

The Split Between Belarusian Elites and Society on Ukraine Widens

On 17 July, Belarusian state media tried to strike a balance between Russia and Ukraine's respective positions when reporting on the MH17 crash.

Russian media clearly stated that it was Ukraine which had shot down the plane and the majority of Belarusians seem to believe it.

The Russian war against Ukraine has shown that the Belarusian elite and society see the world very differently.

Nearly all members of the Belarusian elite (both the authorities and the opposition) have a negative perception of the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine. It seems that Lukashenka's position is the closest it has ever been to that of pro-European democrats and the business elite of Belarus.

However, the majority of ordinary people seem to support Russia's narrative. The Kremlin's propaganda has found fertile soil for its world view in a Soviet mentality that has been perpetrated and cultivated over the years by Lukashenka's regime.

As of late, it appears that the authorities are trying to strengthen Belarusian identity, but despite their efforts, it is clearly not enough to turn back the tide of 20 years of propaganda. Whether they realise it or not, the only way to remedy the issues facing Belarusian society is for Lukashenka's regime allowing society an opportunity to develop intellectually and co-operate other groups of elites.

Otherwise, the gap between the political decision-makers and

the people will only continue to widen.

Elites Support Ukraine

The conflict in Ukraine has become perhaps the singular issue in which the entirety of the Belarusian elite hold virtually the same opinion.

Though the Belarusian authorities have made [several concessions](#) to the Kremlin, they managed [to maintain neutrality](#) in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and be supportive of the Kyiv leadership.

As a gesture of Belarus' commitment to Ukraine, [Lukashenka](#) came to Kyiv as the only president from the Commonwealth of Independent States to be [in attendance](#) at Piotr Poroshenko's inauguration.

Lukashenka calls on Ukraine to wipe out the militants in Eastern Ukraine

Moreover, the Belarusian head of state has time and again shown that he has a much more pro-Ukrainian stance than many politicians from the European Union. While Angela Merkel advises Poroshenko to call for another ceasefire and negotiate with the separatist forces, Lukashenka calls on Ukraine to wipe out the militants in Eastern Ukraine.

[Pavel Yakubovich](#), editor in chief of Soviet Belarus, the main propaganda newspaper of the regime, criticised [Russian media](#) for warmongering in one of his latest columns. Belarusian state media has maintained a certain level of balance in its coverage of the events in Ukraine, while many independent media outlets like Belgazeta, previously neutral, took the side of Ukraine.

The business elite in Belarus are typically silent in public, but unofficially many of them are very upset with Russia's actions, actions that have been to the detriment of the

private sector throughout the whole region. For example, shares of the US-Belarusian IT corporation EPAM Systems fell by a third due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The company has many offices, but its largest ones are located in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia.

All of the significant opposition politicians have been supporting Ukraine since the conflict began, although some marginal figures have been trying to flirt with Russia. For example, Ihar Drako of the Tell the truth campaign said Ukraine's division into three parts is in the best interest of Belarus.

The similarity of the entirety of the Belarusian elite has its roots in their common interests. They view Belarus as an independent, united nation and realise that by protecting Ukraine, they are also protecting themselves.

Society Supports the Kremlin

While the elites are preoccupied supporting Ukraine, a large section of the society is doing quite the opposite. Sociological data made available from the Belarusian Analytical Workshop show that 65.7% of Belarusians support the Russian annexation of the Crimea.

Only 15% of Belarusians consider it illegal. It seems logical to believe that their views on the Donbas may be much the same. The vast majority of people have a negative attitude towards the new Ukrainian authorities.

Russian media dominates Belarus' airwaves, presenting only the Kremlin's views on the events in Eastern Ukraine

This is the result of aggressive Russian propaganda and the absence of any adequate attempts to bring about some form of informational balance from the Belarusian authorities. Russian media [dominates Belarus' airwaves](#), presenting only the

Kremlin's views on the events in Eastern Ukraine. As the Russian media is much better funded and offers higher quality products, most Belarusians choose them over their Belarusian counterparts when given a choice.

A restricted-access sociological study to which the author has access to shows that the programme 'News of the Week with Dmitry Kisilev' remains the most popular informational television programme of its kind in Belarus. This Russian television program has become one of the main mouthpieces of the Russian information war against Ukraine.

The Belarusian authorities have been cultivating a Soviet way of thinking for a considerable period of time, an issue that they are now having to contend with. The regime has systematically [weakened Belarusian national identity](#), reducing the value of its national history and symbols, and as a result Belarusians tend to perceive the world through the lens of Russian interests.

At that moment, as Western scholars are almost entirely absent from Belarusian academic institutions, universities host guests like hardcore Russian nationalist Alexander Dugin. Other similar phenomenon have long been accepted in most arenas of public life. As a result of this isolation and identity maintenance, even the authorities are finding that they lack qualified and capable people for public service.

How the Elite Can Fix Belarus' Problems

The Belarusian authorities grew afraid of the war in Ukraine not only for a fear of Putin, but also because the Belarusian public appear much more pro-Russian than their own elites. Hence, the regime has recently begun to quietly work on developing Belarusian national identity.

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On 3 July, Independence Day, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, for the first time in many years, spoke Belarusian in public. This month Vitsebsk officials erected a monument to Algird, the Grand Lithuanian Duke. The Mahiliou city authorities announced the renaming of their Soviet Square, reasoning that the name was now obsolete. But these gestures all appear to be too little, too late.

Every year, the Kremlin every strengthens its role in Belarus and Lukashenka seems to be unable to stop curb its growing influence, though he does try to slow its growth as much as he can. The Belarusian economy hums along largely [thanks to Russian money](#). The Kremlin controls Belarus in almost every aspect of its existence, including its culture. Belarus remains the only country from the former Soviet Union where the Russian language was given official status.

If the state elites want to have public opinion be closer to their own, they should support the national identity of the people and the intellectual development of society to greatest extent possible. The regime, over time, could find ways to cooperate with other elites, at least on a basic level, to help develop the nation's identity and bring it out of isolation.

Previous efforts in this direction can be found in the creation of the Advisory Board at the Presidential Administration, which functioned between 2008-2010, and could be a means to open up societal dialog once more. Another idea would be to invite members of the business elite to high positions in the government of Belarus. Improved relations with the West would also bring no harm.

On the one hand, the authorities would have to carry out their new policy quietly in order not to draw the wrath of the Kremlin for a pivot west. On the other, they need to do so quickly, as no state can function if the elite and society maintain largely opposing perceptions about their national and

civic identity.