

Who is Mr Kosinets? The Rise of the Second Most Powerful Man in Belarus

On 27 December, Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka appointed Alyaksandr Kosinets as the head of the Presidential Administration.

In less than a decade, Kosinets rose from the position of dean of a provincial university to one of the top offices in the country, effectively becoming the second most powerful man in Belarus.

Kosinets has become known not only for his exotic initiatives like painting every type of public transportation into a specific colour, but also for his statements and actions in support of Belarusian sovereignty.

While working outside Minsk, although undoubtedly with central government's consent, he punished displays of Russian nationalism among Belarusian public servants, and erected the first ever monument to a mediaeval Belarusian ruler. Furthermore, Kosinets has not hesitated to argue with Lukashenka.

Choosing such a person to serve as his right-hand man, the Belarusian president is demonstrating his proclivity to look for people which have proven their support of Belarus as an independent state. Interestingly enough, these were not the kind of people he appointed at the beginning of his presidency. This appointment happened at the same time as the Kremlin is once more raising the issue of the legitimacy of post-Soviet borders and statehoods, first of all in Ukraine.

The Surgeon

Alyaksandr Kosinets was born in 1959 in a village near the city of Orsha in Northeastern Belarus. He made a brilliant carrier in medicine becoming an accomplished surgeon and scholar. At 37 years old he became Professor, a higher distinction than a PhD in the former USSR and quite an achievement in medicine. His list of publications include numerous articles and monographs on surgery and oncology, with his last book – written together with his son – being published just three years ago.

In 1997-2005, Kosinets worked as the rector of Vitsebsk State Medical University. Then came the great climb upwards as, in 2005, Kosinets became a Vice Prime Minister. He served in this office until 2008, when he returned to Vitsebsk as the chairman of the [Vitsebsk Province](#) Executive Committee, i.e., the governor of one of the six provinces of Belarus.

Kosinets has become known for his very original proposals concerning state social policies. Thus, he made a point of personally participating in the struggle against alcoholism. As the Vitsebsk governor he went to houses of alcoholics to rebuke them. Another time he proposed to impose fines against people who refused to care about their health.

Yet the new head of Presidential Administration is not a man with a stern personality. Working in Vitsebsk, Kosinets demanded that nice cafes were opened there and worked hard to elevate the annual singing contest at [Slavianski Bazar](#). He spent time trying to promote the idea of building a Disneyland in Vitsebsk.

Firing Russian Nationalists and Honouring Mediaeval Belarusian Rulers

In 2011, an official from the Vitsebsk city administration, Andrei Herashchanka gave an interview to the Russian media outlet Materik and discussed the “artificiality” of the Belarusian language and denied the existence of a Belarusian

nation. Vitsebsk authorities tried to avoid publicising the issue and got rid of Herashchanka without scandal. Still, the case attracted much attention among Russian chauvinist circles as the Vitsebsk authorities – undoubtedly with the involvement of Kosinets – fired the scandalous Russian nationalist at the first opportunity.

Speaking on Belarus' Independence Day in 2011, Kosinets said, “Independence, freedom and sovereignty are for us not just symbols, they are our history, our future,” and described the Belarusian state as heir to Soviet Belarusian republic but also to Polatsk principality of the early Middle Ages. The following year, he went further, proclaiming that “freedom and independence have always been part of, and are the main priority of, the Belarusian people.”

In June 2014, [Kosinets opened](#) a monument to the Grand Lithuanian Duke Alhierd in Vitsebsk. Alhierd ruled in the XIV century and inter alia was known for conquering Moscow. In his address inaugurating the monument Kosinets said:

This man is a great politician and statesman. He played an important role in the development of Belarusian statehood, the development of Vitsebsk itself. [...] In those times, Belarusians were called Lithuanians. He did a lot to defeat the [Mongol] Horde and liberate Kievan Rus'

Some [activists from the so-called Cossacks' with Russian chauvinistic](#) views and Russian nationalists protested against the Alhierd monument and claimed that the monument would have an anti-Russian character. To their dismay, the authorities proceeded with their plans. They were supported by their loyal allies – the Belarusian Communist Party (KPB).

The Alhierd monument became the most publicised example of the rather Belarus-centric views of Vitsebsk governor Kosinets, but it was not the only one. In 2010, following his proposal, Lenin Park in Vitsebsk was renamed Shmyrou Park honouring the

famous local [Belarusian Soviet guerrilla](#) leader Minay Shmyrou who fought the Nazis in WWII.

Standing Up to Lukashenka

There is, however, one more important aspect of Kosinets' personality – his willingness to defend his own opinion. In encounters with Lukashenka most Belarusian officials back down if criticised by the Belarusian ruler. Yet being the Vitsebsk governor in September 2010, Kosinets openly opposed Lukashenka. Between the two the following exchange took place (abridged below)*:

Lukashenka: Tell me about gains, profitability, money.

Kosinets: In agriculture, we have a profitability of 7.6%. With state subsidies. Without subsidies it would be -7.6%.

Lukashenka: In brief, you are working with [losses in agriculture](#) and if it would not be for the state...

Kosinets: Of course...

Lukashenka: You would have gone bankrupt. Do I understand you correctly? So you are a sponger!

Kosinets: The whole country is in the same position!

Since the late 1990s, hardly anybody from among the Belarusian top officials has publicly argued with the president like that. Later on, Kosinets even got officially reprimanded for the poor implementation of some projects in the Vitsebsk Province. Still he demonstrated remarkable resilience and managed not only to stay in office yet also rise to the very top of Belarusian government.

Kosinets, however, has over time articulated some rather unconventional ideas. Like when he called for a 30-percent reduction of the size of control agencies in the Belarusian

government. After his appointment as the head of the Presidential Administration he demanded “total debureaucratisation.”

Another time as the Vitsebsk governor, Kosinets ordered a list of citizens which have no job to be drawn up, to investigate why they are not working, and if was necessary to make them work. On the other hand, he warned against “revolutionary measures” in solving this problem, as well as demanded more transparency in the [public utilities](#) sector, calling for concrete measures to that effect.

Every Belarusian senior official – irrespective of his will and personal views – remains to a large extent restrained by the framework of the existing government. Alyaksandr Kosinets is no exception. Yet this framework itself changes over time. And the rapid rise of this man to the highest of heights of the Belarusian state demonstrate an important transformation in the government which is evolving towards a consolidation of its independence.

At the same time, the top tier of the Belarusian ruling establishment in this case – as in the case of the [new mayor](#) of Minsk – demonstrates some flexibility regarding the admission of [new members](#) and even new ideas. Something almost altogether unthinkable at the beginning of Lukashernka's time has become an evident reality nowadays – and without any revolutions.