

Belarus and Lithuania: A Tale of Two Nuclear Power Plants

Last Tuesday, Lithuanian Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevičius demanded that Belarus to not construct a nuclear power plant (NPP) in the vicinity of Lithuanian territory. He referred to the alleged breaking of the Espoo Convention by Belarus. Lithuania claims that Minsk is building potentially dangerous facility in a risky place without properly consulting and informing an exposed Lithuania.

The Belarusian opposition and NGOs raise environmental issues and criticised that the power plant is being built by Russians and on a Russian loan. Belarus does not need more energy, and the whole project would bring Minsk closer to Moscow, they claim. Yet Belarus already imports its energy and there are no better options to provide the country with energy. The only reasonable alternative – modernised thermal power plants – make the nation more dependent on Russian oil and gas with their ever increasing prices.

Why not?

The [Belarusian NPP](#) is being constructed in the Astraviets district, a pristine location close to the Lithuanian border. There are only 53 km from the site to the Lithuanian capital, and the river Viliya which flows through Vilnius shall provide water for the NPP. So, Lithuania has reasons to be concerned. On the other hand, the Lithuanian government itself is going to build [a new NPP next to a Belarusian National Park](#) and position it close to the second largest Latvian city, Daugavpils.

Lithuanian officials emphasise the risky geology of the site. Gitana Grigaityte of Lithuanian Foreign Ministry told the BNS news agency that, “severe earthquakes were registered in the

territory in late 1800s and early 1900s.” In 1908, some newspapers published a story from the Astravyets district about an earthquake which, however, was not registered by scientists. In a word, both the story and its pedigree are questionable.

As for water, the Astraviets NPP is planned to only take water from the Viliya, but not return it into the river. And the prevailing winds in Astraviets region blow eastward, i.e., onto Belarusian territory.

The Belarusian NPP apparently is causing such a reaction by Vilnius not only due to environmental reasons. The construction of the Astravyets plant effectively condemns the plans for building a new NPP in Lithuania to the wastebin. What investor would be willing to put his money into a Lithuanian NPP, knowing full well that in a few years the whole region is going to have plenty of cheap energy? After all, the Kaliningrad NPP will go online by 2016, and the two reactors of the Belarusian NPP will be going up too – in 2018 and 2020, respectively.



It is no wonder that at the prospect of the project of a new NPP in Lithuanian, Visaginas is facing considerable problems. The agreement to this effect has already been signed by the three Baltic republics seven years ago. Although Vilnius has chosen the strategic investor – Japanese Hitachi – so far no investment agreements have been signed.

It should also be noted that last autumn a national referendum was held where Lithuanians voted against the construction of the NPP. In May, the Lithuanian prime minister still insisted that his country was not going to renounce its plans for an NPP even if it would not be economically profitable. This decision is not without a good reason – after shutting down its Ignalina NPP, Lithuania became dependent on Russian energy

imports.

Belarus Lacks Energy

Belarusian opponents of the national NPP have two principal arguments against it. First, the country suffered the most of all countries in the region from the Chernobyl nuclear accident and, second, Belarusians will live better without nuclear facilities. Yet some facts show that, in all likelihood, Belarus cannot afford it. Even now when the energy-consumption in Belarus is lower than in neighbouring countries – 3,300 kWh annually (while in Ukraine 3,900 and in Poland 4,000), in winter as energy consumption rises, the country has to buy additional electricity abroad.

To understand the financial benefits of nuclear energy, Belarusians need only to look to their Lithuanian neighbors whose electricity expenses are much lower (almost a third compared to Belarus' present level) until their Ignalina NPP was been shut down in 2009. The attractiveness of nuclear energy for Belarusians rises with a rise in the price of gas and oil. Even though as a Russian ally and Belarus them at a lower price, it is important to consider that while in in 2010 one tonne of Russian oil cost USD \$284, in the first quarter of this year it costs USD \$422.

Belarusian energy system relies on a network of rather old facilities. The actual level of energy conversion efficiency in the country is only about 27% for its thermal power plants, and 19% for its heating and power stations. It is possible to raise it to 60%, but to do so Minsk needs a lot of money and time. Renewable energy resources in Belarus are limited to a small number of windpower generators and hydropower plants.

This means that the NPP is a solution to a real problem. The government failed to modernise its Soviet-era industry and has now to quickly fix its internal energy issues. Lukashenka admitted it recently speaking at the Belarusian State Agrarian

Technical University, where he said: "Before exporting electricity, we must supply our internal market at reasonable prices."

And even the two reactors of the Astraviets NPP with the capacity to generate up to 2,400 megawatts together might be not sufficient. To achieve the per capita energy consumption level of, say, Czech Republic, Belarus needs one still another similar plant. Earlier this month, Deputy Energy Minister Mikhail Mikhadzyuk announced that Belarus is willing to consider offers from potential investors eager to build a second nuclear power plant in the country.

More or Less Dependent on Russia

The second argument against the NPP underlines that to build the Astraviets NPP, Belarus takes loans and [becomes increasingly dependant upon Russia](#). First of all, from Russia it has received around USD \$9 billion, yet to build the necessary energy-transmitting lines Lukashenka signed in July another loan agreement with China for almost USD \$324 million. Atomstroyexport, a subsidiary company of the Russian Nuclear Energy State Corporation Rosatom, is the prime contractor. The Astraviets NPP, however, is the property of Belarus.

It will not be easy for Belarus to repay this sizeable Russian loan. Yet with current trends of increasing energy costs, the NPP looks like a rather promising investment. As for other possible dependencies, they do not lessen Belarus' already critical dependency on Russia. Minsk takes Russian technology and equipment and trains its specialists in Russia in so many areas that one more such area will not change much.

In addition, the situation is not nearly clear-cut or fatal as it might seem. As the deputy director of BelNIPI Enerhapram Uladzimir Babrou emphasised at the beginning of the project, even with Russian-designed reactors Belarus would not become dependent on Russian uranium. Minsk had already studied the

possibilities of getting the fuel from French and Chinese companies. Moreover, companies like the French Areva and the Japanese-American Westinghouse-Toshiba declared their willingness to supply fuel for the Russian-designed NPP. It will be easier for Belarus to diversify its sources of plutonium rather than natural gas or oil.

In today's Belarus, the opposition media and parties discuss every project in terms of policies pursued by Lukashenka's regime and its evil intentions. Meanwhile, the Astraviets NPP seems to have a sound economic basis and the idea itself does not belong to Lukashenka. Serious deliberations about the construction of a NPP in Belarus began decades ago. The now-closed Lithuanian NPP in Ignalina initially was projected to be built on the Belarusian shore of the Drysviaty Lake, and only later landed on the side Lithuanian of the border. And the National Academy of Sciences began to look for a site for the prospective NPP as early as in 1992.

The opponents of nuclear power plant recall the Chernobyl tragedy, which led to the contamination of up to a fifth of Belarus' territory with its nuclear fallout. Yet Belarus is already surrounded by three active NPPs – in Smolensk, Chernobyl and Rivne. Moreover, the planned Lithuanian NPP in Visaginas would literally be on the Belarusian border, and Poland plans to build up to three NPP in locations which have not yet been defined in north of their country.

Has Minsk Something to Hide?

Minsk failed to ensure more public participation in the Astraviets project not because it was hiding something. The Belarusian state regularly functions in this way and, for better or worse, actively withholds information from society. The NPP project itself has not been subject of criticism from IAEA experts, who were regularly involved in its planning since at least 2009. The monitoring of the project's safety has been awarded to a Ukrainian institute.

Lithuania itself has little leverage over Belarus. Vilnius cannot even resort to the [EU's help](#) and lash out at the “nuclear project of the last dictatorship in Europe”, as it would contradict the usual mild position of Lithuania with regards to the Belarusian question. Belarus is also [increasingly important for the Lithuanian economy](#) – the latest illustration of this can be found in the Belarusian national potash company buying a terminal in Lithuanian Klaipeda port.

The Lithuanian government has grounded its protests on the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (informally called the Espoo Convention). The UN Economic Commission for Europe acts as the Convention's Implementation Committee. In March, the Committee found that Belarus failed to comply in full or in part with six norms of the Convention.

The omissions seem to refer to the procedure employed and not safety or technical issues. In particular, the Belarusian government apparently made the decision to build the plant before carrying out the needed environment impact assessment (EIA) and, as always, ignored the requirements to provide public information in full information about the project and do so in a timely manner. Belarusian state officials delayed or simply ignored additional Lithuanian questions which made the consultations a pure formality.

In reality, the Belarusians had hardly anything from the international Committee or the Lithuanian side. Minsk preferred to ignore not only some Lithuania's requests, but also a [letter from the EU](#) and provided the Committee with documents in Russian without a [translation into English](#). At the same time, it manipulated with the EIA texts and held only nominal public hearing with Lithuanian residents.

Isolated from many pan-European projects, the Belarusian state clearly has real problems with educating its bureaucrats on new ways of doing government business, particularly in

international context. Projects aimed at training [Belarusian public servants](#) would help to overcome this problem. Yet isolating all Belarusian [government system](#) – regardless of the involvement of specific organs and persons in carrying out political persecution in Belarus – the West effectively preserves the old system in Belarus. Moreover, this would undermine a future government which would be in charge after the current president leaves.

Belarus-Russia: History of Disintegration

In the last days of July, the backbone of Belarusian economy – the potash industry – suffered a severe blow dealt by its Russian partner.

The Russian company Uralkali refused to work anymore with the Belarusian Potash Company (BKK), a joint enterprise of Uralkali and Belaruskali authorised to sell their products throughout the world.

These developments have seriously weakened the global position of Belaruskali. The “potash collapse” is just one more illustration of the problematic relations between Belarus and Russia.

Both Russian private business and the government do not perceive their Belarusian counterparts as equal partners. Additionally, Belarusians have to work with Russian business without a sufficient legal framework. In these circumstances, integration between the two countries has had no real chance from the very beginning.

Some bigger agreements simply failed or fell apart like the joint companies in the potash or oil industry. Other projects were implemented many years behind the schedule – whether it be [military cooperation](#) or the sale of Belarusian pipelines to Russia.

Younger Brother Is Always Wrong

Russian Uralkali, of course, immediately blamed Belarus for the failures of the joint business venture. The Director of Uralkali said to the Vedomosti daily newspaper that it was Lukashenka who allowed the national mining company Belaruskali to sell potash without involving the Belarusian Potash Company and violated thus the previous agreement to work through this company. Yet the Uralkali itself has sold a bulk of its own goods without the Belarusian Potash Company. In the least, the Russian position looks dubious.

An information war followed soon afterwards. “This situation confirms only one truth – Belarusians, as always, are incapable of working with partners in a civilised way,” said the well-known Russian political commentator Andrei Suzdaltsev Radio of Liberty.

Yet the background of this story indicates that something different might have happened. Suleiman Kerimov, the Russian owner of Uralkali, wanted to acquire Belaruskali as he previously acquired another competitor of Uralkali – Silvinit. If he only managed to add Belaruskali to its business empire, he could control up to 43% of global potash market. Kiryl Koktysh of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations says that Uralkali’s actions may indicate Kerimov’s attempt to force Minsk into selling Belaruskali.

With all of its problems, the Belarusian Potash Company was, according to Belarusian economic web-portal zautra.by “probably, one of the most successful strategic Belarusian-Russian economic alliances to have existed since the moment of

the Soviet Union's demise". This begs a question: if this was the best, how exactly have the other projects?

Belarusian-Russian Integration: History of the Decline and Fall

The chronicle of [Belarusian-Russian integration](#) looks like a tug-of-war between Minsk and Moscow. Pompous rhetoric are dismissed by the reality of trade wars and agreements' delayed implementation. The list of failed major projects between the two countries is another skeleton in the closet of bilateral relations.

Project	Years of Implementation	Costs (planned or factual)
International Potash Company	1992-2005	No data
Belarus-Russian oil company Slavneft	1994-2002	Sold in 2002 for USD1.86 billion
Belarus-Russian oil companies Rosbelnafta and LYUBel-Oil	1995-2001	Russian investment by 2002 was planned to reach USD 550 million
Modernisation of Minsk brewery Krynica by Russian Baltika beer company	2000-2003	Factual Russian investments reached USD 10.5 million, a controlling block of shares was promised to be sold in 2001 for USD 50 million

Project on PET-granules production on facilities of Mahilyou's company "BelPAK" by the Russian Itera	2001-2006	By 2003, Itera allegedly invested more than USD14 million.
Development project Minsk-City by Itera	2008-2012	Planned amount – USD 4.8 billion

It is more to the point at this time to talk about Belarus-Russian disintegration rather than integration. Some experts admit that the problems in Belarus-Russian relations exist yet believe that some areas are integrating smoothly, defence cooperation in particular.

Anais Marin of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs argues in a publication of the Polish Centre for Eastern Studies that defence cooperation is "unfold[ing] regardless of the disputes that sporadically sour relations between Minsk and Moscow, standing out as the main achievement of the Union State [of Belarus and Russia] – if not the only one". Yet, Minsk has delayed the implementation of every military agreement with Moscow, sometimes for years – as happened with the [Single System of Air Defence](#).

On the other hand, Moscow failed to equip its closest ally with adequate arms – only now, has Belarus finally [replaced](#) its remaining old air defence systems, the S-200, with the S-300. The Russian army meanwhile is already replacing the S-300 with S-400. Belarus has no real prospects to get any S-400 in coming years. It is no wonder, then, that the Kremlin does not care about its Belarusian allies. Despite the rhetoric of Belarusians defending Moscow, Belarus pursues its own military policy and enters military agreements with Russia when it wants Moscow to foot the bill.

No Friends in Moscow

There are numerous reasons explain the failure of individual projects in Belarus-Russian relations. Yet there is one fundamental factor. Russia does not perceive Belarus as an independent state with its own needs and interests. "Russia believes that Belarus is its property," said once in Belsat TV Belarusian analyst Paval Usau. Actually Moscow looks in the same patrimonial way on all post-Soviet nations. The latest Russian-Ukrainian trade war proved this point once more.

Partly, Belarus itself is guilty of the discriminatory behaviour that has been coming from Russia. First, Belarus is still failing to consolidate its own nation and to draw a dividing line with Russia. After all, good fences – both physical and mental – make good neighbours. The very close alliance between the US and Israel is a model proposed by Lukashenka for Belarus-Russia relations. Yet Washington looks on Tel-Aviv as an independent nation not as a breakaway territory. In particular, this means that Washington wishes for Israel to be robust and powerful. It is better to have a stronger ally.

On the contrary, Moscow considers any Belarusian success as a threat. Thus, in recent years it did not welcome attempts by Minsk to [diversify its sources](#) of imported oil. Russia actively counteracted Belarus' policy of buying Venezuelan oil, which is quite logical from the Kremlin's perspective. If the Kremlin considers Belarus not as an ally but simply a breakaway territory, then this territory should not become strong. The reasons that Moscow does not give Belarus new military equipment become clearer when this is considered. As Anais Marin put it, the Russian establishment sees Belarus as a territory, and not real ally.

Second factor between Russian dismissive stance towards Belarus is lack of a [Belarusian lobby in Russia](#). The Belarusian government has done a lot to find such support in

Russia. Minsk tried – rather successfully to present itself as the last island of sunk empire and to mobilise Russian right-wing political groups. The Belarusian regime clearly could find some support among Soviet-time generals, right-wing intellectuals and regional industrial bosses. Yet this support appears rather unorganised and gives Belarus little leverage in disputes with the Kremlin.

A Civilised Divorce

In last decade, Russian officials have effectively renounced earlier rhetoric of integration with Russia. They apparently had no illusions that what Lukashenka has done – at least in the last decade – resembles a gradual separation from Russia. Furthermore, Minsk is not Russia's marionette. For all its services, the Belarusian state received from Russia subsidies which last year amounted to ca. USD10 billion (16 per cent of GDP).

Oddly enough, it is often Western policies which drives Belarus into the Kremlin's hands. So, for example, the problems of the Belarusian Potash Company began last year when the EU threatened to [impose sanctions on Belarus](#). It created a favourable atmosphere for Russians to put pressure on Minsk to sell Belaruskali to Russian potash magnate Kerimov. The media then reported about plans to found a new Russian-dominated potash company – Soyuzkali – whose office had to move from Belarus to Switzerland, i.e., under control of Kerimov. It did not happen, yet contributed to a crisis inside the Belarusian Potash Company.

The Russian option for Belarus remains elusive. Objective opportunities which exist for Belarusian business and individual Belarusians in Russia are offset by huge biases against them that are regularly demonstrated by Russia. Moreover, aggressive Russian attempts to take over Belarusian assets leave little space for integration and cooperation between two countries. In a word, Belarus is not as close to

Russia as frequently assumed and the West should never dismiss Belarus as an active actor.

Belarusian Defence Industry Recovers from The Last Year's Scandal

Last month, Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro promised his people that very soon Venezuela would possess the most powerful air defence system possible, capable of stopping any attempt at illegal entrances into the country's air space. For years, Belarusian specialists were working on the construction of this facility.

The statement by the Venezuelan head of state means that the Belarusian side managed to sort out this serious crisis which the Belarusian military industry encountered abroad just a year ago. Back then, a light airplane of a Swedish PR-agency illegally entered Belarusian air space. Allegedly, it did so to promote democracy by symbolically [bombarding Belarus](#) with teddy-bears. But as the leading Belarusian military expert Alexandr Alesin recently noted on naviny.by, it might just as well have served to discredit Belarus' military capabilities and defence industry. Recent news show, however, that this has not happened.

Belarusian "Contract of the Century"

The national defence industry has achieved some success over the last decade by specialising in the modernisation of equipment and the development of its own new systems along Soviet technological lines. Especially impressive are its

innovations in air defence – no wonder, Belarus has maintained from Soviet times probably the most comprehensive air defence system among all the former Soviet states.

In recent years, Belarus achieved some qualitative breakthroughs by developing new systems and extending its own arms exports – which are not leftovers from Soviet times – and defence products. For example, Belarusians received contracts for the modernisation of the air defence in [Azerbaijan](#) and apparently sold some of their products to Iran (though Minsk has not admitted as much). Yet the most lucrative contract was, of course, its [Venezuelan one](#).

While visiting Caracas in December 2007 Aleksandr Lukashenka signed with the then president Hugo Chavez of Venezuela an agreement on the construction of a unified air defence system and radio-electronic warfare system in Venezuela. Belarus had to coordinate the project, while cooperating with Russian, Chinese and Iranian companies.

Afterwards, Belarus sent numerous military advisors to Venezuela who had to ensure the complete creation of the air defence system in six years time. It went well up until the Swedish incident of last summer. After the incident, Hugo Chavez allegedly thought twice about the reliability of his Belarusian partners.

Belarusian Defence Industry Vindicated After Last Summer Failure

To reassure him, Belarus sent its leading air defence expert Aleh Paferau to serve as ambassador to Venezuela. He was a perfect figure for that assignment, being the former Belarusian air force and air defence commander. In addition Paferau, while serving as a deputy chairman of the State Military Industrial Committee of Belarus actually participated in the conclusion of the “contract of the century” with Venezuela. And he succeeded. By autumn, the Venezuelan air

defence and electronic warfare systems shall be essentially completed, says both Venezuelan and Belarusian officials.

The film demonstrated how Iran deployed Belarusian-made Vostok-E system to intercept the American aircraft.

Of course, another accident also vindicated Belarusian defence industry after its "Swedish failure." In February, Iranian TV broadcasted a film about interception of a US drone which entered Iranian air space in December 2011. The film demonstrated how Iran deployed [Belarusian-made Vostok-E](#) system to intercept the American remotely piloted vehicle.

It had an effect and although the US immediately sanctioned two Belarusian enterprises, Minsk could demonstrate some tangible and battle-proven achievements to its foreign friends. In May, as the Vietnamese prime minister visited Minsk, Belarusian officials claimed to have achieved an agreement with Hanoi on selling Belarusian unmanned aerial vehicles to Vietnam. A month ago, Belarus agreed to sell about 20 Vostok-E radar systems to Vietnam, as well as send advisers to train Vietnamese operators for them.

Forever With Moscow?

But Belarus is still rather limited in its weapons business abroad. Any big deal requires the involvement of Russia. Sophisticated Belarusian military products require components produced in Russia or other post-Soviet republics. And it is this dependence on Russia that has increased in the last decade as Minsk has exhausted its stocks of Soviet-era equipment or, often, this equipment simply became obsolete. Now Belarusians are producing the equipment themselves, but their dependence hampers their growth in this field.

The creation of the Venezuelan air defence system illustrates this complementary feature of Belarusian defence industry. Thus, as the command center of the system, Belarus chose its native automated fire control station Bor-1M. In addition,

Minsk provides Venezuela with radar equipment and radio-electronic combat systems of its own production. Among them, of course, the above-mentioned Vostok-E developed by the firm KB Radar in Minsk. But that is essentially all, for the remaining components of the Venezuelan air defence system Belarus has to resort to Russian weapons.

As for surface-to-air missiles, most likely the S-125 Pechora-2M on chassis from the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT) will be used in Venezuela, after their modernisation at select Belarusian and Russian factories. Some other important components of the Pechoras are also being developed and produced by Belarusian firms, yet essentially the Pechora is a Russian product.

In addition, Venezuela ordered from Russia some items of more modern systems such as the S-300 and Buk-M2E. Once more, Minsk cannot provide such arms itself independently, although the Buk launchers are also installed on Belarusian MZKT chassis. Caracas had also to complement these purchases by buying from Russia some Zu-23s cannons and Igla-S man-portable surface-to-air missiles.

Is Russia Ready to Recognise Belarus as an Ally?

Russian policies towards defence cooperation with Belarus look more like a desire to grab the most efficient Belarusian firms in its defence industry.

Evidently, Belarus has to cooperate with Russia on big arms and defence modernisation deals. There is nothing particularly extraordinary about this, as allied states usually cooperate with regards to their defence industries. Yet Russian policies towards defence cooperation with Belarus look more like a desire to grab the most efficient Belarusian firms in its defence industry than cooperate with them.

The best example is the same MZKT which produces chassis of world-renown quality. The Kremlin some years ago launched a

policy of replacing all the components of Russian weapons produced in former Soviet republics with Russian-made ones. Since at least the early 2010s, it made no exception to this rule even for its closest ally – Belarus. The Russian military decided to replace Belarusian chassis of the Russian missile systems with their Russian equivalents which were not even available at the time when the decision was made.

It further led Russia to the idea of buying the MZKT – one of the best Belarusian firms. Moscow has many means to pressure Minsk with its financial troubles into selling the works. This would both undermine the future prospects of Belarusian economic development and will further diminish the importance of Belarus to Russia.

It is precisely these kinds of situations that show Belarusian officials and businessmen the risks of cooperating with Russia. The Russian side apparently is not eager to do business together with Belarusians, but rather it wants to take their business from them. Moscow simply refuses to [accept Belarus as a partner](#) despite its geopolitical significance and strategic proximity and commitments of Belarus concerning its alliance with Russia.

The Belarusian opposition and Western politicians should avoid demonising the Belarusian defence industry and military. It would be wiser to provide them with realistic prospects with a positive future – an alternative to being strangled by Russia. The demonisation of the defence industries and military by reformist forces in the former Soviet republics in 1990s – especially in Russia and Ukraine – brought no good and led to backlash with grave political consequences.

More Russian Military Bases in Belarus?

More Russian military bases may appear in Belarus soon. According to naviny.by, a Belapan news agency web site an entire aviation division may soon be deployed. This report, however, referred only to an expert from the dubious Russian "Academy of Geopolitical Problems".

Belarusian military expert Alexander Alesin predicted that "as ability of the national air forces for battle diminish, the air borders of Belarus will be increasingly guarded by Russian military pilots."

Earlier, the opposition media negatively commented on the symbolic presence of Russian paratroopers at a military parade in Minsk on 3 July. Speculations and fears of the [Russian military overtaking](#) Belarus are also prominently featured in Belarusian politics. Often they help both the opposition and the government to achieve their other political aims.

Nobody Wants A Neutral Belarus

Belarus proclaimed its neutrality as early as 1990, although its current Constitution more cautiously states that it strives "to achieve neutrality". Meanwhile, almost no major political group in the country is seriously committed to neutrality. The government openly promotes a military alliance with Russia. The opposition loudly protests against such policies but fails to commit to neutrality and instead campaigns for an alliance with the West.

Belarusian politicians, however, articulate and instrumentalise security issues also in other contexts. Both the Belarusian government and opposition use a politics of security – discussing seemingly unrelated issues in security

terms – as a strategy to convince their respective foreign friends of their own importance. For years Lukashenka has been resorting to [security-related rhetoric](#) about “Belarusians always defending Moscow” to put pressure on the Russians each time they try to push the Belarusian ruler into a corner.

For their part, the Belarusian opposition emphasises that the regime endangers not only the future of Belarusian nation. Opponents of the current government try to prove that Lukashenka is a threat to regional security – on his own or as a stooge of Russia, and moreover, sometimes he takes to creating [mischief far away](#) – in the Middle East, Latin America, Africa. Later on appear the fake documents about Belarus supplying weapons to Pakistani terrorists or arming Sudan’s government killing Darfurians.

Does Anybody Fears Today’s Belarus?

Its security strategy failed in many cases. Gazprom repeatedly charged Belarus to the fullest extent possible for the sake of Russian gas, carefully ignoring its ally status. No serious Western expert considers Lukashenka a real threat to international security – for example as a source of weapons for Iran. Moreover, even in neighbouring countries opinions on this matter differ.

For instance, after in late April Belarus and Russia publicised the plans for a [Russian air base](#) in Belarus, the most harsh reaction came from Warsaw. Even some reputable politicians like former defence minister Onyszkiewicz talked there about danger of Belarusian and Russian military cooperation for Polish national security. Fortunately, other Polish experts sounded much more reserved.

Anna Maria Dyner in the June issue of the Bulletin of the Polish Institute of International Affairs warns, “at this stage, the development of Belarusian–Russian military cooperation cannot be treated as the beginning of an “arms

race" in Central and Eastern Europe". Moreover, she believes that, "Russian support to maintain the country's military capabilities is necessary," given the scarce funding Belarus gives to own military.

Lithuania even more cautiously reacted to the news of a prospective Russian air base in Belarus. The Lithuanian defence minister Juozas Olekas, speaking to the BNS news agency in late April, said that he gave no particular importance to possible influence of a new Russian military base in Belarus on regional security. "For some time now we have been watching the cooperation between Belarus and Russia, and, it is possible, the time has come when their integration, especially in defence matters between these nations is increasing. One of its forms may be seen in the establishment of military bases on Belarusian territory," he explained.

Risk of Proxy Confrontation of Russia and NATO in Belarus

Actually, the Belarusian government has little choice at the moment in matters of national security, but to ask Russians for help. As Yury Drakakhrust of the Radio of Free Europe argued, last year's [teddy-bears' bombing](#) conducted by Swedish pilots over Minsk "has demonstrated the weakness of Belarusian air defence – the Russians decided to strengthen it their own way (and have wanted to do so for a long time)." He believes that the Swedish action provided a psychological background for Russian decisions and had harmful consequences irrespective of intents.

Unfortunately, the security situation around Belarus concerns not only Belarus and surrounding states. It is becoming ever more a situation of bigger confrontation. In this confrontation Belarus – justly or not – is perceived as a proxy for Russia, while Minsk and Moscow consider surrounding states first of all as the NATO. The trend continues. Thus, Anna Maria Dyner of the Polish Institute of International Affairs proposes that Poland should not only keep modernising

“its own defence capabilities, [and] pursue regional cooperation”, but also “work towards maintaining the involvement of NATO in the region”.

Belarus can become involved into geopolitical struggle between the West and Russia with all dangerous consequences thereof

In this context, Belarus can become involved into the geopolitical struggle between the West and Russia with all dangerous consequences thereof. This security policy helps to freeze the existing situations of political suppression – not only because Lukashenka can use military confrontation with the West and historical reminiscences of, say, Second World War to mobilise ordinary Belarusians and distract them from issues of internal politics and economy. He would get for his confrontation with the West something more important – more help from Moscow. And that means his rule will stay.

Actually, the talks of security threats from Belarus look odd against a background of the current situation with Belarusian military. The Russian military delegation which visited Belarus in June found most of the two dozens Soviet-era Belarusian military airfields deactivated and unsuitable for use. The situation with arms is not much better. Belarus only now completed modernisation of its air defence with the S-300, and it apparently gave up its loudly-discussed plans to buy Russian-made Iskander tactical missile systems.

It is no wonder that the national defence budget this year is just \$686.4 million. It equals to 1.2% of GDP, this number did not change significantly in last decade, and is one of the lowest levels among post-Soviet states far below the level of defence budgets in the NATO states. It failed to prevent Anatoli Paulau of the United Civic Party a couple of years ago from publicly criticising military spending as hypertrophied on the grounds that on every serviceman Belarus spends ten times more money than on a teacher. The comparison proves nothing as soldiers and teachers cost very differently in

every country.

At the same time the neighboring countries embarked on ambitious programmes of military reorganisation and modernisation inside NATO. Neighbour states and wider Western community shall recognise security concerns of Belarus. It would be wrong to see the current Belarusian state as a mere marionette of Russia.

On the other hand, security-related actions – e.g., harsh reactions to [ordinary military exercises](#) in Belarus or promotion democracy flights over Belarusian territory – may cause more extensive Russian military presence in Belarus. Such actions present a real danger for gradual transformation of the country and its integration in the region. In fact, Belarus does not threaten anybody in the region or beyond it. Responsible Western politicians and media should avoid helping the Belarusian regime by overplaying military issues.

Belarus Wants New Russian Fighter Jets But Without Russian Pilots

Last week, Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu discussed with Alexander Lukashenka establishment of a Russian air force base in Belarus.

A few days later, Lukashenka dismissed the claims that Russia will have a military base in Belarus. The news came as media of neighbouring countries continue to discuss the significance of [Belarus-Russian military drill West-2013](#) (*Zapad-2013*) scheduled for autumn.

Belarusian and Russian officials insist that the West-2013 drill does not threaten anyone, and remind that last year NATO conducted a dozen of drills of different scales in neighbouring countries. Despite various speculations in Belarusian and Western media, little evidence exists to support that is Belarus threatening anyone military, together with Russia or on its own.

Negligible Russian Military Presence

At the moment Russia has two military sites in Belarus. Moscow emphasises that these are not “bases,” just “obyekty,” i.e., sites. In the northwestern town of Vileika since 1964 functions the 43rd Communications Centre of the Russian Navy where reportedly 350 naval commissioned and warrant officers serve. In the southern town of Hantsavichy since 2002 functions an early warning radar of the Russian Aerospace Defence Forces. At this site around 2,000 Russian troops are stationed. The presence of Russian troops in Belarus remains lower than in many other countries of the former Soviet Union, say, in Ukraine, Georgia or Armenia.

Despite loud rhetoric about integration with Russia, Lukashenka so far limited Russian military access to Belarusian territory. Both above mentioned military sites were established by a treaty signed between two states in January 1995 – long before he established his authoritarian rule.

Moreover, the military exercises are also not an invention of his, NATO experts knew, the regular military exercises “Zapad” were held in this region by the Soviet Union since 1973. The only breakthrough Russians had in military integration with Belarus under Lukashenka was delayed by Belarusian leader for many years [creation of Single Regional System of Air Defence](#), which actually Moscow needed more than Minsk.

Against this backdrop, the possible Russian air force base indeed seems like something very new. But the whole talk about it could be more a bargaining chip than a finalised deal. The most important resource of Belarus is its location between Russia and the EU, so contemplating a prospect of establishing more Russia troops in the country the Belarusian leader may collect points in several games, beyond getting more Russian loans or subsidies.

Belarusian S-300 and Polish Patriots

First, avoiding too much Russian military presence is a gesture toward the EU which is not only critical but also dismissive about Lukashenka. Now, he wants to show Brussels how dangerous can be for the Europeans not to take Lukashenka seriously.

Second, both Moscow and Minsk now perceive military balance in the region as worsening for them. The NATO fighter planes are present on duty in Lithuania, Poland since 2006 deployed F-16 fighter jets and since 2010 – Patriot surface-to-air missile systems.

In its military survey, the Russian *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* recently admitted that Belarusian army formations are in a much better shape than Russian army units deployed in Western Russia. Yet, continues the journalist, “while the Russian army – after adopting two years ago the State Armaments Programme – started to receive the newest equipment, it can hardly be said about the Belarusian military.”

In December Belarus took out of service the last functioning Su-27 fighter jet. Belarusian daily *Ezhednevnik* wrote that it amounted to a “loss of almost a third of fighter fleet of the Belarusian air force.”

The latest statement of the Belarusian ruler himself also supports it. Dismissing the news of a Russian base Lukashenka said that nevertheless “two dozens of modern

jets" lack him "as a supreme commander." According to the Belarusian leader, he definitely discussed with the the Russian Minister of Defence something different than a military base: "We buy Russian jets Su-27, MiG-29 or more modern, in order to guarantee security of air space borders of our state."

Moreover, some other details undermine the theory of a possible Russian expansion. The military exercise *West-2013* will be smaller in troops numbers, although Belarus is planning to deploy its [territorial defence units](#), yet their military significance is minimal.

Polish criticism of deployment of additional S-300s in Belarus sound rather insincere as Warsaw since 2010 deploys Patriot missiles, an American equivalent of S-300, which according to some analysts Patriot actually may be even superior to its Russian counterpart.

Moreover, Belarus wants to get four S-300 batteries, because it has four batteries of S-200 designed in the 1960s as well as some even older S-125 systems which need to be replaced. Making too much noise about additional S-300 in Belarus makes little sense, as Minsk clearly does not exceeds the reasonable needs of its national security.

Playing Enemies For Lukashenka

Unfortunately, the latest military news from Minsk were accompanied by very unhelpful comments in the neighbouring countries which implied that Belarusian government together with Russia is a source of instability in the region.

Polska daily *The Times* even speculated that in the autumn military drill Belarus and Russia might even practise preparing for a nuclear strike at Warsaw, referring as argumentation to some aspects of previous *West* military exercises. The Belarusian obsession was not limited to Poland. This week, the head of the Latvian counterintelligence

agency Jānis Kažociņš said, “The military exercises *West-2013* are an attempt to cut off the Baltic countries from the EU and NATO help.” He continued to warn of Russian plans to block Baltic Sea with the help of nuclear weapons.

Exactly such rhetoric is very useful for the Belarusian leadership which wants to prove that Belarus is threatened and nothing has changed since times when, say, Poland until 1939 suppressed Western Belarusian population and talked of retaking the Eastern Belarus. Official propaganda in Belarus would be grateful for a chance to discuss troops and missiles with Warsaw, Riga or Vilnius instead of human rights or elections.

These rhetoric from the West also stimulates the Russian leadership to continue supporting the Belarusian regime which in their eyes confronts the West. The [image of an anti-Western dictator](#) remains Lukashenka's main selling point for the Russians.

The Belarusian opposition failed to neutralise these odd speculations, yet mostly chose to support them. On the 1 May festivities a group of oppositional activists in Brest came out with a slogan “Today Russian Base = Tomorrow 22 June,” meaning the day of the beginning of the 1941 German invasion. It is hard to find more unsuitable slogan for the Belarusian society deeply traumatised by the World War II.

The Belarusian service of Radio Liberty on 30 April published on its web-page deliberations on new the Russian base with an even more [provocative title](#): “If it Were not for the Germans, we would not have Survived the War [WWII]”

To become more real and less emotional, it is important to understand that stability and security in the region requires respecting security of all states, including Belarusian ones. So far, the Belarusian collaboration with Russia remains limited and reactive rather than proactive. Moreover, since

mid-2000s Belarus is [increasing its cooperation with the NATO](#). According to the expert of Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies Dzyanis Melyantsou the cooperation is a long-term and relatively successful which continues without much publicity.

In this context, the rhetoric of military threats should be used by those who like to speculate on it, including Alexander Lukashenka with his pathetic speeches of “the trenches of the Great Patriotic War.” Fortunately enough, this time top officials of the neighbouring countries resist a temptation to lash out at the Belarusian regime for its military policies. Probably for a good reason.

Is Time on the Side of the Belarusian Regime?

Last week Alexander Lukashenka declared his interest in good relations with Western countries.

His statement came against the backdrop of active contacts between Belarusian officials and their European counterparts in the past two months. Involved in these meetings were a director of a department of the EU External Action Service, a delegation of the Council of Europe, representatives of the Lithuanian foreign ministry, a delegation from the Swedish foreign ministry, and a Czech foreign minister.

Two weeks ago, Lukashenka said at a meeting with US experts that Belarus seeks “normal” relations with Washington, as well. Though all these developments are far from a breakthrough in relations with the West – frozen after 2010 – they demonstrate that the Belarusian government is aware that it cannot just stick to Moscow. At the same time it does not

display any haste in improving its relations with the West. It hopes that the time is on its side in the international arena.

No Democracy for a Nickel

Sure, the prospects for a genuine rapprochement between Belarus and the West currently look bleak. The interests of all parties apparently do not require the urgent mending of fences. The Belarusian regime feels secure with its Russian protection and assistance. The European politicians who tried to strike a deal with Lukashenka in 2008-2010 are not likely to risk it again. The European Union has more important problems to sort out and is quite happy to just demonstratively punish the ugly, yet rather harmless (for Europeans), dictatorship in Belarus.

Having tried to democratise Belarus and bring it closer to Europe in 2008-2010, the EU never offered Minsk a [serious deal](#) capable of changing the situation in the country. After all, Belarus needs to compensate for the possible loss of enormous Russian subsidies in the potential aftermath of eliminating the existing model of relations with Moscow which has been so fundamental to the existing regime.

European politicians failed because they ignored basic the political economy of Belarusian state

To change this reality, extensive and expensive modernisation is needed. Yet European politicians wanted to do it on the cheap. Of course they ,because they ignored the basic political economy of Belarusian state.

So, the EU began to fight against the Belarusian regime using isolation, threats and restrictive measures. Cutting links with Minsk, the West played into the hands of Moscow and Lukashenka. The isolation brought the regime closer to Russia and did not threaten its existence. On the contrary, it

drastically diminished opportunities for political alternatives to Lukashenka to emerge among the Belarusian [nomenclatura](#) and business community allied with the state.

Removal of the current regime cannot be achieved without changing the political economy of the nation. Currently there is very little hope for such changes. Yury Drakakhrust of Radio Liberty quoted an anonymous Western diplomat who said while “your modernisation costs big money, the defence of democratic values costs nothing.”

The EU continues to condemn Minsk and demand the release of political prisoners yet is not ready to seriously invest in changes. Thus, last year the Polish-based Belsat TV – the only TV [project](#) supporting the opponents of Lukashenka – had to suspend its operations for weeks as much of its 2012 annual budget for broadcasting had been spent before the year ended.

Lukashenka's Dream

Of course, two EU members – Lithuania and Poland – will always have interests in neighbouring Belarus, yet they are by far not the most relevant actors in the EU's foreign policy. Other EU countries, and all major EU members, have no interest in a small post-Soviet country lacking any major assets like oil or gas, a country that is not threatening anyone in its own neighbourhood.

However, a country which is not important today may become important tomorrow. In better times for Russian-Western relations, the West could neglect Belarus by dealing just with Russia. Worsening relations with Russia will increase the geopolitical significance of the region and of Belarus. The deterioration of these relations has been evident in recent years and this tendency will likely continue given the increasingly authoritarian methods of the Kremlin.

It was Russian aggression in the Caucasus in 2008 which brought Western politicians round to the idea of negotiating

with the Belarusian strongman. He knows it, and anticipates a new change in the current geopolitical reality. Moreover, if this time the confrontation between Russia and the West lasts longer, Lukashenka could become for the West something like Ceausescu of Communist Romania in the time of the Cold War, i.e., a man with dubious views and background, yet who is indispensable for geopolitical reasons.

Putin's efforts to establish the [Eurasian Union](#) in the post-Soviet world by 2015 are just adding to a series of collisions between Moscow and the West in the Middle East and on ever recurring questions of human rights and democracy in Russia itself. Actually, Western countries may have to accept not just Lukashenka. The EU has also to deal with the increasingly authoritarian Ukraine run by Viktor Yanukovich who may join Lukashenka in his defiance of democracy.

Dangerous Russian Ally

The hopes of the Belarusian ruler for a new confrontation between Russia and the West make him seek contacts with the EU without giving in to European demands concerning liberalisation and release of political prisoners. At the moment he is using contacts with the EU merely as leverage in negotiations with Russia. For the Belarusian ruling elite is clear that, though Russia is their main sponsor, they shall [beware](#) of the Kremlin.

Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makey](#) once said that there is a brutal "jungle law" in the international environment surrounding Belarus. Some commentators were quick to interpret it as a reference to the Western pressure on the regime, yet there are signs that Belarusian officials consider relations with Russia in similar terms.

At a meeting with experts representing the Jamestown Foundation, an American think tank, Lukashenka emphasised the contradictions in Russian-Belarusian relations. He stated that

Russia had changed its imperial thinking, yet Belarusians were vigilant and constantly defended their independence. He brought up an example of a “forceful attempt [by Russia] to introduce a common currency” which had been defeated.

This understanding is a positive development which created a precondition for a new age in Belarusian relations with the West. Just a dozen years ago, the Belarusian ruling establishment did not see the country outside the Russian realm at all. Yet no government in Minsk – neither authoritarian nor democratic – can introduce significant changes in foreign alignment of the country without changes in its political economy, i.e., freeing the economy from its total dependence on [Russian energy subsidies](#).

Only when this strong dependence on Moscow has been overcome can Belarusians change their country and build a functioning democracy. Belarusian independence and democracy require serious investments and risky deals. And these investments and risk-taking initiatives by the West can materialise when Belarus becomes more important due to changes in its geopolitical situation.

Siarhei Bohdan

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Lukashenka's New Right-Hand Man: Andrei Kabyakou

The presidential administration is the centre of the Belarusian regime. It controls all state bodies including

the government and parliament. The head of the presidential administration is the right hand of the president.

On 27 August, Alexandr Lukashenka appointed Andrei Kabyakou (age 52) to that very office.

Moscow-born Russian Kabyakou has been one of the closest people to the Belarusian ruler since 1990s. Some analysts predict that his appointment means that privatisation will soon come as well as increased Russian clout. Others believe that his loyalty to Moscow is exaggerated and he will faithfully work in the interests of Belarusian authorities.

Rocket False Start

Lukashenka considers his Russian origin as no problem. Appointing Kabyakou to the position of ambassador in Moscow last December he emphasised, "Half of our officials are Russians". Among them defence minister and head of president's security service. Foreign-born candidates are preferable also for other reason – according to the constitution they may not run for presidency. The Belarusian state has been an inclusive one in terms of ethnic diversity – it had among its ministers even a Volga Tatar and an Azerbaijani.

Kabyakou was born in 1960 in Moscow. His father was a political officer in the Soviet air force and served in Belarus. Therefore Andrei has lived in the country since he was three years old. He emphasised: «And what shall I do in Moscow? Right, I was born there, but since 1963 I lived here. I am not going to leave our country [Belarus]»

In 1983, Andrei graduated from prestigious Moscow Aviation Ordzhonikidze Institute with an engineering diploma in rocket and missile design. His dream was to build rockets yet he had to work at Diaproektor factory in the Eastern Belarusian city of Rahachou. The enterprise produced optical mechanical equipment, including those used for military purposes.

In 1988, as other people became disappointed with the Communist party and some even publicly burned their Party cards, Kabyakou went to work full-time for the party. First, he worked in the organisational department, then studied simultaneously at the High Party School and the Belarus State Economy Institute. That was false start in his carrier.

After Communist rule crumbled, he returned to the same Rahachou factory. There he became friends with the factory deputy director Vasil Dauhalyou, who would bring Kabyakou to the top of Belarus rulling elite. Dauhalyou decided to work in 1994 on presidential candidate Lukashenka.

After Lukashenka's victory, he did not forget how Dauhalyou and his people helped him. In 1995, the president made Dauhalyou chairman of the Control Service of the President (later State Control Service), dubbed the "economic security service." Kabyakou followed him as his deputy, then switched for a while to a post in Light Industry only to become in 1998 the Chairman of State Control Service himself.

Union State as a Trap for the Russian Bear

That was the right path to the top. In 2000, Kabyakou was appointed deputy prime minister, in 2002 the minister of the Economy, and in 2003 the vice prime minister. Among his tasks were financial issues and Customs Union, which Belarus joined under Russian pressure. Yet it does not mean that his goal was to bring Belarus into Russia's orbit. Many integration initiatives pursued by Minsk were smart tricks to get badly needed Russian support for unreformed and unmodernised Belarusian economy.

In December 2011 he became ambassador to Russia. Immediately after the appointment he declared on Belarusian TV that his main priority would be establishment of the Single Economic Space. The Customs Union has created [some serious problems](#) for the Belarusian government as Russia has increasingly gained

control over Belarusian [reexports of reprocessed Russian oil](#) – one of the vital sources of income for Belarus. The single Economic Space could restore Belarusian government this lucrative oil business.

In this context Kabyakou's words about the Single Economic Space sound ambiguous:

That is a higher stage of integration within the Customs Union. That is a stage where our fundamental problematic issues shall be solved, the issues which existed in our trade and economic relations. It concerns equal prices for gas, equal conditions in oil and oil products trade, etc.

Even more ambiguous were Kabyakou's statements in a December 2011 interview for Rossiyskaya Gazeta. He pathetically elaborated on advantages and achievements of “Union State of Belarus and Russia,” yet the double-dip character of this dubious political project is common knowledge.

The Union was launched in 1997 and allowed Russian elites to satisfy their emotional sentiments for the lost Soviet empire. Belarusian leadership used it pragmatically to [extract from Kremlin exorbitant subsidies](#). Minsk managed to give nothing essential in return to Russia. Belarus spoke with brash slogans and resorted to unrealistic demands anytime Moscow tried to commit it to something. Thus, Lukashenka agreed to introduce a single currency if he was given opportunity to print money as well.

Putin's Blood

As ambassador, Kabyakou not only proclaimed himself an “apologist of the Union State” playing on sentiments of Russian nationalists. He directly participated in very important negotiations for the Belarusian economy, among them those tied to oil export duties. Lukashenka was satisfied with his performance there.

Not only the Belarusian leader has noticed Kabyakou's defence of Belarusian interests. When Russian President Putin was visiting Belarus in May and saw Kabyakou at negotiations he made the following remark: "He has sucked so much blood out of me this past year – and now they sent him to us to Moscow to suck the rest out of me..."

Kabyakou is definitely not a grey official simply executing orders. In November 2007, as vice prime minister for economic issues, he made it to the headlines after shouting at Lukashenka. After the Belarusian ruler once again put forth a very questionable economic agenda, Kabyakou openly and very emotionally explained him that although Lukashenka could set "crazy tasks", it would end in catastrophe. In a Belarusian context, this requires a lot of courage.

Is He Working for Moscow?

What motivates the Moscow-born and educated Kabyakou to work for the Belarusian state? Shortly after being appointed ambassador in Moscow he said that he "returned home." But Kabyakou's Russian identity and loyalty is probably not particularly strong. There are Russians who underwent even more radical transformation and undersigned the Belarusian national project. Among them – one of the leaders of national democrats in early 1990s and today's chairman of the Belarusian Language Society Aleh Trusau.

Personal ambition to get to the top might be also a crucial factor. Kabyakou has managed to do that in Lukashenka's Belarus and he is going to continue serving it. Furthermore, he might defend Belarus's interests even more relentlessly, just to prove that his loyalty lies with the government in Minsk rather than his native Moscow.

To dismiss Kabyakou as Moscow's man is to disregard evidence that proves the opposite. Of course, the murky waters of Belarusian establishment politics make it difficult to

analyse. The opposition, however, shall [look for possible allies](#) in the future transformation of the country everywhere. This also means among the ruling elite without prejudices to someone's origin or rhetoric.

Selling Russian to the Russians

This week the Belarusian Association of Advertisers announced a competition for the best poster in popularising the Belarusian language. They want to draw public attention to "one of the most painful social problems" – the low usage of Belarusian in everyday life in Belarus.

Belarusians have the weakest national self-identification in the former Soviet Union and authoritarian ruler Alexander Lukashenka is happy to pursue pro-Moscow cultural policy in exchange for cheap Russian gas and oil. The most recent manifestation of such a policy was a letter from the presidential administration urging local authorities "not to allow artificial reduction of the use of the Russian language".

While the authorities are trying to suppress the use of Belarusian, Belarusian civil society is trying to revive it. And for good reason.

Russification Before Independence

The Belarusian language was the only official language of the Grand Duchy of Litva (Lithuania) – once the largest state in Central Europe. But in the last two centuries went through very difficult times.

Since the late 18th century, Russia tried to assimilate Belarusians into the Russian Empire. Mikhail Muravyov who led Russia's administration in the Belarusian territory in the 19th century, famously said: "What Russian rifles did not succeed in doing, will be finished off by Russian schools".

The modern Belarusian national movement developed relatively late and in less favourable conditions compared to Baltic states or Ukraine.

The modern Belarusian national movement developed relatively late – in the 19th century and in less favourable conditions compared to Baltic states or Ukraine. In 1920 there was a brief period of "Belarusification" in the Soviet Union. Repressive [Stalinist totalitarianism](#) ended this short-lived policy and damaged Belarus more than other Soviet republic.

Post-Stalin Soviet leaders continued this policy. Nikita Khrushchev during his visit to Minsk in 1959 stated: "The sooner we all speak in Russian, the faster we build communism". Belarus occupied the last place among all Soviet republics according to the use of its native language. And still it was higher then than today. In 1950, the majority of Minsk residents spoke Belarusian.

In 1970, almost 40 per cent of books and newspapers in Belarus were published in Belarusian. Already in 1984, only 5 per cent of newspapers in Soviet Belarus circulated in the Belarusian language.

Russification After Independence

After the declaration of independence in 1990, the Belarusian Parliament proclaimed the sole official language of the country. But the first Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka was unable to speak either proper Russian, or Belarusian. He spoke a mixture of the two languages with a heavy Belarusian accent.

Since the 1990s, the myth of "Belarusian nationalists" has been helping Lukashenka gain political and economic support from Moscow.

However, he decided to position himself as the defender of the Russian language from Belarusian nationalists. Lukashenka also portrayed the Belarusian language as a real threat to Russians in Belarus. Since the 1990s, the myth of "Belarusian nationalists" has been helping him gain political and economic support from Moscow.

Following a questionable referendum in 1995, Lukashenka made Russian the second official language in Belarus. Russian president Boris Yeltsin was thankful and surprised with the result: "Just think of it! They have even made Russian official!".

Lukashenka rarely speaks Belarusian. When he does so, his main goal is usually to ridicule his political opponents. There was no place for the Belarusian language in the newly created state ideology based on the glorification of the Soviet past.

Under the 18 years of Lukashenka's rule, education and schooling in the Belarusian language had been marginalised. In 1994, 75 per cent of Belarusian children went to schools with Belarusian as the language of instruction. Today, it's less than 20 per cent. This figure is based primarily on rural schools which are gradually dying out. For comparison, only 2 per cent of pupils study in Belarusian-speaking classes and schools in Minsk, and only several children do so in the town of Mahilou with a population 360,000.

Many Belarusian parents refuse to send their children to the Belarusian-language classes simply because they do not think it would be useful for them in the future. In spite of the appeals from civil society, the authorities did not allow the establishment of even one college or university with Belarusian as the principal language of instruction.

Belarusian-speaking people used to be the primary target of police and KGB during the opposition street protests.

Belarusian is almost never used in official communication and office administration. Most of the state-owned mass media broadcast in Russian. Moreover, often people are just afraid to speak Belarusian publicly. The reason is Belarusian-speaking people used to be the primary target of police and KGB during the opposition street protests.

That is why statistics demonstrate decreasing use of the Belarusian language. If in 1999 there were 36.7 per cent who claimed they spoke Belarusian every day, in 2009 it had dropped to 23.4 per cent.

Selling Russian to the Russians

Official Minsk has been trading its pro-Russian cultural policy for oil and gas loans for years. These tactics were slightly modified during the cooling down period with Russia and a thaw with Brussels in 2007-2010. In 2008, Lukashenka appointed "the first Belarusian speaking minister". Pavel Latushka, Belarus' Minister of Culture, is the first high-ranking Lukashenka's official who predominantly uses Belarusian even in official communication.

However, the state policy to reinforce Belarusian national identity remains poorly articulated and very inconsistent. The Belarusian media recently published a letter from Alexander Radzkou, a senior official in the presidential administration. The letter instructs regional and local authorities "to take concrete measures to prevent the policy of forced Belarusification by heads of state bodies and other organisations and the artificial limitation of the use of the Russian language in their activities."

The vast majority of the population has no problem with understanding Belarusian even if they struggle to speak it

fluently.

The vast majority of the population has no problem with understanding Belarusian even if they struggle to speak it fluently. Today Belarusian is the language of the intelligentsia, creative elites and young city dwellers. Many world famous brands have staged a range of successful advertising campaigns in Belarusian. It has proven that the Belarusian language has huge potential to affect people. But its prestige and wider use need to be supported.

The Belarusian Language Today

Some western policymakers elaborating strategies to democratise Belarus neglect the importance of the Belarusian language. They forget that Belarusian had been the basis for the original Belarusian national movement and statehood based on democratic ideas. It brought together people of different faiths and ethnic origins.

As David Marples noted in 1999, “For Belarus, national development without the native language, especially under the shadow of a much larger Slavic neighbour with a lengthy historical tradition as an empire, was virtually impossible”.

And it is still not possible today. Being the cornerstone of Belarusian identity, Belarusian language protects the nation from Russian expansion and Russification. On the other hand, Belarusian makes Belarusians feel European. It is a very important tool for democratisation.

That is why, if the West does not want to “lose” Belarus to Russia completely, it should help Belarusians strengthen their national self-identification and to feel themselves to be a part of a greater European heritage. The Belarusian language as the cornerstone of the nation should definitely be supported alongside democratic values and human rights, as Kenneth Yalowitz, the US ambassador to Belarus, [noted recently](#).

Kanstantsin Lashkevich

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2011: Year Under The Sign Of Crackdown

The year of 2011 was in many respects a unique year for Belarus. Unlike a regular year, it started not on 1 January but rather on 19 December of the previous year. On that day the presidential election took place and in the evening a huge crowd of protesters gathered in the center of Minsk. The police violently dispersed the crowd. Hundreds of the protesters were arrested, including 7 presidential candidates. Numerous hopes for a more democratic future crashed instantly. As a result, all the major events and trends of 2011 in Belarus were in this or another way affected by the crackdown and its repercussions.

Reduced Space For Geopolitical Maneuvering

The most evident repercussions of 19 December reflected in foreign policy. After two years of a thaw in the relations with the European Union the 2011 signified a partial isolation of Belarus by the EU. Targeted sanctions against certain individuals and economic entities were introduced and expanded throughout the year. But it was only a partial isolation – Belarus remained in the Eastern Partnership and some official and informal political communication continued. Moreover, mutual trade (in particular, Belarusian exports) demonstrated an impressive growth. According to the Belarusian Statistics

Agency, the export of Belarusian goods to the EU in January-October 2011 grew by 121,7% (compare: the exports to Russia grew by 41,2%).

However, even the partial isolation from the EU lead to a significant reduction of the space for geopolitical maneuvering. The Belarusian authorities became more [exposed](#) to pressure from Russia. Dependence on Russian credits, investments and subsidies grew considerably. As a result, Belarus had to fully implement its integration commitments given to the Kremlin, which in many respects endangered the country's interests. For example, a recently leaked government document shows that the authorities did not even have enough time to analyze the future implications of Russia's accession to the WTO for the Belarusian economy before they had to sign the documents on the Single Economic Space. They were simply rushed into it by Moscow.

'Belarusian Economic Model' Hopes Lost

The economic [crisis](#) that hit the country in 2011 was not directly caused by the crackdown on 19 December. It was an inevitable outcome of multiple macroeconomic imbalances that the government had ignored for several years. However, 19 December made a less painful transformation of the model impossible. It deprived Belarus of potential western investments which could have softened the currency shocks and facilitated some degree of economic modernization. Western investments would have also counterbalanced Russian investments and, thus, safeguarded the interests of the Belarusian elites and society at large.

But after the government resorted to repressive actions against its political opponents several international financial institutions (including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and European Investment Bank) decided to suspend their programs in Belarus. This was

interpreted by potential western investors as an additional sign that the country was not safe to work in. As a result, instead of USD 6.5 billion of foreign direct investments (FDIs) planned for 2011 Belarus received less than USD 800 million of FDIs in its real economy (the Beltransgaz deal can hardly be considered an FDI).

The 'Power Vertical' Myth Unveiled

Before 19 December 2010 and the economic crisis of 2011 the Belarusian 'power vertical' was widely seen as super efficient. The majority of experts argued that the political model was capable of producing any governance result wanted by the president. Therefore, they would say, there should be no problem with, for example, carrying out market and political reforms once a decision is made by Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Now it looks like this theory was wrong.

The financial turbulence of 2011 clearly showed that the 'power vertical' in Belarus ceases to be efficient as soon as it faces untypical challenges. Under unaccustomed circumstances it fails to perform even relatively easy tasks. Like, for instance, privatization. In order to help the troubled state finances the government worked out a privatization plan for 2011. But the 'power vertical' only managed to sell 13% of the planned assets.

While the reasons for this failure are multiple, one is particularly interesting. According to the Chairman of the State Property Committee Georgi Kuznetsov, the privatization was [sabotaged](#) by local bureaucrats and managers of state enterprises. In other words, like on 19 December 2010, some parts of the 'power vertical' undermined the government's policy and worked against the government's interests. And, as the emergence of [cracks](#) in the government demonstrated, the more difficult challenges get the less potent the Belarusian 'power vertical' becomes.

National Pessimism

On the background of the repercussions of 19 December and the crisis of 2011 it is not surprising that numerous surveys revealed a very alarming trend. Thousands of people left the country in search of better work and life standards. Even more sadly, according to several polls, between 60 and 80 per cent of the youth are eager to emigrate once they have a chance. And today it is really difficult to find even a most radical babushka-supporter of Alyaksandr Lukashenka who will not be happy for her grandchildren to leave Belarus for a better place.

Thus, Belarusian society is unanimous in its pessimism about the future of the country and opportunities that one can have in it. This is, perhaps, the most telling result of the outgoing year and the best characteristic of the accomplishments of the incumbent regime.

Unfortunately, it looks like the legacy of 19 December will continue to stay with us and will become lingering. It means that there might be many more unpleasant developments waiting for the people of Belarus. And we can only hope that the New Year will introduce a bit more of optimism in the lives of the Belarusians.

Yauheni Preiherman

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Andrew Wilson on His Belarus Book and Lukashenka's Survival

Last month Yale University Press published Andrew Wilson's [book](#) "Belarus – The Last European Dictatorship". The book covers Belarusian history from Polatsk Principality to the present day Belarus and offers particularly interesting insights into Lukashenka's rise to power and the system which managed to help him survive for such a long time.

Belarus Digest interviewed the author of the book – Andrew Wilson who is an academic at the University College London. The interview first touched upon the history of Belarus and then on its current political and economic system. It also highlighted interesting parallels between the Soviet leaders of Belarus and Lukashenka who were both successful in extracting economic rents from Moscow and suppressing political freedoms and the Belarusian national movement at home.

BD: Why do you use the words like "Litva" rather than Lithuania and Vilna instead of Vilnius?

Litva is the right historical name. The modern name Lietuva is ethnographic Lithuania. But Litva was a multiethnic project, which included Belarusians, Lithuanians, Jews and other groups.

Norman Davies's latest book 'Vanished Kingdoms' on how states disappear also has a chapter on Litva. Many famous personalities called themselves Litvins even after the Grand Duchy of Litva ceased to exist. For instance Adam Mickiewicz and Marc Chagal had Litva loyalty.

As far as the name Vilnya, Vilnius, Vilno is concerned; whichever version you chose – you will cause controversy. In my book, until 1940 it was Vilna and since then it is Vilnius, the capital of modern Lithuania. Historically the city was more Slavic than Baltic. But I try to avoid calling the city Wilno to avoid endorsing the Polish claim. In my book, it was only ever Belarusian Vilnya briefly (potentially) for two weeks in 1940.

BD: Writing about the Soviet period of Belarusian history you observe that those who ruled Belarus at that time, in particular Masheraw and Mazuraw, managed to successfully exploit the partisan myth to get maximum subsidies out of the central Soviet budget. They were not very enthusiastic about the language, human rights and similar issues but were good in satisfying the economic needs of the people. Lukashenka seems to follow their path when he exploited Yeltsin's "Belovezhsky" syndrome. Does Putin have any syndromes, which Lukashenka can play with?

That's a very good question. Lukashenka is playing the game differently. Masheraw and Mazuraw operated within the Soviet political process. The key to Lukashenka's role-playing is that he is playing a number of roles in the foreign policy arena.

His primary task is to get subsidies. First he sold to Yeltsin the idea of the Union State by playing on Yeltsin's 'Belovezhsky syndrome' (his responsibility for the collapse of the Soviet Union). Then Lukashenka positioned himself as a pan-Russian nationalist to appeal to Yeltsin's opponents.

It became much more difficult to play the same role with Putin who is playing the role of Russian savior himself. For Putin Lukashenka reinvented himself as a bulwark against the coloured revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. In addition, Russia could test various counter-revolutionary technologies in Belarus such as falsification mechanisms, disabling youth

groups, cloning opinions polls, etc.

I think you yourself have made the very interesting suggestion that Lukashenka might find a new role with Putin by selling Belarus as an exemplar in Russia-supported integration schemes such as the Eurasian Union. Russia cannot allow Belarus as a member of the Eurasian Union to go bust because that would seriously undermine the whole idea of Russian-sponsored integration projects.

BD: You mentioned that "the national movement" proved to be the only well-motivated group of politically active people in 2001 and 2006 presidential elections. Why was that the case, in your opinion?

Lukashenka has enjoyed surprisingly solid support since 1994 amongst the older population, rural small towns, those with less education – around 50 percent of the population which is of course not the 80 percent which he claims at election time. He kept this support – at least until the most recent period – with the help of Russian subsidies. Though at the same time of course there were groups, which always opposed him. For instance, the Belarusian national movement was particularly vocal because his vision of Belarus fundamentally contradicted their own.

BD: Why were pro-Russian forces outside of the ruling elite never particularly visible or organised?

I think that there are no organised pro-Russian groups mainly because the Russian language is pervasive in Belarus and is used by the State. The Lukashenka project does not threaten Russian-speakers in the same way that the Belarusian national project has been marginalised.

It is interesting to recall the Ukrainian party SL0n hat tried to appeal to the local Russian speaking intelligentsia in 1998 by using figures like the poet Anna Akhmatova (born near Odesa) as their symbol. They did very badly – around 1 percent

– they were maybe too intellectual. Maybe they should have used Russian-speaking Ukrainian football heroes instead. This tradition of a local Russian speaking intelligentsia exists in Belarus but it is much weaker than in Ukraine, which had Russian-speaking writers such as Mikhail Bulgakov.

Second, Lukashenka kept an eye on all pro-Russian forces and he hit them very hard. Anything supported by Russian money has been cracked down on particularly hard, as at the last election.

But that's an interesting question.

BD: In several parts of your book it looked that Russia was thinking of replacing Lukashenka. They saved him so many times and the regime's economic model is also based on extracting rents from Russia as you show in your last chapter. Had they really wanted to replace Lukashenka – they could have done so in the past. Do you think that Russia ever seriously considered removing Lukashenka?

It is not an easy task for Russia to get rid of him or even to put pressure upon him. Belarus has become very authoritarian since 1994. It is difficult for any opponents to operate in Belarus. Russia tends to play with the local elite and Lukashenka also kept a close eye on it.

Another fact is that Russia is aware of the paradox that whoever replaces Lukashenka (even if the new person is Russian, Russophile or even Russian nationalist) he could make a new fresh start with the West simply by virtue of not being Lukashenka.

The personal relationship between Lukashenka and Putin is terrible, but Russia thinks it has Lukashenka exactly where they want him to be now – weak, but not fatally so, more dependent on them and less dependent on the West. They think they will be able to use the current economic difficulty to extract as many assets as possible – but they certainly do not

want his regime to collapse, as that would multilateralise the potential solution.

BD: You explain that Lukashenka had clearly made a geopolitical choice in favour of Russia because it did not impose any conditions on the Belarusian regime such as democracy and avoidance of repression of political opponents. On the other hand, the IMF and the EU always come up with various kinds of conditionality, which Lukashenka does not like. Can these attitudes of Russia and the West ever change?

More exactly, Lukashenka wants to play the geopolitical game of balance between the West and Russia. He does not want to align fundamentally with anybody. Russia wants less transparent privatisation, the EU wants more respect for human rights, the IMF wants reform, which the regime finds difficult to implement. The ideal scenario is to be in the middle and avoid any kind of conditions.

But this game of balance has broken down since the crackdown after the December 2010 presidential elections. This is when arguably Lukashenka made a serious geopolitical mistake. After such an egregious crackdown, the choice of sanctions was actually made easier for the West, which had been divided before then. Since December 2010 there is a united stance in favour of stronger isolation.

Now Russia is the only and almost sole strategic partner of the Lukashenka regime. He may be forced to sell strategic assets to Russia. He tried to restore the balance by bringing China into the game, but China has proved to be disappointingly mercantilist. It is happy to invest in particular projects such as the reconstruction of Minsk International Airport but it was not going to give open-ended financial support.

The big picture is that Lukashenka tried to avoid any kind of

conditionality but his room for manoeuvre is narrowing as we speak. The West has for once gotten its policy reasonably right – the combination of the relative isolation and sanctions. And I do not think that the West should worry that sanctions will push Lukashenka towards Russia. Lukashenka does not want to be absorbed into Russia.

BD: What would be the most promising groups in Belarus which Europe could support?

Political opposition in the country is divided by itself and by the regime – one should not give up on them, but it is important not to place all bets on it. A more promising channel of engagement is to work with various civil society groups. Although the regime is also making this progressively more difficult, that is no reason to give up.

But the West needs to broaden the focus of its outreach. Human rights NGOs such as Viasna of course deserve support, but the whole spectrum of non-political NGOs should be supported too. That would show that the West is concerned not only with political change, but with the condition of the people too.

Restoration of ‘manual control’ of the economy since December 2010 has put Belarusian small and medium enterprises in a very difficult position. They need to be supported too.

Finally, it is important to signal to the elite and the bureaucracy that sanctions very specifically target those responsible for the crackdown, but if Lukashenka were to go the whole elite would not necessarily have to go with him.

YK