

Belarus: personnel changes in Lukashenka's inner circle

Kamil Kłysiński

On 27 June, Alyaksandr Lukashenka announced a number of appointments to important government positions. The key post of Head of the Presidential Administration went to the Belarusian ambassador to Moscow, Dzmitry Krutoi, who has previously served as Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Economy and the Administration's Deputy Head. This post had been vacant for three months, since General Ihar Serheyenko resigned after he won a deputy's seat in the House of Representatives. When justifying his decision, Lukashenka mentioned Krutoi's extensive experience in top government positions and his good grasp of the agenda for the country's bilateral relations with Russia.

Natalia Petkevich was appointed as the First Deputy of the Presidential Administration's new head; she had already served in this position from 2009-10. At the same time, Foreign Minister Syarhei Aleynik was dismissed and replaced by the current First Deputy at the Presidential Administration, Maxim Ryzhenkov, who worked at the Foreign Ministry between 1994 and 2006 and gained some of his diplomatic experience at the Belarusian embassy in Warsaw. The new minister has been tasked with 'putting the ministry in order'.

Commentary

- In the Belarusian authoritarian system of government, the position of Head of the Presidential Administration plays a central role, ranking higher in the actual hierarchy than the functions of Prime Minister and the speakers of both houses of parliament. Therefore, any changes in this position may hint at Lukashenka's current preferences regarding the distribution of influence between different groups in the ruling elite and both internal and external policymaking.
- The appointment of Krutoi as head of the Administration confirms the years-long, unprecedented alignment with Russia, currently an almost unavoidable direction in Minsk's policy. It is also worth noting that unlike his predecessor Serheyenko, who hailed from the KGB and headed the administration from 2019-24, Krutoi represents the civilian segment of the *nomenklatura*. In this way, Lukashenka is trying to build a counterweight to the law enforcement agencies, which have dominated a large part of the state apparatus since the political crisis of 2020. Last April, a similar change was made to the position of the Minister of Justice: civil servant Yauhen Kovalenko replaced General Syarhei Khomenko.
- The sole purpose of Lukashenka's latest reshuffle is to strengthen his position and consolidate the system. We should not assume that this change in the balance of power between the civilian and security sectors within the *nomenklatura* will translate into any

modifications to Belarusian policy. The regime will stay on course towards ever closer ties with Russia while continuing its confrontational rhetoric towards the West. At the same time, Belarusian diplomacy is likely to become more active on the international arena; this is expected from the new Foreign Minister, who is more energetic than his predecessor. There are also no reasons to anticipate any liberalisation of the regime's domestic policy, which means that the government apparatus will continue to act in a highly repressive manner.