

EU considers Lifting Sanctions, Putin's Proposed Airbase – Western Press Digest

Putin's announcement of a Russian air base in Belarus dominated western media in September. Western media see the declaration as further support of Russian expansion.

Other significant news: The EU might lift sanctions after Lukashenka freed 6 political prisoners. A decision may lift Lukashenka's travel ban and allow some Belarusian companies to trade with the EU.

Upon returning to Belarus former presidential candidate Ales Mikhalevich was briefly arrested for alleged provocations after the 2010 presidential elections. Another former presidential candidate, Mikalaj Statkievich, held an unauthorised rally in central Minsk denouncing the upcoming election as a "circus". All of this and much more in this September edition of the Western Press Digest.

[Russia moves to establish air base in Belarus](#) – Deutsche Welle reported that Putin stated recently ordering the Defence Ministry to begin negotiations with Minsk over a Russian air base. Minsk stated it would not welcome the base. However, it is reliant on Russian energy, credit and already has Russian military facilities. This makes it unlikely Minsk will deny its building.

With the Ukraine crisis, the Kremlin estimates it needs to bind Belarus closer. Yet, for Valery Karbalevich "against the background of the Ukrainian crisis, the stationing of a permanent Russian military contingent in Belarus will upset

the balances of forces and facilitate an increase in tension in the whole region”.

The air base, according to [EurasiaNet](#), has caused consternation among Belarusian elites. The Russian government has pushed the issue. It [published a document](#) alleging an agreement. It will be built near Babruysk in 2016. According to the agreement, Minsk cannot monitor the base, receive money for staging the base and Russia can put any weaponry on the base's territory.

Sections of the [western media](#) believe that Minsk's delay could herald Russian intervention similar to Ukraine.

[European Union considers removing Sanctions on Belarusian Elites and Companies](#) – An article published by Reuters contended that with the release of 6 political prisoners; the EU is considering reducing sanctions on Minsk. EU diplomats are contemplating ways to reduce asset freezes and visa bans on Belarusian elites. Reuters contends that diplomats are planning freezing sanction renewal for a year. These could extend to Lukashenka. Diplomats are considering lifting trade restrictions on 25 Belarusian companies. However, the EU will retain sanctions on military elites and companies.

[The Eurasian Union Contemplates Potential new Eurasian currency](#) – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty raised the issue of a new Eurasian currency. Although it remains unlikely the Belarusian rouble will disappear soon, the new Eurasian currency story did the rounds this month in the western press. It first appeared in [March](#). But it is only now the name Altyn has appeared. The Eurasian Union has called to stop using the Euro and the dollar in foreign trade. Now it looks to create a common currency. The idea of creating the Altyn emphasises further Eurasian integration.

In other economic news, according to Reuters, the network provider Turkcell has stated that its Belarusian unit,

Belarusian Telecommunication Network (BEST) is now debt [free](#).

[Ales Mikhalevich Arrested upon return to Belarus](#) – Deutsche Welle published an article that border guards arrested Ales Mikhalevich. He was an opposition figure who stood at the 2010 presidential elections. After a 5 year exile in the Czech Republic he decided to return due to the release of political prisoners “I want to live in Belarus, in my homeland. I want to be with my family. I always said that when all political prisoners are freed...I will return immediately”.

Yet on his return, border guards quickly arrested him at the Belarusian-Lithuanian [border](#). They released him, but told him not to leave Minsk. This is all the more bizarre as another opposition activist returned, but was not arrested. [Vyacheslau Siuchyuk](#) has vocally stated he will compete in the elections. Yet, unlike Mikhalevich he has not been arrested.

[300 Opposition Activists Call to boycott the October Presidential Elections](#) – A group of 300 demonstrators protested in central Minsk according to the Washington Post. They called for an election boycott. Mikalaj Statkievich, an opposition activist, held an unauthorised rally. Statkievich was only released from prison last month. But he called on Belarusians to boycott the upcoming presidential elections. Other opposition activists, Anatol Liabiedzka and Uladzimir Niakliajeu called for a united opposition.

[Lukashenka Publishes \\$31,000 Income Statement](#) – Bloomberg published an article stating that for the upcoming elections Lukashenka submitted an income statement of only \$31,000 per annum. The statement does not mention houses or cars.

In other electoral news, 3 candidates other than Lukashenka registered with the central electoral commission on the final day of registration. Bloomberg contends that the Belarusian regime hopes this will create a [veneer](#) of democracy and appease the west.

[Minsk Residents defend a Blind Man](#) – An article and video posted by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty shows police dragging a blind man down some steps and banging his head on metal railings. Passersby intervened on the man's behalf. But police arrested him for being 'unkempt' and 'violent'.

Stephen Hall

Opinion: Russia's Troublesome Ally

Belarus' strained relationship with Russia illustrates the contradictory relationship between its leadership and that in Moscow during the presidential election campaign.

The problematic areas include the war in Ukraine and the closely related issue of collaboration in the military-industrial complex.

In late 2014, at a meeting between president Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Russian Minister of Defence Sergey Shoigu, the latter proposed to station a regiment of 24 Sukhoi Su-27SM3 Flankers at the Babruisk Air Base. Russia already uses other bases in Belarus to deploy SU-27s, in response to NATO operations in Lithuania and Estonia.

The Babruisk Base

Currently Russia operates two military objects in Belarus: a naval communication station near Vileyka, in service since 1964 and the Hantsavichy Volga-type radar station near Baranovichi founded in 1986, but fully functional only from

2003. It intends to open the new base in Babruisk in 2016.

Belarus is caught in a fragile situation between NATO and the Russian Federation, a position exacerbated by the forthcoming election as the president seeks more support from the West. Having decommissioned its own Su-27s, Belarus becomes central in Russian plans to bolster forces in response to United States' decision in late August to station F-22 Raptors in Europe.

The opposition quickly turned on these plans. After the release from a correctional facility of Mikalai Statkevich on 23 August, he held an interview with Radio Svaboda on 3 September, in which he launched an attack on the stationing of SU-27s on Belarusian territory. Statkevich argued also that the proposed new base could be a cover for use of nuclear weapons. The obvious target, in his opinion, is Kyiv 350 kilometers to the south.

Likewise the presidential candidate Tatsiana Karatkevich (cited by Aliaksandr Klaskouski in Naviny.by), declared on Belapan that

These bases will make Belarus a target and constitute a threat to our national security. Given the conflict in Ukraine, it is irresponsible to station weapons of another country on our territory, as well as in the entire region, as they can be fired at any time.

In theory, the weapons could not be fired without the consent of Belarus.

Klaskouski also discussed the Russian government's goal of joint protection of the external borders of the Union State and using Belarus "as a sword against the West." He considers it the "Achilles heel" in terms of public relations, and particularly inappropriate for Belarus to enter the confrontation between Moscow and the West when the country's

relationship with the European and United States has normalised.

Russian Media and Lukashenka

Belarusian state news agency Belta reported on 21 August that the Belarusian president denied that he faces a choice between Russia and the West. He maintained that Russia can have no doubt as to our “honesty, principled [position] and reliability.” Nevertheless, he continued, “we wish to normalize relations with the European Union and America” just as with Russia or any other state. Yet Russian critics—“weathercocks [flyugery] and provocateurs”—continue to pester him, as Lukashenka acknowledged at a meeting with Aleksey Miller, chairman of Gazprom in late August.

On 21 August Poland-based TV station Belsat broadcasting in Belarusian racked down some Russian media critiques of Lukashenka. One Russian outlet noted the change in election slogans from “For a strong and enlightened Belarus” (2010) to “For the future independent Belarus” (2015). Lukashenka’s verbal assaults have targeted Russian oligarchs, the company “Rossel’khoznadzor” (which deals with sanitary surveillance), and the general concept of “Russkiy Mir.”

Further the relatively liberal website “Slon.ru” held a discussion on the theme “When Lukashenko decides to break with Russia,” observing that the Belarusian leader has begun sharply and even crudely to criticize Russia. Notably the most outspoken jibe pandered to non-state media in his interview of 14 August when Lukashenka described the notion of the Russian world as propagandistic nonsense and that “in Russia they have neither money nor brains.”

Does Russia Seek Regime Change in

Minsk?

Belsat analyst Mikhas' Likhtarovich points out that in the view of the Russian leadership, Moscow finances keep the Belarusian leadership in place. A decision needs to be made on how to deal with Lukashenka, and hasten the integration of Belarus into Russia. Such integration presupposes the introduction of the Russian ruble (an old canard first debated in the mid-90s), the transfer of executive functions to Moscow and even lustration of Belarusian officials.

The current assaults during an election campaign resemble those of the 2010 elections when Moscow's NTV network ran the 5-part documentary "Krestnyy Bat'ka" (The Godfather) but with the significant absence of a war in Ukraine to increase the external pressures on Minsk.

Writing in Eurasia Review last week, Paul Goble cited Arseniy Sivitsky of the Belarusian Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Research that if Belarus refuses to agree to the new Russian base in its territory, Russia may take steps to destabilise its neighbour.

Fellow analyst, Yury Tsaryk, maintains that Russians concur that Lukashenka has betrayed Vladimir Putin and thus favour a regime change in Minsk to bring the recalcitrant ally under full control. The Russian government, however, has not expressed that view and media attacks remain milder than five years ago.

Playing for Time

Russia's economic assistance to the "Near Abroad" has experienced a steep decline. In turn, the fall of GDP, collapse of currency, and general recession in Russia has brought analogous dilemmas to the Belarusian economy. Between January and July 2015, compared to 2014, GDP has fallen by 4%,

exports incomes declined, and foreign capital dropped. Belarus lacks sources for internal stimulation, according to experts of the Eurasian Bank of Development. The joint problems, together with Ukraine's disaffection, further induce the Russian side to step up integration.

During the election campaign, Lukashenka has adopted a strong patriotic stance to undermine the so-called "nationalist opposition." Thus he needs to delay commitment to the Russian base and further integration to attain a comfortable victory in the coming elections, with a mollified West reducing its traditional support for the opposition and—he hopes—recognising his victory. The Russia problem looms large, but the government intends to win the elections and wait out the economic crisis before making further commitments to Moscow.

David Marples and Uladzimir Padhol

David Marples is Distinguished University Professor, Department of History & Classics, University of Alberta.

Uladzimir Padhol is Belarusian political scientist and journalist, editor and publisher of Narodnyi televisor. Tsitaty i baiki A.G. Lukashenko [People's Television: Citations and Stories of A.G. Lukashenko], which is now in its thirtieth edition.

**Belarus Policemen Work in
Russia, Su-30 Fighter Jets,
Combat Robots – Belarus**

Security Digest

Minsk continues political manoeuvring around the issue of the establishment of a Russian air force base in Belarus. Apparently, negotiations around the military facility have not been going well for Minsk so far. In this regard, in November, Aleksandr Lukashenka demonstrated his readiness to carry out an independent defence policy.

Budget constraints do not allow for any true resolution of the staffing issues in the Belarusian police. Moreover, the steady outflow of staff from the Interior Ministry continues, not only to the civilian sector but also to local police in Russia.

The Belarusian military and industrial sector tries to enter the market of combat robotic systems. They have a certain technological base to be able to do so, one which is being improved despite their limited resources.

Belarusian policemen seek employment in Russia

The Ministry of Internal Affairs is not able to cope with the rate of labour migrants going to Russia. There have been numerous cases where Belarusian policemen have left their jobs in order to get enlisted in the Russian police force later on because of the difference in wages have become noticeable, even if these kinds of cases are not of a large-scale nature just yet.

If before, the labour migration to Russia was largely police units found near the Russian border (most of the Homiel riot police moved to serve in Briansk), now the outflow from the Minsk police force has begun. Several criminal investigation officers (three from the Leninski District Department of Internal Affairs alone) work in the Smolensk police, where they are on duty every fourth day. While

continuing to live in Minsk, they drive themselves in their own vehicles to Smolensk to work.

The overflow of Belarusian policemen in the Russian police force is notable because their Belarusian residency prevents them from participating in the investigation of crimes. They remain foreigners and do not become Russian citizens.

The fact that the management of local units of the Russian police have accepted this has led to a personnel situation in the border regions with Russia that is simply catastrophic. The result has been that the heads of various departments of the Russian police force have to employ foreigners in civil service (which in and of itself is illegal) by all possible means.

Su-27 fighters can return to duty

On 14 November, the Commander of the Air Force and Anti-Air Defence of Belarus Aleh Dvihaleu said to journalists that the Su-27 fighters had been withdrawn from operational use because of their operational cost. Immediately afterwards, Aleh Dvihaleu announced that the Su-30 fighters were considered as a possible alternative for the Belarusian Air Force, while these planes are a modernised version of the same "expensive" Su-27 models.

It is evident that the decision to withdraw the Su-27 fighters from operational use was taken on other grounds: the refusal of the Russian manufacturer to guarantee the service of aircraft and the general unpreparedness of Belarusian generals to take responsibility for continued use of combat planes in this situation.

Already on 18 November, during a visit to the fighters' airbase in Baranavichy, Aliaksandr Lukashenka said that the withdrawal of the Su-27 fighters from the Belarusian Air Force was premature. The fighters should be retained in the Air Force reserves in case of a threat of armed conflict arising.

Lukashenka's participation at his event at the airbase in Baranavichy and the statements made there were addressed to Moscow which was in no hurry to transfer combat fighters to its ally. Even back in autumn 2012, after his talks with Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Lukashenka spoke of prospects for receiving new Russian combat jets, though these plans have obviously still not been realised.

The return of the Su-27 into the ranks of the Belarusian airforce and statements about the possibility of modernisation of its arsenal, including aviation weapons, by Belarus' own means should demonstrate to the Kremlin the ability of Belarus to have its own independent defence policy without increasing foreign military presence.

Bargaining for a Russian air force base in Belarus continues

On 14 November, Commander of the Air Force and Anti-Air Defence of Belarus Aleh Dvihaleu leaked information during a press conference that combat alert duty would be stationed at the air force base in Baranavichy and not in Lida as it was initially declared. The joint combat alert duty was supposed to start before the end of this year.

At the same time, it is unclear from Aleh Dvihaleu's statement whether it was about changing the deployment site of the Russian base or simply how the combat alert duty will be maintained from two bases – (the air force base in Baranavichy for the western direction and the base in Lida for the Baltic States). This change of plans for the deployment of a potential Russian base seems to be more probable.

There are several arguments in favour of transferring Russian planes from Lida. First, Baranavichy has the necessary infrastructure for the Su-27's operations, including an aircraft repair plant which specialises in this type of aircraft. Second, deployment of the Russian airbase in Baranavichy does not look as provocative as it would in Lida which is very

close to the borders of the baltic states.

However, subsequent events provide no answer to the dilemma associated with creating a Russian base. The disbanding of the helicopter base in Zashchyny, Pruzhany district, is all but a done deal. Moreover, there are plans to deploy some helicopters to Baranavichy itself.

The return of the Su-27 fighters to the ranks of the air force and the redeployment of some helicopters from the base in Zashchyny to Baranavichy could lead to a situation where there will be no place for the Russian base there. And the establishment of a Russian air force base in Lida is politically disadvantageous for Russia as it can be perceived as a provocation by Eastern European political elites.

It seems that Aliaksandr Lukashenka, after not getting commensurate compensation from the Russians for deployment of the airbase in the Belarusian territory, has decided to block the issue from moving forward for the time being.

Belarus tries to enter the market of combat robots

The Belarusian authorities continue to exert considerable efforts to promote domestic military products to foreign markets. In November, an agreement was reached on setting up the manufacturing of Belarusian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in Turkmenistan.

The Turkmen orders allow for stockpiling by domestic enterprises that manufacture components for the UAVs, including their charges, while supporting subsequent research projects in this field. More than this cannot be expected at this time as procurement from interested Belarusian agencies will be rather limited due to budgetary constraints.

Besides the UAVs, the domestic military industry has its hopes pinned on exports of the unmanned robotic combat vehicle "Adunok-M". Currently, efforts are under way to expand

the range of weapons which can be integrated into the vehicle. The export targets thus far are Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Indonesia, and Jordan. However, nothing is yet known about the products commercial achievements.

The one deterrent to exporting the "Adunok" is the fact that it is undergoing tests and has not yet been officially added to the armoury of the Belarusian military.

Andrei Parotnikau

Andrei is the head of "Belarus Security Blog" analytical project.