

# How did Lukashenko's friends latch on the feeder?

## The Kraken of Corruption

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Photo: pup.org.ng

Belarus is one of the most corrupt countries in Europe due to its unprecedented brutality, according to the [statement](#) by the international organization GRECO, established by the Council of Europe. But, as per the same statement, the Belarusian corruption system is devised quite intricately. Despite the fact that the level of thievery and bribery is outrageous, most Belarusians do not even realize it.

How do the Belarusian authorities manage this? How far do the tentacles of the Belarusian corruption Kraken go? How do ordinary citizens suffer from this and how much do some such feedings cost? With you - the next issue of the program Let's Figure It Out.

In our new investigation, we examined the activities of lesser-known businessmen and those whom many have already forgotten because they successfully hide in the shadows. We will tell you how the most profitable sectors of the Belarusian economy were redistributed, and how the schemes of withdrawing money from the state treasury work.

## CAR «UNLUCKY»

Our first hero is a recipient of special benefits from the state **Aliaksey Vaganau (Alexey Vaganov)**, one of the earliest businessmen in the Belarusian arena.



*Aliaksey Vaganau Photo: TUT.by*

He made his first capital from selling Ford vehicles through the company Lada OMC he had founded. In the 1990s, he became the state authorities' exclusive partner in two of the largest car production investment projects. Lada OMC became a co-founder of the joint ventures MAZ-MAN and Ford Union. **Alexander Lukashenko** headed the grand opening of the vehicle assembly plant in Abchak, near Minsk.

Through Vaganau, the authorities attempted to create domestic car production back then. In the late 1990s, Ford Union became a resident of the Minsk Free Economic Zone with its tax and customs benefits. At that time, the media called the former secretary of the Union State, **Pavel Borodin**, a friend of Vaganau's. That is, he helped launch the plant near Minsk. But the project was unsuccessful.

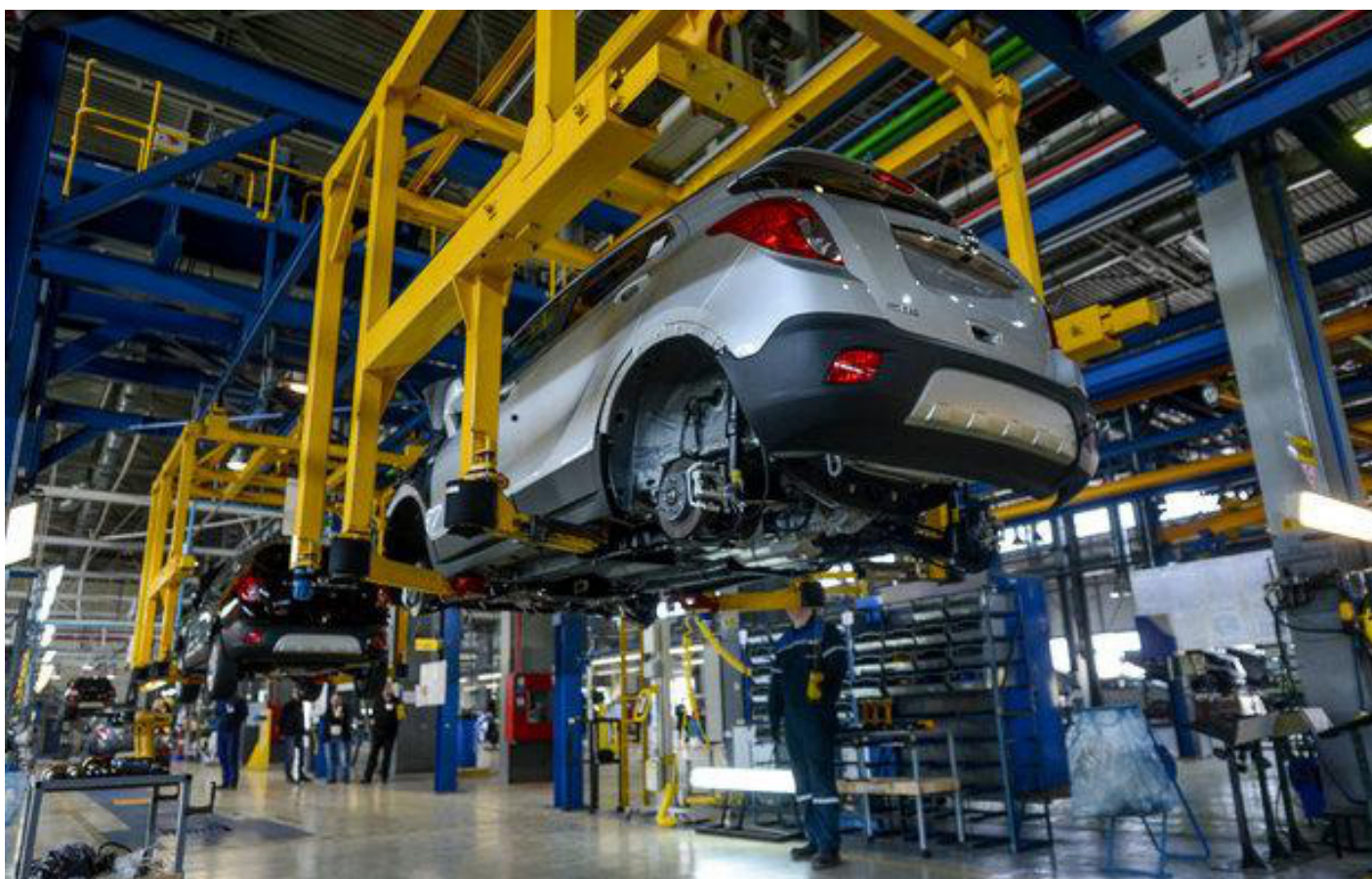
*"I believe that the Ford project could have had a phenomenal result had it not been curtailed. As far as I remember, the state stopped supporting it or some questions from the state arose,"* - recalls the chairman of the Belarusian Automobile Association (BAA) **Siarhei Mikhnevich (Sergei Mikhnevich)**.

In the early 2000s, Vaganau became an MP, and the company name changed to Unison. Over 20 years, the company has managed to assemble a number of cars with varying degrees of success. First, the Iranian Samand. Then, the Western brands, such as Opel, Peugeot, Citroën, Cadillac. In recent years, Unison produced Chinese cars Zotye and Chang'an.

*“Vaganau’s company created everything from scratch. We must pay tribute to this. There were no large infusions from either automakers or other outside investors. And that slowed down this project,”* Mikhnevich believes.

Unison is, in fact, a screwdriver production, explained the automotive market experts. The company buys ready-made vehicles abroad. It simply imports them disassembled. Here, they are assembled on the Lego principle and delivered to Russia.

At the same time, it enjoys extensive benefits. It does not pay value added tax, or recycling fees in Belarus. In addition, for a long time Unison was exempt from customs duties on imports of components and spare parts, from which the cars were assembled.



*Car assembly at the Unison plant. Photo: unison.by*

Back in 2010, the Ministry of Industry entered into an investment agreement with Unison, according to which the company received customs benefits in exchange for the construction of welding and painting shops. They were supposed to start operating last year, but have not yet been launched, and the contract with the company was not extended.

Roughly calculated, over ten years Unison received preferences worth millions of dollars. We inquired with the Ministry of Industry whether it planned to collect money from them.

*“Luck helps a businessman in many ways, if he has it. If it is not there, then even the help of God himself or the state will not save him. And who helped him? He had some partners who at one point lent a shoulder. There was a time when the state gave support and preferences,”* states the BAA chairman.

Contradictory information is spreading on the market. Such as, Unison assembles almost nothing, and Vaganau sold his stake in the company. The businessman refutes this information.

*“I’m staying in the project. I am the chairman of the supervisory board of this company. We assemble Chang’an cars. This is the second or third company in the Chinese market. A good state-owned concern with a good model line. So we are still working with them and considering them as our strategic partner,”* Vaganau told us.

He promised that this year Unison would finally launch welding and painting shops and significantly increase car production. Earlier, grandiose plans were announced to produce 25,000 cars a year. In recent years, 2-3 thousand cars have been assembled at the Abchak plant. But Vaganau left the MAZ-MAN tractor assembly project back in the early 2000s.

## SCANDALOUS BUILDER

**Viktar Shautsou (Viktor Shevtsov)** is another influential businessman dating back to Lukashenko’s first presidential term. In 1994 he created Infobank. Ten years later, the bank got into a scandal with money laundering for Saddam Hussein through the UN Oil-for-Food programme. Belarusian companies arranged for humanitarian help for Iraq, and in exchange received oil and sold it on the world market. The media reported that Shautsou knew Saddam Hussein personally.

*“Infobank laundered funds for Saddam Hussein’s regime received as a result of schemes to circumvent the UN’s Oil-for-Food programme, including illegal surcharges and inflated contracts. These funds were then laundered through several other foreign banks and fictitious corporations. Finally, proceeds from illegal surcharges and inflated contracts were either returned to the Iraqi government in violation of the UN program, or used to purchase weapons or finance military training through Infobank and its subsidiary,”* according to the [statement](#) by the US Treasury Department.



Viktar Shautsou, right. Photo: bzs.by

After the scandal, Infobank first changed its name to Trustbank, and later to Reshenie [Solution - Transl.]. Now this bank is one of the shareholders of Belzagranstroy. Shautsou chairs the supervisory board there. Belzagranstroy is known primarily for its activity in Venezuela. The company has built factories to assemble Belarusian tractors and trucks, as well as several residential complexes. The projects' implementation was accompanied by a preliminary political agreement between Alexander Lukashenko and **Hugo Chavez**.



*Residential complex in Venezuela. Photo: bzs.by*

The construction in Venezuela did not go without scandals. Local journalists suspected Belzagranstroy of milking local contracts on a large scale. In 2011, Shautsou was detained. A criminal case against him was initiated for illegal money transfers and construction violations. But he never got a prison sentence.

Nowadays, Shautsou is still in business. In the Emirates, the businessman founded the company Future Metro, which services aviation, defense, data centers, hotels, commercial and residential buildings.

## HONORARY CONSUL

**Siarhei Tsiatseryn (Sergey Teterin)** came into business from tennis. For a long time he held key positions in the sports field. He worked as First Deputy Minister of Sport and Tourism, Assistant to the President, Director of the Raubichi Sports Complex, Vice President of the National Olympic Committee. Now, he heads the Belarusian Tennis Federation.

Tsiatseryn is often seen in the company of Lukashenko: he mows the grass with him, or picks watermelons in Drazdy. And receives gifts from Lukashenko.



*Siarhei Tsiatseryn (Sergey Teterin). Photo: tennisacademy.by*

*“Alexander Grigoryevich gave me a shepherd named Mike, a parrot Kesha and a cat Tom. Other than them, I have another small doggie, a hamster, a guinea pig, and fish. I have a small zoo at home,” the businessman told Komsomolskaya Pravda.*



*Siarhei Tsiatseryn and Nikolai Lukashenko picking watermelons in Drazdy. Photo: president.gov.by*

After the Belarusian athletes' unsuccessful performance at the Summer Olympics in London in 2012, Tsiatseryn was fired and quickly went into business. In partnership with **Leonid Mints** he controls a significant proportion of advertising flows on television and radio. He makes money on the sale of food and alcoholic beverages.

Tsiatseryn's BelGlobalGarant has the status of a special importer of alcoholic beverages. It sells Georgian wine. Tsiatseryn is an honorary consul in Georgia. This position provides a number of benefits. For example, an honorary consul has the right to drive a car with red license plates.

By the way, Tsiatseryn opened a consulate in Lukashenko's birthplace, the village of Alexandria. And came into land ownership by the neighboring village of Hima. The businessman owns about 30 hectares on the right of lifelong hereditary possession. The purpose is to run a farm.



*Siarhei Tsiatseryn's plots of land near the village of Khima*

## «THE DECIDER»

2020 turned out to be a breakthrough year for Nikolai Lukashenko's ice hockey team coach **Dzmitry Baskau (Dmitry Baskov)**. He became the Hockey Federation chairman, and co-owner of the infamous battery plant in Brest. Yet, Baskau began his business journey in construction projects. First, he partnered with **Andrei Yakimchyk**, and then - with the Yarmashou (Ermashov) family.

Baskau has a stake in Dutch Star. It was building the residential complex Grand House in the capital's district Hrushauka (Grushevka). Dutch Star planned to expand the construction. It planned to cut down part of the Hrushauski Park for this purpose. Local residents were outraged. They called the police against the builders, wrote an appeal to Lukashenka, and went to rallies. As a result, they were heard. The head of the Council of the Republic **Natalia Kachanova** came to investigate the issue. That conflict was resolved by compromise. The company Dutch Star was given the adjacent site for construction, and the order was issued not to touch Hrushauski Park.

Portal [TUT.by](https://tut.by), citing sources, wrote that Baskau's main asset is access to the body. Thanks to this, he can help resolve issues and receive dividends. Last autumn, Baskau received a mortgage from the state-owned Belarusbank for 550.000 rubles [ca. €174.000 at the current exchange rate] for 20 years at 13.35% per annum. The loan was approved, despite the fact that at that time Belarusian banks had suspended or restricted housing lending for the population amid economic and political crises.



*Nikolai Lukashenko and Dzmitry Baskau (centre). Photo: TUT.by*

## **BELARUSIAN PHARMAGEDDON**

Businessman **Aliaksei Sychou (Alexey Sychev)** and his relationship with the authorities is an illustration of the corruption-prone schemes that have dominated health care since the beginning of Alexander Lukashenko's rule.



*Aliaksei Sychou (Alexey Sychev) Photo: probusiness.io*



In our investigations into the state procurement of anti-cancer drugs, we talked about the Vitsebsk businessman's assets, i.e. VitVar, AkanitPharm and Nativita. Imitation of competition, the use of the state program of import substitution and tax benefits are implemented in it not for production, but for the import of drugs and their repackaging under the guise of own production. Afterwards, Sychou's entities supplied these drugs to state entities, inflating their prices up to 13-fold. Minister of Health **Dmitry Pinevich** demanded that Nativita return the money.

*«Nativita must return everything Belsat wrote about. Sue them if necessary. And then he can talk about his initiatives. And we need to show a different situation: how much cheaper the cost parameters of these analogues have become,»* [said](#) the high-ranking official during one of the procurement commission's meetings.

The cunning schemes became possible probably due to Sychou's personal ties with the former Minister of Health, **Vasily Zharok**, who the media dub **Nikolai Lukashenko's** godfather.

During the «doctors' case» the former Minister's of Health apartment in the centre of Minsk was gifted to Sychou's youngest son, Fyodar (Fedor). In 2018, during the investigation, Sychou was held on suspicion of bribery, but escaped the trial.



*Research and production complex NatiVita. Photo: nativita.by*

In 2020, after the first part of our [investigation](#), we learned that the security forces had questions for Sychou, and he left the country for Slovakia. The choice of the country is due to the fact that Sychou was the honorary consul of Slovakia in Belarus. By the way, the Consulate office was based in the same building as Sychou's pharmacological firm VitVar's in Vitsebsk. In addition, he resigned as head of the Belarusian Beach Soccer Federation, which he headed for about 10 years.

What did we find out at this stage of our investigation? There are a number of state-supported businessmen in Belarus who have access to the body, which helps them solve difficult problems and fill their own pockets. But at the same time, there are a number of court businessmen whose feedings cover many large high-profit industries, like the Kraken.



## TOBACCO TYCOON

One of the influential businessmen in modern Belarus is **Aliaksei Aleksin (Alexey Olexin)**. He is not a stranger to authorities. For some time he worked for Belvneshtorginvest, which was subordinated to the Presidential Affairs Management. There, he was engaged in petroleum products export. Then, he was developing the same direction in the group of companies Triple belonging to **Yuri Chizh**, known as Lukashenko's wallet. Over time, the paths of the two businessmen diverged, and Aleksin became an independent figure.



Aliaksey Aleksin (Alexey Olexin). Photo: TUT.by

His assets include Energo-Oil, the countryside recreational complex Syabry, MTBank, the Molodechno meat-packing plant Veles-Meat, the engineering company Ekovo, and the national transit traffic system operator Belneftegaz. But above all, Aleksin is known to the general public through the infamous kiosks Tabakerka (Snuffbox).

Three years ago, the authorities entrusted Aleksin with one of the most profitable branches of the Belarusian economy, tobacco. After the meeting, Lukashenko decided to create a single distributor in the tobacco sector. An investment agreement was signed with Energo-Oil. First, it was granted the right to import cigarettes. Then, it became the exclusive distributor of the Hrodna tobacco factory Neman's produce. Eventually, Aleksin opened his own tobacco factory, Inter Tobacco.



*Tobacco factory Inter Tobacco. Photo: TUT.by*

As a result, Aleksin's entity controls the sale of cigarettes in two of the three Belarusian factories. Energo-Oil positions itself as No.1 in the Belarusian market, and estimates its share at 40%. And, as our joint [investigation](#) with Naviny.by and Proekt uncovered, Aleksin may be involved in cigarette smuggling.

"Everyone is talking about it. He is the main beneficiary. There are no others there," says **Alexander Zayats**., economic commentator at TUT.by.

Russian TV presenter **Tina Kandelaki** on her [telegram channel](#) simply accused Aleksin of smuggling cigarettes from Belarus to Russia. She accused Lukashenko of the patronage of the «Belarusian tobacco mafia».

The love for Harley Davidson motorcycles connects Aleksin with the Lukashenko family. Viktor Lukashenko and the son of the former Prosecutor General of Russia **Artem Chaika** founded an elite motorcycle club Iron Birds Chapter, which organizes biker rallies in Russia and Belarus. The event is co-organized by Moto Event, in which the director of Energo-Oil **Dzmitry Paulovich (Dmitry Pavlovich)**, Aleksin's employee, has a stake.



Artem Chaika and Aliaksei Aleksin at a biker rally in Voronezh. Photo: RIA

*«If we talk about whether Alexin is connected with or close to the current government, then we can say that it helps him to do business,» said Zayats.*

## OIL BARON

Another influential businessman of modern Belarus is **Mikalai Varabei (Nikolai Vorobey)**. His business is tied, first of all, to the oil products trade. Varabei controls such assets as Interservice and the Oil Bitumen Plant. By the way, the Oil Bitumen Plant was spotted in shadowy schemes with the re-export of Russian dark oil products.



Mikalai Varabei Photo: TUT.by

Last year, Varabei became one of the founders of the New Oil Company (Novaya Neftianaya Kompaniya). His company Interservice owns 75% of the shares, while the remaining 25% belong to the Development Bank and the Belarusian Railways. The New Oil Company has received the right to export oil products from Belarusian refineries in Mazyr and Navapolatsk. It offers fuel oil (mazut) delivery through the Baltic ports. Previously, only the state-owned Belarusian Oil Company had the right to export oil products.

Late last year, Varabei came under the EU sanctions for supporting the Lukashenko regime. He is blacklisted as a co-owner of Bremina Group. Varabei owns this major logistics operator along with the aforementioned Aliaksei Aleksin and another influential businessman, **Aliaksandr Zaitsau (Alexander Zaitsev)**.

## LOGISTIC OFFSHORE

Zaitsau is a former state official who worked as Viktor Lukashenko's aide. He exports Belarusian dump trucks, manufactures military equipment, mines sand and gravel in Belarus, and gold in Africa. But his main interest is in the field of logistics. Bremina Group has built large logistics complexes on the border with Poland. Now he is building a large complex with car, railway and aviation terminals on the border with Russia in Orsha district. In 2018, Lukashenko visited the construction site.



*Aliaksandr Zaitsau (Alexander Zaitsev). Photo: TUT.by*

During that visit, Lukashenko asked businessmen to speed up, and promised to support the ambitious project. Less than a year later, an economic zone was created in Orsha district. Residents were given extensive benefits comparable with the Chinese-Belarusian park Vyaliki Kamen'.

Thus, for a period of time the residents of Bremina-Orsha are exempt from income tax and tax on dividends, income and real estate. They do not pay value added tax and duties when importing equipment, components, spare parts, raw materials and supplies to Belarus. In fact, a particular offshore zone was created specifically for Bremina-Orsha. The state guaranteed the residents of this zone the inviolability of tax benefits until 2028.

## ATTRACTIVE LAND FOR FRIENDS

Real estate is another area where businessmen close to the government have settled well. The largest developer in Belarus is Dana Holdings. It has built or is still building the residential complexes Minsk Mayak (Minsk Lighthouse) and Minsk Mir (Minsk World), Dana Mall shopping center and BK Capital Center business center.



*Dana Holdings office in Minsk. Photo: danacenter.by*

The company received attractive plots of land for the construction of the Minsk Mayak and Minsk Mir complexes without an auction - under secret investment agreements with the state. Housing is mainly built with the shareholders' money. Special mortgages from state-owned banks with the lowest rates on the market exist for buying apartments in these complexes. Dana Holdings received other bonuses from the state, too.

*"One can name the main preference. The land near the former airport is being developed at the expense of the budget. Every year, the Minsk investment program has an expense item that is the Minsk Mir residential complex maintenance. In 2019, it was worth almost 70 million Belarusian rubles [ca. €35 million at the time - Transl.] In 2020 - the same amount. And in 2021 - 67 million [ca. €21.18 million at the current exchange rate - Transl.] This money goes to demolition and laying communications. In addition, kindergartens are being built at the expense of the budget, there should be a school, there should be polyclinics,"* lists the preferences **Natalia Litovskaya**, an expert in the field of residential real estate .

A number of companies have been created for the housing and commercial real estate construction, whose traces lead to the Cypriot company Dana Holdings Limited. For a long time, **Nebojša Karić**, the son of the Serbian businessman Bogoljub Karić, was its sole owner. In November 2019, Bogoljub's three daughters went to share with Nebojša - **Nadežda (Lazarević), Jelena and Danica**. All four Dana Holdings owners are residents of Dubai.

The Karić family has known Lukashenko for a long time. By invitation from **Dragomir Karić**, Lukashenko visited the popular Serbian resort of Kopovnik in 2009.

*"I brought Mr. Lukashenko, persuaded him to come ten years after his visit to Yugoslavia during the NATO bombings, to see how we are fighting and progressing. Lukashenko refused all privileges: he did not want his own ski slope, and a group of 60 businessmen he brought was standing in line,"* Dragomir Karić told the [BBC](#) .



*The Karić family. Photo: novosti.rs*

Dragomir Karić is the Honorary Consul of Belarus in Belgrade. In 2012, Lukashenko thanked him for strengthening friendly relations between Belarus and Serbia. In 2015, before the construction of the Minsk Mir complex began, Lukashenko had received Dragomir and Bogoljub Karić at his residence, and then laid the stone for the construction of the complex together with the former president of Serbia, **Tomislav Nikolić**.



*Dragomir Karić, Alexander Lukashenko and Tomislav Nikolić (from left to right). Photo: president.gov.by*

At some point, Viktor Lukashenko's wife Lilia worked for one of Dana Holdings' companies. She now runs the Art Chaos gallery at Dana Mall. The Karić's companies have come under the EU sanctions for supporting the Lukashenko regime. They are going to slowly curtail investments in the Belarusian market.

*"Sanctions will not affect them, and the curtailment is due to the fact that they do not see stability in Belarusian politics and economy. Even if we put the politics aside, when the economy has failed here, there will no one to sell housing to in this Minsk Mir,"* Natalia Litovskaya reckons.

The company Tapas is building up Minsk along with Dana Holdings. Its owner is **Pavel Bely (Pavel Belyi)**, a forward on Lukashenko's ice hockey team. Tapas has built the residential complexes Olympic Park, Park City, Braslavsky, Aquamarine, Megapolis, and the business centres Futuris and Ajax.



*Pavel Bely (centre). Photo: udf.by*

The land for the construction of the elite complex Olympic Park near the reserve Lebiadziny (Lebyazhiy) was allocated without an auction. Without an auction, Tapas received another plot nearby - for the construction of the residential complex Monterey.

*"It seems to me that the land allocation is a hugely preferential. The thing is that now the plot for the construction of one building at the last auction was sold, depending on the encumbrances, for three, four and even ten million dollars. The land is quite expensive. And they essentially make you a gift for that amount,"* says the residential real estate expert.

The construction of Olympic Park was accompanied by a scandal. The complex includes a restaurant. To accommodate it, Lukashenko reduced the boundaries of the Lebiadziny natural reserve. This caused public outrage. Tapas was repeatedly fined, but the construction never stopped. Representatives of the Belarusian show business and athletes, as well as Alexander Lukashenko, were present at the opening of the restaurant. The restaurant is managed by the unitary enterprise Lebiadziny Park. Its founder is the National Olympic Committee, headed by Lukashenko.



## FRIEND MISHA AND BELARUSIAN SUBSOIL

Russian billionaire **Mikhail Gutseriyev** is a long-time acquaintance of Alexander Lukashenko's. The businessman began his activity in Belarus with the modernization of the Mozyr Oil Refinery, built gas stations and oil depots, which became the basis for friendly relations.



Mikhail Gutseriyev. Photo: TUT.by

*“Gutseriyev earned the Belarusian president’s favourable disposition through his reliability. This is a man whom the President of Belarus absolutely trusts. Let me give just one example: when Gutseriyev was tasked with modernizing the Mozyr Oil Refinery, the task was accomplished - as, indeed, is everything that Mikhail Safarbekovich promises,”* said Lukashenko’s press secretary **Natallia Eismant** to Forbes.

Gutseriyev built hangars at the Minsk National Airport; an Orthodox shrine in Sharshuny; a private school in Drazdy; converted the Krasnaselskaye estate, near Radashkovichy, formerly owned by Dipservice, part of the Presidential Affairs Management’s portfolio, into a hotel complex.

The businessman has helped Lukashenko on many occasions. He brought Russian pop stars to the New Year’s reception, and supplied oil to Belarusian plants during the conflict with major Russian companies. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the businessman provided Belarusian hospitals with computer tomographic scanners.

Now the Russian billionaire is one of the few private individuals who received access to the Belarusian mineral resources. In the Luban district, his company Slavkali is building a potash plant, which plans to produce two million tons of fertilizers a year. The cost of the project is estimated at US\$2 billion.

Son of the Russian billionaire **Said Gutseriyev**, together with the Belarusian IT entrepreneur Viktor Prakapen (Viktor Prokopen), invests in startups. In addition, he recently acquired the state-owned Paritetbank.

By the way, Gutseriyev was present at Lukashenko’s secret inauguration at the Palace of Independence after the 2020 presidential election.



*Alexander Lukashenko and Mikhail Gutseryev. Photo: sputnik.by*

## **LOYAL PRIVATIZER**

Another businessman seen at that inauguration is **Aliaksandr Shakutsin (Alexander Shakutin)**. This is a man completely loyal to the current government. Shakutsin is a former member of the presidium of Belaya Rus, and of the Council of the Republic. In the last presidential election, he voted «for a stable course of the country.»

Shakutsin is mainly known as the majority shareholder in Amkodor holding. Over 20 years, the businessman privatized about a dozen machine-building plants, all of which became part of the holding. In difficult times, Amkodor received support from the state.



*Alexander Lukashenko and Aliaksandr Shakutsin. Photo: President's press service*

But Shakutsin has more «interesting» businesses, too. Eximoil and Logex, controlled by him, were seen in gray schemes with the re-export of petroleum products and flowers. Like Varabei, Shakutsin came under personal sanctions from the European Union.

## SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION

Corruption in Belarus is systemic, GRECO believes. Experts criticize our country, among other things, for the broad powers of the president.

In 2012, the international organization sent 24 recommendations to the Belarusian authorities based on the results of monitoring in Belarus. Since then, 20 of them remain unfulfilled. Moreover, Belarusian officials did not give permission to publish the report. In a conversation with us, the chairman of the international organization called on the Belarusian authorities to publish the document.

*“GRECO’s normal practice is, we approve a report and then publish it on our website upon authorization by the country, permission from the state. Unfortunately, Belarus is the only member state of GRECO that has not agreed to publish any reports. I can only repeat that I will insist that the Belarusian authorities agree to publish GRECO reports,”* said **Marin Mrchela**.



*Marin Mrchela. Photo: coe.int*

In each of the few lucrative sectors of the Belarusian economy, the authorities have created feeders that suck money out of the budget and into the pockets of the businessmen who are top officials’ cronies, including Alexander Lukashenko’s family.

A typical scheme is when the authorities exempt these businessmen from taxes or reimburse their expenses from the budget. Are these feeders distributed free of charge? Let everyone draw their own logical conclusions.