Belarus’s 2019 parliamentary election: consequential or not?

On 17 November 2019 Belarus chooses a new parliament. The last parliamentary elections, held in September 2016, brought two non-loyalist candidates into the lower chamber for the first time in more than a decade.

Although the role of the parliament is relatively insignificant in the Belarusian political system, the outcome of the poll later this month will send an important signal about Belarus’s domestic trajectory. Moreover, the international response could determine the direction of travel for Belarus’s relations with Russia and Western states as it moves towards presidential elections in August 2020.

2016: A confidence trick?

Elections in Belarus usually provide few surprises and critics fairly dismiss parliamentary ballots as inconsequential affairs. In the earlier part of his rule, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka replaced the unicameral parliament he inherited with a pliant bicameral National Assembly. The president also liberally uses presidential decrees to bypass the parliament.

Despite the parliament’s minuscule powers in domestic politics, the September 2016 poll did capture foreign analysts’ interests. The election of Hanna Kanapatskaya, a member of the oppositional United Civic Party, and Alena Anisim, the head of the Belarusian Language Society, occurred against a backdrop of warming relations between Belarus and Western states that have long criticised Belarus for its undemocratic political system.
In 2016’s tense ‘post-Crimea’ international environment Western officials hoped relations with Belarus would continue to thaw. They keenly wondered whether prominent opposition candidate Tatsiana Karatkevich, who had been defeated in the presidential elections a year earlier, would be ‘allowed’ into the parliament as a concession to Western actors’ calls for greater democracy.

In the end Kanapatskaya, who stood in the same electoral district as Karatkevich, found herself a parliamentary deputy instead. Someone memorably told me that observing those elections recalled a ‘Find the Lady’ card trick played on a street corner. Observers thought that they were following the ‘card’ (Karatkevich) in the electoral district, only to realise that they were following the wrong card.

**Prospective sticking points**

The 2016 elections succeeded in keeping Belarus’s relations with Western states on an even keel. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission’s final report contained criticisms, but less overtly than in the analogous report for the 2011 elections. The 2016 report found the elections ‘efficiently organised’ and spoke of democratic improvements, albeit referring to ‘long-standing systemic shortcomings’ and ‘procedural deficiencies, inconsistencies and irregularities.’

An argument can be made that Belarus’s relations with Western states continue to improve. Dialogue with the US has intensified and an agreement for the exchange of ambassadors has been reached. In respect of the EU, the Belarusian president will visit Austria a few days before the vote in what constitutes his first visit to an EU member state since the lifting of a travel ban and other sanctions in early 2016.
However, one could plausibly argue that the rapprochement with the EU has stalled as the latter focuses increasingly on affairs within the bloc. The issue of an enhanced visa regime for Belarusian citizens visiting the EU has dragged on and still not-quite-finalised. Within the EU there remains a long-running dilemma about inter-parliamentary relations with Belarus representing de facto recognition of the National Assembly, the legitimacy of which some MEPs with long memories dispute.

The Belarusian authorities could use a pretence of democracy in the parliamentary elections in the hope of coaxing further concessions from the EU. Early signs in this regard haven’t all been positive. On 17 October the Central Electoral
Commission denied registration to both Anisim and Kanapatskaya, among other candidates, citing irregularities with the requisite signature collection. Furthermore, candidates from the United Civic Party and European Belarus have complained about the blocking of campaign television broadcasts.

In the past, the authorities have routinely resorted to measures involving candidate registration and restricting media access to disrupt oppositional political campaigns. Above all, it reminds domestic actors that the authorities retain effective control.

The use of these techniques during the election campaign period gives observers an early indication of the Belarusian authorities’ beliefs when it comes to their Western partners. Belarus has an obvious interest in keeping relations on a good footing as it strives to maintain leverage with Russia.

**International response**

The Belarusian authorities may calculate that they are doing enough to satisfy Western states. Lukashenka has spoken publicly about reforms to the political party system and could argue that this will supply the means to address ‘systemic shortcomings’ — though one suspects such proclamations of reforms will come to nothing.

As well, the authorities have registered over 150 candidates from recognised opposition parties for the forthcoming elections. Admittedly that is significantly fewer than the number who stood in the 2016 elections with the United Civic Party successfully registering 47 candidates for this year’s ballot, compared to 57 in 2016, and the Belarusian Popular Front registering 31 candidates (49 last time round). What outside actors will really notice, of course, is the composition of the parliament after 17 November.
Alternatively, the authorities may have calculated that Western governments will not change their policy towards Belarus regardless of the conduct or outcome of the elections. They may have concluded that geopolitical security now takes precedence over democratic values for the West, and that the costs of rowing back on improved relations with Belarus would prove too high, especially as Russian influence grows in eastern Europe and elsewhere.

In the complicated geopolitical environment since 2014 Russia has been keen to consolidate its grip over its neighbour and there have been persistent frictions between the two states. Belarus has resisted Russian pressures to deepen integration and cooperation on terms the Belarusian side deems unfavourable, but Belarus’s leverage with Russia depends of having credible alternatives to deeper integration. Some analysts argue that Russia sees further concessions from Belarus as the price of its tacit support for Lukashenka in next year’s presidential election.

Accordingly, whether the number of deputies loyal to Lukashenka rises or falls as a result of the 17 November vote, the broader international reaction to the elections matters. It will play a role in determining the tenor of Belarus’s international relations in the coming year. Injudicious actions by either Belarus or Western actors could presage a renewed deterioration in their relations.

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Trump’s advisor in Minsk: why should we care?

Last week US National Security Advisor John Bolton visited Minsk and met the Belarusian president. The visit shows how greatly Belarus’s stock has risen in international relations over the past five years. It also adds to suggestions of ‘normalising’ diplomatic ties between Belarus and the United States, with President Aliaksandr Lukashenka insisting that he has long wanted ‘to start a new page’ in relations. But how much substance really backs up such talk and how far could any ‘normalisation’ proceed?

Bolton’s visit came as part of a tour of eastern Europe. The National Security Advisor’s trip follows a change of administration in Ukraine and the demise of the INF Treaty. His itinerary included two full days in Ukraine, but no one should doubt the significance and symbolism of Bolton’s presence in Minsk. Ahead of his arrival he promised ‘frank’ discussion on human rights issues alongside talk about sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In the current climate it has become de rigueur to interpret Western officials’ references to ‘sovereignty’ and ‘territorial integrity’ in the region in the light of Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Ongoing strains in the Belarus-Russia relationship make such an interpretation especially compelling. However, the visit proved still more significant given the dire state of Belarus-US relations in the past and, I would submit, it’s worthwhile to view the occasion in the context of improving bilateral relations.
A new normal in Belarus-US relations

The US has long been an ardent critic of Belarusian President Aliaksandr Lukashenka. In 2004 Congress passed the Belarus Democracy Act that pledged to support opposition to Lukashenka’s authoritarian rule. The following year US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice labelled Belarus an ‘outpost of tyranny’ alongside North Korea, Zimbabwe, and Iran among others. The US soon imposed sanctions on the oil refiner Belneftekhim and its subsidiaries.

The Belarusians reacted by demanding that the US reduced its diplomatic staff at the US Embassy to five and the US Ambassador left Minsk under threat of formal expulsion. Belarusian diplomatic presence in the US was reciprocally downsized and bilateral relations were in freefall. The situation changed with the conflict in Ukraine as Belarus – once described as ‘a piece that fell of the chessboard’ – saw its strategic value climb.

In recent years bilateral relations have improved noticeably. Earlier this year the Belarusian authorities lifted the cap on the number of diplomatic staff it permitted the US to have in the country. Bolton’s presence in Minsk last week came on the heels of visits in October 2018 by A. Wess Mitchell, at the time the US Assistant Secretary of State, and in March this year by US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent.

Bolton represented the most senior US official to go to Belarus since at least March 2001 when the Bush Administration sent a delegation. There have also been additional, less conspicuous US delegations in Minsk over the past two years with law enforcement and security agencies strengthening their cooperation.
Talk of normalising diplomatic relations has gathered momentum and the frequency of US official visits indicates both sides’ commitment to the goal. With high level officials in both states talking it up, it looks like the return of ambassadors will happen in the medium term. In the round, problems persist in the relationship and Bolton acknowledged that his meeting with Lukashenka ‘didn’t resolve any issues.’

**Stumbling blocks**

Belarus would like to see US sanctions lifted entirely, but late last year the US prolonged those still in place. Secondly, Belarus would like to buy US oil as a substitute for dependence on Russian oil imports, although geography calls into question whether this is a realistic prospect. A third goal may be that thawed relations will increase US investment in Belarus – though the elimination of sanctions would be crucial here.

*Source: www.president.gov.by*
Some trade potential undeniably exists, primarily for exports of Belarusian oil products (already the major export). However, the level of bilateral trade before sanctions was modest and there’s little evidence to suggest that this could change much because it’s not obvious where significant increases would come from. Trade volume between the two states has been consistently low; fluctuations in the data around the timing of new sanctions reflect the relatively small numbers to begin with rather than any drastic changes in trade volume.

Human rights issues remain another obstacle even if, unlike the EU, the US does not outright object to the continued use of the death penalty. Speaking after his meeting with the Belarusian head of state, Bolton acknowledged differences over human rights. The remark sounded like little more than a sop to the human rights lobby and, while one might argue that human rights fall outside of Bolton’s job description, it’s fair to conclude that he soft-pedalled on those issues for now.

**Bolton sure to have irked the Kremlin**

And the biggest obstacle of all is Russia, which will be nervous about its ally increasing ties to the US. The Kremlin’s credibility would be severely dented if Russian citizens thought that they risked ‘losing Belarus’ – however unlikely in reality.

Yet the Russia relationship remains by far the most important one to Belarus, which accordingly acts in its international relations with Russian onlookers in mind. Belarus has sought social capital from its role in the Ukraine peace talks and official sources confirm that the Ukraine conflict featured prominently in the Bolton-Lukashenka talks.
One can assume that Belarusian officials, having afforded Bolton a meeting with the head of state, will make a compensatory gesture towards Russia. Polish media speculated about Lukashenka’s absence from a ceremony in Warsaw on Sunday in this regard: Belarusian officials have joined their Russian colleagues in arguing against Poland’s calls for a US military base on its territory (another issue that will surely have been discussed by Lukashenka and Bolton).

Last week also saw Lukashenka’s 65th birthday. Bolton’s visit proved something of a birthday gift for the Belarusian leader in so far as it bolsters Belarusian efforts to demonstrate to Russia that it has foreign policy options. Then again, in an interview with Radio Free Europe’s Current Time, Bolton was asked about alleged Russian desires for Belarusian-Russian unification. The US official remarked that sovereignty was a matter for the ‘Belarusian people’ – as opposed, presumably, to the president and his inner circle. The Kremlin, confident it finds favour among Belarusians, might not mind that so much.

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The State of the Union: Belarus, Russia and the
virtual state

On 18 July Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin met in St Petersburg. Integration within the framework of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, which will mark its twentieth anniversary in December, featured prominently on the agenda. It has become a leitmotif in recent meetings between the two heads of state. Remarkably little has been achieved in two decades since the Union State’s creation and the reluctance of either country to abandon the project prompts one to reconsider its contemporary function in the bilateral relationship.

Both Belarusian and Russian rhetorical commitment to the Union State has looked odd ever since the 2015 formation of the Eurasian Economic Union supplied a parallel framework for economic and, if desired, political integration. Despite this, the Union State continues to generate flurries of activity in both states’ bureaucracies. Speaking in St Petersburg, Lukashenka ambitiously proposed that the problems besetting the Union State should not be carried over past the December anniversary.

Two sides of the coin

Over the years – interspersed with lulls in activity – officials have drawn up roadmaps for integration, formed working groups, and often talked up their accomplishments. No doubt this proliferation of activity impresses some observers, but a less impressive picture emerges when one looks at policy implementation.

Take the widely discussed issue of a common currency between the two states. The issue predates the Union State: the 1996 Treaty on a Community of Sovereign Republics envisaged the introduction of a single currency by the end of 1997. In 2005
Lukashenka praised ‘difficult but fruitful work’ towards its creation. Yet on 21 July Russia’s Minister for Economic Development said of the matter: ‘We haven’t discussed this issue thoroughly.’ Clearly the importance of the single currency means moving towards it as the pace of a garden snail.

From one angle this is unsurprising. If one takes the European Union as a model of economic integration, then monetary union came late in the day. The European Community established a free trade area in 1957, a customs union in 1968, and a single market after 1986. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty provided for monetary union, which became a reality only in 2002. The EU model would suggest that Belarus and Russia need to do more work on building a single market before addressing a potential monetary union. This would seem to be what Dmitry Krutoi, Belarus’s Minister for the Economy, had in mind when he spoke on 21 July of a roadmap to establish unified industrial markets by 2021.

From another angle it is telling of the prospects for progress. If Belarusian and Russian officials had a well-formulated plan, then one wonders why statements over the years have been so inconsistent. There simply doesn’t appear to be the political will. Russia does not want Belarus to wield influence on monetary policy, while Belarus insists it must have equal rights alongside Russia. Hence the impasse.

**Economics or security?**

The Union State emerged from the uncertainties of the 1990s. For Russia, the Union State served security interests by providing a vehicle for unifying defence structures even if officials always emphasised the economic and political dimensions of integration. While most military cooperation happens outside the Union State framework, the recent endorsement of a new Union State military doctrine shows the
continued significance of the Union State to the two states’ security alliance. It also bolsters Russia’s arguments to retain its military presence in Belarus; leases on its radar and communications facilities expire next year.

In addition, the Union State has served a useful function in keeping Belarus away from other suitors. The Kremlin’s dislike for EU engagement in post-Soviet eastern Europe is well-known and, from Russia’s perspective, the Union State shelters Belarus from integration into EU – and, more recently, Chinese – economic designs. Nonetheless the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union superseded this function and Russia has long strived to move away from a bilateral model allowing hefty subsidies to Belarusian enterprises. For this reason, the Union State increasingly looks like an inconvenience to Russia rather than a help.

The Union State plays a role sheltering Belarus from China’s economic ambitions
For Belarus too, both economic and security dimensions characterise the Union State. The framework ostensibly provides a mechanism for avoiding barriers to trade with Russia, although in fact non-tariff obstacles can be readily erected. The Belarusian dairy industry knows this all too well. The Union State has also allowed Belarusian enterprises to benefit from Russia’s domestic rates and receive hydrocarbon subsidies, although again the Eurasian Economic Union to some extent supersedes this.

Arguably, the main benefit to Belarus of the Union State over the past two decades has been in terms of ‘regime security.’ Specifically, there has almost certainly been a conviction among Belarus’s leaders that Russia is more interested than other external actors in keeping the Lukashenka regime in power. Russia has sheltered Belarus’s political and economic systems from the alternative liberal models pushed by Western states. However, Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine and its application of economic and diplomatic pressure on Belarus has most likely gone some way to undermining this conviction. There is then, as in the case of Russia, tension about whether Belarus’s interests continue to be best served by the Union State.

The virtual state

The function of the Union State in 2019 still looks puzzling. Belarus’s firm opposition to surrender any sovereignty to Russia, combined with Russia’s unwillingness to view Belarus as an equal rather than junior partner, stymie prospects for further integration within its framework. Instead, the Union State is best viewed as a forum for shadowboxing: through it the two sides appear to address substantive problems in the Belarus-Russia relationship without landing any actual hits. Without a big shift in either state’s position – a shift of the kind barely imaginable in current conditions – the Union
State will remain a virtual state.

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2019 Parliamentary Elections and New Constitution

In spite of the reduced oil donations from Russia’s side and imposed limitations on Belarusian agricultural exports, Lukashenka will not concede to steps of real integration (unification of currencies, creating common customs, creating supranational institutions within the union state etc.).

Currently, the statements of the Belarusian side on diversification of oil supplies is an attempt to blackmail Russia. In reality, the Lukashenka team do not take any measures aimed to diversify oil supplies. It is highly unlikely that in response to increasing US military contingent in Poland Lukashenka would agree to deploy Russian military contingent or Russian military bases.

Lukashenka will bid for the presidency at the presidential elections that are to take place in 2020, after the parliamentary elections. In the next presidential term, he will be thinking of a successor. Lukashenka speaks of a new Constitution, meaning the forthcoming hand over of the authority to a successor.

Despite the growing disagreements in the issues of the
Belarus-Russia Relations: disagreements on integration

On December 13, 2018, the Vice Premier of Russia Dmitriy Medvedev claimed: “Russia is ready to keep moving on the way of building up the union state, including the creation of the single currency emission centre, the unified customs, courts, auditing chamber.” Since then, practically every month the sides have been exchanging statements of strongly different variants of developments in the relations within the union state.

The Russian side suggests discussing its initiatives on deepening integration. On December 14, Lukashenka claimed: “If someone wants to pop us into Russia – that will never happen… Under the pretext of the deep integration, Moscow wants to incorporate Belarus into Russia. I understand these hints: get the oil, but go ahead, ruin the state and enter Russia.” Lukashenka claimed that it is through Russia’s fault the union state has not yet been created. The union implies equal rights, equal conditions for economic subjects. And these conditions are getting more and more uneven. According to Lukashenka, currently, the Belarusian enterprises pay 200 USD for a thousand cubic metres of gas, whereas Russian enterprises pay 60 USD.

Commenting on the statements from Medvedev regarding the unified emission centre and unified customs, Lukashenka claimed that Russia offered “to create the union from the roof, and not from the basement”. Such basement, in his opinion, is the creation of equal conditions for economy subjects, i.e. supplies of oil and gas at home Russian prices and absence of barriers for Belarusian exports to Russia.
The problem is not about the logic or sequence of integration (basement-roof), but that Lukashenka does not want to integrate at Russian terms. He wants to be an absolute sovereign in Belarus and, in the meantime, get Russian donations.

In 2002-2003, there used to be the “basement” (as Lukashenka means it) of the union state: Belarus was receiving Russian gas at home market Russian prices; the Russian market was open for Belarusian export, there were no trade wars (dairy or meat) between Belarus and Russia.

The Russian leaders in 2002 suggested building the “roof” of the union state: unification of currency, with the Russian ruble as the currency in the territory of Belarus; adopting a Constitutional act of the union state that would envisage setting up supranational bodies with the prevalence of Russian representatives.

Lukashenka in return offered to keep building the “basement”. He offered the variant of unifying the currency systems in which the National Bank of Belarus would have the right to emit Russian rubles. And to stipulate in the Constitutional Act of the union state the obligations of Russia to supply energy carriers to Belarus at Russian home market prices. And now, every time when commenting or criticizing the initiatives of Russia to deepen the integration, Lukashenka claims that the Belarusian side supports the real integration within the union state. He expresses hope that the union state will be created.

Despite the growing disagreements, it is unlikely that the Kremlin and Lukashenka will stop speaking of the integration within the union state and give up the project. In the Kremlin, they hope that if not Lukashenka, then his successor will take steps towards the real integration, as the Russian side implies it, which would tight securely Belarus to Russia forever.
For Lukashenka, the special relations with Russia in connection with the formal existence of the union state—it is a convenient excuse for getting oil and gas donations from Russia in the past. And, what is more important, a justification to make bids for donations in future. The statements of diversification of oil supplies are nothing but attempts to blackmail Russia.

Earlier, in the spans of deteriorations in relations with Russia, official representatives of Belarus were talking of the necessity to diversify oil supplies. At the background of negotiations with Russia concerning compensation of losses from the tax manoeuvre, again some statements were voiced about the intentions to get oil via ports of the Baltic states.

On May 23, meeting the Ambassador of Kazakhstan Yermukhamet Yertysbayev, Lukashenka said that he was conducting negotiations over oil supplies from Kazakhstan. “We’ve now been busy with the diversification of supplies. We are negotiating supplies of oil to Belarus from various sources.”

If the Belarusian side had really applied to Kazakhstan, this address had been badly meditated and calculated. The Ambassador of Kazakhstan remarked that the prices of Kazakh oil for Belarus would be higher than of the Russian one. Since, it is to be delivered by railroad, whereas Russian oil gets to Belarus by oil pipeline.

And it is unlikely that Russia will provide opportunities for such deliveries. Y.Yertysbayev remarked that for Russia it was unprofitable that Belarus got oil from Kazakhstan.

According to information of the Russian newspaper Kommersant, Kazakhstan does not have spare volumes of oil to supply to Belarus: there is an increasing demand for Kazakh oil from the Chinese side.

Just like the declarations over the intentions to get oil via
ports of the Baltic states, to build an oil terminal in a Baltic port, the Lukashenka’s statements of the intention to get Kazakh oil will not bring practical results. The main goal of such statements – to show to Russia that Belarus has alternatives to get oil, to strengthen its standpoint in negotiations over the compensation of the losses resulting from the tax manoeuvre.

It is highly unlikely that in response to increasing US military contingent in Poland, enhancing the military capacity of Poland, Lukashenka would agree, under Russian pressure, to deploy Russian military base(s), as well as to deploy Russian military troops in Belarus. Most probably, as a responsive measure, Russia will enhance even more its contingent in the Kaliningrad enclave.

Russia does not have economic levers to induce Belarus to station here Russian military bases and troops.

Russia cannot cease oil and gas supplies to Belarus, as it is interested to have reliable and cheap transit of oil and gas and other cargoes via Belarus. The Russians buy Belarusian goods, including equipment (tractors, automobiles etc.) not out of personal favours, but because these goods have a good ratio of price and quality, they are competitive at the Russian market.

Russia has been reducing oil donations: Belarus is earning less on refinery of Russian oil. Among all, due to import phase-out and food self-provisioning, Russia is imposing restrictions on Belarusian food export. This has resulted in a slowdown in the rate of growth of the Belarusian GDP. But these measures have not led to worsening social and economic situation in Belarus.
A New Constitution for Belarus?

The statements of Lukashenka concerning amendments to the Constitution: in the next presidential term, he will be thinking of a successor. At the press conference on March 1, Lukashenka said he would bid for presidency for the sixth time. “Out of my current situation and of the country and the attitude to me, I can’t help seeking candidacy for the post of the president”.

Lukashenka claimed that he could not help running for the presidency due to the attitude (of the citizens of Belarus) to him... One cannot doubt that, just as before, the elections will be held according to the scenario of total falsification of the results. In the first run of the elections, Lukashenka will declare his victory with an overwhelming majority with around 80 per cent of voters have cast their votes for him. Such level of support Lukashenka declared on the outcome of the previous “elections”.

A certain sensation has been the statement of Lukashenka that within a period fewer than five years, a new Constitution would be adopted in Belarus. In his opinion, “it is necessary to strengthen the executive and the legislative branches of power”.

In April and in May, Lukashenka made several more statements about the necessity to work out a new Constitution. Lukashenka gave very few details. According to his words, the amendments would also touch upon the role of the president: “It is not the business of the head of state to drive across fields and factories”.

Every time, when speaking about a new Constitution, Lukashenka used the term “the head of state”, which is typical of authoritarian political systems. This means that, according to the new Constitution, the president (head of state) will have significantly larger powers that the head of the executive
branch of power. He will control the legislative and judicial branches. Either directly, or through his assignees (there will be no elections) in parliament, the president will be assigned other top officials; among all, he will be assigning and controlling, and will have a possibility to change the Prime Minister and Ministers.

Obviously, Lukashenka wants to shift responsibility for the social and economic development of the country on the Prime Minister, so that the latter “drive across the fields and factories”. In case of necessity, the head of state could use him as the boy to beat. For years in power, Lukashenka has staged the performance in front of Belarusian citizens: “a good president – bad officials”. He counts that the head of state with the new Constitution will do this as well.

On March 1, Lukashenka said that the presidential elections would take place in 2020. When he is “elected” for the sixth presidential term, he will be 65, almost 66 years old.

Now Lukashenka is healthy. His press conference on March 1 lasted around seven hours.

However, he might have health issues. He suffered two microstrokes (in 1999 and in 2006). After the presidential elections on March 19, 2006, the chairperson of the Central Executive Commission Lidiya Yermoshina said that the inauguration of the president would take place on March 31. According to the official information, she mentioned the date “without complying it with the work schedule of the head of state”. The inauguration took place on April 8. It was the shortest official speech of Lukashenka. Many people paid attention that he was gasping and unhealthy. Lukashenka was supported by pills. In April – May 2006, Lukashenka did not turn up in public for more than a month and did not receive official representatives. In Belarus, rumours were spreading that he had died... By the end of the sixth presidential term, he would be 70 years old.
Probably, the statements of Lukashenka about a new Constitution were caused by the fact that he realizes: during the sixth term, he will have to define who his successor will be. Who guarantees him a calm and safe old age. The cost of a mistake might be very high. Lukashenka might spend the rest of his life behind bars, charged with abuse of power and official position, corruption, abductions-murders of the leaders of the opposition in 1999.

The political system of Belarus, defined by a new Constitution, has to be the most convenient for his successor, allow him keeping power.

The Constitution of Belarus of 1996 was written for Lukashenka. A new Constitution will be written upon Lukashenka’s order for his successor.

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**Will Russia’s new man in Minsk improve relations?**

On 30 April Russia replaced its ambassador to Belarus. The outgoing Mikhail Babich, who was only appointed in August last year, repeatedly stoked controversy and this may account for his short tenure in the role.

The appointment of Dmitry Mezentsev to the post may smooth day-to-day bilateral relations, though it will not have any effect on the fundamental causes of friction in the relationship.
Babich mired in controversy

Babich’s appointment last year was interpreted by some as a signal of intensified Russian pressure on Belarus. The new ambassador’s past involved lengthy service in the Soviet KGB and subsequently Russia’s FSB, which raised suspicions about the techniques he would bring to his new role. Moreover, Babich was a cause célèbre in some circles because two years earlier Russia had tried to appoint him as its top diplomat in Ukraine – an effort that met resistance from Kyiv for breaching diplomatic protocols.

The Russian ambassador sailed close to the wind on several occasions. In an interview with RT he admonished Minsk’s policy of ‘soft-Belarusianisation.’ He said there was

> a fine line between soft-Belarusianisation and de-Russification... [The former] should not happen at the infringement of the rights of the Russian language, common culture, common historical facts, and even [imply] the falsification of history.

Furthermore, his concurrent status as ‘special representative of the Russian president for trade and economic relations with Belarus’ blurred the boundaries of his remit as ambassador. As my colleague Yauheni Preiherman notes, he breached diplomatic protocols by holding business meetings in Minsk before presenting his credentials to the head of the Belarusian state.

In March Babich overstepped the mark by all-but-directly criticising Belarus’s president Aliaksandr Lukashenka. In an interview with the Russian news agency RIA Novosti Babich said that ‘there was no need to teach Russia and her government how to live’ and questioned why Belarus had raised the issue of Russia’s lease of military facilities on Belarusian territory.
Although Babich did not refer to Lukashenka by name, these and other comments were unambiguously a response to the president’s remarks during the ‘Big Talk with the President’ on 1 March. Then, on 19 April, Babich further chided Lukashenka calling the latter ‘mistaken’ about the costs of the nuclear power plant being constructed by Russia at Astravets.

Sensitive to any slights concerning Belarus’s sovereignty, the Belarusian foreign ministry spokesperson suggested in March that Babich needed to recognise ‘the difference between a Russian federal district and an independent state.’ While one might think that the rhetoric from the Belarusian side was overblown, any criticism aimed at Lukashenka is out of line with the norms of the bilateral relationship. As Preiherman wrote at the time: ‘Babich himself looks ready to continue behaving like something “more than an ambassador.”’

A more conventional appointment?

A cursory glance at Mezentsev’s biography might be interpreted to show that he is a more conventional appointment. He held the post of general secretary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) from January 2013 through to December 2015.
His history with the SCO – a regional organisation encompassing security and economic relations between China, Russia and states in Central and South Asia – should ensure that he is better acquainted with international affairs and diplomacy, and the sensitivities of states such as Belarus. Minsk itself has held observer status with the SCO since 2015.

At the same time, the bulk of Mezentsev’s previous experience has been at a regional level and inside Russia. He comes to Minsk from Sakhalin, where he has vacated the senator’s post, and earlier served as the governor of Irkutsk oblast. This reaffirms the idea that Russia views its relations Belarus more akin to appointing a regional governor since it could have appointed someone from an embassy elsewhere. Indeed, Russia’s ambassadors to most countries have a career progression more rigidly confined within the diplomatic corp.

Another line in Mezentsev’s work history is noteworthy when we consider that Babich’s handling of the media was a cause of Belarus’s dissatisfaction. In the early 1990s, according to RT, Mezentsev worked in the St Petersburg mayor’s office as chairman of the committee for the press and mass media.

One can, therefore, presume that he is skilled at handling the media. Moreover, his spell in this role coincided with Vladimir Putin’s period working as deputy mayor of St Petersburg, which suggests that the two had a working relationship then and that perhaps Putin himself looks upon Mezentsev as a reliable agent.

**Outlook for bilateral relations**

Nonetheless, after Babich’s fractious tenure, the appointment will most likely be welcomed by officials in Minsk. This is doubly so as the country prepares for parliamentary elections
later this year and presidential elections next year. Although the results of both elections are highly predictable, they make for moments of vulnerability as the ruling elite gauges the level of interest in the opposition and a figure like Babich with his growing propensity to criticise Lukashenka would be unwelcome.

The problems in Belarus-Russia bilateral relations are structural ones and the latest dispute over the so-called has ‘oil tax manoeuvre’ typified this. The two sides have different understandings about the meanings and goals of economic integration within the Eurasian Economic Union, as well as about the rights and responsibilities of its members.

Meanwhile, economic tensions have spilled over into (and been compounded by) political and social differences governed by other institutional arrangements. Belarus’s efforts to diversify its foreign policy have drawn limited rewards and roused Russia’s ire. The ambassadorial change should help to smooth Belarus-Russia relations on a day-to-day basis, although clearly the individual diplomats are a factor of secondary significance when it comes to longer-term prospects for reducing tensions.

Ostensibly, the new ambassador has an identical role to his predecessor. Interestingly, mind, as some commentators have been quick to note, Mezentsev appears to have been appointed only to the ambassadorship. Yet Babich has also been relieved of the title of special representative of the Russian president for trade and economic relations with Belarus. Whether or not this reflects any substantive change in the expectations of, and instructions being issued to, the Russian ambassador remains to be seen.

Paul Hansbury

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Public protests as authorities destroy people’s memorial in Kurapaty

On the morning of 4 April tractors began digging up 70 wooden crosses at the Kurapaty memorial site on the outskirts of Minsk. Police detained 15 activists that came out in protest. Later the same day around 200 people gathered in the Kurapaty forest to commemorate the victims of Stalin’s mass execution at the site, where over 150,000 people perished during the purges.

Today, more than 30 years after the discovery of the mass graves, Kurapaty still symbolises the most outrageous atrocities of the Soviet regime. Kurapaty has unleashed the potential social capital residing in Belarusian civil society and mobilised citizens to erect a people’s memorial, which civil society has preserved despite the hostility of the authorities.

Many Belarusians worry about the future of the memorial site and the recent dismantling of the crosses because it relates to the ‘sacred’ sphere of commemorating the dead, something which many view as apolitical and something ostensibly beyond the control of the state.

‘Let’s go and eat’ in Kurapaty?
After two archaeologists, Zyanon Paznyak and Yavhan Shmulakov, discovered remains of executed victims in 1987, Kurapaty soon found infamy for the mass execution of hundreds of thousands of people in 1937-41. The discovery proved that Soviet authorities committed serious crimes against their own citizens and this, along with the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe, later contributed to the national awakening of Belarusians in the late 1980s.

Although, since 2004, the Ministry of Culture included Kurapaty in the national register of cultural properties of Belarus, the state has not done much to commemorate it for some time. In 2017 a private investor upset many by purchasing a plot of land adjacent to the memorial and opening a restaurant 50 metres from it.

As a result, various civil society groups including the Young Front, the Belarusian Christian-Democratic Party, as well as ordinary individuals vocally opposed the restaurant. Some activists kept protesting in Kurapaty, as well as picketing the entrance to the restaurant, hoping to make it less popular and unprofitable. Zmicier Dashkievich, a leader of the Young Front, joined several activists and began erecting crosses to mark the memorial site too.

Several public figures openly expressed their disapproval, including the Noble Prize Winner in Literature Sviatlana Alekseyevich. Recently, Archbishop Tadeuš Kandrusievich, the
head of the Belarusian Catholic Church, has called for a dialogue between the authorities and representatives of civil society groups. He called for greater respect towards the religious feelings of believers while resolving the conflict over Kurapaty: “I think that it is necessary to organise a public discussion about putting things in order in Kurapaty, with the participation of representatives of various faiths.”

Siarhej Liepin, the press-secretary of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, also disapproved of the methods used by the local authorities. He wrote in his blog: “Remember. The Devils are very afraid of the sign of the Cross of the Lord, for in it the Saviour has exposed and put them to shame.”

Who owns Kurapaty: citizens or state?

In February 2017 the Belarusian authorities became more active in relation to Kurapaty. The state-run daily Belarus Segodnya organised a round table on its future. The participants of the discussion argued that the lack of commemoration activities has led to a vacuum which was filled by political forces. Also, they recommended establishing a National Mourning Memorial in Kurapaty, which could be supported by all
Belarusians. This would, in their view, prevent society from being divided. In fact, in June 2018, the Ministry of Culture announced that they had raised over 11,000 Belarusian roubles for the new monument and a special jury chose the best design.

The violent removal of crosses surprised many in Belarus. On 4 April Sviatlana Alekseyevich commented to the daily *Naša Niva* that Kurapaty remains a “symbol of national self-reliance, national memory. And the state does not want to accept it […].” She aptly notes the uniqueness of a national monument spontaneously raised by Belarusians.

However, the press secretary of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, Natallia Ejsmant, has told the media that the head of the state is certain that “things should be put in order” in Kurapaty. In her words, he will do it “in accordance with the customs and religious tradition” of Belarusians. No details have emerged on how and when this will be done.

### Unexpected mobilisation of Belarusians?

Around 200 people gathered at Kurapaty. This shows that, aside from fairly organised civil society groups, ordinary apolitical Belarusians care about the matter too. After all, the topic does not relate to politics but is a highly sensitive one since it relates to a social taboo – death and the commemoration of those who died. Many Belarusians continue to practice *Radounica*, visiting graves of relatives, a tradition which stems from the Orthodox Church and Greek Catholic Church’s ritual.

By removing the crosses, the authorities have also touched upon a sensitive religious symbol – the cross. The removal of crosses was also happening during Lent and appears highly disrespectful to many Christians in the country. This
contrasts with the many official public statements in which the authorities strive to emphasise the importance of Orthodox values in Belarusian society.

Dialogue instead of pressure

The nervous and unexpected reaction of the Belarusian authorities looks rather confusing. Officially, they want exactly the same what various different civil society groups aim for – a respectful commemoration of the victims of Soviet repression. But at the same time, they strongly demonstrate their exclusive right to present their own narrative on Kurapaty and shape all public manifestations of it.

The issue of Kurapaty seems apolitical because it concerns the commemoration of a couple of hundred thousand victims of Soviet repression. Yet, the people’s mobilisation with regard to the memorial site, including marking it with the crosses, the defence of the crosses, and, finally, yesterday and today’s prayers there, came as a shock to many in Belarus and abroad.

Belarusian Freedom Day 2019: are the authorities warming to the idea?

On 23 March Hrodna, the Western city in Belarus, hosted Freedom Day celebrations. The occasion attracted up to 5,000 people. Although the authorities officially allowed the celebration of the alternative independence day for a second
year, it is still too early to hope that this represents liberalisation in the country.

Permission for the celebration in Hrodna and the absence of mass repression have contributed to an image of democratisation, but the authorities also detained several activists.

**Independence Day in Belarus: from crackdowns to concerts**

Despite its short history, the Belarusian People’s Republic (BNR) that emerged on 25 March 1918 has become a symbol of the Belarusian opposition’s struggle for independence and democracy.

For a long time, the authorities either resorted to
repressions against those who publically celebrated it or allowed its celebration only in remote areas of Minsk. In 2018, on the eve of the 100-year anniversary of the BNR, the opposition obtained permission for the first time to hold a ceremony and a concert near the central Opera House.

Remarkably, civic activists – not politicians – took on the leading role in organising the event. Instead of political slogans, the organisers emphasised the celebration of the 100th anniversary in a format intended to appeal to ordinary citizens; they gathered almost 11,000 people.

Since last year, the Belarusian state-run media has gradually changed its rhetoric concerning Freedom Day. Until 2018, they called the BNR a puppet-state created with the support of the occupying German forces. Today they more often portray Freedom Day as a stage in the formation of Belarus’s statehood or give only minor critical comments. For example, On 25 March 2019, the main state-run outlet SB-Belarus Today wrote that Freedom Day should be celebrated by everyone, but that the musical artists in the programme were not interesting enough.

Hrodna as epicentre: forced decentralisation of Freedom Day

The same team of organisers as last year, primarily consisting of civic activists and inspired by the success of Freedom Day 2018, submitted an application to celebrate Freedom Day in the city centre. Authorities refused this request, however they suggested holding the celebration at Kiev Square, located further away from the city centre.

Considering the liberalisation of official Minsk’s rhetoric on the Belarusian national idea, this response
unexpectedly disappointed the Freedom Day organisers, especially after the events allowed in 2018. In September last year the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dapkiunas Andrei, said that the BNR is part of Belarusian history and that Belarusians should not ignore it, according to Radio Liberty.

In a similar vein, the newly adopted document on national informational security views the preservation of the Belarusian language and history as a ‘security factor’. However, during a press conference at the beginning of March, Alexander Lukashenka publicly said that he saw no need for a mass and solemn celebration of the 101st anniversary of the BNR.

The authorities’ refusal to allow Freedom Day celebrations in the centre of Minsk divided the Belarusian opposition into two blocs: political parties celebrating in Minsk on 24th March and civic activists marking the event in Hrodna a day earlier. This year the Hrodna authorities, known for their cruel treatment of activists, allowed the celebrations in the same place and hoped that the celebrations would not be large. Around 5,000 people gathered in the city’s central park for celebrations on 23 March and formed the biggest ever crowd for Freedom Day in Hrodna, almost twice as large as the assembly on 24 March in Minsk.

Although Freedom Day was conducted without large scale repression, the compromise steps that civic activists had to take have a rather weak relation to political manifestation that the Freedom Day used to have before 2018. In that way, the “something’s better than nothing” approach led to a Freedom Day fully regulated and controlled by the regime. Such a model can unlikely indicate any real freedom of the part of those that want to celebrate the 101 years of the BNR’s proclamation.
Litmus paper for the West and East

The Belarusian authorities used its permission to carry out Freedom Day 2018 in Minsk as evidence of the democratisation of the country when negotiating with the West. At the same time, louder signals about the need for “better integration” come from Moscow, including the possibility of unification into a single state. In this situation, the tolerance of mass celebration of Freedom Day could be seen by Moscow as a demonstration of the Belarusian authorities to strengthen sovereignty. In the context of almost total economic dependence on Russia, the authorities considered it dangerous allowing the celebration of Freedom Day in Minsk.

On 24 March, the Russian nationalist media outlet Regnum, two authors from which were sentenced in Belarus last year, published an article criticising Lukashenka and highlighting the “failure of Belarusian nationalism”. The rest of the Russian media paid almost no attention to Freedom Day this year, which could indicate that the celebration will not cause any serious changes in Belarus-Russia relations.
In its turn, the West, through the US State Department’s representative, said in an interview to TUT.by on 6 March that the approval of the 25 March celebration will demonstrate the continuation of the movement towards democracy in Belarus. Ignoring this promise in the current geopolitical realities, too, can become dangerous and, therefore, the authorities allowed the celebration in the periphery.

In Hrodna, Freedom Day 2019 took place peacefully and ended without arrests of activists. In contrast to previous years, the celebration of Freedom Day in 2019 has resulted only in a few detentions: of the oppositional activist Zmitser Dashkevich (the court hearings happens on 25 March), Vital Rymasheuski, and several other people including a musician Liavon Volski. This contrasts with around 50 detentions last year.

The authorities’ response to the Freedom Day celebration showed that official Minsk, on the one hand, has allowed a limited expansion of the space for freedom of expression in the country. On the other hand, the authorities want to demonstrate their readiness to use force if any signs of a political protest appear. It seems that the Belarusian authorities tried not to disappoint Moscow while preventing civil society and opposition forces from feeling that they can change the country.
A major diplomatic row between Minsk and Moscow explained

On 21 March 2019, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official comment regarding the major diplomatic row between Minsk and Moscow. Belarusian and Russian diplomats have exchanged mutual reproaches in a rather undiplomatic manner. Whilst the Russian Ambassador to Belarus, Mikhail Babich, told Belarusians “not to teach Russia how to live,” the press secretary for the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Anatol Glaz, blamed Babich for misunderstanding “the difference between a federal district and an independent state.”

Though Belarus-Russia relations have deteriorated due to the clash over oil revenues, the recent diplomatic row might also signal a deeper crisis in the relations between the two states. While Russia is hesitating to compensate Belarus for the losses resulting from Russia’s changing policies (the so-called tax “manoeuvre”), Minsk is getting more nervous. According to several Belarusian analysts, as Moscow decreases indirect financial aid to Minsk, the Belarusian economy will inevitably learn to adjust. As a result, the post-Lukashenka Belarus will eventually end up being less dependent on Russian markets and money.

Babich’s scandalous interview: “never teach
In August 2018, Vladimir Putin appointed diplomat Babich, former Chairman of the Government of the Chechen Republic, as Russia’s ambassador to Belarus, two years after an unsuccessful attempt to send Babich as an envoy to Ukraine. Upon his arrival in Belarus, Babich immediately started raising financial aspects in the relations between the two states. However, it was Babich’s latest interview to RIA Novosti that caused the major uproar among his Belarusian colleagues.

In his scandalous interview on 1 March 2019, Babich commented on Lukashenka’s statements made during the so-called “Great Talk with the President”. In particular, Babich rebuked Lukashenka’s recent criticism of the Russian leadership which “lobbies oligarchic groups”: “All I can say is that no one should teach Russia and its government how to live, especially since there are [already] enough in the world who want to do so.”

In addition, the diplomat commented on Lukashenka’s statements regarding the high cost of Russian credit resources for Belarus. According to Babich, President Lukashenka was simply let down by the aides, who provided the wrong statistics. The diplomat further splashed numbers in relation to Belarus’s exports to Russia: “Out of $5 bn of exports of Belarusian agricultural products that our friends are so proud of, 4 billion stays in Russia, which is 80%,” he calculated.
Finally, Babich referred to recent talk about the Russian threat to Belarus’s sovereignty as “electoral technology.” According to Babich, it was hardly reasonable to implement such technology at the expense of relations with its closest ally – the Russian Federation.

Belarus’s MFA responds, brands Babich a “promising accountant”

Soon Anatol Glaz, Belarus’s foreign ministry press secretary, harshly commented on the assessment of Belarus-Russia relations voiced by Mikhail Babich:

Honestly, there is not always enough time to read all the interviews of Mikhail Babich: all of them are quite similar, and the mentor line of reasoning does not change much… Without reading, I can say for sure that the relations between our states and our nations are much deeper than a fraudulent set of numbers that a Russian diplomat regularly provides. Yet this is his right to set a bar for himself that turns him into a bookkeeper or a promising accountant.
Moreover, Glaz advised Babich to devote more time to understand the specifics of the host country and get acquainted properly with its history. According to Glaz, Babich “simply misunderstood the difference between a federal district and an independent state.” In addition, Glaz promised to give detailed comments to the Russian partners regarding the Ambassador’s statements on Belarus-Russia relations.

Babich quickly reacted to Glaz’s comments and partially tried to downplay the conflict:

_We, in contrast to these commentators [Anatol Glaz], have enough time to read and analyse all the information... I am sure it all comes down. The most important thing is that both the Russian and the Belarusian side have an opportunity to make objective evaluation of different arguments and elaborate mutually acceptable solutions for the benefit of the two nations. All the rest is chatter. We take it very calmly._

Yet, a reaction followed from Kremlin. Grigory Karasin, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, made an official statement that Russia expected a more respectful attitude to its Ambassador from the side of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus.

**Subsequent reaction in Belarus and Russia**

The diplomatic row immediately attracted the attention of the Belarusian and Russian press. As for the Russian media, the majority of media outlets praised Babich as the “new style of Russian diplomacy”. At the same time, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs subsequently tried to settle down the diplomatic scandal. On 21 March, the Russian Foreign Ministry
issued an official statement that “Belarus remains Russia’s chief strategic partner” and “the inter-state dialogue should always stay professional and correct”.

Several Belarusian analysts have also provided their commentary. In his article to Naviny.by, Aliaksandr Klaskouski mentions that Babich stays calm and ironic because Kremlin perfectly understands all of Lukashenka’s weaknesses. By declaring unity and friendship once more, Russia pinpoints Belarus on its vassal dependence.

According to Artyom Shraibman, writing for Carnegie Moscow, despite the bold rhetoric, Minsk has little space for manoeuvre; hence, Lukashenka will continue sticking to Russia and simultaneously preparing for potential separation. The Belarusian economy will eventually adjust to the decrease of Russia’s indirect financial support. Consequently, the post-Lukashenka Belarusian authorities might obtain a favourable opportunity to ditch the Union State with Russia.

In conclusion, the undiplomatic exchange between the diplomats clearly signals an upcoming shift in Belarus-Russia relations. Apparently, Minsk and Moscow have grown tired of each so much
that even diplomats – people whose job remains to calm conflicts – start getting engaged in a battle of words. Nevertheless, the diplomatic conflict will most probably fade away, and neither Babich nor Glaz gets punished for overstepping the boundaries of diplomatic etiquette. At the same time, further battles between Minsk and Moscow might soon recur on a different front taken into account Russia’s reluctance to compensate Belarus’s upcoming losses in oil revenues.

Belarusization 2.0.: Will the Russian threat help Belarusization?

On 2 March 2019 Alexander Lukashenka held his annual conference with journalists. The so-called “Big Conversation” lasted seven hours. The marathon session both clarified and blurred official positions on issues of security, closer integration with Russia, and Russian propaganda in Belarus.

At the same time, in the context of recent discussions about the potential annexation of Belarus by Russia, Lukashenka’s public statements on the importance of preserving national heritage and language have grown more frequent. For example, Lukashenka asserted: “If you are the nation, you have to have your own language.” In recent months, he made a public speech in Belarusian, called on citizens to remember the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and declared that Belarusian sovereignty will not suffer from blackmail and gas disputes.

A policy of Belarusization may prove decisive in deterring the Russian world and protecting Belarusian sovereignty. However,
a superficial Belarusization orchestrated by Lukashenka and
directed at external actors could have a negative effect on
Belarusian language and culture. Instead of genuine
Belarusization and the development of the Belarusian language,
such a policy only awakens Russian propaganda and leaves
Russian language dominating education, the judiciary and the
media.

**Limited space for the development of the Belarusian language**

The Belarusian population continues to Russify more and more.
According to a 2018 study by the IPM Research Centre, only
2.2% of Belarusians speak Belarusian at home, while 73.7% use
Russian; 12.3% speak both and 11.6% use a mixture of the two
languages. According to recently published data from the 2009
population census (not previously published), the state of the
Belarusian language has declined. The recent data demonstrates
that only 57.4% of Belarusians named the titular language as
their native language. With further Russification, the numbers
speaking Belarusian may significantly decrease when data from
the 2019 census is collected.
What language do you speak at home? Data from 2009 population census. Data: belstat.gov.by

A rapid Russification of the Belarusian population primarily occurs through Russian-language media. Three of the nine TV-channels included in the standard TV package are Russian and the rest use Russian as the main language. Belarus buys the majority of its TV shows from Russia and broadcasts these even on the Belarusian-language channels.

Russian propaganda has a wide influence through the Russian TV channels that predominate Belarusian TV. Monitoring by the Belarusian Association of Journalists shows that promotion of the notion of a “Russian world” takes place through Russian TV shows of both political and non-political character and broadcast on the nine official TV channels in Belarus.

Although experts continue to talk about the so-called “soft” Belarusization in the cultural and entertainment sectors, the use of the Belarusian language in state and education institutions continues to fall. The festivals of Vyshyvanka (traditional embroidered shirts), cultural events and growing
usage of Belarusian language by business show an interest in the language rather than its development.

Besides the Russification of the educational system, the growing interest of young people to the Belarusian language is competing with a brain-drain. 2018 marked a record year in so far as around 11,000 Belarusians emigrated to other countries for work, with a total of almost 95,000 Belarusians officially working abroad according to Mikhail Myasnikovich, the Chairman of the Council of the Republic, cited in Zviazda. In these conditions, English becomes even more popular than Belarusian for young professionals, as does Polish among workers moving to Poland.

**Soft Belarusization: External policy rather than an internal course**

On 25 March 2018 Minsk saw one of the biggest celebrations of Freedom Day, organised through crowd-funding. The peculiarity of the event was that the authorities approved the celebration – in contrast to many other events organised by oppositional leaders in the past. Last year’s Freedom Day BNR 100 (the centenary of the foundation of the Belarusian Republic) appeared as yet another sign of soft Belarusisation and gave hope for some liberalisation in the country.

This year activists applied to hold Freedom Day celebrations at the Dynama Stadium, which the authorities are preparing for the 2019 European Games. However, the authorities rejected this year’s application stating that the stadium is not yet ready for concerts. The Belarusian pop-singer Alexandr Saladuha subsequently received permission to perform in the stadium, which some oppositional activists see as a way of restricting their access to the stadium. During the “Big Conversation” Lukashenka also said that he sees no sense in
Although the pressure on the opposition and the initiatives referring to the Belarusian national idea continues, Lukashenka himself does not shy away from playing the language card. Thus, on 9 January Lukashenka delivered part of a speech in Belarusian. The Belarusian president has done this before, for example in 2014.

The speech in the Belarusian language, coupled with statements from Lukashenka during the ongoing Russian-Belarusian gas dispute, awoke Russia’s propaganda machine. Russian media spread information claiming that “Belarusian nationalists plan to ruin the country” and that “Lukashenka has betrayed Russia.”

During the “Big Conversation”, Lukashenka said he does not understand why Russia tries to spread its ideology of the Russian world in Belarus since Belarusians already think like Russians and speak the same language.

The Belarusian language card serves Lukashenka who wants to
quieten supporters of the national idea by showing he is not trying to Russify Belarus. The same card is played when it comes to relations with Russia: here it demonstrates sovereignty and difference from Russia. However, in one or another way, Lukashenka uses this card only to benefit the regime and can barely have a relation to the policy of Belarusization anymore.

**Genuine Belarusization instead of imitation**

Lukashenka’s appeal for the importance of preserving the national language and culture appears as an attempt to strengthen his position by attracting the support of national and opposition forces in the event of Russian aggression. Additionally, he might aim to decrease negative rhetoric regarding his announcement to run again for the presidency (by presenting himself as an advocate of independence, language and culture). Lukashenka may believe that against the backdrop of Russian pressure he can attract more support from the part of the electorate that has never voted for him before.

Although positive rhetoric towards the Belarusian language became more visible, there exists a lack of investments into the language popularisation in education and media. In fact, Belarusization turns into a political tool of foreign policy rather than a genuine movement. If the regime aims to deter the influence of Russian propaganda, Belarusization policy should first of all focus on real reform in all spheres and not mere symbolic steps.
A revolutionary 2018?
Belarus’s government changes its face

2018 witnessed huge changes in the Belarusian government. In August, President Alexander Lukashenka dismissed the prime minister, three deputy prime ministers, three ministers and the chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee. At the same time, commenting on the government reshuffle, Lukashenka said that his decision was far from spontaneous.

While criticising the previous government, the President of Belarus mostly focused on discrepancies in the course of national development, as well as on the low level of labour discipline. Addressing these issues, Lukashenka appointed a team of relatively young technocrats in order to mobilise the state apparatus and tighten his grip on power ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections due during 2019 and 2020. In addition, several experts view the government reshuffle as Lukashenka’s response to the growing pressure from Russia.

The unexpected government reshuffle

In August, Lukashenka fired the ten key figures in the Belarusian government, including the prime minister, Andrei Kabiakou. While explaining his decision on Belarusian state TV, Lukashenka maintained that Kabiakou’s government had failed to demonstrate the due level of discipline and adhered too much to various privatisation initiatives. In fact, Lukashenka blamed the government for declining living standards of Belarusian people:
How much blood was spilled (and I had to do it, personally) in order to convince the government that people should have at least one thousand rubles as average pay in the country? (Approximately $500 – ed.) The lowest paid social strata, including nurses and caretakers, and people working in the cultural sphere and social services, as well as nursery teachers, should earn more.

At the same time, Lukashenka had particular considerations for firing each top official, starting with the prime minister. According to Arsien Sivitsky from the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, Andrei Kabiakou acted merely as administrator without his own programme. Lukashenka, on the other hand, looked for a more pro-active approach from the Belarusian government amid growing pressures from Russia. In this way, the absence of a distinct governmental program cost Kabiakou his job.

The dismissal of deputy prime minister Vasil Zharko links to a series of corruption scandals in the health care sector he oversaw. On the other hand, the dismissal of another deputy prime minister, Uladzimir Siamashka, merely related to the state of his health. The dismissal of Vital Vouk, the Minister of Industries, turned into a farce. Though Vouk received the highest amount of criticism from the Lukashenka, the president appointed him to the post of presidential aide in the Vitebsk region; a de facto promotion.

The new team of pro-market technocrats

As a result of the government reshuffle, Lukashenka appointed Siarhei Rumas, the Chairman of the Board of the Development Bank, as the new prime minister. Rumas held the position of a deputy prime minister previously, during the economic crisis
of 2011–2012. Rumas’s reputation marks him as a skilled negotiator and a consistent supporter of market reforms, capable of dealing both with his Russian counterparts and with international financial institutions. Moreover, Homiel-born Rumas is a Belarusian national by blood (unlike his predecessor Kabiakou, who is of Russian origin).

According to Rumas, the major task of his government remains “providing Belarusians with a ‘decent standard of living,’ in particular:

We are not talking about state benefits and budget support, we are talking about how to make it possible for Belarusians to earn a decent standard of living.

Shortly after his appointment, Siarhei Rumas distributed responsibilities between the new deputy prime ministers. First Deputy Prime Minister Alyaksandr Turchyn has been tasked with implementing the “progressive” measures set forth in presidential decrees on the development of entrepreneurship and ICT. Accordingly, Turchyn will closely cooperate with the Ministry of Economy (under its new head Dzmitry Krutoy) and the Ministry of Communications and Information (under its new head Kanstantsin Shulgan).
Turchyn has already made several statements regarding his further steps in information and communication technologies. According to Turchyn, the Ministry of Communications, under the leadership of Shulgan, will become the supporting ministry for the implementation of the ambitious IT-country project and, probably, the basis for the creation of a Ministry of Digital Economy.

Another of the new deputy prime ministers, Uladzimir Kukharou, will supervise the problematic housing and utility sector (as well as construction, transport and the Ministry of Emergency Situations). Kukharou’s main task, given his background as the controller of Minsk’s public utilities, will include the delicate increase of the share of services paid by the population without an explosion in utility tariffs. The resolution of this issue remains among the major conditions for Belarus to receive a loan from the IMF.

Ihar Lyashenka, another appointment to deputy prime minister and former chairman of the Belneftekhim Concern, replaces Uladzimir Siamashka and will oversee both the energy complex and industry as a whole. Lyashenka’s main tasks include carrying out an intense communication with Russia and monitoring those Belarusian companies receiving large profits from the illegal oil re-export industry, operating under the guise of oil products.

Finally, new deputy prime minister Ihar Petryshenka, who replaces the scandal-clad Vasil Zharko, found himself in the most difficult situation of dealing with “social issues.” At present, the situation with Belarusian health care remains tense due to the latest corruption scandals. Moreover, Petryshenka will have to implement the latest version of the deeply unpopular presidential decree persecuting the so-called
“freeloaders,” or Belarusians without an official work contract.

Will Rumas’s government bring real changes?

A noteworthy circumstance of Lukashenka’s government reshuffle lies in his constant referral to the “difficult times” facing Belarus. According to Sivitsky, “difficult times” means the growing difficulties in relations with Russia. By appointing a team of young Belarus-born technocrats, Lukashenka attempts to mobilize the state apparatus to repel any blows from the Russians if needed.

Ihar Petryshenka will have to deal with the unpopular policy on “freeloaders”. Source: sputnik.by

According to Valery Karbalevich, a political analyst with the analytical centre “Strategia,” Lukashenka decided to reshuffle the government in order to punish “the old guard” who had lost their fear of the Belarusian leader. The appointment of new and relatively unknown people to the top governmental positions should strengthen first and foremost Lukashenka’s power grip.

Despite the reputation of a “free market champion”, Siarhei
Rumas will most probably fail to bring any notable market changes as the President of Belarus *de facto* defines the government policies himself.

Stanislau Bahdankievich, the former Chair of the National Bank of Belarus, agrees with Karbalevich’s low expectations on Rumas’s government. According to Bahdankievich, Lukashenka remains unprepared for the drastic changes needed in the economy. As for Rumas, the new prime minister has so far failed to recognise publicly the biggest challenges which face the Belarusian economy: the unprofitability of state companies, large stocks of unsold products, and huge accounts payable. Therefore, as the economy will likely continue its stagnation, the living standards of ordinary Belarusians will stay the same. Consequently, in about a year, Rumas risks facing the same kind of criticism from Lukashenka that Kabiakou faced in August.

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**Pressure against Belarusian independent media: what’s next?**

Since August 2018 till present, the Belarusian authorities put pressure on independent media resources, including the top Belarusian media outlet TUT.BY. Taken into account that Alexander Lukashenka recently expressed the idea that “We must approach the elections in such a way that there is not even an alternative in people’s minds”, the Belarusian authorities will most probably keep the pressure on editorial offices of independent Internet resources.

The Internet resource TUT.by is the largest mass medium in
Belarus with over one million daily visits. Besides advertising, TUT.by provides quite neutral information about current events in Belarusian politics, economy and society. As of November 30, the chief editor of TUT.by Maryna Zolatava stayed charged with article 425 part 2 of the Criminal Code (inaction of a person in office). The article envisages a penalty from a fine to deprivation of liberty up to five years.

Lukashenka’s dissatisfaction with TUT.BY: early clues

Several years ago, the first signal appeared that Lukashenka was dissatisfied with the existence of such a significant independent mass medium as TUT.BY and its owner Yury Zisser. When Lukashenka was giving a speech, “addressing to the people and Parliament”, he got off a topic and said a phrase: “Yakubovich and Shapiro! Deal with Zisser.”

At that time, the audience giggled. The sentence sounded like a joke. Lukashenka did not go into details about how Yakubovich and Shapiro had “to deal” with Yury Zisser, the founder and owner of TUT.by.

Lukashenka has one more reason to dislike Yury Zisser. The latter is the only representative of the large business who financed a number of events for those whom Lukashenka calls “the fifth column”. In June 2018, Zisser donated a significant sum of money for holding an event of For Freedom movement. An award “For freedom of thought” was presented at the birthplace of the famous Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau, at village Bychki (Vushachy district, Vitebsk region). Also, Yury Zisser donated to the Polish literary award for Belarusian writers named after Jerzy Giedroyc.
How the pressure against TUT.BY outburst

In August 2018, the director of the state-run informational agency BelTA Iryna Akulovich blamed the independent journalists, including journalists from TUT.BY, for stealing information and getting an unsanctioned access. Her claim served as the basis for initiating the criminal cases against the independent journalists.

On 7 August 2018 employees of the police held searches at the editorial offices of TUT.by. Information carriers and computer system units were seized. The police also searched flats of several employees of the TUT.by editorial office. On 8 August 2018, the TUT.by owner Yuriy Zisser and the director general Liudmila Chekina were questioned at the Investigative Committee.

Marina Zolotova, the chief editor of tut.by
Source: tut.by

On 10 August, a representative of the Investigative Committee reported that proofs and testimonies obtained from the
suspects served as a basis for initiating criminal cases under article 349 of the Criminal Code (unsanctioned access to computer information).

Most suspects were released under recognisance not to leave the country, facing liberty deprivation term up to two years. Maryna Zolatava, the chief editor of TUT.by has been charged with article 425 (inaction by a person in office), she faces deprivation of liberty for a term up to five years.

During the questionings, employees of the Investigative Committee exerted pressure on the journalists. On September 25, the editor of the resource finance.tut.by Zmitser Bobryk said:

“I received direct threats – against me and against my relatives and close people. First, I was promised that some details of my personal life would be publicised if I refused to cooperate. It ended with threats concerning my relatives who could suffer. I signed a paper on cooperation.”

Reactions on TUT.BY pressure

Regarding the claims of the Investigative Committee, Yury Zisser said: “I do not understand why one needed to do this. The news from BelTA is in public access.”

Commenting on the detentions of journalists and searches at the editorial offices, Zisser remarked: “The events got a cosmic scale of coverage in various state mass media, totally irrelevant to the matter of the case, thus, political underpinning has become evident.”

The head of the informational campaign Ales Lipay called the charges “absolutely absurd”. The human rights defender Ales Bialiatski remarked: “It is a targeted policy of restricting the information space in Belarus in order to keep Belarusian
citizens in the atmosphere of fear, uncertainty and disinformation.”

On 19 October, employees of the Investigative Committee again turned up at the editorial office of TUT.by with an inspection: allegedly, after receiving a phone call that the office had been mined. Police employees often use such pretexts in order to enter premises of oppositional organisations, NGOs and to spoil their events and meetings.

On 22 November, all suspects of the BelTA case were summoned to the police to get registered on a criminal record for a term up to 15 years. Thus, they received a warning that they could turn up behind bars.

All other journalists involved in the case were held liable under the Code of Administrative Offenses and fined (in particular, the chief editor of BelaPAN Iryna Leushyna paid a fine of 735 BYN). The restriction to leave the country was withdrawn. The information carriers and system units were returned.

A pro-governmental TUT.BY?

According to Andrzej Poczobut, the famous journalist, an activist of the Union of Poles of Belarus, the pressure on the journalists “should be viewed in terms of counter-revolutionary strategy”.
The future will show if there will be any changes in the editorial policy of TUT.by. A gloomy scenario is probable, on the analogy with how the informational space got cleaned up in Putinist Russia. The authorities might pressurise the owner of TUT.by Yury Zisser, or might change the owner of TUT.by and then change the editors.

On October 5, the founder of TUT.by Yuriy Zisser in an interview to the Internet resource kyky.org replied to the question whether he was going to sell TUT.by:

“I do not see any sense in selling it. Most probably, after this, the portal will alter the course. A new owner will change the editor and will turn the portal into BelTA or Sovbeliya [state media outlets] – and nobody will read it.”

The former TV propagandist for Lukashenka and the head of the Belteleradiocompany, currently living in Russia media expert Alexander Zimouski remarked: “Zisser might be asked toughly to hire another editor to manage the portal.”

To conclude, the authorities are likely to keep the pressure on journalists of Internet resources. BelTA claimed material damages from all persons involved in the case varying from
three to 17 thousand rubles (equivalent to 1.5 to 8.5 thousand dollars). Even for profitable companies like TUT.by paying such sums might be problematic. The BelTA case has been clearly fabricated. It might recur, and not even once. The authorities might trample on independent Internet resources from another side. There is no independent court in Belarus. When there is a will, there will always be a pretext for pressure.

Reality Check Non-Paper: Belarus’s Slow and Subtle Transition

The 8th Belarus Reality Check took place on October 22, 2018, in Vilnius, Lithuania. The event gathered leading Belarusian and international experts and practitioners to discuss the latest political, economic and security developments in Belarus and to provide evidence-based analysis and balanced policy advice. This non-paper is the result of the meeting as well as further research.

After the August 2018 change of government, Minsk is now operating in “safe mode.” The new government came to power amid a series of destabilizing events, including corruption and mismanagement scandals, while the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections are on the horizon.

The Siarhei Rumas administration was appointed first and foremost for its managerial credentials. It represents a break from the previous nomenklatura-style governments. This falls short of systematic change, however: President Alexander Lukashenka remains the country’s key decision-maker and the
security services are in control of the implementation.

Nevertheless, the country is undergoing a slow and subtle transition to a market economy. The impact of decades-long redistributive policies — with the middle class now comprising 80% of the population — has shifted Belarusians’ value system from entitlement toward enterprise. The public’s key unmet expectation from the state, that it “create conditions for citizens to make money,” is a cause of growing frustration with the regime.

The social contract is currently under re-negotiation, and some social groups (SME, IT, the real economy, civil society, etc.) are seeing benefits from the country’s cautious economic reforms. The regime has also become friendlier toward certain civil society groups. While the government’s so-called policy of “soft Belarusization” has not brought about any large-scale reform of language or education policy, it has nevertheless allowed the state to engage with citizens who prefer a Belarusian identity without alienating more traditional (i.e. Soviet-minded) people.

Managing this “house of cards” — dependence on an external funding source and on Russian markets — is the key to maintaining the social contract. Although the Belarusian economic model is not sustainable, it has nevertheless worked for over 20 years. Minsk was able to absorb “shocks” from several economic crises while also reducing subsidies from Moscow and energy rents from 2006 onward. The state’s biggest headache is growing debt, particularly that of ineffective state-owned enterprises (SOEs). In addition, the purchasing power gap between Belarus and its neighbours is growing, adding to overall disillusionment within society.

There is rising speculation in the West that Belarus’ sovereignty may be in jeopardy. In particular, the worry is that Moscow may consider using the Union State consisting of Belarus and Russia to keep President Putin in charge after
2024, albeit in a different role. Although Russia’s strategic goal — to limit Belarus’ freedom of action in foreign and even domestic policy — has not changed, Moscow no longer treats President Lukashenka as its only Belarusian interlocutor. Since 2015, the EU’s policy of critical dialogue has led Minsk to take a more constructive attitude to a number of issues, including human rights dialogue.

Since 2015, the EU’s policy of critical dialogue has led Minsk to take a more constructive attitude to a number of issues, including human rights dialogue. However, no systematic political change is in the works. Negotiations over a basic bilateral partnership agreement with the EU are locked due to Vilnius’s opposition to the Astravets nuclear power plant under construction by Russia’s Rosatom, while Warsaw blocks progress on a visa facilitation deal. Even though the United States and European Union have lately been re-discovering Belarus’ geopolitical importance, Poland and Lithuania put their own interests first instead.

**Politics: Safe Mode**

While the economy is recovering and the “parasite tax” — which had spiked political tensions over a year ago — has been watered down, the question of Belarus’ debt and the challenges of external financing have come into the spotlight. The country again faces a “transition” at a time when government debt obligations are too high and reserves too low. Moreover, presidential and parliamentary elections are approaching in 2020.

The Rumas government, appointed after healthcare-related corruption and regional development program embezzlement sparked national scandals, is certainly reform-minded. Compared to its predecessors, the new government appears to have a more realistic understanding of the need for reform but does not want to make unnecessary promises. Its reform program
includes separating ownership and regulatory functions in state property management, as well as abolishing criminal prosecution for tax violations—thereby addressing law enforcement’s “extortionary” tax collection practices. To maintain economic growth, the government wants to focus on developing the service sector, achieving large-scale digitalization, keeping inflation low, improving investment policy, and continuing to reduce regional inequalities.

At the same time, newly-appointed Prime Minister Rumas was primarily selected as a reliable and efficient manager, not a reformer. President Lukashenka now seems to trust the government more and grant it greater authority than in the past. But while the president does not want to engage in micro-management, he is also clearly keeping the direction of policymaking under his control.

Thus, the question is about how much room for manoeuvre the new government actually has. This is especially important with the 2020 elections approaching. Current economic and social policy is framed by the interests of Belarus’ broad middle class, which was created through redistributive policies. This redistribution—even if recently accompanied by the ill-treatment of entrepreneurs as well as the placement of the burden of cost-of-living increases on the shoulders of ordinary citizens—has had a significant impact.

These factors have transformed public expectations and shifted Belarusians’ relations to state from entitlement toward market economy conditions (Graph 1). According to a recent survey, the public’s key expectation of the state is now that it “create conditions for citizens to make money,” a clear sign of frustration and disillusionment with the system.
Despite signs of common sense on the part of other policymakers, the head of state and the security establishment have little interest in a systematic transition.

Until the 2020 elections, the government’s main focus will be on attracting more investment and increase public spending in regions that are lagging behind—as a means of addressing dissatisfaction and minimizing social tension. This is evident from the most recent high-level Belarus-Russia and Belarus-Ukraine regional forums. The usual pre-election increases in social spending—including higher pensions and public-sector salaries as well as housing support for large families—will put further pressure on the budget.

The main challenge Belarus faces continues to be the absence of consensus on how to reform the social welfare system. Minsk still runs large state companies in part as a source of employment. Many reform measures are simply not taken out of fear of increased joblessness and the accompanying political ramifications.

At the same time, the social contract is under re-negotiation, and some social groups are benefiting from ongoing, if cautious, economic reforms such as a modest expansion of the
private sector and limited liberalization. In particular, groups that do not heavily depend on state budget (SMEs, the IT sector, the real economy, civil society, etc) are seeing notable benefits. In the past several years, a great number of businesspeople have accumulated wealth as private entrepreneurs, rather than as the administrators of state-owned enterprises.

While the economic transition is slow and subtle, the regime has also adopted a “combined” approach to the opposition and civil society groups, becoming notably more tolerant towards some. This has been happening in part due to the above-mentioned policy of “soft Belarusization”, and in part, because there is simply no viable and visible alternative to the current political system. As part of this approach, some independent journalists, bloggers, and political activists are regularly detained and fined – while, at the same time, the authorities have released political prisoner Dmitry Polienko and continue to authorize traditional opposition rallies.

The political opposition is marginal, fragmented and continues to operate in a difficult political landscape. Even the question of how to conduct rallies divides opposition forces. Accordingly, the opposition is unable to take advantage of the opportunities that exist; for example, according to a recent survey, 67% Belarusians would like to see a stronger opposition.

However, there is one significant shift in the political environment: it is no longer characterized by a stark binary choice between the regime and the pro-democracy opposition. Now, Russia – with its ample resources – is emerging as a visible political player in Belarus.
Economy: House of Cards Forever?

In the first decade of the 2000s, Belarus’s economic model yielded decent growth coupled with low inequality and full employment. The country’s current politics have been shaped by its rapidly growing middle class. As much as 80% of the population is considered middle class if measured using the baseline figure of $10 or more per day in spending (Graph 2).

Graph 2: % of Belarusian households spending over $10/day

Belarus has been a “star performer” when it comes to sharing the benefits of economic growth across all of society.
Guaranteed employment proved to be both an effective policy and the pillar of the country’s social contract. Not even the 2015-2017 recession had a serious impact on the poverty rate.

Due to redistributive policies and government regulation, standards of living grew more equal. Furthermore, Belarus managed to maintain a sense of social justice — despite the lack of democratic elections after 1996 — by taking tax evasion and fighting corruption seriously.

Belarus’ growth has been fueled by capital accumulation through high investment, although this has masked low productivity growth. High foreign borrowing and a shortage of domestic savings have resulted in increased vulnerabilities, although reforms in some areas — for example, guaranteeing the independence of the country’s central bank — have yielded results. The gradual shift toward an inflation-targeting regime resulted in a higher exchange rate and price stability. Official reserves have risen significantly, though they still remain considerably below the levels required.

The economy’s growth rate this year is 3.8%, thanks to the (temporary) effect of currency devaluation as well as price increases in primary products (primarily commodities and oil). Household living standards have recovered to 2011 levels, but the purchasing power gap between Belarus and its neighbours is growing. This is painful both for the new middle class and for the government as Belarus had previously closed much of the gap. The pace of growth has slacked off in recent years; now, even if 3% growth continues, it will take Belarus 39 years to catch up to Poland. If it does not, Belarusians may vote with their feet, and the decision to move west might be easier, given that Warsaw has an aggressive labour migrant strategy vis-à-vis Belarus and Ukraine aimed at addressing its own labour crisis (Graph 3).
Graph 3. Belarus GDP relative to its neighbours

The dollarization of the Belarusian economy makes monetary policy volatile, and the country’s forex reserves are lower than usual. Accordingly, maintaining macroeconomic stability will require addressing inefficient SOEs, as well as the country’s vulnerability to external shocks – especially those connected to the Russian market, as 40% of exports, go to Russia (70%, if commodities are included).

Because the cost of a serious crisis would be very high, Belarus must continue to pursue regional stability with a proactive foreign policy to protect its economic model. Russia – with its Eurasian Stabilization Fund – plays a dominant role in the region. Despite ongoing clashes with Moscow, Minsk has nevertheless managed relations with its key donor successfully for over 20 years.

Belarus’ “house of cards” – i.e. dependence on external sources – is the key to maintaining its redistribution-based social contract, which keeps the wider middle class satisfied with the state system. To keep its house standing, Belarus must not only manage its relationship with Russia but also further expand positive trade relations, both with its immediate neighbours as well as countries further afield. Although the Belarusian system is ultimately not sustainable,
it has nevertheless functioned for over 20 years. Minsk has been able to absorb “shocks” from (several) Russian economic crises and has managed to adapt to reduced subsidies and energy rents from Moscow beginning in 2006 (Graph 4).

Graph 4. Russian subsidies and loans

The main Western policy suggestion for Minsk is to reduce dependence on Russia. One possibility – as other Central and Eastern Europe countries have done as EU members – is to develop a greater dependence on Germany; this is considered less dangerous by international financial organizations, as the German economy is much bigger and more stable than that of Russia. Minsk should be more economically linked with the EU and needs actively to encourage production and export relations with Brussels.

Belarus’s biggest headache is its increasing debt, 45% of which is made by state-owned enterprises (SOEs) subsidized by the Belarusian (state) banking system. The government is now considering restructuring some money-losing SOEs.
The Belarusian private sector is now relatively large. It competes with SOEs not only in the retail trade and other areas where the state has been relatively passive but also in sectors where the state is traditionally strong such as manufacturing (of which the private sector now accounts for a 25% share) and services (30%). The number of Belarusian SMEs is still far below those in EU countries; however, they are gradually moving beyond the limitations of bad regulations and conflict with the authorities toward overcoming other serious challenges, for example, the quality of education of the country’s workforce (Graph 5).

**Geopolitics: Balancing Dependence on Russia**

Long-term analysis of the trends in foreign policy indices (Graph 6) shows that Belarus has managed to diversify its international relations under a multi-vector foreign policy, although ties with Russia remain the widest and deepest. Minsk’s assistance in regulating the Ukraine conflict has earned (Western) appreciation. However, while some now call
Belarus a new diplomatic hub, there is growing concern that Moscow poses a great risk to the country’s sovereignty.

Graph 6. Belarus’ foreign policy indices

The EU’s critical dialogue with Minsk has brought some results: the government of Belarus now takes a more constructive attitude on a number of issues, including human rights dialogue and political prisoners. Brussels’ approach is to address individual cases privately, not publicly.

However, even if attitudes may have shifted, the EU’s approach has still not led to a breakthrough on key issues like freedom of assembly or press, nuclear safety and the death penalty. Regional security remains important for Poland and Lithuania, while Minsk’s transparency on military exercises, as well as resistance toward a Russian air base on its territory, has strengthened its (quasi-) independent position.

While Belarus’ relations with the EU have distinctly improved and the two parties have moved to normalize and formalize their ties, negotiations on the basic partnership agreement seem deadlocked over Lithuania’s strong objections to Belarus’ Astravets nuclear power plant, now under construction by Russia’s Rosatom. Moreover, progress on a visa facilitation
agreement is blocked by Poland due to Minsk’s non-compliance with Poland’s request for an increase in its number of consuls. Although the Astravets project passed a recent EU stress test designed to assess the probability of a nuclear disaster, Lithuania continues to distrust Minsk — and now links nuclear safety with every other item on the EU-Belarus agenda. One of Vilnius’ concerns is that the project puts further pressure (through competition) on its own energy utility companies while calling into question Lithuania’s overall energy policy.

Meanwhile, Belarus’ continued pressure on political activists and renewed crackdown on journalists have fueled renewed Western criticism of the country’s human rights situation. Despite deepening bilateral relations with Washington, Minsk failed to satisfy the requirements for fully lifting US sanctions. So far, these restrictions have been renewed (and then immediately frozen) every 6 months, indicating that Congress views an eventual display of goodwill by Minsk — e.g., fulfilling some conditions such as registering political parties or human rights groups — as inevitable.

Meanwhile, trade is booming between Belarus and the EU. In January-August 2018, trade increased by 28.7% to $11.6 billion, with exports of goods to the EU increasing by 43% to $6.9 billion, and imports growing by 12.2% to $4.7 billion.

Russia’s strategic goal — to limit Belarus’ freedom of action in foreign and even domestic policy — has not changed. In fact, Moscow has a new tactic in the relationship: it has ceased to treat President Lukashenka as its only interlocutor. With the appointment of Mikhail Babich as its new ambassador, Moscow has started openly to engage with other actors. Moscow has also reminded Minsk that there is one institution in Belarus that the latter does not control: the Belarusian Orthodox Church, which is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. It is no coincidence that the synodal meeting responding to Ukraine’s moves towards church autocephaly took
place in Minsk.

However, there is no reason to believe that Moscow plans to threaten Belarus’ territorial integrity into question. Overall, it is still cheaper and more productive for Russia to continue supporting Minsk in its time of need, even though this has grown more difficult since 2006 due to frequent clashes between these two nominal allies. At the same time, there is little reason to think Moscow lacks contingency planning — for example, to utilize the Union State between Belarus and Russia to keep President Putin in charge after 2024.

Belarus’ growing debt obligation toward Russia should be a concern, as this is how Minsk lost control of its gas distribution system (though not the transit pipeline) in 2011. Gazprom’s ownership of Beltransgaz makes it impossible for Belarus to someday follow Ukraine’s example and purchase gas through reverse flows from Europe, thereby challenging Russian gas dominance in the country. Economic relations with Ukraine remain positive; trade is growing, but political relations are rather tense. Security concerns over the Belarus-Ukraine border (Minsk cites illicit arms flows from Ukraine) and spy scandals (a Ukrainian spy was caught and sentenced in Belarus, while a young Ukrainian was abducted from Belarus to Russia) have complicated bilateral ties.

Meanwhile, relations with Poland are characterized by the absence of real progress despite the growing intensity of contacts. Just as the Ukraine conflict changed dynamics in the region, the new Polish government has changed its predecessor’s policy of isolation toward Belarus. Several issues — the small border traffic agreement (not ratified by Minsk), the status of the Polish minority in Belarus, and the issues surrounding Belarus’ military exercises with Russia — limit efforts toward greater engagement. Economic cooperation is also improving, but Western sanctions on Russia also affect Polish investments in Belarus.
Belarus-Russia integration: how to avoid brotherly hugs

In early October 2018, Belarus and Russia settled the agreement about oil supplies for the remaining part of 2018 and for 2019. Unexpectedly, the Russian leadership abandoned pressure on Belarus.

While in August-September, the Kremlin believed that they could force Lukashenka into making concessions in the matters of genuine integration, later they backed down. There exist several possible explanations for the Kremlin’s tactical retreat: the threat of autocephaly of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the interest in laying a gas pipeline, and the approaching talks on the extension of the lease of military facilities.

Why Belarus matters to Russia

Belarus is an important participant of integration processes with Russia (CSTO, EurAsEc, and CIS); moreover, it is the only European participant of these projects.

An intensive flow of freight goes across the Belarusian territory, including that of Russia, delivering to the West around 60m tons of oil and around 40bn cubic meters of gas. Meanwhile, this is a cheap transit. Belarus communicates
Russia to its Kaliningrad enclave, supplying the land with gas and electricity.

Lukashenka once said that 10 million Russian citizens worked at Russian enterprises that were connected with the Belarusian technological chain, supplying component parts. Perhaps, the figure is too high. However, this factor is not to be ignored.

High-technology production of Belarusian enterprises of the military industrial complex is important for the Russian military industry. Especially, after losing manufacturing cooperation with Ukraine, at the background of tension with the West. And especially, if Russia proceeds in the arms race with the West.

The central region of Russia is shielded by the Belarusian air-defence system. In the territory of Belarus, there is a missile launch tracking station and the station of radio electronic intelligence Volga (near Hantsavichy town, the Brest region) and the communication centre for atomic submarines Antey (near Vileyka town, the Minsk region).

One should also take into account the Russian home politics factor, the factor of public opinion. The Russian society wants to see Belarus as an ally, especially at the background of the strained relations with the West.

How Belarus resists Russia’s attempts of “closer” integration

There are several reasons that explain why every time when the Kremlin was about to tie Belarus to Russia securely, after a period of pressure Russia always stepped back.

This happened in 2004 (gas conflict), in 2010 (oil conflict),
in 2012 (dairy conflict). The latest one, the energy conflict lasted from May 2016 to April 2017.

Every time Lukashenka responded to pressure by pressing on Russia’s sore spots. Belarus impeded Russia’s communication with the Kaliningrad enclave, cutting off its supply with gas and electricity.

It ceased cooperation in the air defence sphere. It raised the prices for the transit of the Russian oil. Lukashenka made statements that led to assume that Russia had to pay for participation in the CSTO, EurAsEc, and even for the Union State.

In these time spans, Belarus intensified political contacts with the West, to demonstrate to Russia that it could get support there, in particular, in the form of the IMF loans.

Oil concessions to Belarus:
Deal or no deal

In August-September, the Kremlin believed again that they could force Lukashenka into making concessions in the matters of genuine integration. In August 2018, events unfolded according to the usual scenario. Russia cut off the supplies of tax-free oil. The Russian information propaganda machine activated its work against Lukashenka. The President of Belarus was very poorly received in Sochi on 22 August. However, after a shower of pressure on Lukashenka, Russia backed down again.

In October, agreements were reached meaning even bigger oil donations to Belarus from Russia. Russia admitted Belarus’s right to receive income from oil refining larger than previously in case oil prices on the world market rise. According to the Russian energetics expert V. Tanurkov, within the agreement on supplies of Russian oil in the volume of 24m tons per year at price $75 per barrel, oil donation to Belarus comprises around $3.3bn per year.

In fact, Russia could have cut oil and gas donations and talked to Lukashenka about the necessity of real integration (as it happened from May 2016 to April 2017). One could make a number of assumptions why Putin put it to a halt such talks already in October.

Fears of Belarusian autocephaly?

First, the Kremlin probably admitted the likelihood that Belarus would follow the Ukrainian example, setting the process of creating an Autocephalous Orthodox Church, independent of the Moscow Patriarchate. The decision of the Constantinople Patriarchate has set up the ecclesiastical law
basis for a Belarusian Autocephalous Church, too.

Moreover, autocephaly will not be strongly opposed to within the Belarusian society. According to the opinion poll, held by tut.by portal in October 2018, only 20.12% supported the Russian Orthodox Church, whereas 26.54% supported the decision of Constantinople. An informational campaign at the governmental level would shift the ratio in favour of autocephaly supporters.

Or negotiations on pipelines and military bases?

Second, Belarus and Russia might be negotiating gas pipeline installation across Belarus territory. There is unofficial information that in the first half of 2018, Belarus and Russia started talks on increasing the export capacity of the gas transmission system of Belarus.

Andrei Ravkov, Belarusian Defense Minister. Source: sputnik.by

Laying a new gas pipeline through Belarus territory, alongside with the construction of the pipeline Nord Stream-2, will allow Russia to refuse totally from the gas transit via the territory of Ukraine. One can assume that the Belarusian side
will insist that the new gas pipeline should be a state property of the Republic of Belarus.

Third, Belarus and Russia will negotiate prolongation of the lease term for the Russian military objects currently deployed in Belarus. On June 7, 2021, the term of agreements expires concerning the deployment of the missile launch tracking station *Volga* and the communication centre for atomic submarines *Antey*. The Belarusian Minister of Defence Raukou said that before June 6, 2020, Belarus might report on its intention to refuse from the prolongation of these agreements.

It looks like the talks on the prolongation of the lease term for the Russian military objects will not be easy. The Belarusian side will try to take the most of the economic profit from the Russian military objects staying in Belarus territory. Lukashenka personally claimed that there are military objects in Belarus that are important for Russia and for which Russia does not pay. “If the president of Russia forgot about it – it’s high time to remember.”

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**Belarus’s next five years: stability above all**

On 13 September the Centre for New Ideas published a pilot *Index of the Future* covering Belarus’s next five years. According to the index’s authors, Belarus can expect a stagnant economy and decreasing research potential. On the other hand, minorities’ rights may improve and the national identity strengthen.

The Centre for New Ideas surveyed 26 analysts and adopted 20 different indicators to describe Belarus’s near future. The
two authors, Ryhor Astapenia and Andrei Kazakevich, interpreted qualitative indicators in the context of ongoing trends in Belarus’s development. Overall, they suggest that Belarus should avoid either significant progress or strong deterioration. They conclude that the notorious notion of Belarusian “stability” will continue to dominate economic, socio-demographic, educational and public administration spheres.

As Astapenia explained to Belarus Digest, the Centre for New Ideas launched the project because “many people see Belarus’s future as too abstract or made by one person [the president], while actually it is shaped by an elaborate tangle of long-term trends.”

**A stagnant economy and rising debt**

The Centre for New Ideas predicts slow economic growth of 1.5% – 3% per year, which in practice means stagnation. The average salary will probably rise from its 2017 level of $422 to at least $500 by 2022, with the top level suggested at $700. This means that Belarus might realise its nationwide struggle for “five hundred dollars to all.” At the same time, Belarusian external debt will likely grow due to increased external debt payments, making the Belarusian economy less stable.

A substantial dependence on the Russian market might remain among the major threats for the Belarusian economy, raising the possibility of trade wars and exposure to Russia’s increasing susceptibility to economic crises. Belarusian dependence on the Russian market may only slightly decrease, falling from 44% of exports in 2017 to 35-40 % in 2018-2022. The index foresees the number of countries receiving more than 5% of Belarusian exports growing by between three and five countries. In this way, the long-proclaimed diversification
strategy of the Belarusian government might achieve partial success.

Longer life expectancy, yet fewer babies

The prognosis for the average salary in Belarus. Source: https://ideaby.org/index/en/

While the life expectancy of Belarusians born after 2017 might increase by approximately 10 years, their demographic load should rise as well. The experts predict a slow decrease of the Belarusian population from 9.5 million in 2017 to 9.25-9.4 million in 2022. Accordingly, Belarusians born today will most probably have to work longer in comparison with their parents to support the over-burdened pension system.

As for social equality, currently, Belarusians practically equal Scandinavian nations in terms of income distribution, evaluated by the Gini coefficient. According to the experts, the disproportion between the wealthy and the poor in Belarus will most probably stay the same in the next five years.

Belarus’s standing in gender equality remains comparable to that of many Western European nations, as Belarus ranks 26th in the world’s gender equality rating (evaluated by the Global...
Gender Gap Index). Furthermore, the Global Gender Gap Index for Belarus might even improve over the next five years.

Though various Belarusian minority groups (including the disabled, sexual, religious and other minorities) currently face systematic obstacles, they might expect positive changes. The experts predict a slight improvement of minorities’ rights on the institutional level, though their dissociation may continue.

The prognosis for the Belarusian demographics. Source: https://ideaby.org/index/en/

Decreasing education and research expenses

Belarus’s education and research expenses will most probably stay at the present low level. Currently, Belarus spends only 0.5% of its GDP on research and development. In comparison, European states such as Norway or the Netherlands spend about 2% of their GDP on R&D. Nevertheless, the experts predict almost the same level of R&D expenditure in Belarus. As for the national education expenses, currently, Belarus spends on
education almost as much as Germany, although the experts foresee a decrease in the coming years.

The index expects more Belarusian universities to enter the top 500 best universities in the QS World University Rankings. At present only the Belarusian State University makes the QS World University Rankings, where it occupies the 334th place. The experts expect the inclusion of additional two or three Belarusian universities in these rankings within the next five years. At the same time, despite the predicted success of Belarusian universities, the number of foreign students should only minimally increase. Apparently, Belarus has already fully employed its marketing potential to attract foreign students.

The authors see the number of patent applications remaining the same or slightly decreasing in the next few years. A slow decline of patent applications represents a worrying trend for contemporary Belarusian science. While in 2008 Belarusian scientists submitted 1500 patents a year, this number dropped three-and-a-half times over the subsequent decade. At present Belarusians submit approximately 400 patent applications annually and this number might fail to improve within the next five years.

No victory over corruption and passive civil society

The national battle against corruption will most probably fail to end up in a decisive victory. Though Belarus fares better in international corruption ratings than Russia and Ukraine, the experts expect the country to fail to achieve any radical progress fighting corruption. Belarus’s international corruption standing should still lag behind the majority of Western nations.

The development of Belarusian “e-government” awaits a limited
progress. Though internationally Belarus ranks well according to e-government services available online and its telecommunications infrastructure, the citizens’ ability to operate e-government fails to keep pace due to governmental leniency. Hence, Belarus occupies an only 39th place in the global e-government index without significant prospects of rising higher in the near future.

The Belarusian national identity should strengthen slightly, and the conditions for civil society development might also improve marginally. Currently, the Belarusian non-profit sector remains in a rather complex condition due to the long-standing authoritarian regime, which hinders any progress in civil society development. Belarusian civil society will most probably remain conserved in the present state of passiveness.

In conclusion, the index for the future of Belarus attempts to evaluate Belarus’s near future in accordance with long-term trends and a range of qualitative indicators. Assuming that the Belarusian regime persists, the index foresees few major changes. The Centre for New Ideas predicts that Belarus awaits moderate economic growth, rising external debt, stagnant demographics, slightly reduced R&D expenses, and only slow progress for civil society.

State-controlled think tanks in Belarus – who are they?

In contrast to the few independent Belarusian thinks tanks, the state-controlled analytical research centres in Belarus benefit from a range of privileges. Benefits include the state’s institutional support and funding as well as lawful
opportunities to engage with business organisations. Belarus Digest identifies the key Belarusian state-owned think tanks in the fields of international relations, economics, sociology and state security.

Many of Belarus’s state-owned think tanks exist for the government’s use only. Governmental bodies such as the Council of Ministers frequently set the research objectives of these analytical centres for the years to come. The major problems faced by state-owned think-tanks include bureaucratisation, a lack of funding, and the decreasing capacities of their researchers.

Think-tanks advising on foreign relations

Several notable state think-tanks in the field of foreign relations operate in Belarus. The Information and Analytical Centre under the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Belarus (the IAC) provides regular analytical support to the president and his administration on foreign policy issues and reports trends in the foreign media. Since 2014 a lawyer, Alexei Derbin, has headed the IAC and the agency works closely with leading think-tanks in Russia and China in the field of foreign relations.

The Centre for International Studies (CENTIS) operates as a joint initiative of the Belarusian State University and the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The major focus of CENTIS’s research agenda remains Belarusian foreign policy in the context of global and regional processes. CENTIS also publishes its online analytical journal called “Expertise”. 
Think-tanks planning economic strategies

The Institute of Economics of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (NASB) remains the oldest and the most influential Belarusian economic think tank, functioning since 1931. At present, the institute employs approximately 150 people. It provides scientific support for governmental bodies over the implementation of different socio-economic policies. In 2017, the institute published a key four-part document titled “The Strategy of the Economic Development of Belarus: Challenges, Instruments, and Perspectives”. Valery Belski, a former advisor to the Eurasian Economic Commission, has headed the institute since 2016.


The Centre for System Analysis and Strategic Research at the Academy of Sciences of Belarus also conducts socio-economic research. In 2017, the centre published 34 scientific articles, 50 theses, 5 monographs, and 5 textbooks. The centre also advises on the problems of economic cooperation between...
Belarus and Russia.

The Belarusian-Chinese Analytical Development Centre (BCADC) represents an example of a bilateral inter-state think-tank. The BCADC develops practical recommendations on the improvement of export-import relations and increasing bilateral Belarusian-Chinese investments. The BCADC advises governmental bodies in both Belarus and China directly.

**Think-tanks conducting sociological research**

The Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus stands out as the leading Belarusian state think-tank in the field of sociology. At present, the institute employs 67 people and comprises four centres and five departments. The wide scope of the institute’s activities includes regular monitoring of the socio-economic and political situation in Belarus, studying the electoral preferences of Belarusians during election campaigns, and carrying out marketing research. Currently, the institute supervises about 50 research projects. As for research publications, the Institute of Sociology publishes about 100 scientific articles, theses and reports annually.

The Centre for Political and Social Studies of the Belarusian State University conducts sociological research for Belarusian commercial organisations and governmental bodies as well as for international organisations operating in Belarus. So far, the centre has conducted about 150 research projects. David Rotman, a prominent Belarusian sociologist, has served as the head of the centre since 1997. The European Commission, UNICEF and UNO list among the centre’s clients.
Thinks-tanks working on security problems

The Scientific Research Institute of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus remains the key Belarusian state security think-tank. The institute prepares solutions to problems of Belarusian military security and the operation of the Belarusian armed forces. The institute actively collaborates with the defence ministry of the Russian Federation in the field of the military security of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Apart from that, the institute cooperates with similar military institutions in Eastern Europe and with those of the Pan-Eurasian Collective Security Treaty Organization (mostly composed of the CIS states).

One of the military-scientific conferences in Belarus. Source: https://vsr.mil.by/2016/02/11/nauchnyj-vzglyad-na-pvo/

The Centre for Foreign Policy and Security Study unites Belarusian researchers working in the state universities. The Centre works on problems related to European security. So far, the Centre has arranged several conferences on international security (including the place of NATO) in Minsk with the participation of European diplomats and experts.
Influential, yet bureaucratic

According to Piotr Piatrouski, a research fellow at the Institute of Philosophy of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences, unlike independent think-tanks, the Belarusian state analytical research centres exude substantial influence on the state’s policies. Since they receive concrete research tasks from the government, they work on specific point-to-point proposals and solutions. The National Centre for Legislation and Legal Research then transforms their solutions into draft legislative acts, such as laws and decrees. Apart from that, such state research centres as the Institute for Philosophy and the Institute of History, conduct various sorts of expertise at the request of the Belarusian Internal Ministry.

As the Belarusian government remains the major employer of these state-owned research centres, a significant amount of their research is exclusively for government use and unavailable to the public. At the same time, as Piatrouski mentions, the state think tanks freely cooperate with business organisations and participate in international research programmes. Moreover, these analytical centres publish parts of their research in open sources, both nationally and internationally. However, the scope of their international publications largely stays within the Russian-speaking academic space due to the lack of the English-language publications.

According to Piatrouski, despite their governmental backing, Belarusian state research centres face several problems. First, Belarus still spends an insufficient amount of GDP on research and development programmes. While Russia assigned 1.1% of its GDP on R&D in 2016, Belarus assigned merely 0.5% of its GDP on R&D. Second, excessive bureaucratisation combined with academic formalism negatively affects the performance of the state’s think-tanks. Third, the education level of incoming researchers lags behind their predecessors, partly
attributed to the general decline in education levels in Belarus.

To sum up, the Belarusian state research centres remain rather self-contained despite their existing cooperation networks. In part, this state of affairs results from the authoritarian character of the Belarusian regime and the secret nature of many research programs.