

Analytical Paper: Who Rules Belarus?

Belarus Digest and the Centre for Transition Studies are launching a series of analytical papers offering in-depth analysis of various aspects of Belarus often overlooked by Western experts and press.

The forthcoming papers will deal with personalities within the Belarusian regime, national identity of Belarusians, the system of education in Belarus, reforms of bureaucracy, business climate and other topics.

The first paper prepared by Siarhei Bohdan analyses the Belarusian political and economic establishment, its features and potential and prospects for change. While the government's authority is concentrated in President Lukashenka, he needs a sophisticated state structures to run the country and has retained his retinue for years. While Lukashenka as a politician has been analysed quite extensively, his close comrades have scarcely been studied.

The paper annex contains personal portraits of key figures in the Belarusian regime, including Lukashenka's older son Viktor, Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich and Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey.

Belarusian ruling elites emerged as a result of an effective power-sharing deal between Soviet-era bureaucrats and new supporters of the Belarusian president who have risen from the depths of the provinces to the very top due to their talent and unscrupulous ambitions.

This liaison has proven successful both in terms of its cohesion and performance. There has been just one failed mutiny, occurring in the late 1990s amongst the nomenclature,

while the consolidated regime-linked elites have run Belarus rather successfully in terms of its governance and economy.

Politically, Belarusian ruling elites of whatever origin have opted for an original path of development which has contradicted Western ideas about democracy and human rights, However, the opportunistic opposition to the West is not based on any profound ideology. The ruling establishment in Belarus can act as responsible and reasonable partner for the West if offered a pragmatic deal.

While pragmatically working with the ruling elites for the sake of preserving Belarusian independence and working towards an eventual smooth transformation, the West should simultaneously demonstrate to the Belarusian people realistic prospects of cooperation with Europe at the same time placing firm demands on the government.

- [Read Analytical Paper "Who Rules Belarus"](#)

Suicide Triggers Changes in the Belarusian KGB

On 16 November, Alexander Lukashenka appointed Valer Vakulchyk as Chairman of the KGB. Vakulchyk remains one of the least famous Belarusian security service officials and the Belarusian state leader trusts him a great deal.

A week earlier, on 9 November, Lukashenka discharged the previous KGB head, Vadzim Zaitsau, whom he suspected of being complicit in "betrayal of the state's interests, corruption and nonfeasance". Recently, the KGB has been in the news in connection with several mysterious events such as the death of

KGB Colonel Kazak and dismissal of the head of Military Intelligence, KGB Major General Zakharau. In addition, this summer's [teddy bears stunt](#) seriously damaged the reputation of the KGB and the Belarusian authorities in the face of the whole world.

Lukashenka wants to reform the Belarusian KGB. However, he realises that reforms may put him in conflict with those state security officials who will not benefit from the changes.

KGB Crisis

Former KGB head Vadzim Zaitsau lost Lukashenka's trust. On 19 November, Lukashenka claimed that the reason for his removal was the "moral and psychological atmosphere in some KGB departments". State Secretary of the Security Council Leanid Maltsau was acting head of KGB for a week. He said that the discharge was related to the suicide of KGB Colonel Alyaksandr Kazak. According to Maltsau, "there still remain a series of other issues that require close investigation".

Maltsau promised that Zaitsau could return to his position if the investigation confirms his innocence. However, Zaitsau will not return, as Lukashenka has serious claims against him. Only the people close to the Belarusian president know the exact nature of the "serious issues" mentioned, but we can hazard several guesses.

First, the mysterious death of KGB Colonel Kazak. The Belarusian authorities give the official version as suicide. However, the KGB at first denied Kazak's death. This looks suspicious and has caused rumours. For example, Kazak could have known about the corruption schemes inside the Belarusian governing elite and some officials could have benefited from his death.

Secondly, the uncertainty of the KGB's actions back in July, when the Swedish PR-company Studio Total organised the so-

called "[teddy bear landing](#)" in Belarus. The KGB denied an obvious fact for a long time then, and looked at the very least inadequate as a result.

Third, Belarusians learned the details of the post-Square 2010 criminal cases. Zaitsau supervised these cases. Several Belarusian politicians, including ex-presidential candidate Ales Michalevic revealed information about torture in the KGB detention centre. Another ex-presidential candidate, Andrei Sannikau, stated that Zaitsau had threatened to inflict damage to the health of Sannikau's wife and son were he not to act as a witness against himself. Both ex-candidates have since escaped from Belarus and Lukashenka was able to blame the former KGB for this as well.

The authors of the Belarus Security Blog list [several possible reasons](#) for Zaitsau's dismissal. First, "deficiencies in organisational and personnel work." The analysts noted that in 2012, suddenly and without apparent reason the head of Military Intelligence, KGB Major General Zakharov, was dismissed. Secondly, they point to the struggle inside the governing elite and redistribution of spheres of influence on Alexander Lukashenka by the Belarusian security forces."

The system of the current Belarusian governing elite remains very non-transparent. The attack on the Lithuanian Embassy in Minsk on 6 November and the blast near the KGB building in Vitsebsk on 11 November could be connected with the crisis in the main state security service of Belarus as well.

Who is Vakulchyk?

Belarusian society does not know much about the new KGB boss, and he rarely gives press conferences or interviews. Valer Vakulchyk comes from Brest Region and was born in 1964. The Belarusian media do not even know the exact place of Vakulchyk's birth.

The new KGB boss studied in the Kharkiv guard higher tank

command school and the Belarusian Presidential Academy of Administration. He also graduated in advanced courses of counter-espionage of the USSR KGB.

Vakulchyk comes from frontier troops. Alexander Lukashenka's elder son Victar, who is the Presidential Advisor on the national security issues, also served in the frontier troops. Connections between them could facilitate Vakulchyk's new appointment.

The new KGB boss has great organisational skills and preserves absolute loyalty to Lukashenka. Vakulchyk served in the KGB in 1991-2008, and after that Lukashenka appointed him to head newly created structures on several occasions.

In 2008, the Belarusian authorities formed the President's Operative Analytical Centre. Alexander Lukashenka appointed Valer Vakulchyk as a head of the new most secretive state security institution. According to Belarusian Partisan, Victar Lukashenka facilitated this appointment. The main task of the Operative Analytical Centre is control over top government officials.

In 2011, the authorities created the Investigatory Committee. Valer Vakulchyk headed the new structure. He supervised several important criminal cases against bureaucrats who had abused their positions: for example, the case of former Chairman of Polatsk city executive committee Tachyla or Deputy Interior Minister Poludzen.

What Will Happen to the KGB?

The criminal cases against the nomenclature and control over the top state officials clearly show that Lukashenka relies on Valer Vakulchyk. The new KGB head is neither more democratic nor less democratic than his predecessor. There should be no illusion: a person who works as KGB head follows Lukashenka's orders and cannot play any political role.

On 19 November, Lukashenka said that some people in the KGB want to “*feel free and not to go to work, and forget that they have shoulder-straps*”. He suggested that they should look for new jobs. Moreover, Belarus hinted that he might reduce the number of KGB officials from 12,000 to 3,000. Where these people will go is not exactly clear.

It will be Vakulchyk's task to deal with it. Changes inside the KGB will happen as a follow-up to the reforms of the [police](#) and [nomenclature](#). These three columns have been the basis of the authoritarian government for a long time.

Ryhor Astapenia

Faces of Belarusian Politics: Viktar Lukashenka

Viktar Lukashenka is a big enigma. The 36 year-old lieutenant-colonel and the oldest son of the current ruler is rumoured to be the next leader of Belarus.

Although Lukashenka has three sons, only Viktar acts as a political figure. Since Viktar became National Security Aide to his father, many analysts have come to explain every move inside the regime in terms of Viktar's influence.

On his trips to Arab countries Viktar Lukashenka meets future successors of Arab leaders as his counterparts. But his father does not intend to step down anytime soon. He is just 57 and has no evident health problems. Viktar may have to bide his time.

Grooming the Next President?

Viktar Lukashenka has been a successor in the making for many years. In the 1990s, he studied at the International Relations Department of the Belarus State University, the most prestigious school in Belarus. Already at that time, Viktar displayed his ambitions in a documentary made by NTV channel. When he and his younger brother Dzmitry were asked whether they could imagine replacing their father as president, Viktar said, "Why not?" Dzmitry replied with a firm "no."

After completing his studies, Viktar first served in the Border Guards. Viktar claims that he belonged to the special forces unit, but it is rumoured that he was assigned to the regular staff in Minsk. In a rare interview, he hinted at his participation in operations planning.

From the Border Guards, he switched to the Foreign Ministry, where he worked in 2001-03 in the Western Europe Department. From there, Viktar jumped into a new role as chief of the foreign department at Agat, a state-owned corporation that handles defence contracts for automated control systems.

In 2005, President Lukashenka appointed his 29 year-old son as his National Security Aide, a position created just for him. In 2007, Viktar joined the Security Council, a high-level organ of the regime. By that time he became involved in sensitive dealings. He regularly visited Libya, Oman, and some other Middle Eastern nations, meeting mostly top leadership and security officials.

Although Viktar kept a low profile, opponents of the regime started to publicly discuss Viktar as a prospective president after he became National Security Aide. Speaking to *Le Monde* in 2007, Lukashenka explained, "When I appointed my son to be my assistant, I wanted to open additional channels to get information. No head of state can have absolute trust in his followers, so my son helps me."



Rise to Power

Political analyst Andrei Liakhovich believes that Viktor shaped major reshuffles among Lukashenka's top officials in 2007-08. Some important regime figures lost their influence and offices. Among them was regime grey eminence Viktor Sheiman, Secretary of the Security Council. Viktor's friends gained influential offices, first of all Uladzimir Makiej, the current chief of the Presidential Administration.

Viktor consolidated his power and promoted his confidants from the Border Guards and KGB Brest Section to influential positions. Lukashenka junior also played different government organs off against one another. He allied with the Internal Ministry against the KGB, which resulted in the appointment of Vadzim Zaytsau, Viktor's close friend, as new chief of the KGB.

Viktor then relied on the KGB while trying to overtake other agencies. In 2009, a former ally, Interior minister Uladzimir Naumau, was dismissed. Even so, the Interior remained beyond Viktor's control. Only in late 2011, after the [arrest](#) of the Deputy Internal Minister Yauhien Poludzien and dismissal of another Deputy Minister, one of them was replaced by a former KGB member and confidant of Viktor's. By that time, Viktor had already formed his own security agency – the Operative-Analytical Centre of the President.

Accused of Political Suppression

The Operative-Analytical Centre focuses on surveillance in IT sphere but is also dealing with corruption and political

dissent. It soon took measures to enforce control over the Internet. For instance, in 2010, the government adopted changes in Internet regulation prepared by the Centre. They caused negative reaction in the society. But the situation with Internet did not change significantly and repressive intentions of the new structure of Viktor Lukashenka have been largely exaggerated.

In September 2011, Lukashenka created the Investigative Committee – a new agency to take over the investigative functions of the Internal Ministry, the Public Prosecution Office, and the Committee of State Control. The move provoked a new wave of speculation that the president was looking to strengthen Viktor's position. But as political analyst Alyaksey Myadvietski has pointed out, there is little evidence of this, and indeed, “almost every significant change of officials in security agencies is explained now by Viktor's influence.



Is Viktor demonised? The *Charter 97* web site believes that he was engaged in a crackdown on protests after the last presidential elections. Opposition activist Uladzimir Baradach has said that Viktor's "personal team" might be behind the terrorist attack in the Minsk subway. But again there are no facts to back up these claims.

Indeed, according to cables published by Wikileaks, US diplomat Jonathan Moore has characterised Viktor as adamant but attentive and polite after meeting him in 2008. In public, Viktor has been courteous and allowed the public to freely take pictures of him. In a 2008 document on the Border Guards, Viktor seemed to feel uneasy about all the attention he was getting.

Dynastic Rule

For the time being, Lukashenka's oldest son seems too weak politically to run the country. He lacks his father's charisma, and has yet to prove his administrative abilities. However, in the post-Soviet space, the Azerbaijani precedent of power succession within one family suggests that Viktor's chances as successor should not be underestimated.

Hardly anyone believed that the current president of Azerbaijan would last even one year – Ilham Aliyev was known more for his casino exploits and embezzlement than for political achievements. But he succeeded.

Of course, Belarus is not Azerbaijan and has different traditions. Viktor also has one major weakness compared to Ilham – his lack of international recognition. Ilham served as Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe before assuming office as president. Viktor's biggest international achievement so far was to land on the EU travel ban list.

Most probably, there is no succession plan at this point. Lukashenka is eager to retain power for as long as possible. He even jokes that his youngest son Mikalai – now seven years old – will be the president. Unlike Mikalai, however, Viktor grew up at a time when his father was not yet president. That makes him different from those dictators' children who have never seen the world without bodyguards.