

# Belarus Uncovers Human Rights Abuses in the West

On 27 February, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry (MFA) released a [report](#) provocatively titled “The Most Resonant Human Rights Violations in Certain Countries.”

The report criticises human rights violations in 25 democracies, ranging from ethnic discrimination to miscounting votes. It includes a section on the United States, which routinely excoriates Belarus in its own human rights [reports](#).

No, Belarus did not suddenly become concerned about human rights. Minsk wants to drive home the point that democracies also violate rights, and in so doing, counter the criticism of its own deplorable record by the United States, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other organisations.

Even though the incidents it mentions are true, the report will not have the desired effect until the human rights situation in Belarus improves. If anything, the report serves to highlight Belarus’s own deplorable rights record.

## **Preaching Non-Interference and Acceptance of Different Developmental Paths**

The report focuses on democracies, several of which imposed sanctions on Belarus for human rights violations in the past. In Eastern Europe, the report targets only the states that joined the European Union (EU). It omits post-Soviet countries and Belarus itself.

This is the third such report disseminated by Minsk. Igar Gubarevich, a senior analyst at the Ostrogorski Centre who held senior positions at the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, notes that “Belarus delayed the report's publication

significantly" this year in order not to interfere with the normalisation of relations with the EU and the United States that has gathered momentum in the wake of the Ukraine Crisis.

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The West is also stirring up less controversy around the report. In the past, several states mentioned in the report denounced Belarusian criticism as hypocritical. This time around, the majority of countries on Belarus's "list of shame" did not bother to respond.

According to the report, the state and society are in "perpetual" conflict in all states, regardless of their "political system[s]" or "the level of social and economic development." It calls for appreciating "the diversity of development paths." Wittingly or not, these and other sections of the report read as attempts to normalise human rights violations.

The report also reminds readers of the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, the "golden rule" of Westphalian thinking that Minsk routinely mentions when communicating with the Kremlin and the West alike.

Why does Belarus suddenly care about the state of human rights? The MFA does not hide its primary motivation: to highlight "violations in those countries that traditionally represent themselves as 'developed democracies'" and "to illustrate by concrete facts their failure to comply with international legal obligations."

### **Seeing the Mote in our Neighbour's Eye**

The report draws on the Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review and other open sources.

It faults the United States for racial discrimination and

excessive use of force by the police, drawing attention to last year's events in Ferguson, Missouri. The report also mentions the failure to close the Guantanamo Bay prison facility and to prosecute persons involved in torture, as well as the deportation and detention of migrants.

In the section on Poland, the report notes the discovery of a secret CIA prison. MFA faults Warsaw for anti-Semitism and racial discrimination, as well as the excessive use of force by the Polish police. The report also mentions the "inadvertence in counting the votes" during the 2014 European Parliament election. Belarus's neighbour Lithuania is criticised for the pressure on the Russian-language media. 

The report notes that the Netherlands leads Europe in the dissemination of child pornography and has a major human trafficking problem. Human trafficking is a sore point for Belarus; despite its attempts to curb [trafficking](#), it remains on the Tier 2 Watch List of the US Trafficking in Persons Report.

MFA also draws attention to the rise in neo-nazism and racial discrimination vis-à-vis refugees in Austria and to the excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies in Belgium.

The report contains a high number of references to the rights of refugees. [Refugees](#) are indeed a growing problem for Western Europe. It also happens to be an area in which Belarus believes its own record is solid. President Lukashenka has been especially welcoming of late to Ukrainian refugees.

### **Practise What You Preach: Why Belarus's Report Does Not Matter**

Perhaps the MFA wanted to get across that human rights violations occur everywhere and that state identity or coercive power should not blind us to human rights violations. This message gets lost on the reader, however, because Belarus itself is excluded from the report. For comparison, the US Trafficking in Persons Report has a section in which it

examines the problem of trafficking in the US as well as all US-allied countries.

Unlike Belarus democratic states have the independent media and NGOs to publicise offences, as well as independent courts to punish transgressors

MFA acknowledges that it did not attempt “a complete picture of the situation of human rights in the countries in question” but simply focused on “the most egregious human rights violations.” Such selective focus undermines the MFA’s potentially valid point, however.

Democracies mentioned in the report hardly needed the MFA to remind them about domestic violations of human rights. The key difference between democratic states and Belarus is that the former have the independent media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to publicise offences, as well as independent courts to punish transgressors. Neither civil society nor the judicial system functions particularly well in Belarus. Ironically, the many European NGOs whose information the MFA draws upon in the report would not be able to do their work in Belarus.

Political scientists Judith Kelley and Beth Simmons show that international rights reports and other performance indicators can indeed serve as a powerful international tool of social pressure. Using the example of US human trafficking reports, they demonstrate that negative evaluations and rankings can motivate states to implement costly policies.

But social pressure works only when exerted by nonstate actors and international organisations on “highly respected or hegemonic state actors.” Not only is Belarus a small, economically and militarily weak state, but it also lacks international credibility on most issues, above all human rights. Human rights reports carry no power when disseminated by the state that refuses to cooperate with the UN Special

Rapporteur on human rights, suppresses civil society and independent media, and keeps political prisoners.

Until Belarus respects human rights domestically, its criticism of violations abroad will mean as much as a corruption index produced by Somalia or North Korea, two of the world's most corrupt countries.

"The report stands little chance of being taken seriously or even getting noticed by the international community," said Gubarevich. "This collection of isolated incidents – all of them freely reported by national media in the countries concerned – pales in comparison to systematic [human rights violations](#) in Belarus that the government-controlled media fails to mention."

Indeed, according to Human Rights Watch, an international NGO conducting research on human rights since 1978, Belarus' human rights record remained poor in 2014. According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights, Belarus helped "ease the tensions and human rights crisis" in neighboring Ukraine, yet failed to address the violation of human rights at home. Domestic rights NGO "[Viasna](#)" would agree with these international assessments, especially because its registration was cancelled in 2003 and its rights defenders are routinely detained in Belarus.

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## **Belarusians in World Values Survey: East or West?**

In February 2015 following the negotiations in Minsk the President of Belarus said he was not planning to "turn to the West." He explained, "You and I are Russian people... we have

shared history. We have shared opinions.”

According to the recently released World Value Survey (WVS), Belarusians and Russians indeed have a lot in common. Respondents in both countries perceive democracy as less important than respondents in West European states. They have become more religious in the last two decades and are much more focused on economic security.

Belarusians’ survey responses seem to reflect the quest for stability and aversion to political change inculcated by Russian and Belarusian media.

Headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden, WVS consists of almost 100 nationally representative surveys conducted with nearly 400,000 respondents. In Belarus, the survey was administered by the Centre for Sociological and Political Researches at Belarusian State University.

### **Does Democracy Matter?**

WVS results suggest that Belarusians differ from EU citizens  most when it comes to politics.

When asked to rank the importance of democracy on a ten-point scale, from absolutely important to not at all important, only a quarter of Belarusians chose the former. For comparison, nearly two thirds of German respondents and half of Polish respondents said democracy was absolutely important.

Both Belarusians and Poles were of low opinion about democracy in the 1990s. In the 1995-1999 survey wave, one fifth of respondents in each states strongly agreed with the statement “while democracy has problems it's better than any other form of government.” Over time, democracy has grown on the Poles, but not on their eastern neighbours.

The predominance of [Russian-language media](#) may be partly to

blame. Belarusians watch Russian TV channels, surf Russian websites, and purchase Russian newspapers. State-owned channels tell them that democracy has already arrived in the post-Communist space and this democracy is of superior quality to the Western variety. In fact, even the Communist authorities used to call their political arrangement a "People's Democracy."

The meaning of democracy also varies across states. Relatively few Belarusians believe that choosing leaders in [free elections](#) constitutes an essential feature of democracy. Free elections are twice as important in Germany and Sweden, for example. Lukashenka would agree. In 2011 he told The Washington Post, "There is no less [democracy in Belarus](#) than there is in the United States."

Furthermore, only 30% of Belarusian respondents said they believe that "civil rights that protect people's liberty from state oppression" are essential for a democracy.

Interestingly, Belarusians concur with West-European respondents that democracy is not about equal incomes or soaking the rich. Perhaps due to greater inequality and conspicuousness of "oligarchy" in Ukraine and Russia, respondents from these states put more emphasis on economic redistribution.

### **Belarus on a Conservative Rebound?**

As Maxim Trudolyubov noted in the February 2014 New York Times op-ed, religiosity is on the rise in the post-Communist states. WVS allows to compare religiosity between the 1981 and 2007 waves, as measured by the question on the importance of God.

Seven of eight states showing the greatest gains in religious faith are post-Communist: Russia, China, Belarus, Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania, Ukraine and Moldova. By contrast, religiosity has steadily declined in Western Europe. As

Europeans grew richer, they went to church less and less. ❌

Social scientists Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris explain the rise of religiosity in Eastern Europe by the combination of decreased economic and physical security and the collapse of Marxist ideology. Turning to religion in hard economic times, people in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia are also reacting against the Soviet atheism policy.

The revival of religious faith has not gone unnoticed by the Belarusian state and opposition alike.

Imitating the Kremlin, Lukashenka frequently rails against the “degradation of Western morals.” For example, at the January 2015 Spiritual revival award ceremony, the President emphasised that “adherence to Christian values, morality, and aesthetic tradition is one of the main factors for the development of the Belarusian nation, preservation of its unity.” He described Belarus as an island of peace at the time when “the wave of international, inter-confessional conflicts and terrorist threats has engulfed the entire world.”

Some [Belarusian opposition leaders](#) seem to share Lukashenka’s sentiments. Vital Rymašeuški of Belarusian Christian Democracy promotes “Christianity against Dictatorship” even as he rails against homosexuals. Paval Seviarynec of Malady Front in 2013 claimed that “the Bible is key to Belarusian National Idea” and in 2012 expressed concern about the “lost” believers from non-Christian traditions.

In contrast to Lukashenka, who calls himself “Orthodox atheist” and supports [the Church](#) in exchange for concrete political benefits, Rymašeuški and Seviarynec are speaking their minds.

Growing religiosity makes Belarusians vulnerable to influence – not only from the Belarusian state or from conservative opposition leaders, but also from the Kremlin’s “Orthodox

empire.”

Luckily, even as religious faith is experiencing a revival, it plays only a small role in Belarusian society. Only 16% of Belarusian WSV respondents viewed religion as “very important.” What is more, only [59% of Belarusians](#) are Orthodox Christians. Religious pluralism as well as widespread atheism may be the surest bulwark against the encroachments of the “Russian world”.

### **Seeking Economic Security Above All**

Social scientists have noted that respondents in post-Communist states differ from respondents in industrialised Western states in the predominance of the so-called survival (as opposed to post-materialist) values.



The survival values focus on economic and physical security. Once basic security needs are met, post-materialist priorities of self-expression and mental well-being come to the fore, according to Inglehart.

Post-materialist, liberal values have weak grounding in Belarusian society. Over 77% of Belarusian respondents, for example, viewed economic growth as their country’s most important priority, more important than, for example, “seeing that people have more say in how jobs are done in their communities” or than “making cities and countryside more beautiful.”

Preoccupation with material circumstances can be explained by the poor state of [Belarus’s economy](#). As incomes rise, concerns about the quality of life, environmental issues, and human rights may begin replacing preoccupation with economic conditions.

### **East or West?**

School textbooks in Belarus routinely emphasise the country's location in the heart of Europe. On social media Belarusians themselves seem ambivalent. Some emphasise the country's innate Europeanness and blame its current backwardness on Russian imperialism and Lukashenka's leadership. Others rail against the depravity of the West and extol Belarus's Slavic, Orthodox heritage.

Results from the recent WVS wave show what Belarusian and West Europeans have in common and what divides them. The Communist past and the authoritarian present have left a deep imprint on Belarusians' attitudes and beliefs.

Out of step with their Western counterparts, Belarusians are becoming more religious, privilege economic security above other concerns, and remain suspicious of democracy. If Belarusians continue to [consume Russian media](#), they and Russians will find more and more to talk about.

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## Swedes Bomb Belarus with Toys

On 4 July, Swedish amateur pilots penetrated Belarus' airspace according to an email received by Belarus Digest. Their small aircraft crossed the Lithuanian-Belarusian border and parachuted hundreds of teddy-bears with notes of support for the freedom of speech. Covered by some Belarusian and Swedish media, but denied by the Belarusian authorities, the flight has generated more publicity than some of the pro-democracy initiatives by civil society groups and the EU in Belarus.

"We planned the operation for one year, bought an airplane, learned how to fly, had people on the ground that *[sic]* was

supposed to help out if the plane got shot down," Hannah Frey wrote in an email to Belarus Digest on 5 July. Frey and co-pilot Thomas Mazetti were not afraid to risk their lives – unlike Belarusians, some of whom are afraid to talk to the media and will neither deny nor confirm the incident.

According to Frey, the idea for the operation came from the ["toy protest"](#) in Minsk organised by opposition activist Paval Vinahradau in February 2012. Vinahradau was punished with 10 days in jail for placing stuffed animals to Minsk's Independence Square with placards like "Free the people" and "Toys against lawlessness." [Studio Total](#), the company behind the campaign, was sending a gesture of support and encouragement for the Belarusian people.

### **Debates over the Teddy-bear Campaign**

The daring flight over Belarus unleashed several debates. One is whether the event reported in Belarusian and Swedish press has even occurred. The Belarusian defence ministry denied the entry of the aircraft and decried photos and videos provided by Studio Total as "visual falsification". If the teddy-bears were simply hurriedly picked up by the Belarusian police upon landing, then Minsk is risking a huge embarrassment. The idea of dropping stuffed animals is catchy and memorable and even the people who have not seen the evidence for themselves are likely to remember the incident – of course, if they understand the message that the Swedish pilots risked their lives to send.

Another debate is over the efficiency of the Belarusian air defence and the inviolability of Belarus borders. Some laugh at Alyaksandr Lukashenka's endless references of Belarus as Russia's shield after the Swedes have already safely returned home, others point out that the early-warning radar on Belarusian territory is supposed to detect objects only at an altitude of 30 metres or higher. If so, the fact that the small plane entered Belarusian airspace does little to

humiliate the Belarusian air defence.

Learning from the incident, the Belarusian authorities may decide to invest in a new low-altitude radar technology and even create a continuous radar field along the Belarus border. They are also more likely to shoot without thinking next time they see foreigners crossing the airspace illegally.

The most important question, however, is whether the Belarusian people have understood the message sent by the Swedes. After all, some were said to be tearing up the toys in the hope of finding money inside them. Moreover, few were able to understand the English-language notes attached to the teddy-bears. The fact that some Belarusians avoid speaking to journalists and neither deny nor admit the event stands in contrast to the courage of the Swedish team.

### **Private Companies: a New Generation of Democracy Champions?**

Unlike most other pro-democracy campaigns, the teddy-bear campaign was initiated by a Western PR company. No government, no civil society, and no Western donors were involved. This may explain why even the Swedish media have initially doubted that the flight has occurred. After all, not only is Studio Total a PR company, but it is also known for organising a few hoaxes in the past.

At the same time, only a private company like Studio Total could have a significant amount of money to spend exclusively on a flashy and dangerous publicity stunt while keeping its plans secret from both the Swedish and the Belarusian authorities. Dependent on donor approval and generally tight-pursed, non-governmental organisations are unable to organise expensive and dangerous excursions into restricted airspace exclusively for attracting media attention.

The teddy-bears came from Sweden, a country that has taken interest in Belarus on multiple occasions. The country has consistently occupied top positions in democracy rankings and

has been exceptionally critical of Belarusian authoritarianism. Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt was among the most involved European politicians who was actively discussing Belarus at the highest levels.

Swedish authorities have supported democracy in Belarus by offering exchange programmes and educational opportunities to Belarusian youth, journalists and policymakers, and empowering Belarus women. In return, Belarus has denied visas to Swedish politicians on multiple occasions. Earlier this year, a visa was refused to the head of the regional structure of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Sweden, Lars Ove Yangson. When even the private citizens of Sweden have begun to champion democracy, the visa rules may become even more unpredictable.

### **Belarusians: See No Evil?**

The residents of small Belarusian town Ivyanets who have witnessed the flight say all dropped teddy-bears were picked up by the police and taken away. Some recall the police throwing rocks into a tree to take down one of the teddy-bears stuck in its branches. But most are afraid to talk, which could be why two days after the incident the mystery of the teddy-bears' landing is yet to be resolved conclusively.

Unnoticed by the Belarus air force, the Swedes safely returned home. It is no exaggeration to say that they had risked their lives during the operation: the Belarusian border guards would not have hesitated to shoot them down. In 1996, the Belarusian army shot down an unarmed air balloon, which drifted into Belarusian air space during an international balloon race.

The Belarusian military killed two Americans, and as former US Ambassador to Belarus Kenneth Yalowitz pointed out in a [recent interview](#) to Belarus Digest, they did not even apologise for the innocent lives lost. If back then President Lukashenka defended the shooting by claiming that the balloon was spying

on military installations, he would have even less remorse after taking down a pro-democracy operation.

At the end of the day, it does not matter whether we all believe in the teddy-bear operation. The news about the flight has left a very real impression in the minds of the people. The story is making circles in the Belarusian blogosphere: people joke about the inviolability of the Belarusian airspace and ridicule the police hunting for something as innocent as a stuffed toy. Continuous denial of the incident will only put the Belarusian authorities in an increasingly difficult position.

The brave flight should serve as an inspiration not only to Belarusians, but also to other Europeans. Europe should follow the Swedish example – of course, not by undertaking similarly dangerous stunts, but by taking action and addressing the Belarusian people directly instead of wasting time on the endless high-level talks about sanctions. Only then will the Belarusian people start feeling that their Western neighbours are not indifferent to their difficult lives in Belarus.