

Belarus: The dismissal of the Interior Ministry's head consolidates Viktor Lukashenka's influence

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On 11 May, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka dismissed the interior minister, General Anatol Kuleshau, and appointed his former first deputy Colonel Ihar Shunievich to this position. At the same time, the Belarusian president announced a reform of the Interior Ministry, including a narrowing-down of its remit. This decision ends the series of personnel changes in the leadership of the Belarusian Interior Ministry which had been ongoing since the end of last year. In December 2011 one of the deputy ministers, Colonel Yauhien Poludzien, was dismissed and arrested (in connection with alleged excesses and abuse of official powers, among other charges), and then over the next few months, a succession of his replacements were fired, including the first deputy Colonel Aleh Piekarski. In January this year Colonel Shunievich was moved into that position from the KGB.

Commentary

- The new head of the Ministry, Colonel Igor Shunievich, has worked in the KGB since 2007 – the moment when the structure began to come under the influence of a group gathered around Alyaksandr Lukashenka's oldest son Viktor. Currently, this group controls the majority of Belarus's security institutions. It seems that the appointment of a KGB officer as head of the Interior Ministry, and the resignations of most of the previous team's deputy ministers, represent the takeover of the last power structure which had been outside this group's influence.
- The takeover of the Interior Ministry ultimately ensures a privileged position in the structures of force for officers of The State Border Committee of Belarus, and for the KGB, which for years has been under Viktor Lukashenka's control. Most of the current executives in the state security sector got their start in these two institutions, including the leadership of the Committee of Investigation and the Operational and Analytical Centre, which are of key importance in the Belarusian system of government. Their tasks include conducting proceedings against civil servants and government officials.
- As a result of the changes in the Interior Ministry, almost the entire security apparatus has come under the control of one influential group, for the first time in Lukashenka's rule. This is regarded as a sign of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's deepening distrust of those who surround him. The Belarusian president has decided to entrust this power block to

his son, seeing it as a guarantee of his own safety and that of the regime. Yet for now, the increase in Viktor's influence does not mean that he is becoming independent of his father, or that he will conduct his own distinctive policy.

- Such a serious strengthening of the influence of Viktor Lukashenka's group, which has already been recognised as the strongest power in the ruling elite, is also important outside the security sector. The increasing dominance of the 'structures of force' will deepen the disparities in the balance of power between the groups in Alyaksandr Lukashenka's inner circles. This will result in the further marginalisation of those who support economic reforms and resuming dialogue with the West, and thus the continuation of the command-and-distribution economic model, and of the continuing repression of the opposition.