

# Between East and West: what's next for Belarus? (podcast)

Belarus has recently moved to the headlines of major international news outlets because of massive protests against the rule of president Lukashenka. But unlike in Ukraine, protests in Belarus has not yet lead to political changes.

The KCL Eurasia Society, KCL Diplomacy Society and the Ostrogorski Centre hosted public discussion "Between East and West: What's next for Belarus?" on 12 April 2017.

Speakers:

## **Prof. Yarik Kryvoi**

Originally from Minsk, he is a legal academic working for the British Institute of International and Comparative Law and teaching at the University of West London. Yarik is also and Editor-in-chief of Belarus Digest. A Harvard Law School grad, Yarik has been working for international law firms and taught law in the United Kingdom, Russia, Belarus and the United States for over ten years.

## **Dr. Alex Kokcharov**

Principal Analyst with IHS Markit Country Risk, responsible for analysis of political, operational and security risks in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Alex holds a Master's degree in Geography and Economics from Belarusian State University in Minsk and a PhD in Economic Geography from the University of Oxford.

Moderator: **Torsten Hertig**, Master student at the King's Russia Institute and President of KCL Eurasian Society

The topics discussed included the following:

- Social parasites' protests and authorities' response,

- the case White Legion (2:20)
- What can the West do? History of Western sanctions against Belarus, pros and cons of sanctions (8:57)
  - Why is the EU position towards Belarus different this time? The need of differentiated approach towards authorities and society (12:33)
  - The inconsistency of the EU visa regime policy (14:31)
  - Geographical and demographical factors in Belarus politics, the significance of capital Minsk (17:03)
  - Political system of Belarus, authoritarian regime (19:20)
  - Economic recession in Belarus, economic dependence on Russia (22:50)
  - Belarus foreign policy balancing (25:44)
  - Social parasites' protests (29:28)
  - The possibility of Russian intervention (33:10)
  - What if Lukashenka is unable to govern any more? Can Russia take advantage of that? (39:14)
  - How likely is Russia's pushing for more serious integration? (46:18)
  - How should the EU react to crackdown on protests in Belarus? (53:42)
  - What did Lukashenka promise Putin in exchange for oil and gas dispute resolution? (56:40)
  - Is the Lukashenka regime currently unified or there are internal factions? (58:40)
  - What kind of cooperation could Ukraine and Belarus have? Would this irritate Russia a lot? (1:03:50)
  - How do the Russian media see social parasites' protests in Belarus? (1:10:46)
  - How does the regime rationalise its crackdown on people who ask him for help? (1:14:06)
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# Increase in Illegal Migration to EU via Belarus, Cultural Treasures Restitution – State Press Digest

In a time of economic downturn, the Belarusian authorities fear making any changes to the current political and economic model, which is well regarded in the state press. The Belarusian leadership has rejected market reforms and is resorting to administrative measures, increased regulation and strict discipline.

Major state-sponsored organisation Belaja Ruś, dubbed a “party of the nomenclatura”, will not become a political party in the near future. Lukashenka apparently does not want another powerful political entity to emerge in Belarus.

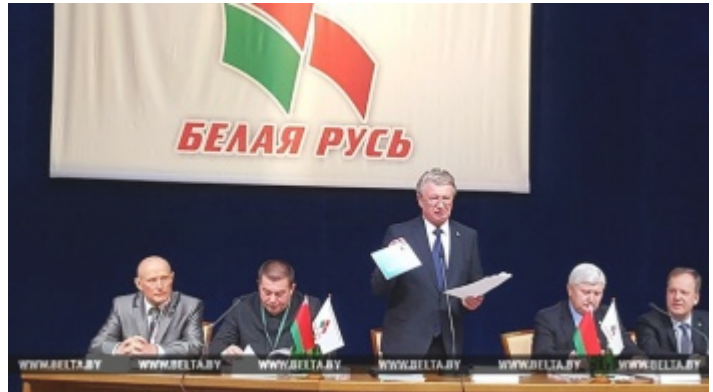
The border committee reports a twofold increase in illegal migration through the Belarus-EU border in 2015. Yet on the Ukrainian frontier it has observed no serious threats so far.

All of this and more in the latest edition of State Press Digest.

## Politics

[Belaja Ruś is not ready to become a political party.](#) *Belarus Segodnya* reports on the meeting of Belaja Ruś, a government organized non-governmental organisation (GoNGO) dubbed a “party of the nomenclatura”. Belaja Ruś chairman [Aliaksandr Radźkoŭ](#), speaking on the organisation's future, suggested that it could become a party as the next stage of its development. However, the logic of the whole Belarusian political system

should be taken into account, and hurrying to address this question could harm the organisation.



According to *Belarus Segodnya*, the organisation should address more acute problems, such as working with youth to prepare new leaders. Belaja Ruś was founded as a GoNGO aimed at supporting President Alexander Lukashenka, but the latter is resisting its attempts to transform into a political party. Lukashenka apparently fears that a party of bureaucracy such as this could become a strong rival in the Belarusian political arena.

### [Special police soldiers love art and hate the opposition.](#)

Specnaz journal publishes an interview with Minsk AMAP (special police forces) commander Dzmitry Balaba. The commander tells the story of the AMAP's development since the 1990s, and its role in the elimination of crime and mobs, then widespread in Belarus. He praises Lukashenka for bringing order to the 1990s chaos. Further, he claims that Belarusian police treats offenders very humanely compared to western countries.

The interview rapidly spread across independent media and became a subject of jokes. Balaba said that 70 per cent of AMAP servicemen “have higher education, know foreign languages, and among them are ardent theatregoers, historians, and lovers of 19th century academic painting”. He said he recently found two officers debating on plot lines in Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*. AMAP is known for its [rude and sometimes violent](#) treatment of citizens, especially

opposition and civil activists.

[Brest region will apply for EU funding.](#) Brest region is eligible for the EU-financed programme of territorial cooperation titled Belarus-Ukraine, writes Brest regional newspaper Zarya. The programme has been established in the framework of the EU's Eastern Partnership and has a budget of €3,3m. It will target cross-border projects, small and medium enterprises, tourism, sport, and the culture and environment spheres. Two regions of Belarus and five regions of Ukraine are eligible for the programme and no partner from the EU is required for its implementation.

Deputy Chairman of Brest Regional Executive Committee Michail Siarkoŭ stressed that the authorities should make every effort to get hold of the funding. They already have a package of proposals in place, aimed particularly at economic development in Brest region.

## Economy

[The government should stop reforms and manage the economy manually during the crisis.](#) *Belarus Segodnya* daily reports on Lukashenka's meeting with the government to discuss economic issues. Due to decreasing oil prices Belarus is losing one of its major income sources – oil refining. Moreover, the subsequent shrinking of the Russian market makes export of Belarusian goods at the previous level impossible.

In this situation, however, Lukashenka is not going to change his economic policy. He thinks that any reforms will destabilise the country and that the population will reject them. “The government should not become a kind of firm. It must govern the current difficult situation in a manual mode and demand irreproachable implementation of decisions from all levels of state officials”, Belarusian leader said.



[Belarus and Russia develop geological technologies to reduce dependence on the West.](#) *Soyuz* newspaper reports that a road map for Skif-Nedra, a project of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, has finally been presented. It is a joint \$17m Russian-Belarusian

project to develop technology capable of advanced identification and evaluation of hydrocarbon stocks. The Russian side of the project argues that it will alleviate dependence on western technologies in the era of sanctions and import substitution, and ensure the technological security of the Union State of Russia and Belarus.□

## Society

[Illegal migration through Belarusian border doubled in 2015.](#)

*Soyuznoe Veche* newspaper interviewed Deputy Chief of the State Border Committee Ihar Butkievič on the situation on the Belarusian part of the border of Eurasian Economic Union. 8,000 people committed border offences and 900 illegal migrants to the EU were detained in 2015 – a 50 per cent increase compared to 2014. The committee detected 44 channels and detained 79 members of international gangs dealing with illegal migration – again, a twofold increase since 2014.

There have been no serious incidents on the border with Ukraine, but the committee is taking additional measures to prevent penetration of weapons and extremists from Ukraine. Smuggling remains a thriving business on the border. In 2016 the Belarusian border authorities will be equipped with an electronic queue system and continue to create infrastructure for [local border traffic.](#)

# Culture

[The problem of restitution of cultural treasures remains on the agenda.](#) The new Code on Culture will include norms on cultural restitution, *Belarus Segodnya* announces. The government has created a commission to find and return national cultural treasures which were brought out of Belarus illegally, or temporarily evacuated during armed conflicts. In 2015 the authorities created online database [viartannie.by](#) which lists cultural treasures moved abroad. According to Ministry of Culture official Ihar Čarniaŭski, this worldwide practice shows that unfortunately countries do not return treasures to their places of origin.

However, a good solution to this problem is cooperation and exchange of museum collections with other countries and long term deposit of these collections in Belarusian museums. For example, this February Belarus' national museum will host a Lithuanian-Polish exhibition of the Radziwiłł family, and Vilnius museum in 2015 displayed a belt of Great Duke Vitaŭt from Belarusian collection.

The State Digest Digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.