

Lukashenka - Putin negotiations, discussion at KCL, Belarus - China achievements – Ostrogorski Centre digest

In April, analysts at the Ostrogorski Centre discussed the results of negotiations between Putin and Lukashenka in Saint Petersburg, ways to respond to continuing political repression in Belarus, prospects for Belarusian-Turkmen relations, and achievements of Belarusian-Chinese cooperation over the last 25 years

The Centre, together with the KCL Eurasia Society and KCL Diplomacy Society, hosted a public discussion entitled 'Between East and West: What's next for Belarus?'

We have also added new profiles and updated existing ones on our BelarusProfile.com database of influential people in Belarus.

Analytics

Siarhei Bohdan discusses [what Russia got in exchange for gas and oil concessions](#). Moscow wants closer collaboration with Minsk in the spheres of security and foreign policy. The two governments clearly chose to resolve the issues critical to each of them: Russian gas and oil supplies for Minsk, Belarusian security and foreign policy cooperation for Moscow. Nevertheless, numerous other issues continue to undermine relations with Russia. Now, even leading experts in the Belarusian government doubt the utility of Moscow-led Eurasian

integration in its current form.

Alesia Rudnik writes about a [‘game’ called ‘blue whale’](#), popular among youngsters across the post-Soviet space. The game consists of 50 dangerous quests potentially culminating in suicide. Belarusian law enforcement services have initiated two criminal cases after two Belarusian youngsters attempted to commit suicide while playing the game. Nevertheless, a direct correlation between teen suicides and the game remains difficult to draw. The hyperbole surrounding the game in the media is not evidence of the game’s existence in real life. Under such circumstances, it is important that control of social media does not turn into censorship.

Igar Gubarevich analyses the [prospects of Belarusian-Turkmen relations](#) after plans for a plant in Garlyk came to an end. The plant, which is worth over \$1bn, and is capable of producing up to 1.4m tonnes of fertiliser per year, has become the flagship project for Belarusian-Turkmen cooperation. However, as trade turnover continues falling and Turkmen remain unsatisfied with Belarus’s role in the Garlyk project, the future of bilateral relations remain a big question.

Between East And West: What’s Next For Belarus? (Podcast)



Events unfolding in Belarus have recently been headline news for major international news outlets because of the massive protests against president Lukashenka. Unlike in Ukraine, however, protests in Belarus have yet to lead to political change.

The Kings College London (KCL) Eurasia Society, KCL Diplomacy

Society, and the Ostrogorski Centre hosted a public discussion entitled 'Between East and West: What's next for Belarus?' on 12 April 2017 in London. The discussion featured prof. Yarik Kryvoi, founder of the Ostrogorski Centre, and Dr. Alex Kokcharov, Principal Analyst with IHS Markit Country Risk. The podcast of the discussion and a list of key issues discussed are [available here](#).

Comments in the media

Ryhor Astapenia discusses the [decline of the 'third class in Belarus'](#) on *naviny.by*. The 'third class' involves small towns and villages, which currently struggle most with socioeconomic problems: unemployment, low salaries, undeveloped business, poor quality of healthcare, alcoholism, and rapid depopulation.

Siarhei Bohdan comments on [achievements in Belarusian-Chinese relations over the last 25 years](#) for Polish Radio. Since the early 2000s, Minsk has relied heavily on China, which it expects to become a major superpower in the long-run, thus ensuring a good position for Belarus. China is also important as a counterbalance to Russian influence. However, Moscow dislikes the openly pro-Chinese rhetoric of Minsk. Meanwhile, Belarus continues to have a large negative trade balance with China.

On Polish Radio, Alesia Rudnik talks about the [dangerous online game 'Blue Whale'](#), which has become widespread in social networks in the post-Soviet space. The game has resulted in a number of suicides, but the scale and consequences of its spread in Belarus remain unknown.

Siarhei Bohdan discusses the [results of the negotiations between Lukashenka and Putin](#) on 3 April on Radio Liberty. Moscow sees the military exercise West 2017 as an important move in its spat with the West, while Minsk would like to

minimise the effects of the show, and is eager to make the drills as transparent to the West as possible. The two sides also discussed strengthening their joint air defence system as Russia becomes increasingly concerned with defence in the Western direction.

Ryhor Astapenia on Radio Liberty discusses what [concessions](#)  [Russia wants from Belarus](#) and which of them the Belarusian government is ready to offer. Recent talks between Lukashenka and Putin have not been successful, and the parties keep returning to the old conditions which existed before the energy dispute. Russia has little interest in acquiring Belarusian companies. Belarus is also losing its significance for Russia in the political and security fields, and the Kremlin is not as willing to support its ally as before.

On Polish Radio, Yaraslau Kryvoi talks about the [EU's policy towards Belarus](#). Europe should continue its policy of engagement, but at the same demonstrate its willingness to bring back sanctions if Minsk continues to violate human rights. The EU should also draw a line between policy towards the authorities and Belarusian citizens, since citizens of Belarus can not freely elect their government.

Igar Gubarevich discusses the [West's reaction to a new wave of political repression](#) in Belarus on Polish Radio. These events came as a surprise to Western diplomats and politicians, and their first reaction was very cautious. According to Igar, the West must call a spade a spade and speak openly about human rights violations. Such actions of the authorities are unacceptable if Belarus wants to have good relations with Europe.

Belarus Profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following profiles: [Miraslaŭ Lazoŭski](#), [Marat Markaŭ](#), [Viktar Ananič](#),

[Alieh Kraučanka](#), [Iryna Kascievič](#), [Ihar Siarhiejenka](#), [Heorhi Hryc](#), [Aliaksandr Liachaŭ](#), [Siarhiej Špiahun](#), and [Ihar Maršalaŭ](#).

We have also updated the profiles of [Anatoł Isačenka](#), [Viktar Ščačko](#), [Iosif Siaredzič](#), [Valiery Kulakoŭski](#), [Vadzim Zakreŭski](#), [Lieanid Małcaŭ](#), [Usievalad Jančeŭski](#), [Aliaksandr Jakabson](#), [Valiery Capkala](#), [Ihar Buzoŭski](#), [Sviatlana Kalinkina](#), [Valier Malaška](#), [Siarhiej Kanoplič](#), [Viktar Prakapienia](#), [Ryhor Kisiel](#), and [Jaraslaŭ Kryvoj](#).

Think tanks in Belarus are encouraged to submit their research for inclusion into the database by [emailing us](#).

The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its projects include Belarus Digest, [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#), [BelarusProfile.com](#) and [Ostro.by](#).

Lukashenka and Putin, justifying repression, EEU economy back on track – Belarus state press digest

Lukashenka and Putin agreed to resolve all critical problems in bilateral relations, including the oil and gas dispute. Belarus realises its largest ever investment project abroad – a potash plant in Turkmenistan.

The official media resoundingly condemns protests against the

'social parasite tax'. Lukashenka approves the creation of a public security monitoring system in Belarus.

The number of young men attempting to avoid military conscription in Mahilioŭ Region increases. Belarus tractor manufacturers continue to face difficulties. The Eurasian Economic Union recovers from economic recession.

This and more in the new edition of the Belarus state press digest.

Foreign policy

[Lukashenka and Putin agree to resolve all critical problems in bilateral relations.](#) The leaders of the two countries met in St. Petersburg on 3 April, writes *Zviazda*. According to Putin, both sides agreed to settle the oil and gas dispute within 10 days. They have been able to reach a compromise and are offering mutual concessions for the 2017-2019 period. Russia has also agreed to refinance Belarus's existing debt to the Russian Federation, promising to re-examine the ban on Belarusian food exports to Russia. Lukashenka, however, informed the public that: 'we did not start talks with oil and gas issues. The main focus was the security of our states... We agreed on cooperation in security'.

[Belarus completes its largest investment project abroad.](#) 

Lukashenka visited Turkmenistan on 30 March for the inauguration of the Garlyk mining and processing plant, which will produce potash fertiliser. The project was fully realised by Belarusian specialists and became the largest project of its kind ever completed abroad by Belarus. According to Lukashenka, Belarus has demonstrated to the world that it can do anything; this is because Belarus has not squandered the powerful scientific and technological potential it inherited from the USSR. The plant is expected to produce 1.5m tonnes of

potash annually and become one of the world's largest exporters.

Domestic politics and security

Major media holding *Belarus Segodnia* published a variety of material criticising the activities of the opposition during the 'social parasite tax' protests and Freedom Day celebration on 25 March. It wrote that the demonstrations were illegal and Minsk residents should not get caught up in provocation; Belarusians should instead attend other cultural and sporting events held on the same day.

The newspaper published numerous 'letters to the editor' condemning the protests

The journalists emphasised the professionalism of riot police and accused the organisers of the demonstrations of fabricating footage for the world media rather than discussing public problems. The newspaper published numerous 'letters to the editor' condemning the protests. It also interviewed several refugees from the Donbass residing in Belarus, who argued that Belarusians should value the peace and stability in their country and not engage in protests.

[There will be no colour revolution in Belarus.](#) Colour revolutions stem from foreign interference in the form of various non-governmental foundations and non-profit organisations, writes *Narodnaja Hazieta*. In such countries, governments themselves were highly dependent on foreign aid. In Belarus, however, the situation is fundamentally different. The democratically elected president was quick to restrict the operations of such organisations.

The state has also managed to maintain control of the media

and humanitarian sectors from the get go. A whole generation of Belarusians has been raised in a country without a massive influx of imported political values. The established social contract between the state and society has created a powerful social base which supports the authorities. The Belarusian economy, although experiencing transitional difficulties, can hardly be called weak, due to its industrial giants and booming IT sector.

[Lukashenka approves the creation of a public security monitoring system in Belarus.](#) Such systems operate in many countries, where they have already proved their effectiveness, writes *Belarus Segodnia*. The introduction of automated processes of threat detection and data analysis will significantly increase the level of public security. In addition, the system will go a long ways towards reducing the amount of workers and resources involved in relevant areas, thus optimising the structure of state bodies. According to Interior Minister [Ihar Šunievič](#), video surveillance will be installed in 2,000-4,000 places within a year or two. For private businesses and citizens, this will certainly not be an imposition, but rather an opportunity.

✘ [Number of young men attempting to dodge the draft grows in Mahilioŭ Region.](#) According to the regional prosecutor's office, this trend can be explained by inadequate military and patriotic education for youth, reports *Belarus Segodnia*.

Some districts provide such education on paper only. Others do not organise meetings between military officers and young people at all, and schoolchildren never visit military bases. Many schools lack the facilities for pre-army training, such as shooting ranges, training camps, arms models, and more. On top of that, police and military conscription offices often fail to pursue conscripts who do not declare themselves following personal notification, and military bodies do not cooperate enough with the police.

Economy

Belarus tractor producers continue to face difficulties.

Despite the fact that the Belarusian tractor giant MTZ held 80% of the Russia market in 2012, in 2016 it only managed to retain around 40%, reports *Sielskaja Hazieta*. Since 2013, Russian producers have developed rapidly, tripling production by 2016.

For this reason, Belarus is trying to mitigate its dependence on the Russian market – an endeavour president Alexander Lukashenka is personally involved in. For example, after his visit to Pakistan in 2016, the country purchased 25% more Belarusian tractors than it had in 2015. Despite these difficulties, MTZ hopes to increase sales and has recently presented its products in the UK.

Eurasian Economic Union recovers from economic recession.

Zviazda interviewed the Minister for Integration and Macroeconomics of the Eurasian Economic Commission, Tatiana Volovaya. In 2016 the GDP of the EEU decreased by only 0.1% – much better than the 2.3% drop in 2015. Moreover, the GDPs of Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan have grown.

Trade within the EEU has grown since January 2016 and was 38% higher in January 2017. The Eurasian Economic Commission predicts 0.9% growth in the EEU in 2017. It expects the positive trend to continue in 2018-2019. As for Belarus, it shows the highest potential in metallurgy, machine building, the chemical industry, and logistical services.

The state press 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.