

# Mahiloŭ Region – the Homeland of Lukashenka

On 6 July Aliaksandr Lukashenka visited a celebration in his village of origin Aleksandryja in Mahilioŭ region. There he admitted that he very much looked forward to visiting his native land during his pressing schedule. “I travelled around the world, but have always wished to come back to my own land”, he said.

In Belarus politics, Mahiloŭ region is associated with its most famous figure – the present ruler of Belarus. Here, he spent his youth and gained his first governing experience in administrative and agriculture management positions. During the early years of his presidency, he promoted his fellow Mahilou residents to high offices in the government, as they were the only people he could trust then.

Apparently, the region has greatly influenced Lukashenka’s identity and politics. It lies in the east of Belarus on the border with Russia, and is, for all appearances, the least Belarusian-speaking in the country. The region always shows up as the the strongest support base for Lukashenka during presidential elections.

Mahiloŭ suffered greatly from the Charnobyl disaster and today around 30% of its territory is still contaminated with radiation.

## **The Ruler’s Home**

Mahiloŭ region stands out among other Belarusian regions – it is the native region of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. He was born in Kopyś village on the border of the Vitsebsk and Mahiloŭ regions and spent his early life in the village Aleksandryja. He studied at the Mahiloŭ Pedagogical Institute and Horki Agrarian Academy, also based in this region.

His early worklife proceeded from here – he was a secretary of the communist youth organisation Komsomol in the town of Škloŭ, and then went on to head several collective farms. Here, he started his political career as a deputy of Škloŭ constituency to the BSSR representative body – the Supreme Soviet.



Lukashenka cares very much for his native village Aleksandryja. The village has received huge investments in recent years and as a result, has a decent infrastructure. Apart from a club and a library, common for Belarusian villages, it has a hotel and a sports complex. The welfare of local people rose considerably thanks to the rich collective farm that was installed here. Local authorities pay a great deal of attention to this village and maintain an image of a model settlement, as Lukashenka has special feelings for it and could get really angry if something goes wrong here. Young A.Lukashenka

## **The Mahiloŭ Clan**

In his early years of presidency, when the regime was still weak, Lukashenka suspected everyone of disloyalty. Therefore he used to appoint to high positions those people he knew well and who he had worked with – his countryside compatriots from the Mahiloŭ region.

One of them, Ivan Ciciankoŭ, a notorious figure in Belarusian political history, served as one of the outspoken supporters for Lukashenka's electoral campaign in 1994 and afterwards was appointed as the head of President's Property Administration, the agency which runs a number of state-owned businesses. The companies which President's Property Administration created under Ciciankoŭ had unprecedented privileges and, allegedly, even operated by illegal schemes. This issue in particular

concerns primarily import operations, where the companies received exclusive rights.

Ciciankoŭ became the enemy of nationally-oriented Belarusians when after the 1995 referendum, which changed the state flag of Belarus, he personally removed and torn the red-white-red flag from the roof of the House of Government and put his signature on each piece. The pieces were subsequently sold as a rare item. However, Ciciankou did not stay long in the Belarusian system and already in 2000 turned up as the head of a department in the Russian gas company "Itera".

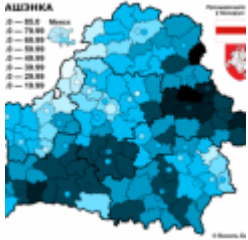


Another of Lukashenka's college fellows, Uladzimir Kanaploŭ served as Lukashenka's aid from 1991-1994, then held a seat as a member of parliament and the speaker several times. He also retired from high politics and today heads the federation of handball, which also turns out to be a rather good position in scheme of the modern Belarusian system.

Aliaksandr Radzkoŭ, also a representative of the Mahiliou clan, has stayed in the game and currently holds the position of deputy head of the Presidential Administration. Earlier, he served as the Minister of education beginning in 2003. He is the leader of "Belaja Ruś" – the pro-Lukashenka civil association which was intended as a party of power like Putin's United Russia, but Lukashenka has not yet granted it such a mandate.

### **The President's Electorate**

Mahilioŭ appears the most Russified region of Belarus – only less than 20% of its population speaks Belarusian at home. The region has always been the major supporter of the homegrown Lukashenka, which can be seen from the map below.



The head of Mahiloŭ region, Piotr Rudnik, presents a rare example of a high official with foreign education – he has a degree from Dresden Technical University. He made his career at various industrial enterprises in Mahiloŭ (city) and in 2008 was appointed head of the region.

Mahilioŭ is one of the two regions most contaminated with radiation as a result of the Chernobyl disaster. Almost 30% of its territory today still has various degree of contamination. Around 7% of population of the region had to move to other regions of Belarus because of the contamination. Many villages were completely buried underground because of the high levels of radiation.

### **Babrujsk – the Jewish Centre of Belarus**

Babrujsk is the second largest city in the region and a big industrial centre. Its claim to fame is that of being the most criminalized city in Belarus according to official statistics. In the 19th and early 20th century, Babrujsk was one of the centers of the Belarusian jewish community, who made up around 70% of its population. It had 32 synagogues and many Jewish organisations. Although World War II and postwar emigration drastically decreased the role of Jews in local life, it remains perhaps the most well-known Jewish city of Belarus. Synagogues, Jewish clubs, schools and newspapers still exist here.

Babrujsk and its jewish legacy appeared in the middle of a scandal in 2007, when Lukashenka at a press conference pronounced an anti-Semitic phrase: “If you were in Babrujsk, you saw how it looks like. It is scary, it is like a pigsty. It was largely a Jewish city, and you know how Jews care about the places they live in.” This speech resulted in the condemnation of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which summoned the Belarusian ambassador to express their concerns.

Apparently, Mahiliou region, its culture and identity deeply influenced the phenomenon of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Unlike his 1994 election rival, Belarusian-speaking pro-European nationalist Zianon Paźniak, Lukashenka presents himself as a product of a more Sovietised region of East Belarus. After winning the elections, he spread this culture to the whole of Belarus which strongly damaged the process of nation-building in the newly independent state.