The Role of Security Services in Belarus Politics

To understand the balance of power in Belarus it is important to understand the role of the siloviki (the security services). Although they affect political decision-making and the degree of violence in domestic politics they are not a predominant group within the ruling elite.

Modern History of Belarus Security Services

In 1999 – 2003, heads of security (KGB, Internal Ministry) and controlling (Committee of the State Control, Prosecutor's Office) bodies headed by Viktar Sheiman an old ally and friend of Lukashenka had significant influence on the foreign and domestic policy of Belarusian authorities.

Sheiman served as Prosecutor General and State Secretary of the Security Council. Regardless of what position Sheiman held, he chaired extended meetings of the heads of security and controlling bodies.

The controlling and repressive mechanisms, led by Sheiman, were directed against the opposition campaign to hold an alternative presidential election in 1999. In the same year, under Sheiman's leadership, opposition leaders, who could become dangerous rivals to Lukashenka in the presidential election of 2001, were eliminated: former Interior Minister Yury Zakharanka and former Deputy Prime Minister Viktar Hanchar. Unknown persons inflicted fatal injuries to Hienadz Karpienka.

In 2001 – 2002, under the leadership of the second-ranked person in the State, Sheiman, independent trade unions were persecuted and the directorate of enterprises were cleansed of likely opponents of Lukashenka.
After January 2004, when Russia set a course for reducing subsidies to Lukashenka's regime, Sheiman began losing his positions within the main bodies of power. On 24 January 2004, Russia fully suspended deliveries of gas to Belarus. Lukashenka faced the following demands: to sell the controlling stake in Beltransgaz for $800m or to face an increase in gas prices to the market level. Survival of Lukashenka's regime was now dependent on the efficiency of the economy.

In 2007 – 2008, the group of siloviki disintegrated. On 7 July 2008, Lukashenka removed Sheiman from the position of the State Secretary of the Security Council. The significance of this position in the hierarchy declined. Lukashenka's eldest son Viktar, who is now Assistant to the President for National Security Matters, became the unofficial curator of security and controlling bodies.

In 2008 – 2011, Viktar Lukashenka replaced Sheiman's appointees amongst the leadership of the security bodies with his own trusted men. However, one can speak only figuratively about the existence of a group of siloviki under Viktar Lukashenka's leadership. Viktar Lukashenka's group includes many civilians, young businessmen and officials, with whom he studied at the Foreign Relations Department of the Belarusian State University. It is known that one of the reasons for Viktar Lukashenka's personal animosity towards Viktar Sheiman was that the latter was interfering with the development of private business.

**After 19 December 2010**

After the events of 19 December 2010 many experts were saying that the siloviki once again became a predominant group. Heads of security agencies involved in repression push Lukashenka towards further deterioration of relations with the West, because political liberalisation in Belarus and rapprochement with the West means a threat of prosecution to them.
There has been a certain movement towards economic liberalisation and privatisation. It means a lesser role for the controlling and law enforcement agencies in the political system in Belarus.

The siloviki do not exert pressure on the decision-making process in the Council of Ministers. The government works in a quiet mode. The discussion is not around who should be punished (as it happened frequently while Sheiman was in power), but what should be done.

Since 19 December, there were no cases of criminal prosecution of top managers of major industrial enterprises and big private businesses. The arrest of General Director of Belvneshstroj Viktar Shautsou in October 2011 is quite in line with the pattern of controlled corruption which exists in Belarus. He appropriated about $10m which was more than what is allowed.

At the same time, criminal proceedings were initiated against Deputy Interior Minister Jauhien Paludzien and General Ihar Azaronak. Personnel changes took place in the top management of the Interior Ministry.

There have been no instances of struggle between law enforcement bodies for control over state-owned companies or instances of takeovers of private businesses by the siloviki. During the existence of Sheiman's group such cases were quite frequent. For instance, top managers of the KGB and the Interior Ministry fought over top managing positions in the Zhlobin Steel Plant for their men.

Currently people from security and controlling agencies tare not frequently to positions in the Presidential Administration. In 2001, former Interior Minister Yury Sivakou (Sheiman's man) was appointed Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration on Personnel Matters. He was responsible for supervising the personnel management in the executive
vertical. Now, the Presidential Administration is rather a civilian body. And this is the most important body in the political system of Belarus.

The siloviki have not received the carte blanche for widespread repression in Belarus after 19 December. After 19 December 2010 repression is much more prevalent than ever before. However, repression is directed against those opposition groups which, in the authorities' opinion, were involved in the attempts to storm the House of the Government. Repression against other opposition groups and NGOs is localised and pin-point in its nature.

After 19 December, there has been no significant expansion in the staff of security and other controlling bodies. The establishment of a new agency – the Investigation Committee – has been done by recruiting employees of the existing agencies.

Who is Pushing the Repressions?

Finally, one cannot reaffirm that these were the siloviki who pushed Lukashenka into unleashing repression on 19 December. There were background factors indicating that under certain changes in the situation, on 19 December, the authorities would stop following the scenario of liberalisation and would act according to a different scenario, a scenario of repression.

In 2009, Lukashenka said that the establishment of a public consultative council at the Presidential Administration was an initiative of Uladzimir Makiei, which he took rather negatively. In 2010, he said that he saw no sense in letting thirty opposition activists to get into the parliament, as "the West will be happy at first, but then it will ask for more anyway".

Lukashenka received many arguments to conclude that the independence of Belarus is what matters most for the West.
From the context of his statements that followed, in his opinion, the West can close their eyes on many things that were happening in Belarus for the sake of its independence from Russia.

Repression of 19 December and in the following period should not be explained solely by emotions and Lukashenka's fear of revolution. Lukashenka acts and speaks in the framework of a certain contract with the nomenklatura. What Lukashenka says about opposition reflects to some extent the nomenklatura's attitude towards the opposition. A fragmented opposition represented by conflicting groups, with no leader and no program, is not only unable to speak to the majority of voters, but also to the nomenklatura and the directorate.

The West and democrats in Belarus have to deal with a nomenklatura frightened by an attempt at revolution. The Belarusian officials sometimes have irrational motives, fears and emotions. But their calculations and rational choices, including in relations with the West, play a much greater role.