

# Belarus Wants to Keep Its Western Border Locked Shut

Last week a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Belarus was not ready to implement an agreement on local border traffic with Poland.

The reason given was 'the anti-Belarusian position of the Polish government'. Although both sides have already signed the agreement and the parliaments ratified it in 2010, Minsk is clearly not in a hurry to implement it despite the clear potential benefits to its citizens.

Lithuania has a similar story to tell. In 2011 both the Lithuanian and Belarusian parliaments ratified an agreement, but it was destined to share the same fate as the Polish initiative. Perhaps Vilnius has more realistic chances of concluding such an agreement with Belarus than Poland does. Latvia was the first and the only country to manage to implement a local border traffic agreement with Belarus, in 2012.

Last week's announcement by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry could be another attempt to divide EU neighbours over Belarus. The regime may be worried that local border traffic with any EU country will open the door to the West for Belarusians.

## History of the Belarus-Poland Agreement

The goal of the agreement is to facilitate the cross-border movement of people who live in an area up to about 30 km from the border. Instead of visas, a special document would prove the right to cross the border on a much more relaxed and cheaper basis.

The Polish initiative on local border traffic with Belarus dates back to 2008. Two years later both the Polish and Belarusian parliaments ratified the agreement. In 2010 the heads of each state, Alexander Lukashenka and Bronisław Komorowski, signed the document. Warsaw has officially declared its readiness to implement it.

However, the agreement seems to have remained in a stack on Lukashenka's desk. An exchange of diplomatic notes between Warsaw and Minsk remains the final missing stage. The recent message by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs makes clear to thousands of those living on both sides of the border that Minsk has no political will to deal with the issue in the near future.

Last October, Andrej Savynych sent a similar message regarding the future of local border traffic with Poland to the one received last week. "The politics of the Polish establishment in bilateral relations with Belarus creates a highly unfavourable climate" – he said, explaining the reasons for delay in the implementation of local border traffic on Belarus' side.

In his words, Poland's support for EU sanctions towards Belarus appeared to be the primary cause of Minsk's reaction. On the other occasion, the Belarusian consul in Białystok said that in addition to the political motives, technical difficulties related to the lack of special printing devices were also hindering implementation of the procedure.

### **Cross-Border Reality: Trade is the Main Driver**

As data from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows, around 1.1 million Belarusians from the Hrodna and Brest regions might receive permission for non-visa movement. On the Polish side, implementation of such an agreement can benefit around 600,000 Poles. Looking at these

figures only, Belarus would gain significantly more from implementing the agreement.

In addition, as the table below demonstrates, the overwhelming majority of those who cross the Belarus-Poland border do not have Polish passports. In other words, Belarusian citizens would benefit from simplification of cross-border movement much more than Poles.

Table 1. Crossing of the Belarus-Poland border in the fourth quarter of 2012.

Voivodeship	Cross-Border Movement (thousands of People)	
	Polish Citizens	Foreign Citizens
Lubelskie	142,7	903,9
Podlaskie	97,7	1116,8

Source: Poland's Central Statistical Office (2013)

Poland's Central Statistical Office reports that over two million Belarusians came to Poland last year. According to estimates of Poland's Customs Chamber, the majority of the foreigners who purchased consumer goods in Poland were Belarusians. Foreigners in the Belarus-Poland borderland claimed over 750,000 tax-free documents. A majority of them crossed the border in the Podlaskie region of Poland.

Both Belarusians and Poles cross the border mainly for shopping (82.5% of Poles and 73% of Belarusians). Consumer electronics, food, chemicals and fuel are the goods in highest demand. As has been true for many years, trade and business allow many in the borderlands to survive.

### **Opera Tickets in Exchange for Visas**

Poland's institutions and businesses are clearly interested in seeing more Belarusian visitors. The Opera House

in Bialystok sells tickets for musical performances to Belarusians in a package deal that includes a visa, accommodation in a hotel and a city tour. The price is cheaper than the cost of a tourist visa itself. According to the opera's director, Robert Skolimowski, 13,000 Belarusians have already booked tickets for this year's performances. The cultural element is important here as well, and can truly bring both nations closer together, but it serves another function too – it contributes to Bialystok's budget.

Bialystok's local newspaper *Gazeta Wspolczesna* notes that 'almost 2 million people on both sides of the border are waiting for it to go through'. Another Polish outlet, *Kurier Poranny*, reports on Sokolka, a town near the border, for which local border traffic appears to be crucial for more dynamic economic development of local businesses.

The queues in the Polish consulates in Belarus prove that many Belarusians have an interest in coming to Poland and going further West. Last year three Polish consulates issued 350,000 visas to Belarusians. Poland is overwhelmed with visa applications and Latvia has offered its support with issuing visas to Poland. Beginning on 18 March 2013, Belarusian citizens may also apply for Schengen visas to Poland at Latvian consulates in Belarus.

Certainly, the absence of easier means of crossing the Belarus – Poland border efficiently hinders the development of these border regions. But for now the population of the border regions in Poland and in Belarus remain hostages of high-level politics.

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# Construction Boom in Minsk: Happy Businessmen and Unhappy Public

On 13 March, Belarus hosted a high level guest – Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić. Nikolić and Serbian businessman Dragomir Karić symbolically launched a new construction project near national library. Today Serbian company Astra Investment is one of the largest investors in Belarus development sector.

Development remains one of the few industries foreigners eagerly invest in Belarus because of high and quick profit. Meanwhile, Belarus authorities struggle with other problems of urban development. They fail to properly regenerate the Old Town of Minsk and their policy of compaction of districts in already densely populated city causes protests of locals.

## Thriving Capital

Although Belarus experiences economic stagnation and resists market reforms, the intensity of development and construction makes an impression of a thriving area. Indeed, development presents one of the few sectors that foreign companies readily invest in Belarus.

In this most cases foreign does not mean western, as investors come from Arab countries, Russia, Iran, Turkey and China. Serbian Astra Investment serves perhaps the biggest investor at the moment. Its projects, Majak Minska (Lighthouse of Minsk) includes a shopping and entertainment complex and several housing projects.

Construction especially flourished after 2009, when the International Ice Hockey Federation chose Minsk the venue for

the 2014 championship. The event seems especially important for regime's image and international legitimation, therefore authorities do their best to prepare the capital for the upcoming championship. The amount of work is substantial – Minsk definitely lacks tourist infrastructure.

However, as it usually happens in Belarus, people do not know how the deals are made. This behind-the-scene politics causes discontent of the public. This discontent is fairly justified – very often good pieces of Belarusian land go to president's friends without asking people's opinion.

For example, in 2012 an official document with a mark "confidential" appeared in Belarusian Internet. According to it, Aliaksandr Lukashenka ordered to grant Qatar state (in fact its ruling family), lands near Minsk for building residence and open-air hunting cages. Expensive lands near the capital should be granted for free for 99 years. Such generous presents of course are a part of bigger deals that the authoritarian leader makes with his Arab counterparts.

### **The Tragedy of Minsk Old Town**



Regeneration of old building remains a disaster in Belarus. Denationalised Belarusian bureaucracy does not realise the value of architectural heritage and do not want to stick to legislation on urban development during the restoration of old buildings.

Most famous cases from recent decade include reconstruction of Old Town in Hrodna, a town with old European architecture in Western Belarus.

Authorities conducted reconstruction with numerous violations. They did not conduct archaeological excavations and damaged a layer of remnants of the mediaeval city; changed traditional planning of Old Town; destroyed some buildings and built them from modern materials instead of restoration. As a result, the biggest Old Town in Belarus turned into typical town of Lukashenka period.

Minsk is in a similar situation now. Poor reconstruction of Old Town of Minsk started in USSR already. Today, in independent Belarus the authorities continue to destroy the historical face of the city for reasons of quickness and minimization of cost. The 2014 ice hockey world championship makes the authorities hurry in their preparations.

Among the biggest problem of renovation experts name the destruction of former planning of the streets and buildings. While a single wrongly erected building can be destroyed and restored, the rebuilding of the whole planning seems hardly possible and will be extremely costly in future. Another task during regeneration is to preserve the past cultural landscape, but Belarusian authorities prefer to turn Minsk Old Town into a business-centre.

According to historian Zachar Šybeka, one of the best experts on Minsk history, normally the Old Town becomes conservation zone, where new construction is prohibited. In Belarus, he says, such norms do not exist in law. As a result, modern buildings appear in the centre. They overshadow the historical architecture and make the whole view ridiculous.

Sadly, authorities even abuse religious monuments like church complexes. Instead of giving them back to church, officials use buildings for state purposes. In one case, they even

presented a plan to turn a former monastery building into hotel with casinos.

## **Compaction of Housing**



Rapid growth of construction results in the lack of free space in the city. Notably, Lukashenka prohibited the spread of the city and building on agricultural lands. Authorities offered an alternative solution – to boost “satellite towns” that lay near Minsk. Citizens that need housing can build it in those towns now.

However, new elite housing and business and shopping centres mushroom in the city, and somehow authorities manage to find land for them. Clearly, those projects are highly profitable and Minsk authorities do not miss a chance to earn some more cash and report to the top about their success.

The government promotes policy of compaction of some communities to create new places for profitable projects. This policy sparked social tension and protests of city dwellers. Politically indifferent Belarusian may become very active and aggressive when the deal concerns their property. Take for example the case of Uručča conflict.

In spring 2012 dwellers of Uručča district protested against building of several houses, some of them were assigned for riot police families. This fact stirred up the discontent with authorities because Belarusians perceive police as a part of the regime. Still, dwellers had no chance to win in this case.



Similarly, owners of the housing in the central district resist the plans of authorities to evict them or rebuild the part of houses and implement other projects. Such sporadic protests appear here and there and authorities have to compromise. They organise civil discussions, where experts, architects, officials and citizens discuss the construction plans.

So far, the discussions appeared not quite fruitful, as sides do not want to listen to each other and retain their positions. Nevertheless, authorities accept that such protests indeed prevented some projects or changed them. "Prevention of social tension", the term that authorities use, shows that even in today's Belarus people can effectively defend their interests if they organise.

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## **Lukashenka Tours South-East Asia**

On 22 March Belarus state leader completed his visit to Singapore where he was trying to find new markets. He spent a week in Indonesia and Singapore, together with a delegation of 80 people.

The state of the Belarusian economy is deteriorating, relations with the West and Russia remain complicated, the death of friends like [Hugo Chavez](#) and contradictions with Ahmadinejad made the Belarusian leadership to look for new partners.

The Belarusian authorities want to become a noticeable player in the South-East and to attract new money to the Belarusian economy. The ultimate goal is to find new trading

opportunities matching those with Russia and the EU. Belarus signed contracts for \$400 million.

For the three days of the visit to Indonesia, Lukashenka lobbied increase of mutual goods turnover by two-three times for the upcoming years. President of Indonesia Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono promised to consider the opportunities of investments in Belarus and accepted the invitation to visit Minsk for further negotiations.

The Belarusian delegation did not gain great success in Singapore. Although the parties did sign an agreement to set up one joint company, official Minsk wanted to get more in the form of investments. The Asian tiger has enough economic weight to become a noticeable player in Belarus. However, it does not hurry to do so, although the regime offers a piece of Belarusian state property that the Russians want so much – a minority stock of Belaruskali, one of the world's largest producers of potash.

The visit to the South-East Asia took place after the failed trip to St. Petersburg. Alexander Lukashenka was hoping to get from Vladimir Putin a \$ 2 billion loan. The Russian Minister of Finance Anton Siluanov replied simply and ingeniously: “If [Belarus carries out privatisation](#) for \$ 2.5 billion, there will be no need for a loan”.

The Russian refusal inspired the Belarusian state leader. Ruling politicians realise the importance of development of relations with countries outside of Europe. Due to such contacts, the Belarusian authorities gain international legitimacy and find partners who do not demand further integration or respect of human rights.

### **Indonesian Success**

On 18 March, Lukashenka arrived to Indonesia for the first time in the history of relations with this country. On the one

hand, the relations between the countries do not develop as quickly as the Belarusian authorities would like. In 2012, the goods turnover between Belarus and Indonesia amounted only to \$132,2 million. Alongside with that, the Belarusian export still remains undiversified. Belarus shipped almost exclusively potassium fertilisers and tires to Indonesia.

On the other hand, Belarusian authorities can expect rapid start in the mutual trade. Belarus signed contracts for \$400 million for the three days of the visit. According to Belta news agency apart from the traditional potassium fertilisers, Indonesia will get about 500 tipper trucks and 600 tractors manufactured in Belarus in the nearest years. Belarus also plans to earn about \$150 million on shipment of milk products.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono announced that a group of businessmen would visit Minsk in the nearest future, and he would come to Belarus personally for further negotiations afterwards. Lukashenka mentioned cooperation in the military sphere separately. According to the new information provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Belarus occupies place # 20 among the biggest [exporters of weapons](#) in 2008-2012.

The Belarusian authorities had been preparing this visit for several years. According to Lukashenka, the goods turnover is likely to grow by two-three times in the next several years. If official Minsk manages to open several joint-stock companies with Indonesia, it will become a great break-through for the Belarusian economy. In political sense, these contacts have little importance as the countries are located too far away from each other, and their spheres of interest at the international arena stay too different.

### **Singaporean Hopes**

Success in the relations with Indonesia seems less important than the prospect of cooperation with Singapore.

The current state of the economic relations strives to the minimum: the goods turnover in 2012 made \$26,5 mln, Singapore invested in Belarus only \$730,000 for a year. The Belarusian authorities realise that Belarusian products cannot be competitive in Singapore. The regime hopes to set up joint companies (for example, in the IT sphere) or direct investments into the Belarusian economy.

During the Belarusian-Singaporean business forum the parties agreed to set up a joint company for production auto parts and fittings. As for the direct investments, Singapore has taken no decision so far. The speaker of the Singaporean Parliament will visit Belarus in the near future to see the Belarusian enterprises.

Also, Lukashenka met with President of the “Riyada Group” holding company, a member of the Bahrain royal family, one of the most influential women of the Arabian world Shaikha Dheya bint Ebrahim Al Khalifa. The parties agreed to set up a joint company in Amman and about shipment of the Belarusian goods to the Arabian countries.

### **Multiple-Vector of the Regime as a Guarantee for Belarus' Independence**

The regime deeply appreciates the relations with countries located far away from Belarus, countries which have quite different, but not contradictory political interests with Belarus. The Belarusian authorities want contacts with South America, Asia or Middle East to become a security cushion in case of deterioration of relations with Russia and the European Union.

When Lukashenka headed for the South-East Asia, the Belarusians started joking that the state leader “disclosed his multiple-vector nature”. The Belarusian authorities often use the concept of “multiple-vector nature” to underline importance of development of relations with all the countries

of the world. Translated from the official Minsk's language, it means creating a counterbalance to Russia.

Although in reality only the West can replace Russia for Belarus, the Belarusian authorities continue to look for new partners. The contacts with Indonesia or Singapore look a drop in a sea in comparison with the agreements with Russia or the European Union. However these relations create appearance of the regime's independence and stabilise its positions in the negotiations with Moscow or Brussels.

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## **Human Capital: Leave Cannot Stay – Digest of Belarus Analytics**

Belarusian experts discuss migration, philosophy of barricades and coexistence, urban development and the readiness of the official Minsk to start another cycle of the Belarusian-European relations among other issues.

[Human Capital: Leave Cannot Stay](#) – BISS paper examines migration and immigration attitudes of Belarusians in the light of sociology. The study is based on the results of a fresh national survey (December 2012 – January 2013). One of the preliminary findings does not prove an assumption that most Belarusians want to leave the country – this figure is comparable to 2009. At the same time disproportionate big number of those who wish to leave Belarus for permanent residence are people with higher education (mainly specialists in economics), and of high social status.

### [From Philosophy of Barricades – To Philosophy of Coexistence](#) –

sociologist Oleg Manaev in his interview for Mediakritika.by tells about the nature and focus of the complex processes taking place in the Belarusian media. In particular, Manaev considers that division of Belarusian nation into two groups with different values and understanding of reality is historical and is unlikely to disappear any time soon. Nevertheless, “we need to transition from the philosophy of barricades to the philosophy of coexistence with each other. After all, we are one nation – Belarusians”.

### [Compaction in a Black Way](#) –

Denis Kobrusev, European perspective NGO, provides in-depth analysis, how a scheme of compaction and urban conflicts occur in Minsk: how developers find a necessary piece of land, how the area is trimmed and what is being done to ensure that citizens are legitimately unable to protect their own interests. The author illustrates his arguments by specific fresh case studies of buildings in Minsk.

### [2012 Results: Andrei Pachobut is an Absolute Civil Society](#)

[Champion](#) – the Assembly of NGOs summarised the results of the CSOs awards ceremonies held in the year 2012 and found out that Andrei Pachobut, a journalist from Hrodna, became an absolute civil society leader. He was named the journalist/civil activist of the year five times: the Young Front, the Assembly of NGOs, the Svetlana Naumova’s, Human Rights Alliance’s and the newspaper’s “NashaNiva” awards.

### [The Conservative Revolution: Breakthrough to the Past](#) –

Alexander Adamyants, Center for European Studies, continues to debate between liberals and conservatives. In his article, the author presents the dispute as a competition of ideas about the present and future of Belarus. The expert believes that the current conservative futurism is a breakthrough in the past, in a bygone era which has only of historical-philosophical sense, but nothing more.

### [Civil Society in Post-Soviet Europe: Seven Rules for Donors](#) –

The west's contribution to building more democratic and open societies in the post-Soviet region leaves much scope for improvement. Orysia Lutsevych at Chatham House draws lessons and offers recommendations – pillars – to both public and private donors. Namely, the author suggests make citizens "actors for change" not "consumers of democracy assistance".

### [Position Paper on European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarus](#) –

the Coordinative Council of the Belarusian National Platform has produced a position paper on the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarus. In their paper the authors express their position on the current status, problems and prospects of the Dialogue. They reaffirm their full support for the Dialogue, but draw attention to the need to make changes.

### [Nashe Mnenije – 10 years. Expertise as a Cure for Boredom](#) –

in 2012 an online project of the Belarusian expert community *Nashe mnenije* celebrates 10 years. The authors of the portal discuss the most important events in the history of the project. They also talk about the features of the Belarusian expert community. In particular, the experts believe that there are no more than 300 publicly employed analysts in Belarus, including New Europe and other editions, as well as such institutions as Political sphere, BISS, BEROC, etc.

### [BISS Trends #12](#) –

BISS presents the 12<sup>th</sup> issue of the BISS-Trends quarterly monitoring of main trends in political, economic, legal, geopolitical and cultural spheres. From now on, semiannual BISS-Trends together with monthly BISS-Timeline issues will replace the BISS-Trends quarterly format. In the fourth quarter of 2012, the experts noted the continuing stagnation or regression as regards virtually all the trends considered. Social and political life was only slightly enlivened by the parliamentary elections, and stagnation

continues here.

[ABC. Political Review # 1, 2013](#) – Analytical Belarusian Center presents its first Political Review in 2013. The paper examines proposals on changes in the electoral law; the process of coalition building of the opposition forces; and the readiness of the official Minsk to start another cycle of the Belarusian-European relations.

[Improving the Situation in the World. What is Important for Belarusian Women?](#) – In January, the United Nations launched a global survey "My World", where everyone can choose what she/he thinks the most important for a better world. Six priorities of Belarusian women looks like as follows: better health care, honest and effective government, protection from crime and violence, affordable and quality education, protection of forests, rivers and oceans, non-discrimination and harassment. The first four priorities coincide with the global one.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

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# **Belarusian Constitution: An Obituary on Democracy**

On 15 March 2013 Alexander Lukashenka congratulated Belarusians on the Constitution Day.

Since this document entered into force in 1994 it has suffered two substantial revisions, each of which emphasised the further decline into an authoritarian abyss.



Nowadays the Belarusian Constitution fails to fulfil its main purpose: to safeguard the country from the usurpation of power. Instead it has become an instrument of such abuse, entitling the all-powerful ruler to control the state machinery completely.

## **The Story of a Grand Takeover**

Adopted in 1994, the Belarusian Constitution contained all the prerequisites to make this post-socialist state a European democracy based on the rule of law and the separation of powers. But it failed to resist the intentions of the first democratically-elected president to grasp power.

Since Lukashenka won the presidential elections in 1994 he has remained in permanent conflict with other branches of power: the legislative (Supreme Council) and the judicial (Constitutional Court) until 1996.

In November 1996, Lukashenka initiated a referendum proposing a new version of the Constitution which would enormously enlarge his powers and demean the role of parliament. The Supreme Council came up with a counter-proposal to abolish the institution of president and reform Belarus into a parliamentary republic.

The Constitutional Court unambiguously ruled that the results of the planned referendum could be only advisory, not mandatory. But Lukashenka issued a special edict making the referendum's results legally binding.

A group of MPs opposed to the edict initiated an impeachment procedure against President Lukashenka. They asked the constitutional court to examine this issue. Ultimately, it culminated in a major political crisis in Belarus.

After a night of secret talks with Russian governmental envoys on 22 November 1996, □Alexander Lukashenka and the Head of the

Supreme Council of Belarus, Syamyon Sharetski, signed an agreement: parliament was to withhold the impeachment and Lukashenka was to withdraw the mandatory implementation of the referendum by edict.

The next day, after the Russian envoy had left, the pro-presidential fraction in the Belarusian parliament rejected the agreement. This gave Lukashenka a free hand to hold his referendum as legally binding just as he wished it to be.

On 24 November the referendum finally took place. Lukashenka, according to official figures, won on all the items that he had proposed.

The head of the Central Electoral Committee, a famous Belarusian lawyer and politician, Viktor Hanchar, refused to recognise the results because of multiple falsifications. Lukashenka dismissed him immediately without consulting the parliament as required under law. A few years later Viktor Hanchar was mysteriously [kidnapped](#).

On 26 November 1996 the Constitutional Court, by a majority opinion, terminated the proceedings on impeachment. This event signified the end of the short-lived Belarusian democracy.

### **In the Aftermath of the Referendum**

Soon after the referendum Lukashenka himself formed a new parliament that, having dismissed the others, counted among its ranks 110 loyal MPs. The new body was called the House of Representatives and became the lower chamber of the bicameral National Assembly.

In 2004 another referendum took place. Lukashenka removed the limitation of two presidential terms for any individual, allowing himself to stay in power for as long as he wanted. This time the loyal parliament and judicial system kept silent about falsifications and a direct breach of article 112 of the Electoral Code that prohibited putting issues dealing with

presidential elections to a referendum.

The Venice Commission, a reputable Council of Europe institution, tasked with observation of constitutional developments in the world, called the results of the 1996 and 2004 referendums both unconstitutional and anti-democratic.

The EU, OSCE, and USA followed the same line. After the events of November 1996 they [withdrew recognition](#) of Alexander Lukashenka and his puppet parliament as the legitimate authority in Belarus. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe expelled Belarus. It now holds a "special guest" status.

### **The Constitution Enables Autocracy and Contains "Dead" Norms**

In the present-day Belarusian Constitution the president dominates all three branches (legislative, judicial and executive) and has exclusive powers in each of their fields of apparent competence.

For example, the president can appoint and dismiss all the judges in the country except for six judges of the Constitutional Court (they are elected by the Council of the Republic, the upper chamber of Belarusian parliament). For the appointment of top judges to the higher courts, the president needs formal approval from the Council of the Republic, which he has always received in the last 17 years.

Although the president is not de jure the head of the executive branch, he appoints all the ministers and other members of the government. The House of Representatives must approve the person of prime-minister. If it fails to reach such an agreement twice, the president can dissolve the parliament. Once again the recent history shows that parliament has never disputed any presidential decisions.

In the legislature, the powers of the president seem to be overwhelming. Presidential decrees and edicts have the same

legal force as laws. But article 137 of the revised Constitution specifies that presidential acts are to prevail in any case of conflict with other laws.

Symbolically, Article 84, which describes the powers of the president, is the longest one in the entire Constitution.

Some norms in the Belarusian Constitution remain purely declaratory. Cases of multiple human rights violations are de-facto deviation from the Constitution, but the situation with alternative civil service is a unique officially admitted legal gap in the Belarusian legislation.

Article 57 of the Constitution provides citizens with the right to choose [alternative civil service](#) instead of mandatory military service. But the mere absence of the corresponding law disables this provision. Young men referring to this norm risk [going to jail](#) for claiming to exercise their constitutional right.

Even the Constitutional Court, cleansed of independent judges, has several times referred to such gaps and other defects of the Constitution, such as the absence of an ombudsman-institute or the presence of the death penalty. Nobody, however, has responded to these unpretentious efforts put forth by the Court.

The narrative of Belarusian modern history will always be a perfect example of how a country must not treat its most important law. When rewritten for the political purposes of specific personalities, the constitution becomes a political tool instead of the foundation of a democracy.

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# **Economy Recuperates but Slower than Forecasted – Digest of Belarusian Economy**

While economic growth seems to be recuperating in January and February, it remains below the wishful forecasts of the government.

At the same time, the situation with current account balance continues to be the pressing matter, as the government is looking for the money both to repay the debts and to finance its modernization projects.

The economic policy is once again trying to accommodate both the stagnating real sector and the need for macroeconomic stabilisation necessary to attract foreign funds.

## **GDP and The Real Sector**

In January 2013 the year-on-year GDP growth was at the level of 103.1 per cent. It is significantly below the official forecast of 8.5 per cent for 2013. Compared to the same period of last year the slowdown in growth took place in most economic activities.

The ban on exports of solvents and thinners, reduced export of potash and some deterioration in terms of oil deliveries from Russia explain the negative dynamics in manufacturing.

In January 2013, growth in the inventories of finished goods in stock accompanied output growth. If at the beginning of January 2013 the stock of inventories in manufacturing industry was equal to 52.8% of average monthly industrial production, and on February 1, 2013 it grew to 79.1%.

In the first months of 2013, the companies, according to the

National Bank report, report reduction in volume of production and demand. At the same time demand for loans increases, and the liquidity-constrained banking system can not meet this demand.

### **Incomes, Savings and Consumer Market**

In January 2013, an average wage decreased in nominal and real terms relative to December 2012. Average nominal wage amounted to 4368 thousand rubles (505 U.S. dollars), while last month it was 4741.3 thousand rubles (552.2 U.S. dollars). At the beginning of the year decline in revenue in general and population wages in particular had seasonal nature. Traditionally, wages grow at the end of each year due to bonuses and other additional payments.

A similar dynamic is also typical for consumer market. In January 2013 compared to the same period of previous year the retail trade turnover increased by 20.3%. At the same time, the reduction of the indicator relative to December 2012 was 21.9%. Retail trade boom in New Year and Christmas time stimulates the rise in consumer demand.

However, at the beginning of the next year businesses slow down and consumption declines. In January 2013 a decline of wages and consumption took place against the household deposit growth in national and foreign currencies. High degree of confidence to the banking system and income growth in previous periods stimulated the growth of household deposits, but also contributed to the decline in consumption.

### **Monetary System and Exchange Rate**

In January 2013, the banking system was experiencing the lack of ruble liquidity. Credit growth at the second half of 2012 and decline of real sector deposits in national currency in January 2013 have predetermined the shortage of ruble resources. Some factors, i.e. slowdown in production sector and reduction of sales, explain the reduction of ruble

resources at the accounts of enterprises.

Because of problems with liquidity in January and early February 2013 the interest rates on interbank market reached the level of 37-38% per annum. National Bank was forced to carry out a number of operations in order to maintain short-term liquidity of commercial banks.

As a result, the lack of resources has been eliminated from the second decade of February. Interest rates at the interbank market declined to 19-20% per annum. Moreover, since the second half of February, there was a surplus of Belarusian rubles at the banking system.

The situation at the currency market can be characterised as relatively stable. In January-February 2013, the fluctuations of Belarusian ruble were more of opportunistic nature and ranged from 8570-8680 rubles per U.S. dollar. One of the negative factors on currency market was the excess demand for foreign currency from the enterprises in January 2013. The net demand on foreign currency at this segment of currency market has developed as the result of reduction of foreign revenue.

At the currency market for population the excess demand on foreign currency compared to supply has been observed since the middle of 2012. Incomes growth and weak confidence to Belarusian ruble are the main reasons of the increased currency demand.

In February 2013, the Government has been considering the possibility to allow lending in foreign currency. However, the National Bank decided that this measure is untimely.

## **Eurobonds**

2013 and 2014 are the years when Belarus will have to make major payments on foreign debt. The amounts to be paid in 2013 and 2014 are equal to USD 1.7 bn and USD 1.4 bn. There are

three possible ways to attract additional financing, which are eurobonds, privatization and FDI, and foreign loans.

Because of the economic crisis of 2011, in 2012 Belarus was not able to attract foreign capital through Eurobonds. Yields of 2015 and 2018 Belarusian Eurobonds were highly volatile throughout the last year. However, wise policy implemented by the authorities and National Bank, focused on macroeconomic stability together with punctual repayment of external liabilities, had a positive impact on the quotes of placed notes.

As a result, in the middle of February yields declined. Active preparation to the next issue of Belarusian Eurobonds started at the end of 2012. In November, a road show in Singapore and Hong Kong was organised with support of Russian banks "VTB Capital" and "Sberbank CIB". In February, a similar event occurred in Europe. The placement of the next issue (worth around USD 700-900 mln) is expected to occur in March 2013.

### **Privatisation and Foreign Direct Investment**

Among other sources of external financing, foreign loans and privatisation continue to be the most important one. At the end of January Belarus received the 4th tranche of USD 440 mln of EvrAzES loan. In 2012, despite obtaining 3rd and 4th tranches, Belarus was not able to fulfil the requirements of state assets privatisation at amount of at least USD 2.5 bln.

Therefore, results of negotiations on allocation of 5th and 6th tranches will depend on success of privatisation process. According to the agreement, Belarus will have to sell at least USD 2.5 bln of state assets to obtain the rest of the loan.

However, there are threats of a slowdown in privatisation process in the nearest future. The law "On Amendments to the Law on Privatisation of State Property and Transformation of State Enterprises into Joint Stock Companies" will most probably come into force in April 2013 and will revive the



golden share institute, which was cancelled in 2008. This law brings changes to the management of the enterprises. It assumes appointment of state representatives even in joint stock companies without government ownership shares.

In joint stock companies, which were privatised or created on the base of rental companies, the governors will appoint state representative who will protect rights of the citizens/minority shareholders. State representatives will obtain the right to attend general meetings and represent votes of minority shareholders as well as to impose ban on decisions of general meeting of shareholders.

This law will have a negative impact on investors' interest in Belarusian state assets or assets with minority shareholders, as their property rights would not be protected. Therefore, we can expect low demand on small and mediums state-owned enterprises. The only privatisation that one can realistically expect is the privatisation of big government enterprises by Russian corporations affiliated with Russian government.

*Anastasia Luzgina and Maryia Akulava, BEROC*

*This article is a part of a joint project between Belarus Digest and Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC) – a Minsk-based economic think tank.*

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## **Why Belarus Needs To Reform Its Bureaucracy**

Belarus is awaiting reforms to the public administration system, ordered by Alexander Lukashenka last year. It looks like the president's main motive is to save money.

Considerations of efficiency come second. However, the existing system of public administration cannot boast of particularly outstanding achievements.

Several indicators point to the necessity of a serious overhaul. Reasons for public administration reform are as evident as, perhaps, never before.

International governance ratings score Belarus very low. Bureaucrats are becoming increasingly uninterested in state service. The state apparatus systemically fails to reach socioeconomic targets. The functions of government bodies remain excessive and often overlap. Finally, corruption is rampant.

### **Quasi-Reform Out of Necessity**

In 2012 the Belarusian president [declared](#) that he wanted to reform the system of public administration in the country. He said that the state apparatus needed optimisation and appointed a special state commission to prepare reforms.

In January 2013 the commission presented its conclusions. Among other things, the members of the commission provided a recommendation to liquidate two ministries: the Ministry of Trade and the Ministry of Housing and Communal Services. The commission also suggested that some functions be transferred from ministries to state corporations.

But Lukashenka only supported the idea to fire about 25 per cent of government officials – in order to save state funds and raise salaries for the remaining 75 per cent. He practically dismissed the commission's recommendation to dissolve the two ministries saying that he was “not ready to make such decisions yet”.

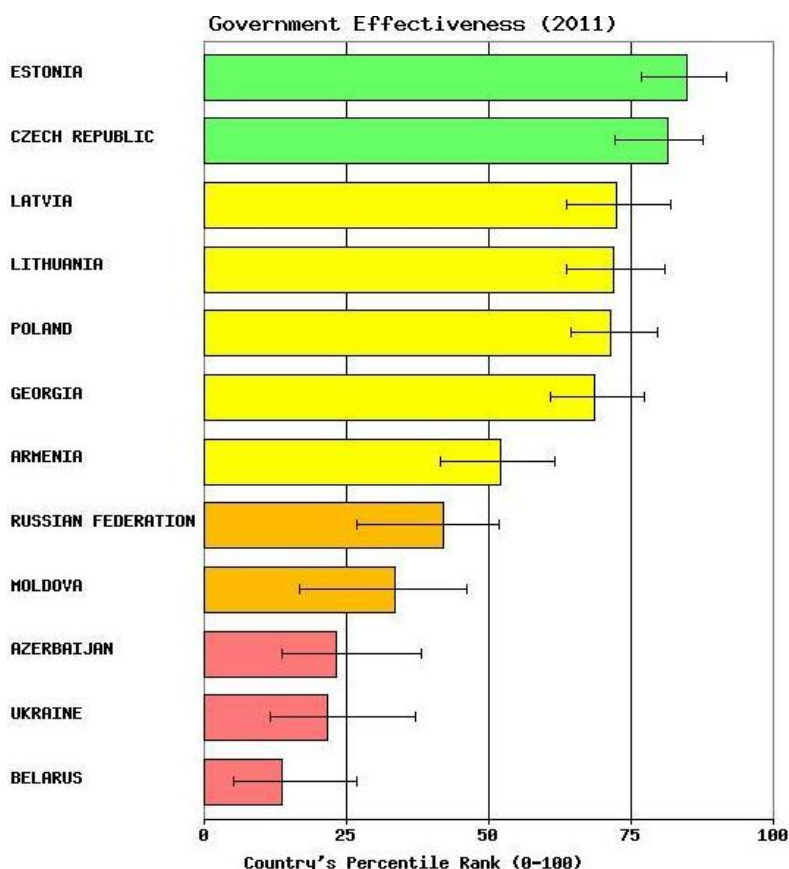
Now the legal act that will define the contours of the proclaimed public administration reform is going through its

final discussions in the Council of Ministers. According to a source in the government, the prime minister's office is not going to push for something different to what Lukashenka announced in January. Even though primarily it spoke in favour of reforming the structure and functions of the executive branch.

Thus, it looks like the whole "reform" will be limited to mere personnel firing. And this obviously cannot solve the problems of the public administration system in Belarus, which, in Lukashenka's own words, fails to deliver.

### Poor Scores in International Governance Ratings

Respected international studies prove this failure. Worldwide Governance Indicators by the World Bank has the reputation of being the most thorough comparative study of public administration systems in the world. The chart below shows the 2011 results in in the category "Government effectiveness".



### Officials Drain

Presumably, the problem of government officials leaving their posts in Belarus in search of better professional opportunities elsewhere became one of the triggers for Lukashenka. He publicly admitted it several times.

The situation looks logical. The level of pay that Belarusian bureaucrats enjoy leaves much to be desired. If we compare responsibilities and salaries in the public and commercial sectors, the latter is far more comfortable. And the commercial sector in Russia offers even better opportunities.

Hence, more and more government officials in Belarus prefer to change their jobs.

Average salary of a civil servant in Belarus	USD 560*
Average salary of a high-profile civil servant in Belarus (a director of a ministry department)	USD 930
Average salary of a medium-level manager in the commercial sector in Belarus	USD 583
Average salary of a high-profile manager in the commercial sector in Belarus	USD 1400
Average salary in Russia	USD 813
Average salary in Moscow	USD 1483
Average salary of a high-profile manager in the commercial sector in Moscow	USD 2683

\*As of November 2012

The problem seems self-evident. And it goes beyond miserable salaries in the government sector. Huge workload is another factor.

### **Socio-Economic Flaws**

During an 8-hour long session of the Council of Ministers on 1 March President Lukashenka disclosed many secrets of the Belarusian government. He pointed to personal shortcomings of almost all ministers and made several catchy statements about the state of the public administration in the country. For example, he emphasised that a great deal of his own decrees

never come into being because of the government's poor performance.

For observers of Belarusian politics this was a familiar scene: the populist authoritarian leader publicly reprimanding his appointees to demonstrate to the general public that he remains in full control of the situation. But in fact, Lukashenka really spoke the truth.

Analysis of the government's achievements proves a poor record. Take for example the 2006-2010 Program of Socioeconomic Development (Belarus sticks to the Soviet tradition of 5-year long macro-plans).

Technically the government accomplished most of the quantitative goals, like general investments and personal income growth. But the achievement came at a very high price. The authorities' policies led to huge macroeconomic imbalances, which in their turn led to the [2011 financial crisis](#). The latter resulted in the 300 per cent devaluation of the national currency and enormous monetary losses for the population: according to some estimates, the Belarusians lost more than USD 1 billion.

In any democracy in the world this is reason enough for the government to step down. In Belarus, however, the government lingers on, as President Lukashenka does not have much choice from among his nomenclature to form a new one. However, such poor performance definitely signals the need to reform the governance system that fails to deliver on its basic functions.

### **Excessive and Overlapping Functions**

A popular saying in Belarus goes that you cannot even sigh without official permission.

According to the legislation, the state apparatus has 1500 functions. But as the Ministry of Economy found out, if we

take a closer look at all these functions it turns out that the real number exceeds 3800. The laws are often so vague that one big function of the state bodies actually foresees three or four smaller functions. Not surprising, therefore, that the government seems to be everywhere in the country.

And also unsurprisingly, the functions of different government institutions quite often overlap. The state's controlling activities serve as a classic example.

The central body that deals with controls is the Committee of State Control. But besides them, 37 (!) other government institutions have the right and responsibility to exercise controlling functions. For local businesses this turns life into a real nightmare. Each year entrepreneurs' unions call for a fully-fledged government reform to stop the controlling mayhem.

### **Untamable Corruption**

Finally, corruption.

If we compare corruption in Belarus and, say, Ukraine, the former will look almost flawless. And this is an argument that the authorities in Minsk often proudly make.

However, numerous international corruption indices do not leave much room for pride. For example, in 2012 the Corruption Perceptions Index of Transparency International ranked Belarus 123<sup>rd</sup>. In 2011 the result was even worse – 143<sup>rd</sup> place. This is another reason for the Belarusian authorities to seriously consider public administration reform.

To sum up, the Belarusian system of public administration definitely finds itself in crisis. By merely firing a quarter of civil servants, the government solves no major problem. Comprehensive reform is knocking on the door.

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# **Lukashenka: Enough Babbling about Privatization**

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Arkadiy Dvorkovich visited Minsk on an official visit in February. A number of experts believe that in the near future, Lukashenka's regime will make important concessions to Russia and sell major enterprises to Russian companies in exchange of favourable terms of supply of crude oil from Russia.

According to them, Dvorkovich came to Minsk as a representative of a wholesale buyer of Belarusian enterprises. Together with First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Siamashka, Dvorkovich visited some major Belarusian enterprises: Minsk Automobile Plant, "Hrodna Azot" and Agricultural machinery plant "Homsielmash".

As the Russian Deputy Prime Minister said, the parties agreed that before the end of the month Russian companies would conduct negotiations with top managers of MAZ and "Hrodna-Azot" and agree on joint steps for developing cooperation.

## **Privatisation linked to Russian oil supplies?**

During a joint interview, Siamashka said that the parties continued negotiations about supply of crude oil in 2013. According to him, even while the agreement has only been reached for the first quarter, Belarus expected receiving 23 million tons of crude till the end of the year. He pointed out that Russia proceeded from this figure as in the first quarter it would supply a quarter of the volume requested by the Belarusian side – 5.75 million tons.

The opinion that the Russian Deputy Prime Minister came to accept the surrender of Lukashenka is not justified. Options for cooperation which the Belarusian side is suggesting to its Russian counterparts do not envisage privatisation of major enterprises.

On the eve of his visit to Minsk, Dvorkovich said that Belarus should compensate losses of the Russian budget from the ["solvents and diluents" business](#) which is estimated in at least USD 1.5 billion in Moscow. He also stressed inadmissibility of nonfulfillment by the Belarusian side of its obligations to supply high-octane gasoline to Russia. However, he did not raise these acute questions of bilateral relations during the talks.

Siamashka, speaking about prospects of receiving crude oil from Russia, said once again that Belarus was fulfilling in full its obligations regarding supply of oil products to Russia.

### **What is on sale?**

On February 26, speaking at a meeting of the Council for Business Development at the President, Lukashenka made statements which implied that Siamashka, by far, was not the only "Mr. No" in power in the matter of sale of enterprises to Russian companies.

In contrast to Russian companies, the Western business does not lay claims on purchase of major Belarusian enterprises. Clearly speaking of Russian partners, Lukashenka said:

*We won't privatise anything in the lump. We even gave up on having a list of enterprises singled out for privatisation. Any enterprise can be privatised: "Belaruskali", which many put their eyes on, oil refineries, MAZ, BelAZ and others. However, these enterprises have very high price. For instance, the announced price of "Belaruskali" is 32 billion dollars, I can't reduce it. They don't want to buy at this*



*price – fine. We aren't in a hurry. These are efficient companies.*

Lukashenka's team understands well that sale of major enterprises would mean strong attachment to Russia and dependence from Moscow, including in political matters. He said: "If they babble about privatisation in the government, and it passes to society... Then, there is a question: so, do you want to sell out the country ASAP?"

Lukashenka said repeatedly that he would not allow, as he puts it, a "barbarian privatisation" which can be imported from Russia. However, among major Belarusian businessmen who are loyal to him, Lukashenka speaks about his vision of privatisation.

The group of personalities similar to Moshenski and Shakutin understands very well that Lukashenko's words that "there would be no privatisation among officials or selling enterprises cheaply to big businesses" are a pure and simple populism.

For Lukashenka, former chairman of a kolkhoz and political propaganda worker during the Soviet era, it was impossible not to tell words pleasing to the Belarusian television audience to common people sitting in front of TV screens.

Among the members of the Council, there are also people who manage the business of Lukashenko's family: Jury Chizh, director of "Triple" (export of oil products, manufacturing of building materials, construction, network of hypermarkets, network of restaurants and cafes) and Evhieni Shihalov, director of the trade house "Zhdanovichy".

The following words of Lukashenka may be seen as addressed specifically to those present: "Please come. All things being equal, we will give preference to our people. But it should be in honesty. This is why the national investor will exist. If

somebody lacks money alone, so get together".

### **Conditions attached to privatisation**

Lukashenka also provided criteria of who are "our people" and who are not.

First, private business must not finance opposition. He said: "If a businessman finances the "fifth column" or makes negative impact on society in some other way, I will see it as their involvement in political struggle, in struggle against the state. And this struggle has its own laws. Then, let such businessmen take no offence".

Second, the entrepreneurs must finance social programmes. It follows from Lukashenka's statements that businessmen must be sympathetic towards "suggestions" of the authorities to finance repair of streets, roads and buildings and give money to kolkhozes for sowing campaigns.

These words of Lukashenko are not addressed in the first place to his confident businessmen. Shakutin, Moshenski or Chizh can hardly be suspected of intentions to finance opposition. This is a warning to entrepreneurs who, at best, will get crumbs from the pie of possible privatisation.

One can get very big troubles (up to closing down of business) for hiring an opposition activist, for giving a pack of paper to a regional branch of an opposition political party, for any assistance to an NGO, which is seen as the "fifth column" by the authorities.

Not only pro-European organisations belong to the "fifth column", according to Lukashenka. At the beginning of May, 2010 he claimed that Russia was financing several opposition organisations. After that the offices of the "Tell the Truth" campaign were searched in 20 cities of Belarus on May 18.

Overall, Lukashenka's team gets additional reasons to believe

that during this year Russia will not bring into focus the acute questions of bilateral relations. The suggestions to sell enterprises to Russian companies will be a probing of the Belarusian side's position and will not be accompanied by pressure.

*Andrei Liakhovich*

*Andrei Liakhovich is a contributing author. He directs the Center for Political Education in Minsk.*

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## **Quo Vadis Belarusians? – Belarus Civil Society Digest**

The snow storm “Xavier” did not discourage Belarusian civil society from new projects and initiatives.

BISS recently discussed migration and Liberal Club “diagnosed” Belarus at roundtables in Minsk. The DisRight Office launched a new phase of an accessibility campaign. The Festival of Central European literature Shengenka opened in Minsk. Gomel activists campaign want to preserve historical wooden buildings.

The government asked business to form partnerships. Due to Constitution Day, Belarusians had the opportunity to query the Chairperson of the Constitutional Court.

### **Civil Society Activities**

[BISS roundtable on migration](#). On 14 March, in Minsk, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) held a roundtable *Quo vadis, Belarusians? The Impact of Migration on*

*the Economy and Society*. The event presented some results of a recent national survey on migration, as well as [a study on migration](#), published by the Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration CARIM-East. The event brought together experts on migration topics from government bodies, independent research institutes and international organisations.

[Human rights defenders put new questions](#). The first anniversary of the execution of Uladzislau Kavaliou and Dzmitry Kanavalau, sentenced to death on charges of terrorism, is being marked in March. During a press conference held in Minsk on 13 March, the mother of one of the executed, Liubou Kavaliouva and human rights defenders declared that they start a series of actions in order to get the information about the place of Vlad Kovalev's burial and issuing his body.

[From Accessibility to Equality](#). Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities is launching a new phase of the information campaign *Accessibility* under the slogan "From Accessibility to Equality" aimed to visualise and expand understanding of accessibility. The Office has produced four video-clips, where people with disabilities tell their real stories. The Office has also announced a [competition for the best graphic](#) "Accessible to the disabled."

[Roundtable of liberals](#). On 15 March, in Minsk, the Liberal Club held a roundtable, aimed at gathering those who are in Belarus to declare their commitment to liberalism and to give them an opportunity to explain what kind of ideals they actually defending. The round table was attended by Yaroslav Romanchuk, Mises Center, Oleg Gaidukevich, the Liberal Democratic Party, Yauheni Preiherman, Liberal Club, etc.

[Marketplace in Hrodna](#). On 26 March, in Hrodna the Capacity Development Marketplace is to hold an Open House day for CSOs and providers from the Grodno and Brest regions. The event is a continuation of [the first national Capacity Development](#)

[Fair](#), held in Minsk in October 2012, and is designed to present the regional market of organisational development's services for local nonprofits.

[Bell's Call for papers](#). The Vilnius-based Eastern Europe Studies Centre after releases the electronic newsletter "Bell". "Bell" is a monthly electronic analytical publication comprising articles written by Belarusian researchers and journalists. Next "Bell" issue "Russia's mounting influence in Belarus" is expected to be published in the middle of April.

[MediaBarCamp 2013: Survive in the Web](#). On 9-12 May, in Lithuania, the 6<sup>th</sup> International MediaBarCamp, dedicated to the use of new opportunities of online media and the development of media activism, will be held. The participants – media, CSOs, political organisations – will have an opportunity to present their online projects at special presentations and in working groups. The organiser of MediaBarCamp 2013 is the Swedish International Liberal Centre (SILC).

## **Cultural Events**

[Shengenka in Minsk](#). On 12 March, Festival of Central European literature *Shengenka* opened at the Minsk Gallery Ÿ. The Festival consists of five events and aims to introduce the works of well-known Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Polish writers, philosophers and political scientists translated into Belarusian. The project initiator is Laboratory of Science and Art of Translation, its co-organizers are the campaign Budzma Belarusians! and the Association of Belarusian Writers.

The latest book by [Joanne Ivy Stankievich](#) recently came out with Outskirts Press. "Living with a Scent of Danger, European Adventures at the Fall of Communism" is about the 13 years the author and her husband spent in Europe: 1988-2001, when he worked for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. They interfaced with KGB and Foreign Ministers and participated in the transition from Communism to, mostly free, societies in

Eastern Europe.

[34 sights of Belarus](#). Online magazine [34mag.net](#) prepared a subjective guide titled *34 sights of Belarus*, a concise guide to places for Belarusian and foreign visitors. The guide contains a map and a witty description of the proposed architectural monuments.

[Gomel tries to preserve wooden buildings](#). Gomel CSOs, which work to preserve local historical wooden buildings, plan to hold informal public hearings and develop consolidated actions. The hearings are to be held with the support of Gomel Democratic Forum. Earlier, on 13 March, Gomel activists with the police's assistance [managed to prevent the destruction](#) of a monument of wooden architecture. [Youth CSO Talaka](#) also appealed to the city authorities to take one of the buildings on the organisation's balance to make there a museum and a youth cultural centre.

[Belarusian Week in Vilnius](#). On 25-30 March, the Belarusian Week will take place in Vilnius. The program of the Week includes various events such as conference, festival of short films, music festival, which are going to begin with the solemn celebration of Freedom Day on 25 March. The Organising Committee invites all Belarusians in Vilnius and Belarusian guests of the Lithuanian capital to join the celebration of the Freedom Day.

[Belarusians collect money to save old Belarusian films](#). A campaign on the Internet has begun raising money to save old movies shot by *Belarusfilm*. Since the cost of restoration and digitisation of the films are not provided for in the state budget, Belarusians themselves decided to save them for their own money.

## **Trainings and Seminars**

[Raising the expertise of young researchers in Belarus](#). The Eastern Europe Studies Centre (EESC) together with BISS

launches an opportunity for the Belarusian beginner researchers in social sciences to further develop their expertise and analytical skills. Within the framework of the programme "Raising the Expertise of Grassroots Level Researchers in Belarus" and in collaboration with the Belarus Research Council, new Belarusian researchers will be provided with training and a scholarship to spend time at a leading European think-tank.

**New consultants.** Clearing House Project recruited a new set of consultants who will provide free services to Belarusian CSO on developing project proposals for competitions held by the European Commission and other programs. Five new consultants will take part in a series of informational meetings and workshops that will soon take place in different Belarusian cities.

**Seminar on quality assurance in higher education.** On 26 March, in Minsk, the Office for a Democratic Belarus (Brussels, Belgium) together with the Office for European Expertise and Communication (Minsk, Belarus) will organise a seminar on quality assurance in higher education. The seminar will be conducted in the frames of "EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge programme". The organisers encourage participation of representatives of the Ministry of Education, researchers, academics from Minsk and regional universities of Belarus.

**Conference on elderly education and socialisation is coming.** Over a hundred people applied to the International conference, to be held on 29-30 March in Grodno and dedicated to the socialisation and intellectual, physical and social revitalization of elderly. Actual challenges and best practises will be discussed by representatives of the nonprofit, state and educational organisations from Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Russia. The conference is organised by the Third Sector Centre in cooperation with the registered association DVV International.

## Interaction between the State and Civil Society

[Authorities are asking for help from business](#). On 13 March, at a meeting of the Assembly of business circles, The government of Belarus and business once again tried to establish a dialogue. Economy Minister, Nikolai Snopkov urged entrepreneurs to strengthen partnerships with the state. Business said they are not against cooperation, but are waiting on the authorities to improve the business environment.

[Constitutional Court online](#). On 15 March, Belarus Constitution Day, a state-run news agency Belta conducted an online conference with the Chairperson of the Constitutional Court, Piotr Miklashevich. All internet users had an opportunity to ask questions in this open discussion.

[ARCHE gets third registration denial](#). As reported by the acting editor-in-chief of the magazine, Ales Pashkevich. According to him, the reason for the registration denial appears to be wire-drawn.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

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# Snow Storm Xavier Paralyzes Belarus

Large parts of Belarus and the Belarusian capital Minsk have spent this weekend under exceptional circumstances. The cyclone Javier has paralysed large parts of the country for almost two days.



While similar weather conditions in the USA would make it to the top news in Europe, there has been no mentioning of the storm in Belarus in Western media.

It started as simple snow fall on Friday morning, but approximately 20 cm of snow fell in the following 24 hours. The wind was 22 metres per second according to the Belarusian hydro-meteorological centre. Sight was limited to 100 metres in the Minsk region on Friday afternoon because of the heavy snow falls. Although the country is used to severe winters and well equipped to deal with large amount of snow, public life has come to a halt at this weekend.

### **Traffic standstill during Friday rush hour**

By the time most Belarusians were trying to go home, the situation was at it worst. This led to a chaos that is extraordinary for Belarus. "The last time I have seen something similar was in the 1980s" says Sasha, who has reached home by walking from the metro station to his homes. Buses stopped running during the afternoon and have not re-started until Saturday evening.

Getting home during rush hour was very difficult for all people and impossible for many. "My colleague left the office at lunch time and got home at 4a.m.", says Vasili. Indeed, circulation on the Minsk beltway came to a standstill during rush hour.



Thousands of cars were stuck in traffic jams. More than 650 traffic jams were registered in Belarus on Friday evening according to Nasha Niva. This is twice more than on a usual day, according to the road police. 3 people died in accidents. In several cases, more than 20 cars were involved in mass accidents.

For some time, the roads out of Minsk were completely closed.

It was impossible to get from towns to the periphery of the capital such Dziarzhinsk and Fanipol' to Minsk or back. Circulation on the main street in Minsk, the prospect, came to a complete still-stand during the rush hour.

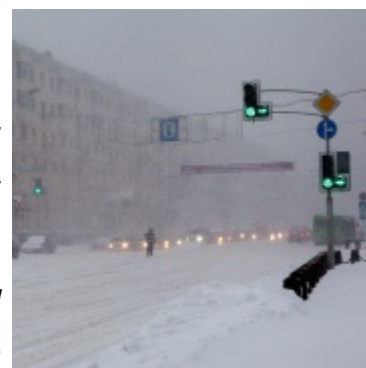
Many people had to sleep at work or were forced to stay overnight with friends in the centre. As there were no buses running, the metro had to be temporarily closed because it was so overcrowded. Those who could, left their cars at works and tried to get home by public transport. This turned out to be difficult, however, when only metro and regional trains could operate.

### **Thousands forced to spend the night in their cars**

The roof of a car park near Hotel Minsk in the very centre of the capital fell down on account of the masses of snow covering it. The plastic roof buried around 30 cars but fortunately did not hurt a single person.

While in Minsk, inconveniences consisted mainly in perturbed traffic and the impossibility to reach home, by Friday evening more than 530 villages and towns in Belarus were left without electricity. Up to Saturday evening, 26 villages are still without electricity in Brest region. This region suffered especially from heavy snow falls and wind: 82 cars were freed from snow drifts. 320 persons, among them 37 children were in the cars. None of them was injured.

On Saturday, although the snow fall had stopped, Minsk was quieter than ever before. Around 20 000 employees and parts of the army that were called to support the city administration to clean the roads. The news agency BelTA informs that more than 900 snow clearing vehicles were employed to clear the capital.



Most people had to stay at home in the "sleeping districts"

during the day. While even the courtyards and central parks had been cleaned from snow during the day, there were still no buses running or streets cleared in the suburbs.

Some shops stayed closed, as for example the Central Fashion Market. However, fresh bread and meat was delivered to the shops in the centre of Minsk.

Public life had to be postponed as well. All Maslenica events (Maslenica is the holiday of winter farewell) as well as football, hockey and basketball matches are to take place on Sunday instead of Saturday. The soccer team of the "Football Club Homel" had to spend 28 hours on the way to the quarter finals of the cup of Belarus that was supposed to take place in Minsk on Saturday. The players spent the night in their coach and finished their journey by regional train on Saturday morning.

### **International airport closed on Friday**

While international airport Minsk II was closed for several hours on Friday, all passengers that were supposed to land in Minsk on Friday arrived there on Saturday morning. As planes could not touch down in Minsk, they had to be directed to Homel or Kyiv.

700 passengers had to spend the night at the airport in Minsk. During the day, around 2,000 people were waiting to fly to their destinations. Unfortunately, the Belarusian national carrier Belavia did not accept that flying would not be possible on Friday and refused to inform passengers about what was going to happen according to a news report on tut.by.



According to the Minsk city executive committee, the roads leading out of Minsk were opened only for a limited circulation in order to allow the vehicles to clear away the snow. This is also true for the majority of roads in the Minsk region. On the M4 from Minsk to Mogilev, there were still more than 30 km of traffic jam on Saturday evening.

For the upcoming days, the weather forecast promises less snow fall but still icy temperatures. The Minsk city administration did a remarkable job in clearing the centre from snow. But next time they should clean the roads on the outskirts of Minsk before clearing the parks and courtyards of privileged houses in the centre.

*Nadine Lashuk*

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## **Will Pope Francis Visit Belarus? Lukashenka Hopes So**

In his congratulation letter to the newly elected Pope Francis, Alexander Lukashenka invited the Pontiff to visit the "friendly Belarusian land".

Although two previous Popes declared the wish to come to Minsk, neither actually had a chance to meet the millions of Belarusian Catholics. Whereas Minsk remains unwanted in the West, the Vatican appears an important mediator between both sides. However, for the first non-European Pope in a hundreds of years, Belarus could be too exotic to make it a priority and visit the country.

Lukashenka has repeated on many occasions that he welcomes the Pope to Belarus. During a meeting with the Vatican's Nuncio

in April 2012, he expressed the will to strengthen both the Catholic and Orthodox Church in Belarus. Pope John Paul II never received an invitation to visit Belarus. But in 2002, Vatican officials conducted discussions with Minsk on the issue. However, as happened with Moscow, the visit never materialised.

A breakthrough in Belarus-Vatican relations took place with the new Pope Benedict XVI who met with Alexander Lukashenka and his youngest son Mikalai in the Vatican in 2009. Significantly, it broke for a moment the diplomatic isolation of Minsk in the West. It also turned out to be Lukashenka's first trip to Western Europe since his 1999 visa ban was implemented. However, the Pope could not reciprocate the visit to Belarus. Instead, the Vatican's Secretary, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, visited Belarus in 2009.

### **Support for Society**

The Holy See has always supported the independent post-Soviet states. John Paul II in one of his audiences said to the representatives of the Belarusian Catholic clergy that "Belarus is the former Soviet republic that has undergone the least change since the fall of Communism, and is the least integrated into the rest of Europe".

In May 2008, when Pope Benedict XVI addressed the new ambassador of Belarus to the Vatican, he said: 'Please be assured that the Holy See will continue to support your nation in its efforts to affirm proper and legitimate aspirations for freedom and in her labours to foster the democratic process as a part of the great family of free and sovereign European nations.'

On 1 March 2008 Minsk was included in a special video link of Belarusian youth with the Pope. For the first time Belarusian Catholics could take part in the event. After the common prayer, the Pope made a speech to the Belarusian youth.

Belarusian state media broadcasted the event.

### **Concordat: Still to Be Concluded**

A possible concordat remains an unresolved issue between Belarus and the Vatican. A concordat is a special document concluded between a church and secular authorities to regulate bilateral relations, including the right to religious education and protection of religious freedoms.

The leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, [nominally the largest religious group in Belarus](#), have already signed a number of agreements with the Belarusian authorities and view the initiative of a concordat with the Vatican with suspicion. The Patriarch of Moscow, Kiril, during his meeting with Lukashenka in September 2009 said that 'Belorussia is not a bridge, nor a gateway, but a Western part of the Saint Rus, historical Rus'.

The 2009 visit of Lukashenka to the Holy See might have heralded a conclusion of the document. Nonetheless, until now the two sides have failed to conclude it. According to the head of Belarusian Catholics, Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, the conclusion of the concordat would enhance the prestige of both the Roman-Catholic Church and Belarus in the international arena.

Concordats with countries where Catholics are in a minority are not unusual. For example, Montenegro was the first country with a majority of Orthodox citizens to conclude a concordat with the Vatican, in June 2012. During the act of conclusion of the agreement, Benedict XVI confirmed his support for the European integration ambitions of that country.

### **Through Vatican to the West?**

Lukashenka's 2009 visit to the Holy See remains remarkable for a few reasons. Ten years of isolation of Minsk might have given its leadership hope for improving the relationship with

the West. Whereas the West spurns Lukashenka, he finds himself more comfortable with the East.

For Lukashenka, the visit to the Vatican was particularly prestigious at the moment when nobody in Europe wanted to do it. This was probably one of the reasons why the Apostolic nuncio in Belarus was the only diplomat who could [visit the Belarusian prisoners of conscience](#).

The Vatican still appears as an important mediator, but also as a promoter of Western values. At the same time, the Pope with his moral authority is in a good position to improve the image of the West in Minsk, which is a subject of frequent attacks by Belarusian propaganda.

It is too early to speculate over the politics of the newly elected Pope. Most likely the new Pope does not have any special links or emotional attachment to Belarus. He was born and grew up in Argentina where most people are most likely not sure where Belarus is.

The two previous European Popes – John Paul II and Benedict XVI – carried a 'regional historical burden': both witnessed the atrocities of WWII and were aware of the post-war and transformation difficulties Eastern European societies faced.

However, the new Pope may wish to continue their activities and strengthen the position of the Church in the region as the previous leaders of the Holy See did. It will be an important event for Belarusian Catholics and for Belarus, but may raise concerns for those who will regard the visit as tacit support for "Europe's last dictatorship".

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# Minsk Hopes to Become Las Vegas for Russians

The Russian government severely restricted gambling in Russia in 2009, and the Belarusian authorities quickly spotted an opportunity.

Gambling supplemented by other services became a source of high profit for local authorities and businesses, which are often the same in Belarus. Since then, wealthy Russians have started their pilgrimage to Minsk to squander their fortunes.

For less rich and venturesome Russians, Belarus became attractive for other reasons. Some of them were looking for the Soviet spirit of their youth, others like the calmness and order of local life. For them, Belarus presents an example of how Russia could develop if the situation had developed differently after the USSR's collapse.

## **Good Old USSR with European Tinge**

When Russians speak about travelling to Belarus, they usually tell very similar stories which all involve positive feelings. When Russians cross the border, the good quality of Belarusian roads is the first impression. As the famous phrase goes, there are two disasters in Russia: fools and roads.

Belarusian roads really seem better than Russian roads. "Just try to drive the road between Moscow and Saint Petersburg, let alone any road in provinces, and you will feel the difference", Russians say to their sceptical Belarusian colleagues.

Belarus traffic police present another road-related issue that Russians cannot understand in a positive sense. They are amazed by the fact that Belarusian police usually do not take bribes, while in Russia being a traffic policeman became a



sort of business enterprise.

The second nice thing in Belarus is the state of cultivated lands and small settlements and villages. In Russia, the government dissolved most *kolhozes* (communist collective agricultural enterprises), and much land remains abandoned because peasants simply do not want to work it.

In Belarus, state enterprises remained, and have to cultivate all land regardless of their quality. This creates the picture of total diligence of Belarusians that contrasts with that of disorganised Russians. Furthermore, villages simply look better: houses and fences are fixed, and the area around them groomed well. This picture creates a somewhat more “European” image of Belarus compared to Russia.

### **“The Last Slavic Country”**

Practically all Russian visitors admire the omnipresent cleanliness of the streets, something that Belarusians spitefully call “sterility”. For elder people, Belarusian cities are a reminder of the good old Soviet past, with its confidence in one’s own future. People feel calm and relief after bustling life in Russian megalopolises.

However, for younger visitors, this creates the opposite impression. They look for night life, cultural events and shopping, and this type of entertainment for young people Belarus cannot offer. Belarusians themselves prefer to go to [neighbouring Lithuania](#), Poland or Ukraine for these purposes.

Somewhat surprisingly to Belarusians, visitors from Russia often note and particularly like the absence of people from the Caucasus and Central Asia in Belarus. This category of migrants have flooded Russian cities in search of income and have become a crucial feature in Russian society, which often causes tension on nationalist grounds.

The underdeveloped Belarusian state capitalism does not

attract migrants on such a scale. Belarus, in the eyes of many Russians, remains “the last white Slavic country”.

## **Post-Soviet Las Vegas**

In 2009, Russia introduced restrictions on the gambling industry. Apart from four special zones, the government ordered the closure of all gambling houses on Russian territory allowing online websites like the [Best UFC Betting Sites In Singapore 2021](#) to grow. The Belarusian authorities decided to exploit this important gap for enrichment and enhanced the development of their own gambling sector.

Some Russian companies that own gambling businesses decided to move their assets to Belarus. Around 30 casinos operate in Minsk and there are a lot more places with slot machines.

Minsk is becoming an entertainment centre for rich Russians, predominantly from Moscow. A poll in 2012 showed that Russians spent \$3,000-5,000 in casinos during one weekend in Minsk. Their average bill at a restaurant amounts to \$200, roughly half of the salary of a typical Belarusian.

The flight from Moscow takes only one hour, and many firms now offer gambling tours. When you drive the Moscow-Minsk highway, you can see more and more billboards advertising gambling as you approach Minsk. Likewise, a lot of of gambling ads are displayed on the road from Minsk international airport.

During holidays and weekends, Russians book numerous places in the hotels and restaurants of Minsk. The luxury service industry receives huge profits from such visitors, and in fact works mostly for Russians. Most Belarusians simply cannot afford such costly entertainment.

Although prostitution remains invisible on the streets of Belarus, the [sex industry](#) surely accompanies such cash-rich enterprise as gambling tourism. Inside hotels, it has become common, although from the outside one might think that Belarus

remains prostitution-free.

Gambling has become one of the reasons for an increase in elite real estate sales in the capital. To feel more comfortable, gamblers simply buy the best flats in Minsk for prices that seem insignificant compared to prices in Moscow.

### **The New Landlords**

Of course, gambling is not the only reason for Russians buying property in Belarus. After the 2011 economic crisis and devaluation of the Belarusian rouble, the property market fell and rich Russians started to buy elite flats in Minsk centre in order to sell them profitably when the crises ended.

Further, Russians eagerly buy houses in the regions with pleasant natural conditions – like the Braslaŭ region with its famous lakes in the north-western corner of the republic. They either use them for personal recreation or start tourist businesses there.

Another group of Russians that tend to buy property are ethnic Belarusians who return to the motherland after retiring from difficult work in the Russian north or noisy and stressful Moscow. They also have enough money to buy the best pieces of property, but do not aim to make profits. They seek a quiet life in the land of their grandfathers.

Some Russians even buy estates of the Belarusian gentry that locals abandoned either before the Russian revolution of 1917 or Soviet intervention in Poland in 1939. The estates are municipal property and local authorities sell them for ridiculous prices, because the investor has to pour in huge funds to renovate them. However, some Russians or ethnic Belarusians from Russia have enough courage to invest in them: apart from the building, the estates have beautiful lands around them with old parks and gardens.

In such a situation, many Belarusians worry about become

servants of rich Russian bosses on their own land. On the other hand, Russians present a desirable source of income for local business and authorities. Russia will always be here and Belarusians need to learn how to take advantage of that.

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## **Arms Trade Charges Against Belarus: Speculations and Facts**

In early March, the U.N. Security Council's independent panel of experts raised the issue of Belarusian and Russian arms sold to Sudan.

According to the experts, Sudan had used these weapons in the Darfur region, violating a Security Council resolution and written pledges to Belarus and Russia to not do so. Most non-state Belarusian experts expressed doubts about possible Belarusian involvement and pointed out the lack of clear evidence corroborating the claims.

Such charges, however, have emerged periodically for more than a decade now. Belarus is supporting global villains of all kinds and its regime finances itself to a substantial extent through the illegal arms trade, the radical opposition insists. The charges are groundless, the government says. The truth, however, is not simple as the known facts prove.

### **First Smoking Gun?**

Hardly any violations of international legal regulations of arms trade by the Belarusian government have ever been explicitly proven. From a legal point of view, the Belarusian

arms trade is in a grey zone, as is the work of many occasions even by such prominent weapons-producing corporations like BAE Systems or Lockheed.

Likewise, it is very difficult to classify some Belarusian deals. Thus, a month ago, the First Channel of Iranian TV broadcast a short film about hunting down a US drone in the Eastern Iranian province of Khorassan. On the seventh second of the video, one can clearly see the a Belarus-produced electronic warfare system, Vostok-E. It is shown in an Iranian-like landscape, and indicates that Belarus actually sold such equipment to Iran.

The US immediately – in a couple of days – reacted by imposing sanctions against two Belarusian companies involved in producing the weapons system. However, the time of transfer of these systems is not clear, and the international legal grounds are shaky.

After all, the Vostok-E is a defensive weapon and is not covered by the UN sanctions against Iran. Dr. Paul Holtom of the Stockholm-based SIPRI Institute, told the Jerusalem Post in December that while it was possible that Belarus cooperates with Iran on military-technical projects, but until now he had seen no “credible evidence that it has provided to Iran items falling within the seven categories of the UN Register of Conventional Arms.”

### **Countries Like Belarus**

Yet at least it was the first case in years with some substance behind it. There were many accusations for which facts were lacking. For instance, the much quoted 2004 Report of the Special Advisor to the Director of US Central Intelligence on Iraq’s WMD contains only two minor cases of explicit charges.

The rest of Belarus-related material found in the report sounds rather opaque and sometimes oddly uncertain. Here is

one example:

*Iraq imported at least 380 SA-2/Volga liquid-propellant engines from Poland and possibly Russia or Belarus.[...] Iraq also imported missile guidance and control systems from entities in countries like Belarus, Russia and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.*

In November 2004, Belarusian pilots participated in the attack launched by the national army of Ivory Coast on a French military base in the country. Yet nothing has confirmed the Belarusian government's involvement in the incident and its sending military specialists to the African country.

Actually if the Belarusians were there privately, of their own accord – something not entirely unusual for jobless post-Soviet military pilots – then the French government could not even press charges against them as it did not join the appropriate conventions on mercenaries in internal conflicts. No wonder, it let the Belarusians go.

### **Third-Hand Information**

For some years, in particular in 2009 and 2010, Belarus regularly faced accusations that it provided Iran with the S-300 air defence system. They looked extremely murky, especially when levelled by the Jerusalem Post. Yet even such authoritative news agency as Associated Press published in August 2010 a news piece based – according to its own admission – on the Iranian FARS news agency quotation of the Lebanese al-Manar TV saying that Iran might have acquired the S-300s from Belarus.

Another time, in 2011, some Belarusian and international media published a package of documents allegedly proving the shipments of Belarusian arms to Pakistani-based terrorists via Syria. The electronic scans were presumably stolen by a hacker group from Italian cyberpolice. The content of documents,

however, looked so outwardly fake that nobody followed this trace.

Maybe the most dubious of all was the extremely doubtful publication in September 2012 of documents allegedly proving the involvement in drug trafficking by people close to the former [Kyrgyz president](#) now in exile in Belarus. The site belonging to the Belapan news agency claimed that the original documents of Nepal's military were stolen by hackers from the web-site of Cambodian Foreign Ministry. Such pedigree of accusations did not prevent Belarusian media from republishing the story.

### **Arms Stories For Internal and External Use**

The reasons for such interest in this kind of stories are clear. The Belarusian regime is ugly and despotic, yet it is also petty. That is good as far as human lives are rarely threatened. Yet it is unsuitable and unhelpful for motivation and mobilisation of the regime's opponents.

In these circumstances, every mention of possible illegal deals of Belarusian regime abroad, especially with the regimes opposing the West, looks very seducing. The published fake documents in particular refer to the headlines of international politics (alleged link to Syria and Pakistan). If the Belarusian state is an arsenal for the world's conflicts and problems, then to fight it means to fight something more than an election-stealing and rights-suppressing deeply provincial regime.

It means also that such a battle will be more interesting for the rest of the world. And to attract Western attention to Belarusian problems is rather difficult after years of futile efforts to effect changes in the country and the resulting weakness of the opposition.

Actually, the absence of "smoking guns" proving illicit arms trade by Belarus may show that the Belarusian regime cares

about this danger of becoming global problem itself. To avoid it, Minsk stays away from international hot spots and violations of international legal norms. Lukashenka feels, as long as his rule remains, however ugly, internationally sound, he can be certain that nobody in the West will bother to topple the ruler in Minsk.

### **There Are More Things in Heaven and Earth?**

Sure, one should not dismiss the possibility of some “black swans,” i.e., unexpected and unsuspected facts about Belarusian arms trade which can arise after the present ruler goes. Among the known unknowns are the cases with Belarusians allegedly being involved in armed conflicts on the side of Ivorian and Libyan governments.

Nobody knew about Ukrainian officers selling top-secret missile samples to the Communist China and Iran until after Orange revolution Yushchenko came to power and revealed the incidents in 2005.

But such eventuality does not justify the speculations and hyping evident fakes now. Unsubstantiated claims undermine the moral case of the Belarusian opposition and non-state media. There are more than enough appropriately documented outrageous conditions and policies in Belarus to lash out at.

Mixing these substantiated critics with dubious charges and irresponsible rhetoric is a rather destructive. After all, as the proverb goes, one rotten apple spoils the bunch.

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# Belarus Needs A Strategic Vision in Higher Education Management

On 26 February 2012, Minister of Education Syarhei Maskevich announced a substantial increase of a minimum passing grade to Belarusian universities.

The government wants to decrease the number of poorly performing students and to redirect young people to technical colleges instead of universities.

Belarusian officials seem not to care that much about the quality of an education. On the contrary, in every possible sphere of higher education's regulation they exercise rather utilitarian approach. Instead of making cosmetic reforms the government must have a strategic vision of educational reform.

## Statistics Show Some Peculiarities

All in all, more than 428,000 students study at 54 institutions of higher education during the 2012-2013 academic year in Belarus. Approximately 377,000 of them get their degrees at 45 state universities, while the others study at 9 private institutions.

The number of students per 10 000 people

Country	Poland	Finland	Russia	Ukraine	Belarus	Hungary	Kazakhstan	Austria
Number	564	556	493	465	453	397	378	334

There are three forms of higher education in Belarus: full-time (49% of all students), evening (less than 1%) and part-time (about a half). Full-time education means attending lectures and seminars, while part-time students attend the

university only for short periods of time and pass exams there. Evening education means studying at evenings after work.

The higher education in Belarus is either free or paid. To become "state-financed" an entrant must pass his or her exams substantially better than his fellows. However, following the Soviet tradition, a lot of students study for free – 49.4%.

The annual number of enrolled and graduating students is practically even and comprises approximately 80,000 – 90,000. Only 700 students study in the Belarusian language, while the overwhelming majority get their higher education in Russian.

It may look surprising, but even with plenty of free-of-charge places and [simplified entering process](#) only 18% of all men (above 15 years old) have higher education. Among women of the same age this figure is 20%.

### **The Low Quality is Evident**

Generally, officials in such anachronistic systems as Belarusian tend not to admit their mistakes. But, the [decline](#) in the level of intelligence of Belarusian students becomes manifest and alarming even for governmental officials.

On 26 February 2013, Belarusian minister for education, Syargei Maskevich announced the decision to raise the minimum passing grade for entrants into universities. Till now it has been enough to get 7 out of 100 points at all the entrance tests to be entitled to pass. Starting this year this figure will vary from 15 to 20 (depending on the subject).

As Syargei Maskevich himself explained, this measure will leave 30% of entrants out in the cold. At first glance the decision is positive. But an utterly appalling conclusion follows these figures: for now every third school leaver cannot get 15-out-of-100 result during his or her tests. By the way, recent research shows that such a result can be

reached by a simple random filling in the testing form without any preparation.

The declared purpose of the reform is to improve the educational level of students and to "exclude accidental people among the entrants", as the minister said himself. Another goal that he announced was the popularisation of technical schools and colleges.

The idea between the lines is the lack of technical specialists in the country. Belarusian authorities bet on industrial branches of the economy and therefore do not need more lawyers and financiers, but instead – workers and engineers.

Moreover, many students today means many educated people tomorrow. The latter tend oppose the authoritarian system. So to have the obedient population, the regime needs more uneducated people than self-dependent professionals.

### **Foreign Students as Lavish Sponsors**

The Belarusian ministry for education exercises rather utilitarian policy towards foreign students. While the prestigious universities throughout the world do their best to attract young foreign talents, providing them with scholarships and benefits, Belarusian higher educational institutions raise foreigners' fees two- and even threefold comparing with nationals.

In figures this looks like \$1,100 – \$1,700 for Belarusians (paid in roubles) and \$2,500 – \$4,250 for foreigners paid in U.S. dollars. The currency of payment matters a lot in Belarus because of frequent and unexpected devaluations. The gross currency inflow via foreign students' payments during the 2012-2013 academic year will reach \$20m.

Belarusian government concludes specific "educational" treaties with other countries in order to increase the stream

of entrants from these states. Among them – Cuba, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Jordan, Turkmenistan, Lebanon, Ecuador, Vietnam, China, Kyrgyzstan etc.

The essence of these treaties is mutual recognition of the diplomas and relieved entrance procedure. In practice it means becoming students of top-rated Belarusian universities without any entering tests except for basic Russian (in order to communicate with their fellow students).

Current number of foreign students (by the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus)

Country	Turkmenistan	China	Russia	Azerbaijan	Nigeria	Sri Lanka	Iran	Lebanon	Other	Total
Number	6469	1476	1435	263	245	244	234	155	1582	12103

Except for favourable entrance conditions, practice shows that foreign students never get expelled even in case of an utter academic failure. All the facts bring to a conclusion that these students are used as a mere financial resource for the government. The fashionable "educational services export" has become an intentional policy of the authorities.

Meanwhile, the problems of low educational level, universal accessibility and the lack of academic freedoms remain untouched while the ministry for education does its best to absorb additional revenues from foreign students.

Belarusian government claims the desire to reach the European quality of higher education and to enter the [Bologna process](#). In order to do it, officials should handle the multiple problems of domestic higher education with a strategic vision. But for now they choose performing merely cosmetic reforms and self-enriching measures.

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# Belarusians Had to Mourn Chavez for Three Days

Alexander Lukashenka took part in the funeral of Venezuelan former President Hugo Chavez. Standing together by the coffin of their friend, Lukashenka and Ahmadinejad could not stop the tears.

Isolated from the West, the Belarusian ruler does not have much choice when it comes to finding foreign friends and partners.

According to the Belarusian state news agency BELTA, Chavez had closer friendly relations with Lukashenka than with any other foreign leader. The Belarusian authorities announced three days of mourning in the country. All TV and radio stations were recommended not to air entertainment programmes and state flags had to be flown at half-staff starting on 6 March.

That shocked many observers – when the greatest modern Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau died, the authorities announced no mourning at all. Just one day of mourning followed the Minsk metro bombing on 11 April 2011 that left 15 dead and hundreds wounded. Lukashenka is trying to demonstrate how highly he appreciated his personal relations with the Venezuelan leader, a stranger to most Belarusians.

Hugo Chavez used to be one of the most liberal friends of Lukashenka. At least Chavez never falsified elections in his own country. Other friends of Lukashenka, like Moammar Gaddafi and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have a much worse record.

Lukashenka likes to cooperate with other authoritarian leaders, although that brings little financial gain to Belarus. Anti-Americanism and “resistance to the single-polar

world” rhetoric are the main uniting factors here. Such cooperation serves the purpose of support for one another in the international arena and secures internal legitimisation.

Lukashenka’s regime often uses connections like that to show its autonomy from Russia and independence from the West. Further, these relations remain important for the internal stability of the countries. Unofficial sources claim that the special services of Belarus, Iran and Venezuela cooperate with one another and share the experience of preventing the “coloured revolutions”.

### **Lukashenka-Chavez Friendship**

The leaders of Belarus and Venezuela made friends in 2006, when Chavez visited Minsk for the first time. Chavez suggested to Lukashenka that they form a “combat team”, and Lukashenka replied that they could create “a team in football, hockey or basketball”. That friendship looked very doubtful then, and the numbers confirmed it. In 2006, Belarusian exports to Venezuela totalled \$6.0m, and imports zero.

Due to the personal friendship, the situation then changed drastically. In 2012, Belarusian exports to Venezuela totalled \$254.4m, while Venezuelan exports totalled \$326.4m. Moreover, in 2010 and 2011, imports from Venezuela surpassed one billion dollars. Unlike any other of Lukashenka’s partner, Chavez made Belarus a priority over Russia and irritated the Kremlin by selling oil to Belarus. Lukashenka promised to never to forget it.

Venezuela has become a great market for Belarusian goods. Often their quality is so low that only a friend would buy them. The majority of Belarusian economic projects may have to be cancelled after Chavez’s death. The new President is unlikely to sympathise with the Belarusian leader so much.

Whoever becomes the new Venezuelan president , he will never become as popular as Chavez. Moreover, he will have to solve

several complex internal issues and is unlikely to spend money on Lukashenka instead of his country's other mates.

At first, Lukashenka did not plan to participate in his friend's funeral personally. His close aide Victar Sheiman was supposed to go to Venezuela. However, the Belarusian leader decided to put off festive ceremonies dedicated to International Women's Day (an official holiday in Belarus) and flew to Caracas. He probably did this not only because he wanted to say goodbye to his friend, but also to try to support Belarusian interests in Venezuela.

### **Other Authoritarian Friends of Lukashenka**

The more negative Lukashenka's relations become with Vladimir Putin or the West, the more he tries to create the impression of friendly relations with other countries. Lukashenka always liked to demonstrate his good relations with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Moammar Gaddafi, Robert Mugabe, Slobodan Milošević and even Fidel Castro.

Relations with Iran looked the brightest. Close relations with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad secured access to the Iranian market for Belarus. Belarus is now actively selling not just traditional potassium fertilisers, but also agricultural equipment, synthetic fibre and metal products to Iran. Moreover, Belarus got an opportunity to develop an oil field in Juffair while Iranians opened their "Samand" automobile factory in Belarus.



In 2006, Ahmadinejad told Lukashenka that he considered him his best friend ever. However, several years later the Iranians broke the contract for oil production with Belarusians, while the quality of "Samands" appeared so low that the Belarusian authorities decided to close the factory.

Today, Belarusian-Iranian relations are waiting for a new

start. Ineffectiveness of economic cooperation overcame friendship.

Lukashenka also had close relations with Moammar Gaddafi. He even called him his brother in public. Like Chavez.

In 1999, Lukashenka visited Slobodan Milošević during the NATO operations against Yugoslavia, in order to support him and even to discuss Yugoslavia's joining the Union State of Belarus and Russia.

### **Why Lukashenka Needs Such Friends**

Lukashenka has been on the EU travel ban list for many years and cannot travel to most European countries or to North America. Therefore, the Belarusian authorities like to portray any minor international meeting or trip as a major international event. Lukashenka has no particular reason for hugging Mugabe, but he does it.

The second problem comes from the first one: the absence of recognition. The Belarusian regime makes a lot of fuss about its international relations in order to send a signal to Belarusian society that the international community recognises the Belarusian authorities and communicates with them.

Thirdly, the quality of some Belarusian products remains so low that other countries agree to buy them only on the basis of really friendly relations – they have to buy the goods in order not to destroy the friendship.

Nobody knows how real the friendship between the Belarusian and the Venezuelan leaders was, but Lukashenka will definitely miss Chavez. The Presidente indeed supported Lukashenka and asked for nothing in return. Chavez, Gadaffi, Milošević – those are friends whom Lukashenka will never see again.

Every year the Belarusian ruler leader keeps losing friends, and the list of his foes continues to grow.