

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.

The people in Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine believe Lukashenka has swindled Moscow into providing his country with cheap energy and a welcoming market

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.