

Belarus is strengthening military cooperation with UAE

From 25 October to 6 November 2017, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka held an official visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Belarusian delegation included two of Lukashenka's sons: the elder, Viktor, and the youngest, Mikalaj. Despite taking time off for some autumn vacationing, the Belarusian leader also managed to make a couple of important agreements in the security sphere.

Belarus is developing both economic and security relations with UAE. This will likely result in new contracts in the defence industry. In addition, the UAE is providing more financial help and investment for Belarus.

An official, working vacation

Despite the fact that this year marks 25 years of diplomatic relations between Belarus and the UAE, the United Arab Emirates cannot be called a state of great importance for Belarusian foreign policy. The frequency of the Belarusian president's visits there confirms this: one can count five visits throughout the last ten years. In 2014 and 2016, Alexander Lukashenka visited the UAE accompanied by his younger son Mikalaj and his eldest son Viktor. In 2014, he even managed to play hockey in Abu Dhabi. Lukashenka also flew to the UAE in 2007 and 2013.

It is not the first time Lukashenka scheduled a trip to the UAE from the end of October to the beginning of November. In fact, this period is usually the time for autumn vacation in Belarusian schools. Apparently, 13-year-old Mikalaj Lukashenka, in particular, enjoys these sorts of "working visits."

Another important detail is that Lukashenka donned a tie only once during his 12-day visit. The tie made its appearance at a meeting with the Abu Dhabi crown prince. This suggests the primary reason for the visit was to take a rest and to provide a good vacation for the family, especially for his beloved youngest son Mikalaj. At the same time, the Belarusian leader managed to combine vacation with business. Indeed, Lukashenka discussed important issues in the security field.

On 2 November, Alexander Lukashenka met with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who was visiting the United Arab Emirates, too. In addition to discussing the implementation of previously reached agreements, the two presidents also brought up security cooperation. For example, they highlighted the resumption of work by a bilateral commission to properly demarcate the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. The meeting between Poroshenko and Lukashenka highlighted [urgent issues in Belarus-Ukraine relations](#), which need to be solved at the highest level.



Alexander Lukashenka & Petro Poroshenko
in UAE

Earlier, on 27 October, the Belarus's presidential press-office reported the agreement of a loan between the Development Bank of Belarus and the Khalifa Fund for Entrepreneurship Development. The Fund will provide the Bank with about \$25m for the development of private initiatives, innovation and regional projects, and the creation of jobs in Belarus.

Economic relations between the two states are improving. From January to August 2017, exports from Belarus to the UAE amounted to \$44.8m (an approximately 318 per cent increase compared to the same period last year). For the first 6 months of 2017, the amount of direct UAE investment to Belarus

exceeded \$11m (more, than for the whole last year).

Strategic interests

On 5 November, Alexander Lukashenka met with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander-in-Chief Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. They discussed spheres of bilateral cooperation and prospects for the further development of relations. It is probable, though, the main item on the agenda was security and defence. Especially, taking recent developments into consideration.

On 15–16 October 2017, Abu Dhabi hosted the eighth meeting of the Joint Belarusian-UAE Committee for Military-Technical Cooperation. According to the official press-release, committee members discussed the implementation of previous decisions and their aftereffects. New cooperation projects were also put forward. The sides noted the high level of cooperation achieved and confirmed their mutual interest in the further development of military-technical cooperation between Belarus and the UAE.



“Yabhon Flash 20” UAV by ADCOM Systems

Earlier, during a military parade in Minsk on 3 July 2017, people could observe an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the BELAR YS-EX, which is a modification of the Yabhon Flash 20 UAV manufactured by UAE company ADCOM Systems. For their part, UAE representatives showed interest in Belarus’s own Berkut UAV, which is developed by the 558 Aircraft Repair Plant.

Four enterprises will represent the Belarusian military industry at the 2017 Dubai Airshow from 12–16 November 2017: (1) Closed joint stock company BelTechExport; (2) Open joint

stock company (OJSC) KB Radar—the management company for Radar Systems holding; (3) OJSC 2566 Electronic Weapons Repair Plant; and (4) the Scientific and Production Centre of Multifunctional Unmanned Systems at the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (which is a state unitary enterprise).

From harems to tank tractors

In late March 2016, the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MWTP) and the Al Badie Trading Establishment, a company from the United Arab Emirates, signed a contract to supply the UAE Defence Ministry with tank tractors. The all-wheel drive (8×8) MZKT-741351 tractor—equipped with either the MZKT-999 421 or the MZKT-837 211 trailer—can carry up to three tracked and wheeled armoured vehicles or 20 to 40-foot containers weighing up to 136 tons.

For Belarus, the purchase of these particular vehicles is significant. The UAE already has 20 American Oshkosh M1070A0 tractors. The Belarusian and American vehicles are propelled by the same engine, the Caterpillar C18 diesel. However, the key difference is that the Belarusian MWTP tractor has more power (812 hp). Given the almost two-fold superiority in load capacity (136 tons vs. 75), a slight lag in the maximum speed (70 km/h vs. 80 km/h) is negligible.



MZKT-741351

Indeed, MWTP has been somewhat of a success story in the UAE market. MWTP's first contract dates back to a private order by a sheikh in 1997. The sheikh wished to have a "mobile apartment" when he took falconry trips into the desert. The full motorcade consisted of three heavy vehicles: the first one for the sheikh, the second for his harem, and the third one for goods.

MWTP successfully fulfilled the order, fitting special wheeled chassis to the MZKT-79097-30 for the desert conditions. The extraordinary contract was delivered on time and with high quality. After that, UAE leaders saw MWTP as a trusted supplier, capable of developing and fitting tractors for different needs.

While the finance and investment statistics continue to improve, Belarus-UAE relations are focusing not just on economic issues, but on security cooperation, too. The Emirates are looking for new, and relatively cheap, technologies and products in Belarus. Belarusian officials are trying to attract Arab investments and to gain access to Western military technologies, which are restricted due to sanctions. One can expect joint projects in electronic and radioelectronic warfare, as well as information security. Belarus will also try to get more involved in the UAV high-tech market in order to improve its own force capabilities and to become influential in this fast-developing, niche market.

Will Azerbaijan help Belarus to become more independent?

On 8 October 2017, Defence Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Colonel-General Zakir Hasanov, visited Minsk. The visit lasted until 10 October. During the visit, Hasanov held meetings with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka as well as with all the senior military leadership of the country.

The Azerbaijani guest probably made an agreement with his Belarusian counterparts on widening military industrial

cooperation and supplying Baku with “Polonaise” multiple launch rocket systems. Azerbaijan deems the new weapons necessary to balance an Armenian military build-up.

“Iskander” vs “Polonaise”

One should definitely pay attention to the structure of the visit. First, Colonel-General Hasanov met with President Lukashenka. The Belarusian leader’s words during the meeting were vague yet revealing. “I do not want to make excuses about the nature of our cooperation. I just want to say that our relationship does not in any case violate any international treaties or resolutions of the UN Security Council. We are sovereign independent states, and we are entitled to identify the areas of cooperation which correspond to the time and the needs of our countries,” stated Lukashenka.



“Iskander-E” in Armenia. Source: azatutyun.am

Such statements hint at serious intentions of military-technical cooperation, particularly in the supply of Belarusian “Polonaise” multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to Azerbaijan. The arrangements have a certain logic: Armenia’s deployment of Russian “Iskander-E” tactical missile complexes on its territory has forced Baku to look for a symmetrical response.

The “Iskander-E” tactical missile complex can reach targets up to 280 km away. Armenia thus has a missile range that covers almost all of Azerbaijan. With the latest modifications, the Belarusian “Polonaise” system is capable of shooting to 300 km. This modification was presented during the ADEX-2016 military exhibition in Baku last year. Azerbaijan has also shown interest in Belarusian developments in areas of electronic warfare, radar systems, wheel chassis and anti-

aircraft missile systems.

Belarusian weapons for Azerbaijani oil

Having discussed the main issues of military cooperation with President Lukashenka, Colonel-General Hasanov spoke on more technical questions to the country's top military leadership. On 10 October, the Azerbaijani Defence Minister signed a military cooperation plan for 2018 together with his Belarusian counterpart [Andrej Raŭkoŭ](#). As is usual in such cases, the details of the plan remain unknown to the public.

On the same day, Colonel-General Hasanov met with Belarusian State Military-Industrial Committee Chairman [Alieh Dvihalioŭ](#). In addition, Hasanov visited the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant and the "Belspetsvneshtekhnika" state enterprise, which, among other things, deals in arms exports. The Azerbaijani defence minister familiarized himself with the latest modifications to the MLRS "Polonaise," as well as with air defence and electronic warfare means. At the final stage of his visit to Belarus, Hasanov held a discussion with Belarus Security Council Secretary [Stanislaŭ Zaś](#).

It is also important to note that Secretary Zaś met with the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, during his visit to Baku on 27 September 2017. Once again, military and industrial cooperation represented the main topic of the meeting. Supposedly, the Belarusian security council secretary came with a proposition to Baku and discussed the details with President Aliyev. The following step was Zakirov's visit to Minsk in order to present Azerbaijan's answer and sign the documents.



Zakir Hasanov near MLRS
"Polonaise". Source:
bsblog.info

While Baku mainly orients itself around military cooperation, Minsk is also hoping for the growth of economic relations between the two states. There is an assumption that the Belarusian military industrial complex might get financial support from Azerbaijan to develop and produce new weapons. With the economic slowdown Belarus is experiencing at the moment, such collaboration seems optimal for both states.

At the same time, Belarusian authorities are working to [diversify the inflow of energy resources to Belarus](#). Previous deals to supply Belarusian refineries with Azerbaijani oil have been successful. Widening such cooperation is essential for Minsk against a background of continually worsening relations with Russia.

On the subject of propitious Belarusian-Azerbaijani projects in various spheres, one should remember that Lukashenka and Aliyev are on good personal relations. The Belarusian leader visits Azerbaijan as often as Russia and China, which means places high importance on ties with Azerbaijan.

Loud Yerevan, silent Moscow

The character of Belarusian-Azerbaijani relations raises serious questions in Armenia and Russia, who are Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) members along with Belarus. This situation becomes even more complex when the Belarus-Armenia relationship is taken into account. On the same day Colonel-General Hasanov began his tour of Minsk, Belarusian Special Operations Forces completed their maneuvers as part of the CSTO "Search-2017" military exercises, which took place on Armenian territory. This can serve as a canonical example of the Belarusian authorities' much-touted

“multi-vector foreign policy.”

But in terms of the Azerbaijan-Belarus relationship, one can expect harsh rhetoric from Yerevan. It is important to remember that at one time Armenia proposed to exclude Belarus from the CSTO. From the end of 2016 to the beginning of 2017, Belarus and Kazakhstan both attempted to block the appointment of an Armenian representative to the position of CSTO head. Supplying strategic weapons to Baku will definitely not make relations between Minsk and Yerevan any better.



Alexander Lukashenka and Ilham Aliyev.

Source: kp.by

One can't expect Russia to publicly show its disapproval of Belarusian-Azerbaijani cooperation. Moscow's options are to try to contain their partnership or to pressure Belarus. The reason for Russia's indirect reaction is clear: Russia itself is the largest weapons supplier to Baku. But Armenian authorities seem to have ignored this fact. They can blame Belarus for destabilizing the region and undermining the national security of a CSTO member-state, but Yerevan will never make the same claims of the Kremlin. Indeed, especially not after having deployed Russian strategic weapons on its own territory.

The development of cooperation with Azerbaijan plays extremely important role for Belarus in the light of the latest Belarusian security agenda. After the [failure to carry out an information and public relations campaign](#) during the “West-2017” military exercises and a number of provocations from Russia, Belarus is trying to restore its image as an independent actor.

Thus, working together with Baku on strategically important projects should prove to the international community,

including close neighbours, that Minsk is a true sovereign player on the international stage and a stable partner in the security sphere. Arguably, this is even more valuable at present than temporary economic benefits for Belarus.

Why is the West afraid of the West-2017 exercises?

On 21 July 2017, Alexander Lukashenka visited Kyiv and met with Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko. After the meeting, Poroshenko stated that he had received guarantees of security and that Ukraine would never be threatened from Belarusian territory.

However, the very same day, Ukrainian Minister of Defence Stepan Poltorak voiced a different view: 'Ukraine and the world have a common vision of the possible prospects of the exercises of the Russian Armed Forces. The forthcoming [West-2017 exercises](#) are extremely large; they can be used to launch an aggression not only against Ukraine, but against any other country in Europe that shares a common border with Russia.'

Ukraine sounds the alarm

Poltorak was not the only one to voice his concerns: on 7 July 2017, the Chief of General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Viktor Muzhenko, also spoke about the possibility of Russian troops remaining in Belarus after the exercises were over. He underlined the high probability of Russia leaving behind hidden stores of weapons, military equipment, and

material and technical means in Belarus.

Muzhenko also stressed that the West-2017 exercises pose a threat to Ukraine and NATO: 'According to our information, the number of Russian troops to participate in the exercises has now been increased from the declared 3,000 to 5,000 people. This can be regarded as a measure to build up Russia's combat potential on the borders of our state, as well as on the borders of Poland and the Baltic states.' However, given that no reliable sources were provided to back up these claims, they could very well be provocation against Belarus.



Alexander Lukashenka and Petro Poroshenko.

Source: euroradio.fm

Ukraine's position as a first-line whistle-blower in relation to the Belarusian-Russian exercises is mainly promoted by the Ukrainian military establishment. Their statements are immediately broadcast by Ukrainian and foreign media, which strengthens the image of Belarus as an object or at least a base for Russian military aggression. In this context, Belarus is not seen as an independent actor on the international arena.

These alarmist statements from Ukrainian military leaders can be explained by the fact that the country is undergoing military reforms to bring it up to NATO standards; these reforms include a radical decrease in the number of command staff (especially generals). Thus, Ukrainian generals may be employing tough rhetoric regarding West-2017 in order to create the image of a serious threat, thereby making themselves seem less dispensable.

A Trojan horse

At the same time, certain NATO states have been expressing fears about West-2017 since the beginning of the year. On 14 March 2017, Polish Defence Minister Antoni Macierewicz stated: 'we should be ready for Russian troops possibly staying on the territory of Belarus after the forthcoming West-2017 exercises.' Earlier, on 29 April 2017, Estonian Minister of Defence Margus Tsahkna stated that Russia could take advantage of the large-scale military exercises to deploy thousands of soldiers in Belarus as a warning to NATO. He added that he had got his information from Estonian intelligence.



Ben Hodges. Source: republic.com.ua

On 21 July 2017, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, Commanding General of the U.S. Army in Europe, called West-2017 a 'Trojan horse'. He added that although Russia speaks of 'exercises', nevertheless its forces could end up staying.

Belarus's only neighbour (apart from Russia, of course) which appears unfazed by the exercises is Latvia. On 19 July 2017, Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics, following a meeting with [Uładzimir Makiej](#) in Minsk, stated: 'We have no more questions about the West-2017 exercises. My Belarusian colleague explained the position of Belarus very thoroughly, and I'm satisfied.'

Dangerous misunderstandings

The main problem with the West-2017 exercises is that they are being held at the exact same time as the Russian large-scale exercise 'West'. These are two different events, but they have almost the same name and are being held at the same time.

Thus, the joint exercises in Belarus are perceived to be part of a larger Russian event. The Ukrainian, Western, and especially Russian media often fail to differentiate between the two exercises.

Notably, this coincidence is reflected in the position of Belarusian Defence Minister [Andrej Raŭkoŭ](#), who once stated that West-2017 would cover a territory from the Barents Sea to Brest. By making such statements, as well as by categorically refusing to comment on the possibility of Russian troops staying in Belarus after the exercises, the Belarusian Defence Ministry only provides fodder for speculation.

Misunderstandings abound: media coverage of the exercises makes it seem like Russia really is holding a large-scale exercise with an offensive agenda in Belarus. However, this is far from reality. The ultimate goal of this information wave is to undermine Belarus's image and harm its [relations](#) with the West and Ukraine. So far, it seems like this endeavour has met with some success.



Lukashenka with a Kalashnikov rifle. Source: solnzepodobny.livejournal.com

A strong need for transparency

Russia certainly benefits from being perceived as a threat. Moreover, it is the only regional actor interested in the deterioration of relations between Belarus and the West: it wants to demonstrate its exclusive influence in Belarus and diminish Belarus's role on the international arena, showing to

be part of the Russian military system. This attitude often encourages the government in Minsk to be relatively complaisant in negotiations concerning political, economic, and military issues; it also pushes it to further integrate with Russia.

If Belarus wants to be perceived as a more or less 'neutral' state, it should make West-2017 as transparent as possible. Maximum media coverage with complete explanations would go a long way. Likewise, inviting foreign observers to all stages of the exercises would be the bare minimum needed to assuage sceptics.

Naturally, Russia would not welcome such measures and would surely grumble in retaliation. Alexander Lukashenka has spoken repeatedly about his willingness to provide the best conditions for foreign observers and guarantee the full transparency of the exercises. It is crucial that he stick to this word: at the moment, the image of the Belarusian state depends to a large degree on his success in fulfilling this task.

Belarus - Iran: Noisy Friendship Without Real Results

Belarusian State Oil Company "Belarusnafta" can no longer extract oil in Iran. According to official statements released this week the Iranian side decided that the Belarusian company had not fulfilled the contract's conditions and revoked its extraction permit. This case illustrates the nature of Belarus-Iranian relations – they are deprived of any real

meaning despite all efforts by political leadership to fill them with content.

Could it be a kind of 'quid pro quo', after Belarus declared its intent to shut down the Iranian Samand cars assembly line in the country? The plant existed since 2008, but failed to organize a sustainable production of cars. Nevertheless, the project was important for the image of the Iranian company which tries to go beyond national borders and become a global player.

The Iranian regime certainly used new contacts with Belarus in its propaganda – as a demonstration of a "breakthrough to a new European market." Iranian pro-government media devoted significant attention to projects, visits and exhibitions in Minsk. The negative aspects were omitted – even the opposition Iranian media this February did not notice the statement by the Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Semashko that the project of producing "Samand" cars in Belarus failed and the assembly line facilities may be given to another, Chinese automaker.

Iranian news agency "Fars" still vigorously writes about global success of "Iran Khodro" – the company implementing the project. Now, it exports cars to thirty countries and its production plants are located on four continents – in Syria, Venezuela, Belarus, Egypt, Senegal and Azerbaijan. "The Senegal plant procures the needs of the African market and the Belarus plant meets the demands of the Commonwealth of Independent States." At the same time Iranian media periodically discuss the possible bankruptcy of the company.

The economic effect of the Belarusian-Iranian relations is modest. Just last year the bilateral trade volume has exceeded the symbolic mark of \$100 million – although this target for trade volume has been set long ago in 2004, during a visit to Minsk by then Iranian President Khatami. For the Belarusian side, however, more important is that out of approximately one

hundred million dollars more than ninety million are Belarusian exports to Iran. For a nation with a chronic negative foreign trade balance it is a noticeable sum.

There are few large projects underway between Belarus and Iran. The oil extraction has been a point of pride for president Lukashenka, yet it never has had tangible economic effect. Iranian investments in Belarus materialized only in form of quite ordinary construction, logistics, and low-technology production projects.

Of course, while working with Iran, some Belarusian companies were sanctioned by the US government. However, the sanctions had a more preventive than punitive nature. In 2004, it was Belvneshpromservis, in 2011 – Beltekheksport, BelOMO and Belarusnafta [were](#) also subject to sanctions. Some experts even believe that Belarusnafta decided to voluntarily leave Iran to avoid American sanctions rather than thrown out by the Iranian government. Anyway, recently some Belarusian officials began to criticize projects with Iranian involvement.

The Iranian side, too, was not satisfied with the relationship. The current Iranian ambassador in Minsk Abdullah Hosseini said in summer 2009, "The administration system of this country [Belarus] is not too smooth (ravan), it has a peculiar bureacracy and lack of regular sea route with the Iranian side is a noticeable problem." Another problem, according to Mr. Hosseini, is that "the English language in this country is not widespread."

Of course, the Iranian ambassador always had trust in Lukashenka. In the same speech two years ago Mr. Hosseini said, "Now, taking into consideration the political situation in Belarus, it seems to me that in the five-year perspective, we will not see major changes in this country and its interests are so intertwined in a knot with Russia that it is not capable to separate its political structure from Russia."

At the same time the Belarusian regime is extremely careful in dealing with Tehran. In particular it avoids high-level military-related contacts with Iranian officials. This approach contrasts with usual policy of the Belarusian government which prioritizes military and security-related issues in its cooperation with developing countries. Despite numerous allegations, Belarus most likely never tried to sell Iran anything sensitive, as anti-aircraft S-300 systems or radars. Last time when Minsk sold Iran military equipment was in early 2000s. Then Belarus supplied several T-72 tanks.

The contracts were concluded with support from Iranian reformist president Khatami. The statements on these contracts were duly filed with the UN conventional arms trade register.

Lukashenka always distanced himself from the ideological and geopolitical premises of Iranian regime, including its anti-Americanism and anti-Israeli rhetoric, especially after Ahmadinejad's came to power. Lukashenka's attitude towards Iran, as towards the developing world in general, has always been opportunistic – to work wherever possible using capacities already existing in Belarus. And the Soviet-era capacities rather limited his choice of partners. Unlike Hugo Chavez or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the Belarusian leader has no stable ideological preferences.

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Lukashenka's New Information War with Russia

During a recent press conferences, Belarusian TV propagandist Yury Prakopau asked Belarusian President a question: "Why

Russia conducts unfair policy towards Belarus, and doesn't help it in the time of crisis, as the EU helps Greece?" Lukashenka answered: "Yury, don't provoke me. I have enough as it is. Everybody understands it anyway. We'll overcome it".

After the presidential election of December 19 Lukashenka temporarily stopped the anti-Russian information campaign and accused the West of supporting a coup d'état in Belarus. During that period the main topic of Yury Prakopau's shows was devious intentions and actions of the West. Lukashenka simmered for a long time when Moscow was making demands to sell enterprises to Russian companies and make other steps towards genuine integration, as the Kremlin sees it. Now, Lukashenka "lets off the steam". Once again, an anti-Russian information campaign unfolds in Belarus.

Yury Prakopau is a presenter of the evening news on the First Belarusian State Television Channel. He can be called a mouthpiece of the Presidential Administration. Lukashenka calls Prakopau by first name only: "Yury", as a close collaborator.

Lukashenka gave Prakopau the opportunity to say in plain language what he was thinking himself of the relations with the eastern neighbor: "The Kremlin ideologists gave an order to their media: say either bad or nothing about Belarus". "All claims of the Russian side to the president of Belarus are explained by the fact that he does not agree to sell out the country. The goal of the Russian policy is to force selling enterprises to oligarchs. They robbed their own country and now they are eager to get to Belarus".

According to Prakopau, the 'silent protest actions' in Minsk and other large cities of Belarus on June 15 and June 22, 2011 were "stage-managed in Moscow, like all other anti-Belarusian deeds." According to him, "the Kremlin experts believe that the Belarusian authorities will lose their ground, facing

modern web-technologies.” Prakopau established a linkage between the insidious plans of Russia, the silent protest actions, and the stirred up ‘Tell the Truth!’ civil campaign. He was trying to convince the audience that these were the parts of the same system.

Dwelling about a recent silent protest action, Prakopau noted that several hundreds of drunken youngsters participated in the event. “The leader of ‘Tell the Truth’ civil campaign Neklayev was there. Having got out of jail, he fell back into his old ways,” he added. Prakopau was trying to drive the audience at the notion that Uladzimir Neklayev and other leaders of ‘Tell the Truth’ civil campaign might be sent back to prison, since they act in the interest of Russia and its oligarchs.

Actually, the on-line announcements and news stories of “Revolution through the Social Network” civil campaign, calling the Belarusian people to take part in the silent protest actions, must have been created by professionals. Hardly could bloggers deal with production of such materials.

However, there is little chance the silent protest actions will grow into large manifestations against the Lukashenka regime. Several thousands of protest action participants in Minsk and several hundreds of people in the regional centers are quickly dispersed by Lukashenka’s security agents. The silent protest actions will not cause the change of power in the country. Still, they can lead to the appearance of new political prisoners in the Belarusian jails.

Obviously Russia is eager to drive Lukashenka into a corner and catch him by the throat there. The Kremlin is interested in filling the Belarusian jails with new political prisoners. The news programs of Russian TV channels pay serious attention to the crisis in the Belarusian currency market and the silent protest actions nowadays.

"The Belarusians go out to the streets," the Russian 'REN-TV' reported on June 28, 2011. "The Belarusian rubles have turned into "funny money" and people spend days and nights in queues for the foreign currency. The people stormed into stores. The situation became uncontrolled," the Russian "NTV" TV channel's news announcer noted on June 29, 2011. "Russia's subsidies to Belarus have amounted to USD 60 billion over the recent years. The Belarusian economy will not survive without the Russian assistance," a Russian political scientist Andrei Suzdaltsev said. "Now, the only remaining chance for Lukashenka is to appear under Russia's wing. Should Belarus introduce the Russian ruble as its monetary unit, the Belarusian economy will become stable all at once and get rid of quite a few current problems immediately," another Russian political scientist Viacheslav Nikonov summarized the general idea at the end of the program.

Lukashenka expressed his stern will to stand up to the pressure from the West and the East in his speech, dedicated to the Belarus' Independence Day, delivered on July 1, 2011:

we are attacked and tested for hardness nowadays. Somebody hates us for failing to march in the common formation and dance to the Brussels tune. Others regard us as an unpleasant example, thrown in their teeth. The country hasn't been plundered. We don't have a gap between the provocative luxury and the flagrant poverty. Somebody feels infuriated at the impossibility to buy and sell public positions and spend billions of money from public funds to offshore zones here.

Our enemies treated certain problems we faced in the financial and economic field as a signal to action. Some types, who name themselves politicians through a misunderstanding, inside Belarus and abroad keep relishing the emerged difficulties so enthusiastically, as though they have taken their hand in creating the plight. Calm down! You won't manage to catch the desired golden fish in the troubled waters. Even more so you won't be able to force us to our

knees.

He continued the topic of resistance to the West and Russia in his speech at the ceremony of opening the military parade in Minsk on July 3, 2011. Particularly, Lukashenka [addressed](#) the following words to Russia: “Someone intends to use the weapons of mass informational destruction against us and impose their will on us.”

Lukashenka treats the demand of the West to release the political prisoners as a much smaller danger to independence of Belarus in comparison with Russia’s demands to sell the industrial enterprises, unify the monetary systems, and take other steps towards the ‘real’ integration, as seen by the Kremlin.

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Whom to Blame for the 11 April Terrorist Attack?

In less than two days after the 11 April attack, Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced that the investigation resulted in capture of the suspected terrorist. According to Belarusian security services, the terrorist was a mentally ill person who had constructed a unique radio-controlled explosive device using the internet.

Police also detained a few more people from Vitsebsk, a regional center in Northern Belarus, in connection with the

blast. The authorities also announced that the same people prepared two other blasts in public places in 2005 and 2008. The team of investigators, led by Andrei Shved, shared little evidence to support their findings. The authorities also made sure that their findings were not questioned in the state-controlled media. As a result, the Belarusian public remains very suspicious.

For instance, the leading Belarusian portal tut.by (which is not linked to the opposition) showed that over 60% of people polled linked the terrorist act with the authorities. The portal had to promptly remove those results from their website in order not to anger Belarusian authorities. Polls on opposition web sites showed even more mistrust towards the officially announced version.

President Lukashenka continues to hint at links between the opposition and the blast without giving any evidence to support it. Yesterday several human rights activists were detained in connection with the blast. No further details of their alleged involvement were given. In less than two days after the 11 April attack, Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced that the investigation resulted in capture of the suspected terrorist. According to Belarusian security services, the terrorist was a mentally ill person who had constructed a unique radio-controlled explosive device using the internet. Police also detained a few more people from Vitsebsk, a regional center in Northern Belarus, in connection with the blast.

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Belarusian authorities prevent any discussion of the terrorist act in state-controlled media. As a result, Belarusians have to relieve their thirst for uncensored information on Internet. The number of visits to independent and opposition web sites has grown significantly. Although web sites such as charter97.org were blocked in Belarusian state establishments and suffered from DOS attacks, their popularity is much higher than that of the state-run media. Last week, the authorities issued official warnings to the leading independent newspapers – Nasha Niva and Narodnaya Volya and several journalists. Nasha Niva may now be shut down at any time.

The reason for the Nasha Niva warning was that the newspaper published information that while Lukashenka was visiting the crime scene there was a young woman still alive. It appears that the woman was not there, but subsequently released pictures showed there were a number of uncovered dead bodies when Lukashenka visited the scene.

Belarusian authorities cracked down not only on independent newspapers and internet web sites, but also on individual bloggers for “spreading rumours”. Several people were detained for posting untruthful information on the internet. Massive repressions, however, against the opposition comparable to the post-election crackdown have not yet followed. With the exception of the yesterday’s detentions, the authorities primarily use the terrorist act for propaganda purposes.

Both the opposition and the authorities accuse each other of using the terrorist act to reach their immediate political goals. Mutual accusations of the regime and the opposition in organizing the terrorist act show just how bad the political climate in the country is. It is hardly possible to imagine that authorities in Russia or Ukraine, let alone Western countries, would blame their opposition for terrorists acts. In Belarus, however, it is becoming the norm.

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Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act Passes US Congress Committee

The headlines of stories about the US Congress like the one above are among the few opportunities for the words “Belarus” and “democracy” to stand next to each other. Last week, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee approved yet another piece of legislation on Belarus – “The Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011” sponsored by Representative Christopher H. Smith. The bill is now heading to the full House of Representatives for a vote.

This legislation, H.R. 515, supports human rights in Belarus. Importantly, the bill authorized aid for pro-democracy forces and funding for broadcasting to the country. H.R. 515 also calls for blocking assets owned by senior Belarusian officials, and their families, involved in anti-democratic actions. The bill supports targeted sanctions and demands the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners. It also requires the US administration to report to Congress on Belarusian arms sales abroad, censorship or surveillance of the internet, as well as the personal assets and wealth of governmental figures.

Smith, the sponsor of the bill, has championed Belarusian rights also in previous sessions of Congress. A republican senator currently in his 16th term in the U.S. House of Representatives, Smith chairs the Human Rights Subcommittee and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). He authored the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 and the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006—passed the House

and Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support. In his Apr. 14 opening statement, Smith was unequivocal in his denunciation of the Belarusian regime. He said, "Lukashenka's dictatorship has the worst democracy and human rights record of any government in Europe." He stressed that the sanctions were "aimed at the senior leadership" and that the United States stood "with the Belarusian people against their oppressors."

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14 opening statement, Smith was unequivocal in his denunciation of the Belarusian regime. He said, "Lukashenka's dictatorship has the worst democracy and human rights record of any government in Europe." He stressed that the sanctions were "aimed at the senior leadership" and that the United States stood "with the Belarusian people against their oppressors."

The Democracy Acts condemning Belarus human rights violations have a long history. The first Act was introduced to the U.S. Congress in November 2001 after the controversial presidential elections. The bill legislated the freeze of the Belarusian assets in the United States, prohibited trade with Belarusian government-run businesses, denied Belarusian officials entry in the United States; and proposed a \$30 million appropriation to support democratic institutions and organizations in Belarus. The March 2003 version of the legislature increased the amount to \$40 million. In contrast, the 2004 Belarus Democracy Act contained no prohibitions of the travel of Belarusian officials or U.S. exports to Belarus. It also omitted reference to Russia's role in promoting democracy in Belarus. The 2004 act was reauthorized in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

The primary value of the previous US Democracy Acts is in increasing U.S. aid for democratic institutions and civil society initiatives in Belarus. To date, the aid that the US provided through other channels has been modest (\$11.5 million in FY2009, and \$15 million (allocated) in FY2010). Moreover, its efficiency has suffered from the noncooperation of the Belarusian regime (for example, the U.S. diplomatic staff in Belarus has been reduced to five people after a diplomatic dispute). The Obama administration has requested \$14 million in aid in FY2011, but only \$9.6 million of this amount is designated for "political competition and consensus-building" and "civil society."

What impact will the bill have if it passes Congress and

becomes law? Smith hopes it will serve as a “signal to Lukashenka” and “propel[s] this policy forward amidst the administration’s competing priorities.” Yet history shows that economic leverage rarely translates into political gains. In fact, if the sanctions do have any effect in Belarus, it may be strengthening the authoritarian regime. After all, it would be naïve to think that the Belarusian officials would be eager to make a trip to the United States or that they would not know better than to keep their assets in the US and EU banks. Back in 2004, President Lukashenka would say he “could not get a better gift.” His reasoning went as follows, “If you scold me for seeking internal and external enemies, why are you giving me a pretext for finding such an enemy outside the country? Why are you supplying me with such a chance?”

The most the sanctions can accomplish is signal the United States’ resolve to exert pressure and its intolerance for human rights violations globally. Unfortunately, they impose little strain or cost on Washington, and therefore lack weight and credibility, which was acknowledged by Lukashenka himself in 2009 when he told the US delegation visiting Minsk, “If you are strong people, you should repeal this law and abrogate these sanctions that are meaningless to the US.”

However, the sanctions do irk the authoritarian leader. For instance, in 2009, Lukashenka said lifting the US sanctions and repealing the Democracy Act were the preconditions for returning the US ambassador to Minsk. Most importantly, the increased aid toward civil society development and the pro-democratic forces in the country will have an immense positive effect in the long run.

VC

Lukashenka in the Russian Hands

The worst nightmare of the Belarusian regime is a serious confrontation with Russia and the West at the same time if both parties agreed to the removal of Lukashenka. Of course, this scenario is hard to imagine but it is equally difficult to imagine such change without coordination between these stakeholders. The internal opposition is nearly crushed in Belarus but public dissatisfaction with Lukashenka's rule is widespread in Belarusian society as never before.

The game is between Lukashenka, Russia and the West, with organized opposition as a minor player, often used as a whipping boy. The Friday news came as a threat to Minsk that its nightmare can materialize. Russia, together with the IMF, is willing to help Belarus' struggling Belarus economy, but only if the Belarusian government will continue reforms, said Russian finance minister Alexei Kudrin on Friday at the forum on US-Russian relations in Washington.

Kudrin's statement demonstrated that Lukashenka cannot count on unconditional support from Moscow or, perhaps, anyone at all. Much worse, Moscow recently showed that it agreed with the West even on such international 'hot cases' such as Libya. As Russia and China left Qaddafi without their protection, Belarusian state media were outraged that the Chinese and Russians ignored the fate of their long-standing partner. Though there are few reasons to compare Lukashenka's rule with the rule of Qaddafi, it became clear that Lukashenka could not rely on his foreign allies anymore. At the moment, the Russian government – more firmly than ever – is holding the Belarusian regime in its hands. It deprived Belarus of its long-time lucrative business of reprocessing cheap Russian crude oil for sale of refined oil products in the West. Taking away this source of profit from Lukashenka, Moscow ruined the whole

political economy of Belarusian regime. How exactly important it is, is the subject of a recent admission by Belarusian economist Georgi Gryts. According to him, about half of all Belarus' exports are generated from by just three sources – oil, potash and black metals.

In accordance with the new arrangements on oil, Belarusians no longer be able to ear big money on refining and reselling Russian oil because a significant share of the profits now go straight into Russian pockets. After Russia introduced these arrangements, the question of an economic crisis for Belarusian regime became only a matter of time. The hard currency reserves of Belarusian National Bank diminished month by month.

The panic finally gripped the Belarusian population watching such developments as they continue to expect a new devaluation of the national currency. Losing its economic foundation, the Belarusian government could only turn to Russia for new loans. The West was not an option following post-election accusations against some Western countries through Belarus' propaganda and the arrogant political line taken by the Foreign Ministry of Belarus supporting Qaddafi. When in mid-March Russian Prime Minister Putin visited Minsk, the most important issue on the table were new loans to Belarus.

It seemed settled that Lukashenka would get ca. USD 13 billion: 6 billion for a nuclear power plant, 2 billion from Anti-crisis Fund of the Eurasian Economic Union (EurAzES), one billion dollars as in credit from the Russian government and USD 4.3 billion in the form of oil subsidies. Yet something went terribly wrong for Minsk and now Lukashenka is being pressured to make reforms and threatened to be deprived of the promised money. The situation could hardly be worse. The brutal crackdown which followed the presidential elections on December 19th and the terrorist attack of April 11th shocked the nation. People are now hunting for dollars and euros and buying up as much food, commodity products and cars as they

can, quite reasonably expecting them to get much more expensive.

The measures taken by Belarus' government so far have proven futile. It is no wonder that the Belarusian leadership once again recently compared Belarus to a besieged fortress penetrated by enemies. Even before the presidential elections we expected them to pressure us, while purposefully and methodically destabilizing the situation. It came true – first on the foreign currency market, then on the food market, and after that an explosion happened in the underground. A long single chain.

Lukashenka continues to denounce those “who do not like our [public] stability and tranquility”. In another statement he instructed investigators to interrogate opposition activists who expressed their views on the terrorist attack. Such conspiracy thinking, however, shows the desperation and inability to seek rational solutions. After all, the current problem that Belarus produces less than it consumes cannot be overcome by a public hate campaign.

The only solution is to carry out serious reforms and modernize the Belarusian economy to make it produce more. Towards that end, foreign currency is indispensable, and given the circumstances of rather an irrational confrontation with the West, large amounts of such money can come only from Russia.

SB

Belarus Elections: the Opposition Achieved All It Could

✘ By convening tens of thousands in the post-election protest, the democratic opposition achieved all it could. The false impression of a democratic election was destroyed. Despite the cold weather, 2010 protest was much more impressive than the protests in 2006 or 2001.

Some foreign media complain about the defeat of the opposition. But all other imaginable outcomes of the street protest in Minsk – the seizure of state power, or even the takeover of the Central Elections Commissions office or the state television by the demonstrators – were a priori unrealistic. The power between the protesters and the state was distributed highly unequally, given the nature of the current regime and the current situation. Even if we imagine that the opposition took control of the governmental building – then what? Could the opposition defend it against the state armed forces? How? And why?

Even if the opposition had forced Alyaksandr Lukashenka to a dialogue, it would have launched a process with an uncertain and most likely negative outcome. Any arrangements with the current regime are worth nothing and will be violated by Lukashenka when he deems convenient. This has already happened to the opposition-led parliament in 1996, to Russia's attempt to build the Union State with Lukashenka, and to the European Union's attempt to draw Belarus into the Eastern Partnership.

The events of December 19, including the traditionally flawed vote counting that brought one more overwhelming and unrealistically large victory for Lukashenka, have shown that the opposition did not need to nominate a single candidate.

In fact, as a result of nominating nine rather than one candidate, the opposition has fully taken advantage of the opportunities to promote its views during the campaign. The campaign helped the emergence of a number of new nation-level opposition politicians that gained useful experience and aired their positions.

Lukashenka's regime cannot be defeated in an election that he himself organizes. Neither can it be defeated in street battles. A realistic goal for the opposition should be not the fall of the regime, but its gradual transformation.

Lukashenka and his loyal think-tanks are spreading promises. Belarus, they say, has developed what they call "strong democratic institutions" that allow the country's economy, as they claim, to benefit the population. Given these "achievements", the task at hand now is to simply adjust these institutions to the Western standards. Having articulated this position, the regime has no place to retreat, and the need for reform has not disappeared. The demonstration of the population's protest potential, with the opposition taking over Minsk's central square, may well contribute to the reformist sentiments on a purely emotional level.

The democratic opposition has achieved all it could: the false impression of a democratic election has been destroyed, and the population's objection and frustration have been expressed. The West did not recognize the election, and Russia's official reaction has been neutral. Engaging with the EU against the background of beaten journalists and politicians will now be difficult for the president. Moreover, the peace between Lukashenka and Moscow is unstable; in fact, the Kremlin may be waiting for Lukashenka to violate some of his agreements with Russia (as he tends to do) to attack him with more force than before.

The experience shows that an octopus-like opposition – decentralized, pluralistic, but coordinated on a small number

of key issues – may be what is needed at the moment. The oppositional forces already range from uncompromising to “constructive”, from Belarusian nationalists to pro-Russian parties, from left-wing anarchists to Christian Democrats, from radical Mikola Statkevich to cautious Ales Mikhalevich.

Such opposition could not be split, just like it is impossible to split water. Each opposition structure should focus on a particular topic, be it the economy, the revival of the Belarusian language, or, say, the municipal self-government. To go one step further, a member of the opposition in the government, however authoritarian, can do much more than an honorable political prisoner.

Alexander Čajčyc

See the original article [here](#)

Authorities of Belarus Take Hostages Preparing for Diplomatic War with the West

Yesterday Belarus authorities announced criminal charges against former presidential candidates. Also charged are their aides and journalists – eighteen people in total. These people are already kept in a special KGB prison and are likely to be used as hostages in the future diplomatic war with the West.

The criminal charges followed violent suppression of tens of thousands who came out despite very cold Belarus winter and intimidation to protest against falsified presidential elections the center of Minsk last Sunday. The protests were

peaceful with the only exception of what is widely believed to be a KGB-staged vandalization of a governmental building. More than six hundred people ended up in detention and many still face further beatings and torture by police.

Reaction of the West

The United Nations, the European Union, the United States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation were among those who protested against recent human rights violations in Belarus. Most western leaders already signaled their dismay over beatings and detentions of presidential candidates and hundreds of others.

The election day brutality of Belarus authorities ended a short spring in their relations with the West. Radosław Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle, Polish and German foreign ministers recently travelled to Minsk trying to pacify Mr Lukashenka by offering him [cash](#) bonuses for better respect of human rights. Now, the disillusioned Polish foreign minister announced that there would be more sanctions against Belarus authorities. Mr Sikorski also promised more support to the Belarus civil society. However, it may be too late because not much of civil society is going to be left in Belarus after the last presidential elections.

The fate of political prisoners

Although most of the detained in Belarus will be released after serving a week or two of administrative arrests, they are likely to face problems at their universities or at work. A significant number of them will leave the country ask for political asylum abroad. The Belarus authorities would certainly be happy to see the most active protesters to leave the country voluntarily. Thousands from Belarus are already political refugees in Europe and North America.

The leading politicians and journalists are going to be kept in prison much longer. Those seventeen who face criminal

charges will be used as bargaining chips in negotiations with the West. Removal of sanctions or additional economic aid are likely to be demanded by Belarus authorities for their release. By keeping them in prison, the authorities are also hoping to punish them for their active political stand and to intimidate the rest of the population.

Following the 2006 presidential elections, Mr Lukashenka imprisoned Alyaksandr Kazulin. He had also been heavily beaten after he had led demonstrators who protested against the falsification of the 2006 presidential elections. Mr Kazulin was released only after the United States agreed to soften their economic sanctions against Belarus.

What the international community can do

It is important for the West to understand the name of the game and be prepared for the long-term support of Belarus civil society. It is not enough for the West to introduce additional sanctions. Sanctions and travel bans are not going to make lives of the leaders of the Belarus regime much worse. They will still have much more comfortable lives than the rest of the Belarus population.

The West should triple its support of the remaining civil society in Belarus. It is important to increase broadcasting to Belarus from outside of Belarus and help Belarusians who are in the country to remain active.

Access to information is the key to any changes in Belarus. Most people in the country receive information either from TV or from FM radio stations. Although there is already Belsat, an independent TV channel located in Poland, its impact is weak. The channel broadcasts only several hours per day and only available on satellite. Those who take an effort to buy a satellite dish and turn on Belsat already know what the situation in Belarus is like. There is not much point in evangelizing those are already converted. It is more important

to reach an average Belarusian by re-broadcasting television programs across the border. Increasing the coverage of Belsat should be the main priority.

Belarus is surrounded by European Union countries – Lithuania, Poland and Latvia. The Lithuanian border is less than 140 km from Minsk. If the Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite already feels guilty for her [support](#) of Mr Lukashenka, she should facilitate re-broadcasting television and FM programs to the territory in Belarus. There should be no illusions – breaking through the information blockade is going to be difficult. Mr. Lukashenka announced yesterday that he would particularly target internet and internet and independent journalists during his forth term.

The European Union should also encourage people to stay in Belarus rather than to leave. Journalists, human rights activists, university lecturers, researchers need support when they work inside the country. There is no private sector in Belarus to support them and getting a public sector job is nearly impossible. The West should establish grants and scholarships schemes so that people can stay and work on development of civil society inside Belarus. Small grants for mini-research projects in Belarus or inviting Belarusians to work abroad on a short-term basis could make a significant difference.

These measures should be implemented now while there is increased attention to Belarus problems. Unfortunately, even a few weeks from now, very few are going to discuss Belarus in the West. Already yesterday on Euronews, snow in Paris was more important than blood in Minsk.

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Blood on the Streets as Belarus Authorities Announce Election Results

Between thirty and fifty thousand people gathered in the center of Minsk on Sunday to protest against the officially announced results of presidential elections. Despite the freezing cold, people gathered in the center of Minsk and marched towards the headquarters of the Central Elections Committee demanding fair elections. Tens of thousands of people were chanting "Go away!" to the incumbent president Alyaksandr Lukashenka who is running for the fourth turn.

After the protesters gathered at the Central Elections Committee on the Independence Square they started negotiations with the police. Then, as eye witnesses report, a group of people who looked like undercover security agents suddenly stormed a government building and smashed its glass doors. Vital Rymasheuski and other presidential candidates announced that those people had no affiliation with the protesters and were most likely sent by the authorities to create appearance of violent protests and thus justify using force against demonstrators.

Because of the cold temperature many people began to leave the main square. Their plan was to come back on the next day. Mr Rymasheuski was promised by the police that if the organizers remove the loudspeakers they would not use violence against the crowd. The organizers removed the loudspeakers but the police shortly thereafter started to beat and arrest the remaining people. Thousands of riot police personnel were deployed to suppress the protesters.

According to multiple sources, police was using excessive violence, many protesters and journalists were heavily beaten

and blood was seen on the protestors' faces and on the snow. There were no clashes because the protestors did not even try to resist the overwhelming police force. Earlier this Sunday, Vladimir Neklyaeu, the most charismatic presidential candidate, had been attacked and knocked unconscious by a group of men apparently affiliated with the Belarus authorities. Vital Rymasheuski and Andrei Sannikau had also been severely beaten by the riot police. Most opposition presidential candidates are now under arrest. Hundreds of other protestors are also detained.

Although the protests are not yet over, the turnout of more than 50 thousand people despite years of intimidation and cold weather is truly remarkable. Belarus has not seen anything close to these figures since 1996. Apparently, the authorities were seriously concerned that the protest will turn into a true revolution. This is why they decided to use provocations and excessive force to ensure that the results they announced are not going to be questioned.

✘ Although announcement of a very high percentage for the current president and serious election irregularities were expected, the police brutality had not been expected by most Belarus analysts. Most experts predicted that authorities would just wait until the protesters disappear because of very cold weather conditions. An appearance of more democratic elections could have won more friends for the Belarus regime in the West. This is unlikely to happen now.

It is already clear that the Belarus authorities will face the consequences of their brutality. Although the levers against the Belarus regime are limited, more economic and political sanctions may follow. However, it is not clear whether the international community is going to increase support of media directed to Belarus and other civil society groups in the country. The high turnout of protesters suggests that changes in Belarus will come sooner rather than later.

Belarus: from Democracy to Dictatorship through Elections

✘ Charismatic Alyaksandr Lukashenka was elected 1994, when Belarus had its first and so far the only relatively free presidential elections. Lukashenka won giving promises of cash, refrigerators and TV sets to Belarusians impoverished as a result of the Soviet Union collapse. Following the decades of Soviet rule, the country had no well-rooted traditions of democracy or even its own statehood. As a result, civil society and national identity in Belarus was weaker than in any other Soviet republic. The prospects of populist politicians such as Lukashenka looked particularly bright.

The Role of Russia

As a highly industrialized and export-oriented country, Belarus depended in early 1990-s on Russia's markets and raw materials. President Lukashenka skillfully courted the Russian political elite by introducing Russian as the second official language, favoring Russian military bases in Belarus and constantly promising Russia a reunification. The country's pro-Russian foreign policy starkly contrasted with those of Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine were increasingly pro-Western and pro-NATO. The post Cold War political elite of Russia viewed Belarus as its only outpost in the West. Lukashenka's hope was that Russia would support Belarus in the West a similar manner as the United States supported Israel in the Middle East.

Russia was happy to pay for this demonstration of loyalty. For

many years, the Russian Government has been heavily subsidizing the Belarus economy by providing subsidized natural gas and oil. The cheap natural gas helped inefficient Belarusian enterprises to survive. The discounted oil had been processed and sold to the West at much higher prices. In addition, Belarus was often used by Russia as an intermediary for selling military equipment to "rough" states and other murky dealings. All that helped the Belarus regime to survive and keep the economy under state control without almost any foreign investments.

Belarusian Civil Society

Unfortunately, cheap oil and gas are usually detrimental to democracy and Belarus was not an exception. Its political parties were turned into small clubs of dissidents, opposition received zero access to state electronic media and virtually all employees were transferred to short-term contracts which made them dependent upon their employers. With most of the economy owned by the state that meant that people were afraid to protest because of the fear to lose their jobs.

While courting Russia, Lukashenka tried to make sure that the civil society in Belarus, particularly media, and political institutions were under his tight control. As a result, by the end of the 1990-s the parliament and the courts had been replaced with rubber-stamp institutions bowing to the presidential administration. The nearly wiped-out civil society makes Belarus very different from Ukraine and Georgia which had relatively independent media, parliaments and judiciary during their "revolutions".

Russia was always helping the Lukashenka regime at difficult times. When he was nearly impeached by the Belarusian Parliament during very early years of his rule, the Russian prime minister and speakers of both Russian houses of Parliament came to Minsk to rescue Lukashenka. Quite often, when the United States or the European Union imposed sanctions

against Belarus for human rights violation, Russia's immediate response was to provide even more economic aid.

Russia or the West?

Recently Russia started to demand something more tangible than anti-Western rhetoric from Belarus for its economic aid. In particular, Russian businesses are interested in privatizing Belarusian companies and the Russian political elite cannot see any real steps towards the promised re-unification of two countries. Reducing subsidies to the Belarusian economy made Alyaksandr Lukashenka look elsewhere to keep the economy going. Meetings with top European politicians, joining the Eastern Partnership and launching more creative projects such as exporting oil from Venezuela were the steps in that direction.

It is difficult for the European Union to ignore Belarus which borders three EU member states and is an important European transit hub. It is also not in Europe's best interest to leave Belarus to Russia. For Russia Lukashenka is still better than an uncertain alternative president, no matter how pro-Russian he sounds. Almost a decade ago, Russia supported Miloshevich not because he was the most pro-Russian politician of the region, but because he was the most isolated from the West. Lukashenka understands what drives Europe's and Russia's policy towards Belarus and tries gain something both from Europe and from the West to ensure that his regime survives.

The 2010 Presidential Elections

It would be naive to expect that this presidential elections are going to be fundamentally different from the ones it had in the past. True, Belarus authorities registered a number of alternative presidential candidates, introduced some minor changes to its elections regulations and the police so far seems to be less brutal. However, this cosmetic refurbishments have not affected the substance of these elections. According

to the Organization on Cooperation and Security in Europe around 86% of all information in electronic media is about Lukashenka and is positive. All nine alternative candidates have just 14% and they are portrayed almost exclusively in negative light.

In addition, the votes are unlikely to be counted. The election committees consist of the very same people who falsified elections in the past. The central election committee is chaired by the notorious Lidia Yermoshina, who was banned from traveling to the European Union and the United States for rigging Belarusian elections. In her safe hands the result is going to be exactly as Mr Lukashenka wants it to be.

The opposition candidates urged their supporters to come to the main square of Minsk to protest. Thousands will come out tonight. But it would take tens of thousands to make any real impact. Not surprisingly, the elections are held at the end of December, when Belarusian winters are particularly cold. The authorities even took care of removing tents and sleeping bags from Minsk shops and made a huge skating rink in the middle of the square where the protests will take place.

What should be done?

First, if the elections are rigged they should not be recognized. Europe and the United States did it many times in the past and there appears to be little reason not to do it this time. Second, it is important to help Belarusian civil society, and in particular its media. If the eyes and the ears of the Belarusians are closed how can they make a choice in favour of democracy, let alone defending it? After all, most people in Belarus do not really know what democracy is.

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Amnesty International's Key Human Rights Concerns in Belarus

As Belarus prepares for elections on Sunday 19 December, Amnesty International UK outlined key human rights concerns in the country. The organization urged its members to sign a petition addressed to the acting Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and to the 19 December 2010 newly elected President of the Republic of Belarus.

The petition calls for Belarus to fulfil its human rights obligations, in particular, those which may be at risk of being violated during the election period. The closing date for the petition will be announced shortly – it is likely to be a couple of days before the (new) President is inaugurated.

According to Amnesty international UK, the main human rights concerns in Belarus include:

Freedom of expression

Most printed and electronic media remains under state control and the state press distribution system maintains a monopoly. However two independent newspapers – Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) and Nasha Niva (Our Field) – have been allowed to use the state press distribution system.

Amnesty is calling for a prompt, impartial and effective investigation into the recent death of the founder of the unofficial news website Charter'97, Aleh Byabenin. Shortly before his death, he had joined the campaign team of Andrei Sannikov, presidential candidate for the civic movement "European Belarus". He was found with a rope around his neck

suspended from the banisters of his country house on 3 September this year; an initial investigation said the cause of death was suicide. In November two experts commissioned by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) agreed with the official conclusions that Byabenin had committed suicide, however, their mandate had been to review the materials already compiled by Belarusian prosecutors and no autopsy was carried out.

Colleagues and friends questioned this possible cause of death as Byabenin was a happily married man who had arranged to meet friends at the cinema the following day. Eyewitnesses saw bruises on his body and dirt on his hands, suggesting a struggle. Aleh Byabenin had been attacked in the past and in March this year, the Charter'97 offices were searched by police, allegedly in connection with a criminal investigation into corruption in the police force. Colleagues say they have received anonymous threats since Aleh Byabenin's death.

On 1 July, Presidential Decree No. 60 "On measures to improve the use of the national segment of the internet" came into effect. The decree requires that Internet cafés check the identity of all customers and keep records of internet use; and that internet service providers check the identity of subscribers in person and make information about subscribers available to the authorities. Other measures limit access to information that could be classed as extremist, pornographic, linked to illegal migration and trafficking, or that promotes violence and other illegal acts. According to a study commissioned by the OSCE these measures "lead to unsubstantiated restrictions of a citizen's right to receive and disseminate information", and give the authorities extremely broad powers to limit access to certain sources of information.

Freedom of assembly

The authorities continue to violate the right to freedom of assembly by not permitting demonstrations and public actions.

The very restrictive Law on Public Events requires demonstrators to apply for permission to the local authorities to hold an event, and bans all demonstrations less than 200m away from underground stations and pedestrian crossings .

There have been allegations that excessive force has been used to disperse non-violent demonstrations, and peaceful demonstrators have been detained.

On 24 March, Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovich and Iryna Toustsik of Human Rights Centre Viasna were detained overnight and fined for holding an unauthorised picket when they unfurled a banner against the death penalty in front of the Presidential Administration building.

Amnesty is campaigning for three youth activists who fled Belarus after they were convicted for their involvement in a peaceful public protest about taxation. Tatyana Tishkevich left Belarus after she was expelled from university because of her political activities. She was sentenced in her absence. Alyaksei Bondar and Mikhail Kryvau also left the country after they were sentenced. All three face up to three years' imprisonment if they return to Belarus as leaving the country means that they have automatically violated the terms of their sentence.

The original sentence against Tatyana Tishkevich, Alyaksai Bondar and Mikhail Kryvau was in violation of their right to freedom of assembly. Amnesty is calling on the Belarusian authorities to allow the three to return to Belarus without any risk of being charged for violating the terms of their sentence. The organisation is urging people to take action on this case at www.amnesty.org.uk/minsk

Death penalty

Belarus is "Europe's last executioner" – the only remaining country in Europe and the former Soviet Union which still

carries out executions.

In March this year, Vasily Yuzepchuk and Andrei Zhuk were executed by a shot to the back of the head. Vasily Yuzepchuk was sentenced to death in June 2009 for the murder of six elderly women, after an investigation and trial which, according to his lawyer, were fundamentally flawed. The lawyer also claims that Vasily Yuzepchuk was beaten in detention to force him to confess. Vasily Yuzepchuk belonged to the marginalised Roma ethnic group, and was originally from Ukraine. He may have had an intellectual disability and, according to his lawyer, he did not know the months of the year and was illiterate.

Three men are currently on death row. Two were sentenced to death by shooting on 14 May 2010 for crimes committed during an armed robbery on a flat in Grodno in October 2009. Both men had their appeals dismissed on 17 September by the Supreme Court and have now appealed to the President for clemency. On 14 September, Ihar Myalik was sentenced to death by Mahilyou regional court for a series of armed assaults and murders, committed in 2009.

Fair trials and torture

Nineteen years after independence, Belarus retains many repressive features of the Soviet criminal justice system. Judges routinely do not exercise their authority to independently and impartially decide on the legality of an arrest or detention nor the need for continued detention.

There is credible evidence that, under pressure to solve crimes, police investigators sometimes resort to torture and other ill-treatment in order to force confessions. These confessions are subsequently admitted as evidence in trials.

On 18 January a Minsk prosecutor turned down a request for a criminal investigation into allegations of torture made by Pavel Levshin. He had been detained by police officers on 9

December 2009 on suspicion of theft. Levshin claims that on 10 December from 5pm to 8pm police officers subjected him to torture and ill-treatment: they handcuffed him, laid him on his stomach and inserted his feet behind his hands in a position known as "the swallow". They then beat him with a rubber truncheon and with plastic bottles filled with water. They also put a plastic bag over his head and held it there five times until he came close to suffocating. A forensic medical report confirmed that he had injuries consistent with his allegations, but the Prosecutor quoted the police report and stated that no evidence of torture had been found.

Human rights defenders

In January 2009, the human rights organisation, Nasha Vyasna (Our Spring), previously known as Vyasna (Spring), applied for registration for the third time. This request was refused for reasons which appear to be politically motivated, including reference to previous convictions of members of the group on administrative charges, inaccuracies in the list of founders, the fact that the mechanism for electing the Chair and the Secretary was not described, that the name of the organization was missing from one document, and that the headquarters of the organization were too cramped.

On 24 July 2007, the UN Human Rights Committee had ruled that the dissolution of the human rights organization Vyasna in 2003 violated the right to freedom of association and that the organisation was entitled to an appropriate remedy, including re-registration and compensation

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights

The Minsk City Executive Committee refused permission for the Slavic Pride march to take place on Saturday 15 May 2010. The organisers of the march received a letter on 8 May from the Minsk authorities, prohibiting the march on the grounds that the proposed route violated Article 9 of the Law on the staging of public events. The Article stipulates that public events cannot take place within 200 metres of underground

stations and pedestrian crossings.

Amnesty International believes that the strict application of the law in this case resulted in a disproportionate and unjustifiable restriction on the rights to freedom of assembly and expression of those organising and wishing to take part in the march.

Violence against women Adequate resources and structures to respond to violence against women are lacking in Belarus. There are only two shelters for victims of domestic violence, financed from a combination of state and non-governmental funding. The recently-introduced Law on Crime Prevention specifically referred, for the first time, to domestic violence and called on state bodies including the Ministry of Internal Affairs to investigate all cases of domestic violence and to prosecute the perpetrators.

UK office of Amnesty International has issued a Media Briefing which outlines Amnesty International's key human rights concerns in Belarus.*

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How Lukashenka's Election Manifestos Evolved to 'Yes, we Could'

In this blogpost I am sharing my analysis of the changes in Lukashenka's political rhetoric since 1994. Authors like J. Budge, D. Robertson, D. Hearl studied political rhetoric in democracies, and S. Oates has contributed some interesting

insights on the post-Communist Russia. Building on their work, I attempted to trace the evolution of Lukashenka's election manifestos.

Over time, the manifestos have become shorter, better structured and better organized. However, their content has not changed substantially. The same dichotomies like "the wealthy and the poor", "the West and the East", "stability and experiments", "corruption and order," etc are employed while the important issues like Chernobyl or inflation are never mentioned.

Lukashenka's 2010 election manifesto recently published in Belarus demonstrates notable changes in the political communication over the 16 years of Lukashenka's rule. Below are some of my observations.

The intensification of WE (a change in the definition of the audience)

In 2010 manifesto, different forms of "we" were used more than thirty times. Lukashenka has managed to outdo his previous manifestos, which were nearly half in length. At the same time, in 1994 manifesto the substantive meaning of "we" was better defined and categorized. In particular, several categories such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, health conditions, education, employment and pensions were distinguished.

Six years later, in 2001 manifesto more emotional signals were made about the "we" with the use of such metaphors as "united and friendly family" while the number of classified groups had diminished.

In 2010 manifesto, the metaphors of nation as family are still used, but the cognitive map of nation shows fewer points connected to the traditional subject of welfare. Interestingly, in Lukashenka's latest manifesto, the emotional

construct “we did” resembles “yes we can” in US President Barack Obama’s speeches.

Shorter than twitter (a change in form)

The balance of three traditional parts of Lukashenka’s manifestos – “describing the situation”, explaining the “deeds” and outlining the “plans” – has changed. The part devoted to “plans” has become shorter. At the same time, the style of the manifesto is different: paragraphs are now shorter and the use of titles and introductions makes the text easier to read. We can describe this style as the one used in the SMS-messages or Twitter posts, especially popular among the youth who also happen to be the most “invoked” part of the population in this manifesto.

There are also some changes in the timelines constructed in the manifestos. In 2001 and 2006, the focus was on the situation before 1994 (with different inflation indicators for illustration). The existing timeline was: Time before 1994 → deeds (present) → plans (future). The timeline in the latest manifesto contained no references to the pre-Lukashenka period.

Rates and ratings

With no pre-1994 period to measure against, the legitimization of power is now achieved by using “rates and ratings.” This technique provides a sense of “independent, globally-international, and authoritarian” views on the situation. The ratings are used as figures to hammer the “recognized facts” home one more time.

Inflation figures

Inflation as a construct from the past was presented both in words and figures in all previous manifestos. The latest manifesto, however, does not build a bridge to 1994 inflation. This year, the president clearly does not feel comfortable

discussing inflation.

Forgotten Chernobyl

The issue of Chernobyl was present in the two first manifestos. However, in 2006 and 2010 manifestos there were no references to the catastrophe. This could be considered a sign that the issue is becoming uncomfortable for the president or is no longer connected to the interests of a wider public.

Using “the East” instead of Russia

The number of statements about Russia and the meaning of its foreign policy has decreased since 1994. In 2006 and 2010, Russia was not mentioned in manifestos at all. At the same time, Europe and the West are mentioned as an example of high living standards and a source for aspiration for the Belarusian people.

Democracy and human rights

Democracy and human rights, the traditional building blocks of the political rhetoric in Western democracies are not represented in the latest manifesto. Previously the word democracy had been used only once – in the 1994 manifesto. The issue of human rights is mentioned much more often.

New developments

2010 manifesto also contains some new points. In particular, it mentions the goal of developing information technologies and creating a new face for the Belarusian economy. This would entail “no less than 100 considerable investment projects” and the development of new industries (nano- and bio-technologies, alternative energy, space exploration, etc.).

by Solvita Denis, Contributing writer

Is Europe Ready to Tolerate an Anti-Russian Dictatorship?

✘ According to the Economist, some European politicians would be happy to accept dictatorship in Belarus as long as it is not pro-Russian. Mr Lukashenka's anti-Russian rhetoric has recently impressed some Europeans. In particular, Dalia Grybauskaite, Lithuania's president, reportedly told European Union diplomats that a victory by Mr Lukashenka would safeguard stability and limit Russian influence.

Europeans traditionally keep promising rewards to Belarus authorities if the elections are free and fair. However, all signs are that the authorities approach to elections will be as usual despite some cosmetic changes. Although this time there are many alternative candidates and the police tolerates demonstrations, two most important prerequisites of free and fair elections are missing. First, alternative presidential candidates are almost never seen on TV. Neither is there a free discussion about elections. It is difficult to see how voters can support an alternative candidate when they have no access to free information.

Second, the votes are unlikely to be counted. Nearly all elections committees – those who do the actual vote counting – consist of the same people who falsified Belarusian elections in the past. Usually these are employees of state-owned enterprises and their immediate superiors. They know that if something goes wrong, there will be immediate consequences for their employment.

With high unemployment (not acknowledged by the official statistics) and most employers being state-owned the prospect

of losing a job looks scary to most people in Belarus. The vast majority of employees in Belarus work on the basis of short-term fixed-term contracts. The system was introduced to make sure that those who are not loyal can be easily made jobless. It is not even necessary to dismiss the dissidents. Their fixed-term contracts are simply not extended.

The alternative presidential candidates view these elections use more as a self-marketing opportunity rather than as a real fight for power. However, it is difficult to blame them. The civil society in Belarus has been nearly wiped out over the last decade. However, the roots and the seeds of the real civil society are still there. Alternative candidates are just tips of those roots which need to be supported.

The alternative candidates should think long-term and instead of promoting their short-term goals, seek donors' support for independent media and other elements of civil society for the years to come. Presidential elections are an excellent opportunity to attract attention to Belarus once again. Hopefully, other European leaders will not follow Ms Grybauskaitė's pro-Lukashenka position. It is better to make long-term investments in Belarusian civil society, instead of immoral short-term investments in dictatorship. The European history shows that either anti-Russian or pro-Russian, dictatorships are inherently unpredictable and unstable.

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