

Redrawing the geopolitical map: Belarus and its neighbours connect the Black and Baltic seas

Belarus and Poland are [advancing a project](#) to connect the Black and Baltic Seas via the E40 waterway. The 2,000 km-long waterway will run through rivers and canals in Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland and provide better access to seaports for landlocked Belarus.

Having already conducted a feasibility study, the participating countries are now considering ways to finance the project before making their final decision.

However, in July, several environmental organisations and public associations launched a campaign against the E40 waterway. About two dozen organisations from Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine signed a petition to halt the project.

If anything can ensure the sovereignty of Belarus and its neighbours, it is such projects which modify the political geography of the region. Unfortunately, many experts and politicians in the region do not seem to understand this matter.

Is the project really as large as it seems?

Linking up the Black and Baltic Seas, the [proposed E40 route](#) also connects many of the region's major cities: Brest and Pinsk in Belarus, Gdańsk and Warsaw in Poland, and Kyiv and Kherson in Ukraine. The designers of the E40 project emphasise that their intention is to restore a previously existing waterway to move both people and cargo. In most parts of the waterway, ships are navigating even today.

The Polish leg of the project will require the most work, while Belarus has only to partially streamline the Prypiats' River, construct seven locks, and build several other hydro-technical facilities.



Map of the proposed E40 waterway. Image: e40restoration.eu

The Polish *Maritime Institute* in Gdańsk carried out a feasibility study on the project with EU support. According to the institute, construction of facilities on the Prypiats', i.e., the Belarusian part of the undertaking, would cost \$150m. In comparison, about 12bn euros is to be spent on construction of the Polish part of the route.

Criticism from activists

On 19 July, certain environmentalists and economists expressed their concerns over E40 during a press conference in Minsk. Ales' Herasimenka, the press secretary of the *Business Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers*, criticised the project for the high investment risks it carries and the negative consequences for the Belarusian economy.

According to him, internal waterways are generally less efficient than

automotive and rail transport in terms of rapidness, necessity of reloading cargo, and seasonal limitations. Therefore, according to Herasimenka: 'We believe that government and institutional investors should come to terms with the decline of the role of inland water transport. ... Waterways were relevant at the beginning of civilisation.'

However, such cursory dismissal of inland water transport is misjudged. In other European countries, this form of infrastructure shows no obvious signs of decline. Between 1990 and 2015, despite some ups and downs, the cargo volume of German inland water transport remained more or less static, at slightly more than 220m tons.

Likewise, some types of cargo, especially liquid bulk and dry bulk cargo, can be profitably transported through inland waterways, despite the limitations on speed. Several major firms in southern Belarus could take advantage of the waterway to transport large volumes of cargo. The Mikashevichy-based firm *Hranit* has been using the Prypiats to transport its granite for many years. Likewise, the Mazyr oil refinery or the Salihorsk-based potash company *Belaruskali* could transport their products using water transport.

Tourism cannot replace trade



Image: *Nasha Niva*

Environmentalists insist that the project could have grave consequences for the local bird population, including several

vulnerable species. Moreover, they claim it could potentially destroy the unique wetlands ecosystem.

However, the project does not envision any direct destruction of the wetlands. Moreover, nature in the area is not pristine anyway. In the 20th century, most swamps were drained in southern Belarus, and intensive economic activity altered the region significantly.

What's more, the local environment is transforming because of global climate change. The water level in southern Belarusian rivers has been low for several years. Last year, because of the low water level in the Prypiats', navigation on the river stopped much earlier than usual: by the beginning of autumn. On the other hand, because of rising temperatures and earlier springs, last year the company *Belarusian Riverine Steamships* started navigation on the Prypiats' a month earlier than normal, in March.

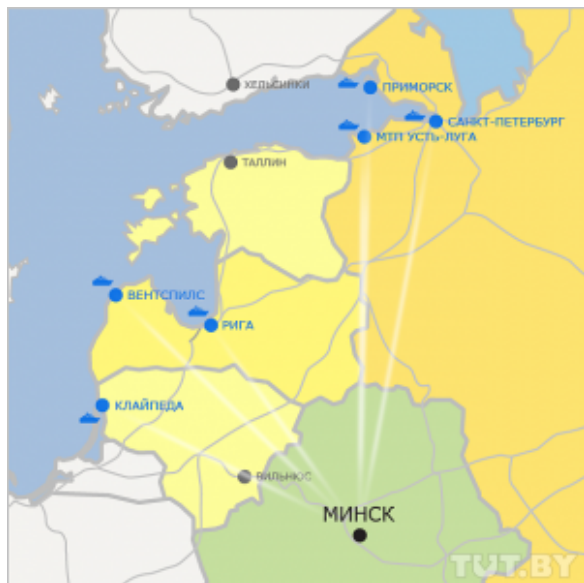
One critic of the project, a representative of the Polish organisation *Ratujmy Rzeki*, Przemyslaw Nawrocki, urges Belarus to develop tourism along the Prypiats'. However, despite the beautiful landscapes along the river, the tourism industry is unlikely to be able to compete with the income brought by the E40. Belarus is simply too poor to leave the region undeveloped to satisfy environmental activists.

The waterway as a political game-changer

The E40 project also has political significance. 'Death of Palissie [*the name of the region in the Pripyats River Basin*] or [an alliance](#) against Russia?' exclaimed the US-financed and administered *Radio Liberty*, writing about the project on 24 July.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian government is negotiating a waterway which would help it use Polish and [Ukrainian ports](#) at the time when the Kremlin is urging Minsk to [reroute its cargo](#) away from Latvian and Lithuanian ports towards Russian Baltic ports. Minsk is not only

resisting Moscow's plans in this area, it even wants to make more intensive use of ports in countries Moscow considers unfriendly.



Map of the Baltic ports used by Belarus. Image: Tut.by

However, this concerns more than just Russia. Minsk is increasingly interested in the Polish port of Gdańsk and various [Ukrainian ports](#) because of very probable problems with [using the Lithuanian port](#) of Klaipėda.

The Lithuanian government has [become unfriendly](#) towards Minsk in recent years because of Belarus's decision to build a nuclear power plant near the Lithuanian border. Moreover, on 14 July, the Klaipėda City council voted to expand the city at the expense of its port – a priority destination for maritime export of Belarusian products. Belarus had invested in the Klaipėda port and there was long-standing bilateral cooperation on using the port for Belarusian foreign trade. This decision of local authorities dismisses the plans of the port administration to construct a new deep-water port for ocean-going ships – a dream for Belarusian exporters.

In sum, projects like E40 alter the geopolitics of the region, [opening it up](#) and providing it with further and better connections to the sea. Belarus cannot change its location, but it can develop its infrastructure in a way which mitigates its disadvantage as a

landlocked country. Minsk can diversify its exports and reduce its dependence on Russia; it can also better integrate with its neighbours and the EU.

The environmental and economic arguments against the project are unconvincing, at least as far as Belarus is concerned. To survive, Belarus must reach the sea; the E40 is one way to do this.