living.

First Initiatives of the Government

The police is particularly interested in sponger issue, because 60% of criminals in 2014 neither worked nor studied anywhere. Thus, forced labour could become a measure to reduce crime. At a meeting with Lukashenka, the Ministry of Internal Affairs suggested to establish an administrative liability for spongers, including forced employment. The citizens who do not pay taxes for over 6 month in a year will be charged a fine. Repeat offenders can be arrested and forced to work.

Another governmental initiative, announced by Deputy Prime-Minister [Anatol Tozik](#), suggested to raise minimal work experience for getting a pension from 10 to 15 years. The

pension age for tax evaders will rise by 5 years. And they will only receive basic free services from the state, and will have to pay for a complete package, available for free to other citizens. However, Anatol Tozik says that so far it is not clear who will be regarded as spongers, and how the whole system will work.

Will the USSR Practice Return?

In the USSR, sponging was a crime and people unwilling to work could get up to one year in jail. According to socialist ideology, work was considered a duty, not a right of a citizen. The 1936 Constitution of the USSR even contained the famous Lenin's phrase "Those who do not work, should not eat". As it often happened during Lukashenka's rule, the government suggested to revive administrative Soviet methods to solve current economic problems.

The International Labour Organisation defines forced labour as all involuntary work or service exacted under the menace of a penalty. This does not include any work or service which forms part of the normal civic obligations of the citizens of a fully self-governing country. According to the Constitution of Belarus, a citizen has to participate in financing of state expenditures, and Belarusian authorities refer to that point when discussing the sponger issue.

Earlier, Belarusian authorities already [used the forced labour methods](#) to help to implement the modernisation of wood industry. However, the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs in an interview to TUT.by assured that Belarus will not return to the Soviet practice of criminalising the sponging. The coming months will show how the authorities see the balance of human rights and state economic interests.

Belarus Corruption Wars

Belarusian authorities recently made a number of arrests among the top employers of state administration and companies management as a part of their war against corruption.

Albeit corruption appears to be a serious problem in Belarus, the latest intensified actions of fighting look more like a propaganda campaign. They also raise questions about internal games within the Belarusian KGB and other security services.

Transparency international ranks Belarus 143 out of 882 countries in terms of perception of corruption. Although the low level corruption in Belarus (police, hospitals, courts) appears to be not such a serious problem as in Russia, corruption at the top levels is very serious. Anti-corruption campaigns seem to deal more with the symptoms of corruption rather than its underlying causes.

Arrests at the Top

Belarus has a long history of corruption wars. In 2009, KGB arrested Anatolii Gramovich, the head of Department of Financial Investigations. Paradoxically, the one responsible for fighting with corruption found himself under suspicion of abusing his power. Later on, Gleb Berdickii the executive of Secretariat of the Council of Republic, on the basis of similar accusations was arrested.

Two other high-flying officials shared the same fate. In December 2011, the Supreme Court condemned Igor Lazarenok (former executive of Belarusian air forces) to 9 years imprisonment and confiscation of property. He was accused of receiving material benefits for making favourable decisions. At the same time, due to suspicions of abuse of power, KGB arrested deputy of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Evgenii Poludzen.

They all have politically important positions in the administration. Such a "sudden" ostracism of these politicians had in the first place political reasons.

Arrests at the bottom

Already since the beginning of 2012 the KGB has intensified its actions to fight corruption, at that time particularly targeted at state enterprises management.

In February 2012, due to charge of accepting the bribe of 32 thousand dollars, the ex – director of the 'Medplast' enterprise – a part of petrochemical concern 'Belneftekhim' – had sentenced 6 years' imprisonment.

In April this year, KGB arrested deputy head of Administration Department of a penitentiary establishment in the south of Belarus. Intervention took place due to charges of abusing his competence for improving life conditions of some of the imprisoned, for what he was paid with the cars.

This June, KGB arrested 29 employees of the Gomel Miasokombinat, one of the biggest meat processing company in Belarus. therein addition, three police officers had been charged with participation in the organized group responsible for theft of the production surpluses. Importantly, the investigation proved that, as in the previous cases, top management was involved in the criminal dealings.

Anti-Corruption Campaign or Just Window Dressing?

These rather spectacular arrests of top officials and managers of state-owned companies may suggest effectiveness of the ongoing campaign of war on corruption. Nonetheless, a closer look at these arrests may suggest otherwise.

The arrests are widely used for propaganda purposes to reach certain domestic objectives for the wider population of Belarus.

Furthermore, these actions can aim to signal to the society that the authorities can still control the situation in the state and, furthermore, struggles for fairness among citizens.

At the same time, keeping on mind that economic crisis are not so good, these arrests can positively influence the way the current president Alexandr Lukashenka is perceived in public opinion.

More importantly, these arrests is a result of internal struggle between various clans within security services of Belarus. Those who are charged of corruption can simply appear as not loyal enough to the strongest clan to manage the key state companies.

What next?

The recent cases of arrests among the top state administration and management employers can demonstrate the intensification of campaign against corruption.

But the fundamental problem in Belarus is not that its officials are particularly dishonest. The authorities do not respect the rule of law, courts are not independent and underpaid officials will also be tempted to supplement their salaries with bribes. Others may simply have tough luck with being not a member of the "right group" and end up in prison for something, which the members of the "right group" are allowed to do with impunity.

A long-term solution would require more transparency and equality of all before the law at all levels, including the very top.