

Major staff reshuffles within Alyaksandr Lukashenka's inner circle

Kamil Kłysiński

On 27 August, Lukashenka appointed Andrei Kobyakov head of presidential administration. Before this nomination, Kobyakov served as the Belarusian ambassador in Russia. Between 2001 and 2010, he was deputy prime minister in charge of economic issues and later became deputy head of the presidential administration. From November 2010, he was the ambassador in the Russian Federation and the permanent representative of the Republic of Belarus in the Eurasian Economic Community. Kobyakov replaced Uladzimir Makey, who was appointed minister of foreign affairs on 20 August. Uladzimir Makey was in charge of the presidential administration from 2008. He was also one of the most influential people within Alyaksandr Lukashenka's inner circle. In turn, on 17 August, Alyaksandr Lukashenka dismissed Siarhei Tkachov, who had been his economic advisor for many years, and replaced him with Piotr Prokopovich, who had been the head of the Belarusian Central Bank between 1998 and 2011.

Commentary

- Uladzimir Makey had a pragmatic attitude towards relations with the West, and therefore was seen as the key supporter of the policy of dialogue with the EU between 2008 and 2010. However, after the crackdown on the opposition's post-election demonstration in the centre of Minsk in December 2010, supporters of the hard-line approach in external and internal policy gained the initiative in their influence on the president. Thus Makey, who had been influential, found himself on the margins of the key decision-making processes. The post of foreign minister is of minor, technical significance. Therefore, this nomination proves that his position within the ruling class has diminished.
- Andrei Kobyakov is seen as a moderate supporter of free market solutions. However, unlike Uladzimir Makey, he has been more loyal in carrying out the presidential guidelines rather than an independent advisor. For this reason, it appears that the presidential administration managed by Kobyakov will lose its previous status as the main policy-making centre, and its significance will be more balanced with that of the cabinet, which has previously been much weaker. This means that the president will have more control of the state apparatus.

- The new economic advisor, Piotr Prokopovich, unlike his predecessor Siarhei Tkachov, has a realistic view of the condition of the Belarusian economy and the possibilities for it to develop. Thus this nomination clearly strengthens the influence of supporters of a pragmatic economic policy inside the president's inner circle.
- This series of nominations in August this year is a sign that Alyaksandr Lukashenka is increasingly fearful of the ever more likely deterioration of the economic situation and the approaching peak in foreign debt repayment (approximately US\$6 billion by the end of 2014). This is visibly strengthening the influence of those who want a more rational economic policy and who, in his opinion, will be able to cope with the mounting crisis and obtain new loans from Russia and the International Monetary Fund. At the same time, the fact that Makey was nominated foreign minister does not mean that Minsk is ready to make any concessions to the EU. Alyaksandr Lukashenka still expects that EU member states will open dialogue on his terms and he rules out any political liberalisation whatsoever.