

Eurasian Economic Union, A Lush Nation, Minsk's Best Cop – Western Press Digest

May became a momentous month for western media coverage of Belarus. While Minsk was awash with foreign and local ice hockey fans taking in the World Ice Hockey Championship, the international press stuck to almost exclusively covering the matches themselves.

The recent signing of an agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus for the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union momentarily shifted some attention away from the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. The Belarusian authorities did not however escape international scrutiny, despite its recently elevated image.

A proposed law that would create virtual serfdom for rural labourers, which has yet to be signed, renewed concerns about civil rights in Belarus. A recently published WHO report portrays Belarus as the world's heaviest drinkers, while a new book of photography examines the peculiar state of contests in Belarus.

All of this and more in the latest edition of the Western Press Digest.

Politics and Economics

[Belarus Joins Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union](#) – After years of preparations and negotiations, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus met in Astana to sign a treaty signalling the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that the new economic Union will bring over 170 million people together and form a powerful regional economic

bloc. AP noted that the union's expected \$2.2 trillion economic output was roughly equivalent to that of Britain.

Lukashenka was not entirely happy with the final deal that the three former soviet republics reached as it did not reflect many of the concerns Belarus had previously brought to the negotiation table. The Belarusian head of state was also reported as having said that Ukraine would "sooner or later [...] understand where the nation's happiness lies."

[Will Russia Absorb Belarus?](#) – Belarus is a nation with a very underdeveloped sense of national identity, a trait which could prove to be fatal to its sovereignty according to an article in the New Statesmen. The author describes Belarusians as not nearly regionally divided as their southern Ukrainian neighbours, and while they consider themselves to be distinctly Belarusian, they struggle to define precisely what that means.

Russia's recent aggression towards Ukraine has some Belarusians concerned and may lead to the Lukashenka regime seeking deeper rapprochement with the EU in order to preserve itself in light of perceived Russian regional ambitions.

[Serfdom Returning to Belarus?](#) – In an attempt to stop urban migration and maintain labour levels on the nation's farms, Belarusian ruler Alexandr Lukashenka is considering signing a decree that, according to him, is tantamount to serfdom. Regional governors, according to the FT piece, have not been fulfilling their quotas on time. The decree would give regional governors more power over the movement of rural labourers and essentially tie them to their land and [stem urban migration](#).

The ostensible reason for the decree is to make sure that the rural labour force does not abandon their fields. The report also notes that in 2012, timber industry workers were also prohibited from leaving their jobs despite the fact that it

was in direct violation of the 1957 international convention on the abolition of forced labour. Russia may object, however, if the decree is passed as the freshly signed Eurasian Economic Union treaty stipulates the free movement of work forces within the union.

Society

[Belarus' Best of the Best – and Other Oddities](#) – Slate.com provides coverage a Polish photographer went to Belarus to explore the various kinds of contests that were held in a country the photographer describes as “over tidy, over clean, almost too perfect”.

The final collection of photographs (some featured in the article) show the apparent winners of awards ranging from “The Best Policeman of Minsk” to “The Best Large Family in the Smorgon Region”. The photographer worked with a local Belarusian journalist to identify these and other “interesting contests” representing a variety of interests and took pictures that tried to provide a raw image of their winners.

[Belarus On Top of the World... in Alcohol Consumption](#) – A recent WHO report, which looked at data from 2008-2010, has established Belarus as the world’s leader in drinking per capita per year, followed by Moldova, Lithuania and the Russian Federation. On average, Belarusians drink 17.5 litres of pure alcohol a year. This figure is nearly double that of the United States, who consumes around 9.2 litres per year, and is nearly triple the world average of 6.2 litres per year.

Human Rights

[Belarus Free Theatre Takes Centre Stage](#) – A leading British Theatre director Michael Attenborough is calling on Prime Minister David Cameron to start getting serious about pressuring Belarus on its civil rights abuses. This statement comes after Attenborough spent a week touring with the Belarus Free Theatre inside Belarus (where the theatre company is

banned from performing) for a week.

The theatre director reported meeting with the co-founder of BFT's father, who had reportedly lost his job due to his daughter's association with the company. One of the events that was put on during his stay was raided by the police, but allowed to go on. Another took place in a forest outside of Minsk. Attenborough goes on to give a grim description of Belarus, calling it "a completely joyless place", though praises the risks that BFT put itself through for the sake of freedom of expression.

[Swedish Human Rights Activist Denied Entry to Belarus](#) – On the eve of the Ice Hockey World Championship, Belarus denied entry to the head of the Ostgruppen human rights group for, ironically, alleged human rights abuses. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty also noted that around 20 opposition activists were detained in jail for a period of 10-25 days, which was seen as a preventative measure by the authorities to keep protests and civil unrest out of the public's eye while the Championship games were going on in Minsk.

Devin Ackles