

# When Sanctions Work – The Belarus Buckle

Damon Wilson and David Kramer recently gave they account of how the United States pressure resulted in Belarus regime's release of political prisoners. David Kramer was the key figure in George W Bush administration responsible for dealing with Belarus.



It is interesting to see different approaches of the United States with their principled stand and the Realpolitik of Germany. According to Wilson and Kramer, the German embassy in Minsk was trying to strike a deal with Belarus authorities to let Alexander Kazulin, a former Belarus presidential candidate, quietly go into voluntary exile. Kazulin rejected that offer and was subsequently released without any conditions following the US pressure.

*Within two months of the asset freeze on Belneftekhim, an authoritative representative of the Lukashenka government quietly approached the U.S. Embassy in Minsk to ask what the American response would be if the regime released its political prisoners. Note that the regime approached the American embassy, not any European embassy, because it was the United States that kept ratcheting up the pressure against the government, backed up its threats when the regime continued to stall and whose political figures, from the President on down, used the bully pulpit to shine a light on authoritarianism and corruption in Belarus. Lukashenka and his cronies wanted to get out from under that bright light and free themselves from the pressure from sanctions, and the only way to do so was to release the political prisoners.*

*Within 48 hours of the American reply to the regime's*

*inquiry, the first of the prisoners was released. Most of the others soon followed. Unfortunately, the unwelcome intervention of one European Embassy in Minsk delayed the release of Kazulin, the most sensitive of the political prisoner cases. German Ambassador to Belarus Gebhardt Weiss had proposed to the Lukashenka regime that Germany take both Kazulin and his very ill wife, but Kazulin rejected this offer because he deemed it virtual exile. The intervention of Weiss, who never consulted with Kazulin before making the offer to the regime, may thus have delayed Kazulin's release from prison. Irina Kazulina, who was too ill to travel anyway, died several weeks later after a long but courageous bout with cancer.*

The full text of the article is available at [American Interest Online](#)

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## **Foreign Policy Magazine Names Belarusian Iryna Vidanava Among the World's Top Dissidents**



Foreign Policy has published a list of the World's Top Dissidents that includes a person from Belarus: Iryna Vidanava, founder and editor of the multimedia youth magazine 34. It is understood that 34 is the revived multimedia version version of *Studenckaja Dumka*, a

Belarusian language youth magazine that has earlier been banned in Belarus. Mrs. Vidanava's will to revive and to continue the magazine's existence in the difficult Belarusian conditions is indeed worth the highest admiration. Repressions from the Belarusian officials force 34 to be proactive and to seek new modern forms for it.

As a result, 34 is a product of much higher quality than any of the archaic and propagandist state media and is indeed a unique phenomenon in Belarus. It is strange, however, that Foreign Policy has ignored such well-known Belarusian dissident politicians as the 2006 oppositional presidential candidates Aliaksandr Milinkievich or Aliaksandr Kazulin. Kazulin has held a 52 days long hunger strike after being unlawfully arrested and sent to prison after the elections\*.

Zianon Pazniak, the exiled former leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, lives abroad since allegedly having faced murder threats in 1996. An other notable Belarusian dissident is Ales Bialiacki\*, head of the Belarusian Human Rights Centre *Viasna*. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 2006.

Iryna Vidanava: Some former Soviet republics have made modest strides in liberalizing their political culture, but Belarus is not one of them. Minsk is infamous for its harassment and intimidation of local media and curtailing freedom of speech – both areas in which Vidanava has fought back forcefully. Vidanava is the founder and editor in chief of 34 Multimedia Magazine, a publication aimed at promoting creativity, dissent, and democratic values in Belarusian young adults.

It's tough going: After years of police harassment, in 2005 Minsk finally decided to simply shut down 34 Multimedia Magazine. Yet Vidanava perseveres. In 2007, she founded CDMAG, a multimedia youth magazine published on compact disc that won the 2007 Gerd Bucerius Prize for press freedom in Eastern Europe. Read the full [article](#) and visit the [website](#) of 34 Multimedia Magazine.

# Looking Back at Presidential Elections in Belarus



Next year, Belarusians will vote in the fourth presidential election in their history as an independent nation. Belarus has been led by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka since 1994. This blogpost provides a brief overview of the President's three electoral victories and may be helpful for anticipating the results of the upcoming 2011 elections.

## 2011 Election

So far, two oppositional candidates have announced running for the Belarusian presidency. Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the leader of the Movement for Freedom, will run the second time. Ales Mikhalevich, the former Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front, said that he would participate, too. Mikhalevich was expelled from the Belarusian Popular Front for criticizing the party's leadership. He plans to campaign for the maintenance of Belarusian identity and culture, teaming up with Western-educated Belarusian professionals. There is a high probability that a third oppositional candidate will stand in the elections representing the United Democratic Forces (UDF). Even under the most democratic conditions, that considerably reduces the chances of any of them reaching a second round.

All political activity in the country is currently oriented toward April 25 local elections. All and sundry parties and

movements are busy registering their representatives for participation in the electoral councils.

The latest poll findings by the Independent Institute for Social Economic and Political Research indicate that 42.5 % would vote for Lukashenka, 4.3 % for Milinkevich, and 2.4% for Alyaksandr Kazulin, opposition candidate in 2006 elections.

## **2006 Election**

The Central Election Commission approved incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Alyaksandr Milinkevich (United Democratic Forces), Sergei Gaidukevich (Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus), Alyaksandr Kazulin (Belarusian Social Democratic Party) to run in 2006 election. Lukashenka was eligible to run again because of 2004 constitutional amendment abolishing presidential term limits. The amendment was supported by 77 to 48 % of voters, depending on the organization counting the votes. Before the elections, candidate Kazulin was arrested, beat up, and held in custody for eight hours. Many opposition activists were arrested as well.

Milinkevich called the election the opposition's "last chance" and "last battle," and in a miraculous fit of political activism, 92.6% of Belarusians voted in 2006, according to the Central Election Commission. Lukashenka won by a landslide, getting 82.6% of the vote.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) declared that the election "failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections" and that Lukashenka "permitted State authority to be used in a manner which did not allow citizens to freely and fairly express their will at the ballot box, and a pattern of intimidation and the suppression of independent voices was evident." The United States did not "accept the results of the election" and "support[ed] the call for a new election." However, the

Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) said the vote was open and transparent.

## **2001 Election**

Lukashenka's original five-year term ran out in 1999. However, 1996 referendum extended presidential term to seven years. In 2001 Lukashenka ran against two candidates: Vladimir Goncharik, the chairman of the Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions, and a member of the parliament disbanded in 1996, and Sergei Gaidukevich, dubbed Belarusian Zhirinovskiy in some Western media and representing the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus.

On the Election Day, international websites covering elections had their IP addresses blocked and Belarusians could not access such websites as 'svaboda.org', 'charter97.org', 'racyja.pl', 'goncharik.org', and 'vybor.org', which covered Belarusian presidential elections. The media that were not hindered, accused the United States of launching a campaign to subvert the election and topple Lukashenka, following the blueprint use to overthrow Yugoslavia's Slobodan Milosevic.

The OSCE international election observation mission reported that the Belarusian elections "failed to meet the OSCE commitments for democratic elections" and could not be internationally recognized. However, Lukashenka called his re-election "elegant and beautiful" in his victory speech. Russian observers also decreed Lukashenka's victory fair and democratic, applauding what they dubbed a convincing win.

## **1994 Election**

Setting the stage for the next 15 years, Belarusian first presidential election was dominated by debates about the country's relations with Russia. The debate was not between those for and those against closer ties with Moscow, however. Both candidates – Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich and populist director of a state farm Lukashenka – called for economic

union with the Eastern neighbor and argued over who of them opposed the dissolution of the Soviet Union the most. A crusader against corruption and inflation, Lukashenka scored an overwhelming victory, winning 80 % of votes. Interestingly, he told reporters he was “afraid that the election results will be falsified” and that is why he “sent 20,000 observers to polling stations.”

To read more about elections in Belarus visit:

[“Belarusian Opposition Prepares for Local and Presidential Elections”](#) by David Marples.

Newsline of Belarus’ local elections from the [special project by BelaPAN](#).

Q&A about Belarusian elections from 2008 in [BBCNews](#).

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## What Washington and Minsk Have to Talk About



On Friday, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Phillip Gordon listened more than he talked. Perhaps because he was not graced with the presence of the chief Belarusian orator, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Most likely, however, because Washington doesn’t have much to talk

about until Minsk lifts restrictions on the political opposition, allows independent media and NGOs to develop and takes other measures to improve its human rights record.

Gordon first talked with the representatives of the Belarusian opposition. Alyaksandr Kazulin, Siargei Kaliakin, Anatol Liaukovich, Anatol Liabedzka, Vincuk Viachorka, Viktar Karniaenka, Vital Rymasheuski, Valiancin Stefanovich, and Mihail Pashkevich briefed Gordon on the political situation in the country prior to his meeting with the presidential chief of staff and foreign minister.

According to the Foreign Ministry's terse account, "The sides discussed the development of Belarus-US relations, in particular taking advantage of the existing opportunities to expand the trade and economic cooperation and interaction in international security sphere."

According to the US Embassy, "During discussions with Belarusian government officials, he (Gordon) stressed the U.S. desire to continue to engage Belarus in a mutual effort to improve bilateral relations."

Gordon emphasized that the United States will not lift its sanctions on Belarus in exchange for the enlargement of its staff at the US embassy in Minsk. Sanctions will be lifted if there are actual improvements in political situation in the country, he said.

Gordon remarked that his visit to Belarus was made possible by the improvements like the release of the political prisoners. The Belarusian government needs to put a little more effort to have the sanctions lifted, however. Washington is ready to send an ambassador to Minsk, but it is up to Belarus to make it happen, stressed Gordon.

Read more about Gordon's visit in [\*The Washington Post\*](#).

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# The United States Mission to the OSCE on New Political Prisoners in Belarus

✘ Today the United States Mission to the OSCE has released the following statement regarding the arrest of political prisoners in Belarus:

*Madam Chairwoman,*

*The United States welcomed the August 2008 release of Belarusian political prisoners, including former Presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin. We also take note of additional steps the Belarusian authorities have taken, including granting permission for two independent newspapers to be distributed through state networks, the registration of the "For Freedom" movement, the formation of a public council through which to engage independent groups, and the commitment by the government of Belarus, as Ambassador Sychoy stated on January 30, 2009, to work closely with the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to rectify shortcomings in electoral laws and practices. These are all positive steps. But they are also limited in nature. We strongly encourage the Belarusian authorities to take further positive steps and ensure that progress is not reversed, and that follow-through is effective.*

*We share the concern of the European Union that in several important respects the Belarusian authorities have moved in a negative direction. Messrs. Yuri Leonov and Nikolay Avtukhovich, two former political prisoners, along with Mr.*

*Vladimir Osipenko, face charges in connection with an alleged arson case from several years ago. We urge the Belarusian authorities to ensure that judicial proceedings with regard to these cases are conducted in a fair, open, and transparent manner. As the United States has made clear, a key condition for improvement in U.S.-Belarus relations is progress on respect for human rights and democracy in Belarus.*

*As reported in the February 19, 2009 OSCE Office in Minsk Spot Report and by the International Federation of Human Rights, police forcefully dispersed peaceful demonstrators protesting these arrests in central Minsk on February 14 and 16.*

*And as the OSCE Office in Minsk also reported, three youth activists Franak Vyachorka, Ivan Shyla, and Zmitser Fedaruk have been forcibly drafted into the military. We understand that Messrs. Vyachorka and Fedaruk both had medical exemptions from military service and that Mr. Fedaruk has in fact undergone surgery for his condition. We are particularly concerned about reports that Mr. Vyachorka was beaten on the day he was forcibly taken to army barracks.*

*Progress on respect for human rights and democracy would lead to an improved relationship between the United States and Belarus.*

*Thank you Madam Chairwoman.*

*As prepared for delivery by Chargé d'Affaires Kyle Scott  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna*

*March 5, 2009*

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# The National Endowment for Democracy hosts an event on Belarus



*The International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and RFE/RL invite you to a briefing:*

## **Are Belarus' Overtures to the West Genuine?**

**Friday, December 12, 2008 9:00AM-10:30AM**

**National Endowment for Democracy 1025 F Street NW, Suite 800**  
[at the historic Woodward and Lothrop Building]

### **Presentations by**

**Olga Kazulina** *Activist and daughter of opposition leader, Alyaksandr Kazulin*

**Alyaksandr Klaskouski** *Director of Analytical Projects, BelaPAN news agency*

### **Introduced by**

**Rodger Potocki** *Director for Europe and Eurasia, National Endowment for Democracy*

**Please RSVP** by email to <[bobbiet@ned.org](mailto:bobbiet@ned.org)> or

by telephone to (202) 378-9525.

**D**espite the controversial September 2008 parliamentary elections in Belarus, which were widely denounced by western

observers as undemocratic, the European Union has followed through on pre-election pledges to loosen travel restrictions on Belarusian government officials, including President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Over the past year, Belarus has taken steps to release political prisoners and says it wants improved relations with the West. Is Belarus, which continues to actively repress domestic criticism and has reportedly offered to host Russian missiles on its territory, sincere in its stated wish to improve relations with Europe and America?

**Olga Kazulina** is the daughter of political prisoner and former presidential candidate

Alyaksandr Kazulin, who was arrested in March 2006 and sentenced to 5 1/2 years of imprisonment for his political actions against the Lukashenko regime. She is a member of the Social Democratic Party and the commission "Freedom for Kazulin and All Political Prisoners." Ms. Kazulina was the deputy director of the firm Alaktiv from 2005 until 2007, when she was fired after attending an opposition conference in Lithuania.

**Alyaksandr Klaskouski** is Director of Analytical Projects for the news agency BelaPAN and Editor-in-Chief of BelaPAN's Elections website. He also runs a popular political blog for the e-weekly *Nasha Niva* and writes a column for *Naviny.by*. Mr. Klaskouski is a regular contributor to RFE/RL's Belarus Service and BelSat, a Warsaw-based satellite television channel. Both speakers are in the U.S. at the invitation of the International Republican Institute to participate in events marking International Human Rights Day.

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