

Humanism or Political Calculation: Why Did Lukashenka Pardon Political Prisoners?

On 22 August, the state-run news agency Belta reported that “based on the principle of humanism” the President of Belarus decided to pardon and release from prison former presidential candidate Mikalaj Statkevich and five other opposition figures.

Lukashenka is trying to enter the same river twice – to repeat the [manoeuvres of 2008-2010](#). It has worked so far: the European Union and the United States has already praised Lukashenka for pardoning the opposition activists.

The past 21 years has shown that the release of political prisoners has very little if anything to do with the principle of humanism and will not lead to significant changes in Belarus. The Belarusian president hopes to secure financial support for the struggling Belarusian economy and become more legitimate in the West and at home.

Principle of Humanism: Is it really?

Lukashenka, often labelled in the West as the last dictator of Europe, can hardly be characterised as a politician driven by the principles of humanism. For the past 21 years while in power, the country has consistently ranked low on all democracy scales including Freedom House, and Polity IV Individual Country Regime Trends.

On the suggested three part categorization of a widely used data series on the level of democracy The Polity IV Project scores of "autocracies", "anocracies", and "democracies", Belarus has consistently ranked as an autocracy since Lukashenka came to power. One can notice similar trends in Freedom House and The Index of Economic Freedom scores.

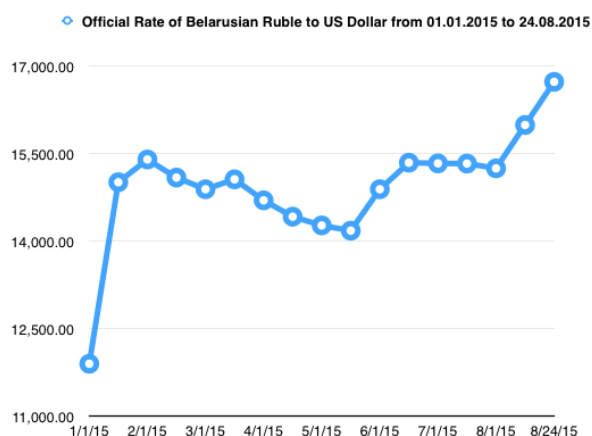
An Internet resource palitviazni.info reports the total of 186 political prisoners in Belarus since the incumbent president came to power. According to the website, Belarus had [political prisoners](#) every year for the past 20 years (see the graph).

The release of political prisoners aims to change the focus from the absence of competition in the upcoming presidential election and gain western legitimation of Lukashenka. But political prisoners are unlikely to become history in Belarus.

Just recently on 11 August, Belarusian authorities arrested three graffiti painters, Maksim Pyakarski, Vadzim Zharomski, and Viachaslau Kasinerau for the painted slogan 'Belarus must be Belarusian' painted on a billboard that used to have images of policemen. The number of political prisoners may rise again in case of protests against the results of the upcoming presidential election this October.

Economic Crisis and Need for Money

Belarus has experienced a significant currency depreciation since the beginning of 2015. The national currency has lost 9.7 per cent of its value since 1 August and 40.6 per cent since 1 January 2015 (see the graph).



In July, Belarus asked the [Russian government for a loan of \\$3](#)

[billion](#), but only received a tranche of \$760 million. Since the Russian government lends in Russian rubles, due to the depreciation of the Russian ruble Belarus in reality only received about \$720 million.

While the loan kept the Belarusian ruble afloat even if shortly, in 2015 Belarus has to make foreign debt payments of over \$4 billion. The Belarusian ruble has been plunging every day within the past week. To avoid this financial turmoil Belarus needs more loans.

After debt repayments to the IMF and redemption of Eurobonds on 31 March 2015 the Russian government became the main creditor of Belarus in the structure of its external debt. Therefore, obtaining funding from the West, matters also in terms of economic security for diversification of external debt.

Hopes for IMF Credit

Besides hoping for help from its Eastern neighbour, the Belarusian authorities are counting on a new loan from the IMF. From a political point of view, the release of political prisoners increases the chances for the Belarusian government to receive such a loan.

Belarus received the last IMF loan immediately after refusing to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following a military conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. In an interview with Charter97, Statkevich commented that he suspected his release after learning that Lukashenka was getting short of money and finding out that none of the opposition candidates managed to collect 100 thousand signatures.

From an economic point of view, the IMF has a reason to start new talks, as this year Belarus completed principal payments on the previous IMF loan extended in 2009-2010. According to

the official news agency Belta “Now Belarus has fully discharged its obligation to the IMF”.



From 8 to 15 July IMF experts worked in Belarus. They met with the Belarusian authorities. IMF representatives agreed with the Belarusian authorities to continue the dialogue "to ensure the preparation of the program." If the International Monetary Fund sees that Belarus made "sufficient progress," the mission will arrive for formal negotiations on the program this year.

The release of political prisoners presents another strategic move of the Belarusian government in its game to stay in power. Such moves worked before and likely will work again. EADaily reports that the EU has called the release of Belarusian opposition figures as "significant progress in the efforts aimed at improving relations" between Minsk and Brussels.

It is doubtful, however, that the release of political prisoners will lead to more systemic changes in Belarus. The graph on political prisoners shows sharp increases in the number of political prisoners in 2006 and 2010, the years of presidential elections. Such sudden rises indicate that there are no guarantees that in November the list of political prisoners will not start to grow again.

In the midst of the economic crisis and close to presidential elections, it is important for the Belarusian government to create the appearance of political liberalisation to receive

funding and praise from the West. At the same time, Belarus will not leave the orbit of Russian influence due to Belarus' huge [economic dependence on Russia](#).