

Dodgy Bank Deals and Protest Theatre – Western Press Digest

Belarus has returned to the spotlight of Western press coverage after brief periods of interest which followed the December 19th crackdown, subsequent international sanctions, and April metro bombing. The new reports focus on the IMF loan request and business relations between the West and Lukashenka's government. An occasional mention of rights abuses appear in a few concerned publications, with the Belarus Free Theatre leading the way in raising awareness amongst the Western public.

Western banks with dirty hands? The big Belarus story to make UK headlines has been the decision by a group of European banks to finally cease raising Belarusian government bonds. More than \$800m in government bonds were issued by UK bank The Royal Bank of Scotland only a month after the December election crackdown. [The Independent](#) continues to devote more attention than any other major Western paper to Belarus. They led with this story early this week and were highly critical of such prolonged unethical investment by a state-owned bank. They argue that the decision to stop selling the bonds was only taken following considerable pressure from the campaign groups Index on Censorship and Free Belarus Now.

Evaluations of Belarus in the context of 20 years since the 1991 putsch appeared in a few sources. [The Financial Times](#) talked to US think tanks who point to Belarus as an example of those ex-USSR states where one leader has pushed out everyone else. [Fox News](#) categorizes Belarus as one of the three most authoritarian regimes in the former Soviet Union, and suggests a change to Lukashenka's rule looks extremely unlikely any

time soon.

The Belarusian request for an IMF bailout which began to be considered on 29 August has gained some media attention. [The UK's Independent](#) reports that Belarus has introduced almost none of the conditions necessary for a loan which were laid out earlier in the month. It describes two schools of thoughts within the IMF: one that considers a loan without reform will only strengthen Lukashenka's oppressive regime, the other that sees a loan as necessary to prevent Moscow from gaining even more influence over Belarus.

US-Belarus tensions rise. Belarus' decision to freeze their pact with America to give up enriched uranium has hit [US headlines](#). The decision, which has been explained as a response to the most recent wave of US economic sanctions, has been described by the US State Department as "disappointing." American experts have said they do not consider it likely the stockpile will fall into the wrong hands.

Good news for the free press? [Radio Free Europe](#) reports on changes in media consumption habits of Belarusians. Trust in state media has fallen sharply over recent months according to one source, due to the increasing disparity between the hopeful reports on the economic situation given in state papers and the daily hardships endured by ordinary people in buying basic goods. The article is optimistic that the market for independent news is expanding beyond the traditional intelligentsia, especially online, as people crave realistic accounts of the current economic situation.

Economic hardship and reform. The deteriorating economic situation for ordinary people continues to draw attention. Radio Free Europe describes '[Belarus on the Brink](#)': Tom Balmforth spoke with commentators in Belarus who predict the situation will only worsen in the autumn, with incomes likely to fall further and construction drying up entirely; this in turn may spark a revival of this summer's protests. He

suggests that structural reforms to the economy are more urgent than ever. [Bloomberg](#) reports on the increasing difficulty of buying currency and meat products in Belarus, noting that Russians are taking advantage of the crisis, enjoying favourable black-market rates on their in-demand Russian roubles.

Neighbours in the bad books. Jeremy Druker from [Transitions Online](#) has expressed his disgust at recent revelations that Lithuania and Poland passed information to the Belarusian authorities which aided them in arresting human rights activist Ales Bialatski. He reports that activists who had regarded Poland as a safe haven feel betrayed.

Spreading the word. Belarus Free Theatre staged their production 'Minsk 2011' at the Edinburgh Arts Festival this month. [The Guardian](#) and [The Telegraph](#) offer very positive reviews of the play, which treats issues of repression and censorship in Belarus through the theme of sexuality. Both consider it an important reminder of the repressive regimes which exist beyond the UK and which deserve attention.