Foreign spies in Belarus: Reality and speculation

On 27 November, the Belarusian State Security Committee, otherwise known as the KGB, officially accused Ukrainian journalist Pavel Sharoiko of espionage. The Belarusian authorities claim that Sharoiko confessed to his guilt. Ukrainian state and security officials, on the other hand, acknowledge neither the alleged confession nor the accusation of espionage.

Until now, the most notorious spy scandal in Belarus was the detention of a Catholic priest, Uladzislaŭ Lazar in 2013. Lazar spent six months in a KGB prison, but was then released due to insufficient evidence. Security services had accused Lazar of involvement in activities amounting to espionage.

Spy scandals involving foreign citizens in Belarus have happened before. This time, however, the circumstances and timing surrounding the allegations against Sharoiko’s are different. Many experts see the trace of Russian influence in Belarus’s actions.

A Diplomatic conflict between Belarus and Ukraine?

Diplomatic tensions rose when Ukrainian authorities were informed on 25 October 2017 that the Belarusian KGB had detained Ukrainian journalist Pavel Sharoiko. The KGB suspects Sharoiko of spying. At first, Sharoiko denied the allegations and claimed to be a staff writer at the Belarusian office for Radio Ukraine, a Ukrainian national public broadcaster. Later, however, Sharoiko allegedly confessed to espionage, but refused to reveal further details. The Ukrainian Defense
Ministry refuses to recognise Sharoiko’s confession. Sharoiko can face anywhere from 7 to 15 years imprisonment for espionage in Belarus.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Source: kp.ua

Belarus and Ukraine have discussed Sharoiko’s case at the highest levels, which has given more resonance to this “spy scandal”. On 24 November, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka commented on the journalist’s detention. President Lukashenka told BELTA, a Belarusian news agency, that he had spoken with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko about Sharoiko’s arrest and claims of espionage.

Lukashenka said he had known the details of the case from the very beginning. He assured the journalist from BELTA that the KGB had enough reasons to continue its investigation against Sharoiko. Later, Lukashenka let slip that both parties had agreed to keep information surrounding Sharoiko’s case secret, but the Ukrainian side went public.

Tensions between the two countries rose further still, because
of a new arrest. On 15 November, KGB agents detained Ukrainian Aleksandr Skiba, the director for the publicly listed Weighting Plant, a company that produces industrial filler materials. Skiba had come to Belarus for a business meeting at the Minsk Tractor Plant. The KGB has not disclosed any details, but according to some witnesses, the security services suspect Skiba of bribery. Even if investigators are reluctant to issue accusations yet, the detention of yet another Ukrainian citizen, this time from the business community, has added to the tensions between the two countries.

The case of Sharoiko, though, has become the central issue surrounding a recent decline in diplomatic relations between Belarus and Ukraine. Acting on information in Sharoiko’s confession, Belarusian security services issued Igor Skvortsov, a counsellor for the Ukrainian Embassy in Belarus, with persona non grata status. In response, Ukraine expelled a Belarusian diplomat. Additionally, Ukrainian authorities still suspect that in September the Belarusian secret services together with Russian agents organised the kidnapping from Belarus to Russia of Ukrainian citizen Pavel Grib. 19-year-old Grib is accused of terrorism in Russia, despite never having visited the country until his recent incarceration there. Until more details on these cases come to light, it remains unclear how much relations between Belarus and Ukraine will worsen.

The detention of foreigners in Belarus
Frenchman Jolan Viaud detained in Belarus. Source: TUT.by

The detention of foreigners in Belarus often gain so much media attention, because of the apparent severity of the Belarus’s security and legal systems. For example, on 21 September 2017, Belarusian border guards detained Frenchman Jolan Viaud, who had a single bullet in his pocket, which he received from a friend in Warsaw.

Viaud has spent two months in the Homiel detention centre instead of going to Ukraine as he had planned. According to Belarusian law, he could have faced up to 7 years in prison. But on 20 November, the court acquitted him.

In summer 2015, a Polish paraglider spent more than a week in prison in Hrodna. He accidentally violated the state border by landing in Belarus. In the end, the authorities forced him to pay a fine and he received a ban on visits to Belarus for 5 years.

Other spy scandals have taken place in Belarus before Sharoiko. One of them related to the detention of priest Uladzislaŭ Lazar from Poland in 2013. After six months in a KGB jail, a court dismissed the priest, because investigators were unable to prove his guilt. The very first case of espionage in post-Soviet Belarus involved the First Secretary of the US Embassy in 1997, whom the KGB accused of supporting Belarusian opposition politicians, reports Radio Liberty, a US
Russian influence and the Sharoiko case

Experts suspect that the detention of Sharoiko might have links to Russia. Former KGB officer Valery Kostka told *Radio Liberty* that he believes the scandal is a fabrication. Only Russia benefits from the conflict between Belarus and Ukraine, says Kostka. The Sharoiko case stands out from other spy scandals, because at present *Belarus is improving its relations with the West*.

Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Pavlo Klimkin agrees with this version of events. Klimkin says the Russian influence is a likely factor. Another security expert, Yury Drakachrust, believes that the case of Sharoiko is closely related to the Eastern Partnership Summit that took place on 24 November—a few days before the KGB’s official accusations against the journalist. According to Drakachrust, it is likely that the Sharoiko story is fake. It’s true aim is to demonstrate Belarus’s allegiance to Moscow.

In the past, spy scandals involving foreigners in Belarus have happened at very specific times. The first is at times of heightened political tensions with the West. The second is on the eve of an election campaign. Both are used to demonstrate the existence of an external threat, which the Belarusian regime may use to its advantage. In both cases, it casts Western governments as meddlers in Belarus’s affairs and it reminds Belarusians of the stability the incumbent regime provides.
Balancing between Russia and Ukraine

In recent weeks, the KGB has been constructing a case of a wide, Ukrainian espionage network within Belarus. The KGB claims that Sharoiko admitted creating the network, which includes Belarusian agents receiving salaries from Ukrainian intelligence agencies. The KGB have also detained one Belarusian, whom they suspect of treason and working under Sharoiko. Ukraine denies the KGB’s claims of a network of spies. It has requested the KGB show proof of the allegations.

Despite any destabilising effects a deep-cover Ukrainian spy network might bring, the Belarusian authorities appear to be keeping the country relatively stable. Relations with the West are also improving. Therefore, many Belarusian and Ukrainian experts explain the detention of the Ukrainian journalist Sharoiko in terms of an attempt by Russia to spoil Belarusian-Ukrainian relations.

So far, Belarus has worked to position itself as a neutral country, able to have good relations with both Russia and Ukraine, and to even serve as a kind of mediator in the settlement of the military conflict between the two countries. Now, the challenge for the Belarusian regime will be to avoid souring ties with Ukraine, which might restrict Belarus’s access to the Ukrainian market, and to show Putin continued loyalty, while at the same time not affecting the warming of relations with the West.
Belarus is strengthening military cooperation with UAE

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

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

An official, working vacation

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

It is not the first time Lukashenka scheduled a trip to the UAE from the end of October to the beginning of November. In fact, this period is usually the time for autumn vacation in Belarusian schools. Apparently, 13-year-old Mikalaj Lukashenka, in particular, enjoys these sorts of “working visits.”
Another important detail is that Lukashenka donned a tie only once during his 12-day visit. The tie made its appearance at a meeting with the Abu Dhabi crown prince. This suggests the primary reason for the visit was to take a rest and to provide a good vacation for the family, especially for his beloved youngest son Mikalaj. At the same time, the Belarusian leader managed to combine vacation with business. Indeed, Lukashenka discussed important issues in the security field.

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

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

Economic relations between the two states are improving. From January to August 2017, exports from Belarus to the UAE amounted to $44.8m (an approximately 318 per cent increase compared to the same period last year). For the first 6 months of 2017, the amount of direct UAE investment to Belarus exceeded $11m (more, than for the whole last year).

**Strategic interests**

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

On 15–16 October 2017, Abu Dhabi hosted the eighth meeting of the Joint Belarusian-UAE Committee for Military-Technical Cooperation. According to the official press-release, committee members discussed the implementation of previous decisions and their aftereffects. New cooperation projects were also put forward. The sides noted the high level of cooperation achieved and confirmed their mutual interest in the further development of military-technical cooperation between Belarus and the UAE.
Earlier, during a military parade in Minsk on 3 July 2017, people could observe an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the BELAR YS-EX, which is a modification of the Yabhon Flash 20 UAV manufactured by UAE company ADCOM Systems. For their part, UAE representatives showed interest in Belarus’s own Berkut UAV, which is developed by the 558 Aircraft Repair Plant.

Four enterprises will represent the Belarusian military industry at the 2017 Dubai Airshow from 12–16 November 2017: (1) Closed joint stock company BelTechExport; (2) Open joint stock company (OJSC) KB Radar—the management company for Radar Systems holding; (3) OJSC 2566 Electronic Weapons Repair Plant; and (4) the Scientific and Production Centre of Multifunctional Unmanned Systems at the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (which is a state unitary enterprise).

**From harems to tank tractors**

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

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

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

MWTP successfully fulfilled the order, fitting special wheeled chassis to the MZKT-79097-30 for the desert conditions. The extraordinary contract was delivered on time and with high quality. After that, UAE leaders saw MWTP as a trusted supplier, capable of developing and fitting tractors for
While the finance and investment statistics continue to improve, Belarus-UAE relations are focusing not just on economic issues, but on security cooperation, too. The Emirates are looking for new, and relatively cheap, technologies and products in Belarus. Belarusian officials are trying to attract Arab investments and to gain access to Western military technologies, which are restricted due to sanctions. One can expect joint projects in electronic and radioelectronic warfare, as well as information security. Belarus will also try to get more involved in the UAV high-tech market in order to improve its own force capabilities and to become influential in this fast-developing, niche market.

Belarus and Ukraine cooperate in the face of Russian pressure

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka travelled to Kyiv on an official visit on 20-21 July. Both Belarus and Ukraine, for different reasons, are seeking to reinvigorate direct dialogue between their leaders, which they resumed three months ago in the Chernobyl zone.

The ‘age-old friendship’ (in Lukashenka’s terms) between Alexander Lukashenka and Petro Poroshenko may appear paradoxical: the former is authoritarian and pro-Russian while the latter is democratically minded and pro-European.

Ukraine is resisting Russian aggression while Belarus remains Moscow’s closest military and political ally. It seems that
simplistic political clichés do not capture the two nations’ complex relationship.

A means to boost trade

Lukashenka attended Poroshenko’s inauguration in June 2014 and returned again to Kyiv in December of the same year on a brief working visit. However, a lengthy hiatus of highest-level encounters followed. An attempt to arrange a meeting between the two leaders before the end of 2016 fell through, probably because of the Ukrainian elites’ displeasure at the Belarusian move against the Ukrainian resolution at the United Nations. The two presidents finally met on 26 April 2017, at the site of the Chernobyl NPP in Ukraine, and continued their talks at the village of Liaskavichy in Belarus. Lukashenka’s top priority was to boost business ties; Poroshenko’s greatest need was assurance of Belarus’s continued neutrality regarding Ukraine’s conflict with Russia.

Despite a twofold drop in bilateral trade turnover in recent years, Ukraine remains Belarus’s second-largest trading partner, and Belarus is Ukraine’s fourth-largest. What’s more, the growth in trade resumed in 2016 (+10.5%, up to $3.8m) and accelerated in January-May 2017 (+26.7%).

Managers of about 90 Belarusian and over 380 Ukrainian companies attended a Belarusian-Ukrainian business forum held
on the sidelines of Lukashenka’s recent visit. They signed contracts amounting to $68m to supply petrochemical products, fertilisers, trucks, harvesters, tyres, lifts, and other goods to Ukraine.

The two leaders agreed to intensify Belarusian-Ukrainian inter-regional ties – in particular by holding annual inter-regional forums. The first such event will soon take place in the Belarusian city of Homiel. The Belarusian government wants to adapt its trade relations with Ukraine to the latter’s decentralisation policies. The Ukrainian regions now have more power and money: thus, direct contacts may prove to be more efficient.

Venturing into foreign markets together

Ukraine’s association agreement with the European Union will pose new challenges to bilateral trade with Belarus as Kyiv starts reorienting towards the European market. At the same time, this situation offers new opportunities for Minsk to promote its products in Europe through their higher localisation in Ukraine. The latter is also interested in exporting more to Belarus and its EAEU partners, especially in the context of reciprocal sanction regimes with Russia.

In Kyiv, the Belarusian leader spoke about ‘thousands of goods’ that Belarus and Ukraine could jointly produce and sell. ‘We want to work together in the Distant Arc, in other countries… We will create high-tech goods
and we will sell them together in foreign markets’, Lukashenka stated.

His Ukrainian host was slightly more specific. ‘It is important that there is now a mutual interest in the creation of new joint ventures. By this I mean aircraft engineering, transport, and agricultural machine building’, Poroshenko said.

According to Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Siamashka, Belarus now has seven knockdown assembly plants in Ukraine, and Ukraine has six such enterprises in Belarus. Belarus’s strategy is to combine Belarusian preferential loans with Ukrainian subsidies to farmers and to increase localisation of goods in order to boost sales in Ukraine and third countries.

**Energy projects: Moscow will not be happy**

Importantly, Lukashenka and Poroshenko discussed cooperation in the energy sector, calling it an extremely promising avenue. Ukraine wants to supply more electrical energy to Belarus. However, they still disagree over the exact terms of the contract.

Poroshenko also announced that the two leaders ‘agreed to consider the possibility of expanding supplies of energy resources [to Belarus], especially crude oil, using the unique transit potential of Ukraine’. 
Thus, on 23 May in Minsk, Gomeltransneft Druzhba (Belarus) and Ukrtransnafta (Ukraine) signed an agreement on the use of the oil pipeline Mazyr-Brody. The pipeline would allow the transport of Azerbaijani and Iranian oil from the Ukrainian port of Odessa to Belarusian refineries.

Currently, about 60% of Ukraine’s total import of petrol and 40% of its diesel fuel comes from Belarus. They are both made from refined Russian oil. Ukraine hopes to get an even better deal and increase the purchase volume by supplying crude oil for refining.

For Belarus, securing alternative oil sources would mean mitigating its energy dependence on Russia. However, this would require strong political will and significant investments; such a scheme may not be economically viable given the advantageous oil prices Moscow still offers Minsk.

**Lukashenka’s assurances according to Poroshenko**

In Kyiv, Alexander Lukashenka carefully avoided making any statement which could be interpreted as him taking sides in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. He spoke about Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians as a ‘civilisational core in this part of the European continent’.

The Belarusian leader stressed repeatedly that he would go no further in his peace-making efforts than Putin and Poroshenko.
asked. He also announced an increase in humanitarian assistance to the Donbass region.

In the presence of Lukashenka, Poroshenko told the press about his counterpart’s assurances that ‘the territory of Belarus, friendly to Ukraine, will never be used for aggressive actions against Ukraine, and the Ukrainian-Belarusian border will never become a border of war’.

The Ukrainian government and Ukrainian society remain extremely worried that Russia could use the upcoming military exercise West-2017, involving the Russian and Belarusian armies, to launch an offensive against Ukraine. The exercise will be held in Belarus on 14-20 September.

Poroshenko had already spoken of Lukashenka’s assurances in similar terms at their April meeting. However, the promises of the Belarusian leader apparently failed to convince certain factions in the Ukrainian government. Following Lukashenka’s visit, Defence Minister Stepan Poltorak refused to rule out the possibility of ‘provocations from Russia under a false pretext’ in the context of West-2017.

The meeting in Kyiv demonstrated that Lukashenka and Poroshenko have developed a close personal rapport. The two countries’ governments share an interest in stronger economic ties; they also have a fairly good understanding of how to build them. Belarus will never willingly endanger Ukraine’s security. Ukraine understands that it cannot realistically expect more than Belarus’s neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.
Despite the fact that they belong to opposing geopolitical alliances, Belarus and Ukraine still need each other to withstand Russia’s pressure. Their close bilateral cooperation will be instrumental in making both countries stronger.

Minsk and Kyiv successfully revive bilateral relations after a dramatic fallout

On 1 May, Ukrainian border guards prevented three Belarusian citizens from entering Ukraine, suspecting them of planning subversive activities in Ukraine. A month earlier, Belarusian security agencies had detained several Ukrainian citizens for alleged plans to undermine public order in Belarus.

Nevertheless, both Kyiv and Minsk prefer to downplay such incidents, angry rhetoric notwithstanding. Both governments make consistent efforts to continue cooperation and development. The results of a meeting between the Belarusian and Ukrainian presidents on 26 April in Chernobyl demonstrate this.

The two countries assured each other of continued friendship despite the Kremlin's pressure, promised to resolve border issues, and spoke of possible economic deals including renewed electricity imports.

Although the meeting occurred on the anniversary of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the two leaders used the occasion to discuss real and sensitive issues.
Arguably one of the most pressing issues in Belarusian-Ukrainian relations is the question of Belarus's position in the regional confrontation involving Russia. On 20 April, just days before the Lukashenka-Poroshenko meeting, the Secretary of Ukraine's Security Council, Oleksandr Turchynov, added his name to the growing list of Ukrainian officials denouncing the joint Belarusian-Russian military exercise West-2017, to take place in Belarus.

According to him, the drills might be a cover for preparation of an offensive against Ukraine. Turchynov believes that after the end of the exercise, Russian troops might well stay in Belarus.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian government emphasises the limited scope of the exercise and pledged to make it transparent, going as far as inviting NATO observers. Lukashenka also strived to convince his Ukrainian counterpart of Minsk's friendly stance towards Kyiv. This follows from a speech Ukrainian president Poroshenko made at the meeting on 26 April:

*I am sure that the Ukrainian-Belarusian border [...] will always remain a border of friendship[...] No one can ever cause a quarrel between Ukraine and Belarus. [...] I have received firm assurance from the President of Belarus. No one will ever be able to draw Belarus into the war against Ukraine. The peace-loving people of Belarus and the honourable President Alexander Lukashenka will not allow that.*

Lukashenka reciprocated by proclaiming ambiguously: 'whether somebody likes it or not [...] we are relatives [...] Who can divide us? Nobody.' Given the extent to which Russian
officials and media have criticised Belarus's cooperation with Ukraine since 2014, this sounds like ultimate defiance towards the Kremlin's pressure on Kyiv.

A passive ally

Last November, commenting on Minsk's ambiguous stance towards a Ukraine-sponsored UN resolution, the Russian news site Lenta.ru described Belarus as 'a passive ally' of Ukraine. Indeed, top Belarusian officials frequently express their willingness to counter Moscow's militant position towards Kyiv.

In an article in the April issue of Belaruskaya Dumka, a monthly published by the Presidential administration, Belarusian foreign minister Uladzimir Makei stated in the very first paragraph that 'it is extremely important that we did not allow ourselves to be dragged into the confrontation caused by the Ukrainian crisis.'

Makei also stressed the importance of patience and keeping Ukraine in the Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Area. As he points out, the CIS already 'lost a lot' after Georgia left. The Belarusian foreign minister openly proclaimed:

[W]e do not see the differently directed integration aspirations of our partners as an obstacle to the development of bilateral ties. This is proven by our active contacts with Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine after their signing of association agreements with the European Union.

Border problems and solutions
Politically, Lukashenka and Poroshenko resolved another major issue: that of their joint border. On 28 April, Ukrainian president Poroshenko announced that Minsk and Kyiv had agreed to complete the demarcation process 'in the near future.'

First and foremost, this means that both governments have decided to accelerate the procedure. Having started demarcation in November 2014, it was officially announced that the process would take approximately eight years to complete, as late as 2022.

Secondly, the Ukrainian government will also contribute to introducing more order at the border. Lawlessness, which emerged on the Ukrainian side of the border last year largely due to illegal amber extraction, caused Belarusian organisations to halt demarcation near the Zherauski Canal.

Moreover, there are rumours that similar problems with controlling and constructing the border emerged last year in at least one other place – the Almanskiya Swamps. Poroshenko implicitly acknowledged that the demarcation process had met with problems, saying that in recent years it had effectively 'stopped.'

An end to catastrophic decline in bilateral trade?

The resolution of political issues is not the only reason for optimism about the prospects of bilateral relations: economic cooperation is on the rise as well.

In economic terms, relations between the two countries were in dire straits for years. Belarusian trade with Ukraine was

However, that trend was reversed in 2016, when the volume of bilateral trade increased by 11 per cent, coming to $3.8bn. In the first quarter of this year, the trade volume between the two nations rose by 40 per cent.

Importantly for Minsk, which is struggling with a foreign trade deficit, the trade balance is turning out positively for Belarus. Thus, last year Belarus sold Ukraine $1.87bn more than it bought from it. Today, Belarus is Ukraine's fourth most important trading partner. In fact, every third imported truck or tractor in Ukraine comes from the Minsk-based MAZ and MTZ plants.

Belarus also needs Ukraine in order to consolidate its sovereignty in the economic sphere. In 2006-2013, Minsk succeeded in diversifying its electricity supplies by buying from Kyiv.

However, this came to an end after the beginning of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, as Ukraine had no excess energy to sell. At their recent meeting, Lukashenka and Poroshenko discussed the issue and agreed to once again begin importing Ukrainian electricity to Belarus.

Kyiv also played a key role in Minsk's efforts to bring non-Russian alternative oil into the region. Most of the transports of Venezuelan, Azerbaijani, and Iranian oil in 2010-2011 and 2016-2017 respectively arrived in landlocked Belarus via the Ukrainian port of Odesa.

In sum, the political will of the Belarusian and Ukrainian leadership ensured that relations between the two countries remain close, despite political disputes over confrontation with Russia or decline in trade. Moreover, Minsk can rely on
Kyiv's cooperation in such strategic projects as diversification of energy supplies.

The recent meeting of the Belarusian and Ukrainian presidents demonstrates that the governments of the two countries can resolve emerging issues on a bilateral basis. This could result in more ambitious regional cooperation. After all, as their reviving economic relations prove, Minsk and Kyiv deliver on their promises to each other.

A snubbed Makei and an axis of good – Belarus foreign policy digest

Belarus’s recent regression in the human rights field has failed to visibly affect the intensity of its contacts with Europe. However, European governments seem to have taken note of the criticism they received for their initially meek reaction and have been voicing their concerns both publicly and (more often) privately.

Lukashenka’s ‘indiscriminate and inappropriate’ reaction to dissent may have affected the chances of Ambassador Alena Kupchyna to become the next OSCE head. Nevertheless, her personal qualities and professional qualifications may still play in her favour.

Ukraine’s security concerns and Belarus’s economic interests have finally led to an overdue meeting between the two countries' presidents. Both leaders appear to be satisfied with the outcome of this encounter, which was held in an
Europe talks to Belarus but ‘snubs’ Makei

The harsh suppression of popular protests in the country by the Belarusian authorities has seemingly failed to affect the dynamics of Belarus’s relations with Europe. Regular contacts between Belarusian and European officials, which continued despite active repression, continued unabated in April.

After 25 March, when over 700 peaceful protesters were detained in Minsk, Belarusian senior diplomats held political consultations with their counterparts from Latvia in Riga, Norway in Oslo, and Estonia in Minsk. Meanwhile, the country’s puppet parliament received parliamentary delegations from Poland and Estonia.

On 31 March, the Belarusian foreign ministry held the second round of trade dialogue with a delegation from the European Commission. Two weeks later, in Minsk, the Belarusian government negotiated the development of business ties with Kai Mykkänen, Finland’s Minister for Foreign Trade and Development.

Foreign minister Vladimir Makei attended a meeting of foreign ministers of Eastern Partnership countries and the Visegrad Group on 12 April. Makei took advantage of the event in Warsaw to hold formal meetings with his counterparts from Croatia, Romania, and Ukraine, as well as European commissioner Johannes Hahn.

Probably the most significant event for Belarus’s relations with Europe during this period was the third meeting of the
Belarus-EU Coordination Group held on 3-4 April. Thomas Mayr-Harting, Managing Director for Europe and Central Asia of the European External Action Service, led the EU delegation to Minsk.

The delegation apparently took note of the widespread criticism of the EU’s feeble reaction to recent developments in Belarus. Its post-meeting press release stressed that ‘the actions applied by the authorities… were indiscriminate and inappropriate and… in contradiction with Belarus' stated policy of democratisation and its international commitments’.

Belarusian diplomats admit in private conversations that, while their European partners show no intention of scaling down bilateral dialogue, they have become highly critical of the recent relapse of the Belarusian authorities. As Alexander Lukashenka confirmed it in his recent address to the parliament. ‘Makei is already afraid to go to [the West]. He's been taken down a notch all over… Wherever he goes, he gets snubbed’, he complained.

Belarus’s ambitions at the OSCE

Senior officials at Belarus’s foreign ministry, as well as the country’s ambassadors, have been striving to enlist the support of their foreign partners for the candidacy of Ambassador Alena Kupchyna to the position of the OSCE Secretary General.

In the race for the Organisation’s top position, Kupchyna is competing with former foreign minister of Finland Ilkka Kanerva, Czech politician and former European Commissioner Štefan Füle, and former Swiss ambassador to the OSCE Thomas Greminger.
The appointment requires the consensus of all 57 member states. This means that in order to get the post, a candidate should not necessarily be the most popular generally, but rather the least objectionable to the most influential member states.

Thus, Füle’s candidacy has a serious handicap, as he remains on Russia’s travel ‘black list’ in connection with his activities as the European commissioner. Meanwhile, Moscow has formally endorsed Kupchyna’s candidacy.

Kupchyna, now Belarus’s permanent representative to the OSCE, made a lot of friends in Europe (especially in its Eastern, Central, and Southern parts) during her tenure as deputy foreign minister in 2012 – 2016. Her European colleagues know her as a democratically-minded person and a strong proponent of closer ties between Belarus and Europe.

Moreover, Ambassador Kupchyna’s gender may be an advantage over all other candidates. Many European governments attach importance to greater representation of women in top international positions.

However, recent actions of the Belarusian government have dealt a definite blow to Kupchyna’s chances. The harsh response to the protests has interrupted the positive dynamics in the evolution of Belarus’s image in Europe.

Nevertheless, all is not yet lost for the Belarusian candidate. Other important posts need to be filled, and Kupchyna may become a part to a package agreement. A decision is expected by late May – early June.
‘Kyiv-Minsk, an axis of goodness’

The leaders of Belarus and Ukraine have finally found a suitable pretext and format for meeting. This will be their first meeting since the Ukrainian president’s trip to Belarus in February 2015 for the summit that would result in the Minsk-II agreements.

On 26 April, Alexander Lukashenka and Petro Poroshenko met at the site of Chernobyl NPP to commemorate those who died in the Chernobyl disaster. Then, they went over the border to the village of Liaskavichy in Belarus for a working meeting.

Lukashenka’s recent statements about Ukraine as a source of militants and weapons threatening Belarus’s security have created a negative backdrop for the two leaders’ meeting.

However, Ukrainian politicians seem to understand that these claims were made largely for internal consumption. Their resentment over Belarus’s vote at the UN against the Ukrainian resolution on Crimea has also become a thing of the past.

Poroshenko sought reassurance from his Belarusian counterpart about Belarus’s continued neutrality in Ukraine’s conflict with Russia – and apparently succeeded. ‘I received a firm affirmation and assurances from the President of Belarus: no one will ever be able to involve Belarus in a war against Ukraine’, the Ukrainian leader said. ‘We are kindred’, Lukashenka confirmed.

Lukashenka’s main interest in the meeting was to support the positive trend in the trade with Ukraine, which grew by 10.5% last year to attain $3.83bn, after falling three years in a
row. In January-February 2017, the growth was even more spectacular – 29%. Ukraine remains Belarus’s second-largest trading partner, and Belarus is on the fourth place in Ukraine’s list.

Belarus agreed to consider buying electric energy from Ukraine and plans to increase its supplies of oil products to this country. The two countries will also seek greater localisation of assembly of Belarusian machinery in Ukraine. Lukashenka and Poroshenko agreed to meet in Kyiv this summer to finalise several issues under discussion.

While Poroshenko called Russia (indirectly) a ‘demon’, Lukashenka carefully avoided taking sides in the conflict between Belarus’s two neighbours. Nevertheless, he clearly has no intention of sacrificing his country’s economic and security interests just to soothe Russian prejudices against Ukraine.

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Belarusian Combatants in Ukraine: Heroes or Criminals?

On 29 August, Ales Charkashyn, a member of tactical volunteer group Belarus Fighting in Donbas, died from combat wounds. This is the first known death of a Belarusian citizen fighting on the Ukrainian side.

No Ukrainian diplomats attended Charkashyn’s funeral in Brest yesterday. Kyiv has been reluctant to acknowledge the devotion of Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine by awarding them Ukrainian citizenship and see them as an obstacle in relations with Minsk.
The Belarusian side, on the other hand, continues to say that it will persecute Belarusians who join the fight in Ukraine, on either the Ukrainian or the Russian side.

Belarusian Volunteers in Ukraine

The true scale of Belarusian involvement in the Ukrainian conflict remains unknown. Most Belarusians conceal their participation in order to avoid persecution at home. Estimates in the media, such as those given by Belsat TV, range from a few dozen to several hundred volunteers.

Several political activists and individuals formerly recognised as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International have joined the fight in Ukraine. Vasily Parfiankou, who served a prison sentence for participating in protests after the rigged 2010 presidential election, has been serving in Ukraine since last winter.

On 25 July, co-chair of the Young Front Eduard Lobau published a video announcement stating that he had arrived in Ukraine "to fight the common enemy". Arrested for organising protests following the 2010 election, Lobau left Belarusian prison just six months prior to the announcement.

The involvement of well-known Belarusian political activists in the Ukrainian conflict who do not conceal their identities draws media attention. Yet according to an anonymous volunteer interviewed by the European Radio for Belarus, the majority of Belarusians fighting for Ukraine have no political background and speak Russian. Many of them have joined the tactical Belarus group, which belongs to Ukrainian militant group Right Sector (Pravy Sektor).
Belarusians Die for Ukraine

On the night of 10 August, the Belarus group came under fire. The Ukrainian coordinator of Belarusian volunteers, Vitaly Tsilizhenko, died right away. Charkashyn, 33, was sent to intensive care with shards in his head, chest and kidney. Ukrainian doctors fought to save his life for two weeks, but he died on 29 August.

Since the early 1990s Charkashyn has belonged to the democratic movement in Belarus. He studied at the Tavriyskiy Christian Institute in Ukraine and previously served as the leader of the Belarusian Christian Democracy party in Brest, a city of 310,000.

At the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict, Charkashyn assisted with humanitarian aid delivery. Eventually he became a soldier. Charkashyn seemed like a quiet and religious man when the author met him several years ago.

Charkashyn is the first Belarusian known to have died fighting on the Ukrainian side; several other Belarusian volunteers died fighting for the separatist cause. Some 150 people attended Charkashyn's funeral on 3 September. The crowd chanted "Heroes don't die" as his coffin was carried through the streets of Brest.

Several leaders of the Belarusian opposition attended,
including Paval Seviarynets of the Belarusian Christian Democratic party and former political prisoners Zmicier and Nasta Dashkevich of the officially banned Young Front. No Ukrainian diplomats appeared.

Are Belarusian Fighters for Ukraine Criminals?

The majority of Belarusian volunteers fight in combat groups such as the Right Sector, a Ukrainian far-right organisation frowned upon by the Ukrainian authorities and the international community. A possible reason for this is that only Ukrainian citizens can join the official Ukrainian army. Right Sector, the only pro-Ukraine combat group unaffiliated with the Ukrainian government, may be the only choice for foreigners seeking to support the Ukrainian cause.

According to one volunteer, even though all Belarusians who return home from the Ukrainian front are convicted as mercenaries, they do not qualify for refugee status in Ukraine. Were the Ukrainian government to enforce its laws, it could start deporting the volunteers, most of whom stay in Ukraine longer than the laws allow.

Even though Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and Minister of the Interior Arsen Avakov once promised to award citizenship to Belarusian fighters, most volunteers still have no Ukrainian citizenship. Two Ukrainian parliamentary deputies close to the volunteer corps, Igor Guz and Dmitry Timchuk, proposed a law that would permit granting Ukrainian citizenship to foreign volunteers fighting on the Ukrainian side.

The only Belarusian fighter who has received citizenship to date, Sergei Korotkich, has a dubious past. Korotkich had lead a neo-fascist organisation in Russia and participated in a crackdown on Belarusian pro-democracy activists in the 1990s.
Belarusian volunteers who spoke with Belarus Digest named two reasons for the reluctance of the Ukrainian authorities to grant citizenship to Belarusian volunteers. One reason is the current dysfunctionality of the Ukrainian state. A no less important reason is Ukrainian concern about the ongoing negotiations between Minsk and Kyiv.

The Belarusian government threatens to criminally prosecute Belarusian volunteers as mercenaries

According to volunteer Andrej Strizhak who spoke to Belarus Digest, Ukrainian MPs drafted a law awarding a Hero’s Medal to Belarusian Mikhail Zhiznieuski, shot dead at the Euromaidan protests, but the draft was never voted on in parliament, “perhaps due to a political agreement between Belarus and Ukraine”. Instead of the Hero’s Medal, Poroshenko presented the Order of the Heavenly Hundred Heroes, a lesser award, to Zhiznieuski's parents.

The Belarusian government threatens to criminally prosecute Belarusian volunteers as mercenaries. The KGB reportedly summons relatives of volunteers fighting for Ukraine for questioning.

“Do you understand that people go there to kill and then return and live among us?”, Chairman of the Belarusian KGB Valiery Vakulchyk told the media in June 2015. He said that these people should face the consequences of their actions, sooner or later. At the same time, no criminal cases have been initiated to date, possibly because all the volunteers have remained in Ukraine.

Just a year ago, the Ukrainian authorities welcomed foreigners willing to fight for Ukraine. Today, they view Belarusian volunteers as a liability rather than an asset. The volunteers deserve more respect than the Ukrainian authorities give them.
Russian Media Attack Belarus: a Warning for Minsk?

The past few weeks have seen an unusual increase of anti-Belarusian activity in pro-government Russian media and blogs.

The Kremlin has not yet used its strongest media tools. However, the manner of the attack is in some respects similar to the information warfare which preceded Russia's annexation of Crimea.

In the face of the unfolding economic crisis in Russia and Belarus and the Belarusian presidential elections scheduled for 2015, this could signal a new shift in the relations between Russia and the regime of Alexander Lukashenka.

Second-tier media in action. Is more to come?

First, the widely-read pro-Kremlin blogger Aleksandr Shumsky has published a detailed post saying that Belarus was a natural part of Russia and suggesting that Russia should actively prevent attempts of a pro-Western revolution in Belarus.

Then, the popular entertainment TV channel REN TV on December 20 aired a half-hour long film about Belarus claiming that the West is preparing a coup d'état in Belarus, criticising both the Belarusian opposition and the regime of Lukashenka.

Failing to spell the names of some Belarusian politicians and media outlets correctly, REN TV told its viewers about Western-sponsored bloody revolt being prepared in Belarus. This film came out as part of a three hours long marathon of anti-Western propaganda, along with conspiracy theories and
homophobia.

The influential nationalistic online publication Sputnik & Pogrom is regularly publishing articles denouncing the right of Belarusians to have an independent state, denouncing the existence of the Belarusian language and culture.

Russian media portray the Belarusian democratic opposition as Nazis and accuse Lukashenka of being weak.

Other publications have in the past weeks been even more aggressive in criticising things like the growth of popularity of Belarusian traditional clothing or the non-Russocentric view of Belarusian history by Belarusians.

Some of the articles, in a typical manner, portray the Belarusian democratic opposition as Nazis and accuse Lukashenka of being weak and opportunistic. The fact that Lukashenka has maintained good relations with Ukraine in 2014 is also a topic for hysterically critical publications on different levels.

Although the media participating in this campaign do not always have a formal affiliation with the Kremlin, in today's Russia there can be no illusions as to the orchestration of such things or at least their approval by state ideologists.

Anti-Belarusian propaganda has not yet reached the scale that the propaganda targeting Ukraine or the Baltic states in the past. For instance, first-tier nationwide TV channels have not yet been seriously involved in the latest round of attacks. However, this scale has certainly become the largest since a series of anti-Lukashenka films titled The Godfather aired in 2010 on the Gazprom-controlled TV channel NTV.

**Lukashenka as the long-time hero of Russian nationalists**

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine, motivated by Russian nationalistic slogans, were preceded by a
long-term information campaign. Numerous books, magazine articles and films aiming to discredit Ukrainian statehood, the Ukrainian language and culture, to demonise the Ukrainian independence movement, have been published over the past two decades and prepared the foundations for the tragic events of 2014.

At the same time, over the past years there has almost been no similar propaganda targeting Belarus. Russian nationalistic circles have never needed to resist growing Belarusian nationalism.

Lukashenka has been viewed as a hero and even as a desired ruler of Russia

The authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenka, established with direct Russian support and enjoying serious political and financial aid from Russia over the past two decades, has always had an ideology very close to Russian (or Soviet) revanchism.

In 1995, Lukashenka has de-facto restored Soviet state symbols and reintroduced Russian language as the dominating language in Belarus. The regime has cracked down the Belarusian national revival at the very same time as it has cracked down democracy and human rights.

Therefore, for the past two decades Russian nationalists could have viewed their goals regarding Belarus as almost achieved, with the exception of a formal incorporation of Belarus into Russia. Lukashenka has been viewed as a hero and even as a desired ruler of Russia by many Russian conservatives and nationalists.

**Belarus: Kremlin’s next victim or its Trojan Horse?**

The activation of anti-Belarusian propaganda in Russian media can be a warning and an indicator of Kremlin’s Belarusian
agenda for 2015. For, in late 2014, the danger of an actual annexation of Belarus is higher than in previous years.

Russian society has greeted the incorporation of Crimea with great enthusiasm. Following this, approval ratings of President Vladimir Putin have been at an all-time high. However, towards the end of 2014 Western sanctions and falling oil prices have led Russia into an economic crisis.

The approval ratings are bound to fall, which creates a temptation for the Kremlin to repeat the "small and victorious" enlargement of Russia’s territory. And for this purpose, the compact, controlled and internationally isolated Belarus could be an attractive target.

Moreover, in 2015, presidential elections are scheduled to take place in Belarus. Together with a growing risk of a serious economic crisis in Belarus, this creates vulnerability and a window of opportunities for the Kremlin.

In this information war Lukashenka may just be a Trojan Horse in Kremlin’s hands

This also corresponds with what Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Kremlin ideologue and PR mastermind, said in his recent interview when commenting on the media attack being mounted against Lukashenka "[Putin’s system today] can’t bear any compromises and must turn an insecure ally [like Lukashenka] into an enemy".

Moreover, the criticism of Lukashenka will be a good topic for the Kremlin to turn society’s attention away from the economic problems and the failure of the war in eastern Ukraine, Pavlovsky said.

On the other hand, there is a less widespread opinion out there that in this latest information war Lukashenka is just a Trojan Horse in the Kremlin’s hands. Some Belarusian activists
suggest that this wave of propaganda may have been initiated by Lukashenka himself using his regime's influence in the Russian media.

This could help him gain support from progressive circles inside Belarus and get sympathy and support from the West ahead of the 2015 elections. As to Lukashenka's actions in the Ukrainian crisis, several Russian pro-government commentators agree that his actions are being coordinated with the Kremlin or even follow Kremlin's instructions.

“His dependence on Russia is enormous, and everybody understands that”, says an expert quoted by the notorious pro-Kremlin online outlet Vzglyad. Despite all the seeming disloyalty on Ukraine, Lukashenka is nevertheless continuing on with Belarus' growing involvement into Russia-led post-Soviet integration bodies, writes Viktor Militarev, a Russian right-wing writer and activist, in a column for Izvestia, the largest pro-government newspaper in Russia.

Anyway, if the media attacks on Lukashenka continue and keep growing in terms of their scale and prominence, this time it might indeed be more than just another staged conflict between Russia and its capricious vassal.

Aleś Čajčyc

Alexander (Aleś) Čajčyc is a Moscow-based writer, consultant and member of the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic

The Fate of European Security
Belarusian state TV provided extensive coverage of the negotiations in Minsk, calling them "constructive" and playing a decisive role in securing the safety of the whole of Europe.

Belarusians can now actively discuss a new anti-corruption law and express their views on the web site of “SB – Belarus Segodnya”, a state-run daily newspaper.

State TV journalists also showed how European farmers have suffered serious damage as a result of the Russian sanctions on their food products. As a result, the number of opponents towards western sanctions grows daily.

**Minsk – a platform for international dialogue.** For first time in its history, Belarus hosted an international meeting involving high profile officials from the EU, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

“Minsk became a platform for a final attempt for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in the east of Ukraine”, states the reporter. In his opinion, the gathering in Minsk would decide the fate of peace and security in the whole Europe.

Alexander Lukashenka declared Belarus' readiness to host any future rounds of negotiations. “Innocent people die, infrastructure is being destroyed, hundreds of thousands of refugees are forced to leave their native land (...) These are not scenes from the history, this is our reality today. Can we look upon what is happening today with indifference? Of course, we cannot”, he stated in his speech.

**After the talks, Lukashenka speaks with the press.** The
Belarusian leader stated that the meeting was a successful step in the direction towards further talks. “The talks were not easy, but the dialogue was essential and open”, he told international journalists gathered in Minsk. Lukashenka also emphasised that all of the participants in the talks had a chance to express their point of view. Despite various positions, “all agreed on one thing: we should find a compromise”.

Lukashenka also noted the importance of the encounter between the two powerful economic blocs, i.e. the EU and Customs Union.

*Initial media commentary on the summit in Minsk.* “Observers, political scientists and journalists of the world's leading media outlets” agree that the talks in Minsk were difficult but constructive. “Minsk has a unique atmosphere that is conducive to constructive political and economic talks, something that is invaluable for international relations”, one reporter proudly stated.

It was also noted that the leaders focused on three key issues: peace, or at least an armistice, humanitarian aid, and energy-related issues – an agreement on gas supply and transit “to not let Ukraine and Europe freeze”, but also the economy – especially the possible losses the Customs Union member states may face as a result of the Association Agreement of Ukraine with the EU.

*Further Russian humanitarian aid.* One report took note of Moscow's plan to send another convoy of humanitarian aid to people living in the Donbas. Sergey Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, informed the media of Russia sending the appropriate official notice to the authorities in Kyiv.

UN Under-General-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs, Valerie Amos, also argued for more aid, including medication and food,
Foreign Affairs

Belarus-Poland relations. The Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs set to travel to Warsaw on a two-day visit. He will meet with Polish officials, including Radoslaw Sikorski, the head of Polish diplomacy. The officials will be discussing issues of “interest to both sides” – the report stated, but did not, however, provide any further details about the visit.

European farmers suffer serious loses due to Russian sanctions. Farmers are struggling with a “catastrophic decrease in demand” for their agricultural goods. Thus, a number of opponents of the “economic confrontation” between the EU and Russian steadily increases on a day to day basis. Producers count their losses and feel that the EU's sanctions towards Russia are ineffective, states the report.

Explaining the context of the ongoing exchange of sanctions, the state TV reporter states that the EU and US imposed sectoral sanctions on Russia, and Moscow reacted with a “boycott of their food products”. This subsequently brought about the losses being experienced by European farmers presently.

State TV's coverage of the issue also pointed out that not everybody supports the politics of sanctions. The Swiss Minister of Economy, Johann Schneider-Ammann, criticised the idea of imposing mutual sanctions and argued how it would negatively affect both sides.

Domestic Affairs

Belarus-Ukraine mutual trade. State TV reported that beginning 19 August both Belarus and Ukraine lifted previously imposed barriers on mutual trade. At the same time, according to the
coverage, Belarus must protect the Russian market from illegal exports through its territory of products from countries that Russia has sanctioned.

**Belarusians free to discuss new anti-corruption draft law.** The Belarusian leader says Belarusian society should join in discussions on the proposed amendments to the nation's main anti-corruption law. People can now express their views on the web site of the “SB – Belarus Segodnya”, the largest state-run daily newspaper.

So far a number of Belarusians have actively joined the discussion, one journalist noted. “Over only the course of the previous week 150 suggestions were made”, they explained. “SB – Belarus Segondya” will send the best and most concise comments to the General Attorney for further assessment.

**Agro-tourism as a source of economic development.** The head of state has visited several agro-tourism farms in the Volozhynkij region. He spoke with the owners of the farms and praised them for their hard work. “In this way, we can turn Belarus into Switzerland”, he cheerfully chimed. He also argued for the further revival of small Belarusian villages.

**Bumper crops in Belarus.** Journalists from state Channel 1 widely covered the results of this year's harvesting campaign. According to their sources, 10 mln tonnes of grains has been collected in total. The coverage notes that the Belarusian leader set a threshold at this level a few years ago, but then nobody believed that would be attainable. Today this is a reality, one journalist proudly noted. “There will certainly not be any shortage of bread in the country”, he added.

The report explains that the key to the harvest's success was primarily due to financial support from the state. In addition to the high level of investment by the state, the report also pointed to the “dictatorship of technology” as another reason behind its success.
Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State Television 1 (BT1). 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.

Belarusian Defence Sector To Benefit From the Conflict In Ukraine

On 24 July, Russian Ambassador Alexander Surikov revealed Moscow's proposal to Minsk to take over production of several thousand new components used by the Russian defence industry.

Russian official openly stated that the conflict in Ukraine was the issue standing behind their offer. In June, president Poroshenko of Ukraine banned all forms of military technical cooperation with Russia.

Earlier this year the Belarusian leadership proclaimed its intent to reboot its national defence industry which by this point has exhausted nearly all of its Soviet potential.

But Belarusian manufacturers will hardly be able to serve as a substitute for Ukrainian suppliers to the Russian defence industry.

Moreover, Belarusian firms do not work exclusively with Russia, but have a number of other partners. Minsk has also a vested interest in continuing its cooperation with Ukraine in this arena.

Belarus' Military Export: Tip of Iceberg
According to the latest data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from 2009-2013 Belarus' arms exports made up 1% of the world's total sales. The country even reached 16th place in the global arms export's rankings. However, Belarusian military-related exports have been declining from the 1990s.

According to SIPRI, in 2012, Belarus' total weapons exports were worth just of $97m (with $69m in sales going to Azerbaijan and $28m to Yemen) – perhaps the worst year in terms of arms trading in nearly two decades. The situation improved last year, as exports rose to $338m (with $170m in sales going to China and $168m to Sudan).

Military analyst Alyaksandr Alesin, speaking to TUT.by, warned that military-related exports from Belarus might be more substantial than is currently believed. Belarusian firms export few ready-to-use types of equipment monitored by international organisations.

They export mostly military electronics, command and control systems, optics, and other components for Soviet and post-Soviet arms and military equipment.

In addition, Belarusian firms focus on modernisation of old Soviet arms. Thus, they recently produced a low-budget version of an air defence system for a developing country by once more "re-modernising" a Soviet SAM system, the S-125 Pechora. A decade earlier, together with the Russians, Belarusian specialists modernised Egypt's Pechoras.

Up to 70 per cent of goods produced by the Belarusian defence industry goes abroad, according to Siarhei Hurulyou, Chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee.

There is little internal demand for its domestically produced
equipment, a result of its meagre defence budget. This makes the industry susceptible to external demand. The rise in arms exports last year immediately resulted in a 51.4% rise in production for defence industry.

Last but not least, the SIPRI almost never publishes data on Belarusian military-related exports to Russia, yet the bulk of Belarusian military exports make their way to Russia.

**Silent Yet Efficient Cooperation with Ukraine**

In recent months, top officials – among them Lukashenka and Hurulyou – have repeatedly spoken about the necessity of avoiding an Ukrainian scenario, one that entails a collapse of the national army after years of neglect towards defence issues.

Hurulyou stated that now national defence industry should be concerned first with supplying Belarus' armed forces with the most modern weaponry and maintain export levels. “Earlier everything was precisely the opposite: [first came] exports and [then] a little bit for the army.”

In April, Alyaksandr Lukashenka urged the government to develop its defence industries. He underscored that the potential of Soviet arms had been exhausted and its national defence industries should create new products. Belarusians, according to him, will start producing helicopters and aircraft.

Of course, Lukashenka said, Belarus will not be able to manufacture them alone but will need to work together with other nations. It should cooperate with Russia in this regard, but as the Belarusian leader added:

"Let's try to make arrangements with the Ukrainians so that..."
we can try [to build new weapons] together... Likewise, the Europeans and other [nations] are today also interested in working with us."

Thus far, however, Belarusian defence enterprises have succeeded in cooperating only with the Ukrainians. Lukashenka referred to a helicopter production project in Orsha.

In 2012, the largest Ukrainian engines manufacturer Motorsich and Belarusian firm "Sistemy innovatsii i investitsii" came together to implement it. Last September, Orsha Aviation Repair Works started assembling modernised MI-8 helicopters.

Cooperation with Ukraine has been fruitful in other spheres of military production as well. In particular, Belarus and Ukraine have jointly developed the T38 Stilet air defence system, the Skif anti-tank missile system and its most recent modification – the Shershen.

because of disruption of Russo-Ukrainian cooperation and Western sanctions against Russia, Belarusian defence industry will likely gain new opportunities with Russia

Currently, Stilet is being deployed in the Azerbaijani army, while the Skif – in the armies of Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Can Belarusians and Russians Be Partners?

New developments in Belarusian defence industry would appear to have contradictory consequences for its own future. On the one hand, because of disruption of Russo-Ukrainian cooperation and Western sanctions against Russia, it will likely gain some new opportunities with Russia.
For instance, it is going to establish some aircraft production inside Belarus with the involvement of the leading Russian United Aviation Building Corporation (Obyedinennaya Aviastroitelnaya Korporatsiya).

On the other hand, the strategy of national military industry development may collapse. Until now, Belarus has tried to position itself as being “in between" Russia and the West.

First, it closely worked with Russia, because without ties to the Russian defence industries the Belarusian defence enterprises would have immense difficulties in producing their own complete products for sale.

Second, Minsk has tried to enhance cooperation with any other countries willing to cooperate. Among them were some countries which have strenuous relations with the Kremlin, such as Ukraine, Georgia or Azerbaijan.

In due course, Belarus could have established a much more equal partnership with Russia and even achieve its own position of effective neutrality by pursuing this policy.

But now, new lines of confrontation in Europe may limit Minsk's opportunities to work with everybody. The Belarusian defence industry might become more dependent on Russia than it had ever imagined possible. Instead of becoming partners with the Russians, Belarusian firms risk becoming just part of the Russian military industrial complex.

If put before a choice – either to cooperate with Russia or
others, Minsk for now will choose Russia and renounce other partnerships. Therefore, the West should not corner Minsk and force it into making a choice between the parties. In doing so, the West would undermine the prospects of Belarus as a viable independent state.

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**Lukashenka the Peacemaker**

Late in the evening on 29 July Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko phoned his Belarusian counterpart and proposed him to host a meeting of a tripartite contact group on Ukraine.

The negotiations' format included OSCE, Russia and Ukraine. Alexander Lukashenka agreed and the talks were scheduled on 31 July. The contact group talks took place in Lukashenka's residence Zaslaũje near Minsk behind the closed doors.

Minsk got the opportunity to host these negotiations because of Belarus' neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Lukashenka showed his best manoeuvring skills, navigating between each party because he needs stable trade relations with Ukraine, but he cannot afford being too disloyal to Kremlin.

Yet, the possible outcomes and implications of Minsk talks may have been overestimated: the Belarusian role in conflict's resolution remains insufficient to affect a serious change or to improve the authorities' image in the West.

**An Ideal Place for Talks**

The contact group planned to discuss two issues: the release of hostages and securing access for international
investigators to the MH17 crash site. For that matter parties decided to invite the representatives of pro-Russian separatists who also agreed to come.

The talks brought together Ukraine's ex-president Leonid Kuchma, Russian ambassador to Ukraine Mikhail Zurabov, OSCE special envoy Adelheid Tagliavini and the separatists' delegation, headed most probably by Andrey Purgin, "the vice-premier" of self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic.

It was no accident that Minsk became the suitable place to host these talks, rather technical, but still important from the humanitarian perspective.

With an open clash between the EU and Russia the Ukrainian conflict rapidly developing, and Eastern Ukraine itself being divided into areas controlled either by the Ukrainian military or by separatists, Belarus appeared to be the only neutral place in all of Europe that could guarantee the security of all the participants.

Credit here is due to Alexander Lukashenka and his rather effective balancing between Ukraine and Russia throughout the entire conflict. From the very first days of Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Belarusian ruler did his best to preserve good relations with both Kyiv and Moscow.

Lukashenka achieved his purpose by making numerous statements that were pleasing both parties. He de facto recognised Crimea as a part of Russia. At the same time, he called for the elimination of the terrorists in Eastern Ukraine, recognised and actively communicated with new Ukrainian interim authorities and even visited Petro Poroshenko's inauguration, but on every possible occasion he swore Russians to be loyal.
Interestingly, Belarusian state officials visibly panicked on 30-31 July: they often did not pick up the phone, could not give a precise answer to anything journalists asked about the upcoming talks and always redirected calls to one another – it was hard to find the responsible entity.

Kyiv and the separatists agreed to maintain a cease-fire near the MH-17 crash site and to release 20 detainees from each side – not a sensational success, but one could hardly expect more from second rate technical talks.

Lukashenka Needs the War to be Over

Although geopolitical balancing remains one of Lukashenka's most notable talents, the agreement to host Ukrainian talks reflects his genuine desire to foster a resolution to the conflict.

As the war in the East of Ukraine escalates, the Belarusian ruler's manoeuvring space continues to shrink. As the war in the East of Ukraine escalates, the Belarusian ruler's manoeuvring space continues to shrink. He cannot openly contradict Russia, his political, military ally and economic donor. While Moscow faces increasing international ostracism, Lukashenka has little interest to follow Kremlin down its path to isolation, especially when Belarusian-Western relations are showing first signs of slow improvement.

Economic ties with Ukraine play a crucial role for Belarus' overall economic health. Trade with Ukraine provides Belarus with $2bn in annual surplus, mostly derived from oil product exports. Given the huge external trade deficit Belarus has faced in recent years, having such a beneficial trade partner like Ukraine means a lot.

The importance of these economic relations was publicly demonstrated on 23 June when Belarus strongly rejected a
Russian proposal to introduce protective trade measures against Ukrainian goods.

Russia claimed the need to protect the Eurasian Union market from the inflow of cheap imports from the West after Ukraine signed its free trade agreement with the EU. But Belarus and Kazakhstan insisted it was too early to panic.

As a result Russia had to start a trade war against Ukraine unilaterally with no backing from its Eurasian Union allies.

Recently, the Belarusian authorities announced a number of their own protectionist measures, some of which (such as the licensing of beer, cement and glass imports, and barriers for confectionery goods) hurt the Ukrainian economy. Kyiv replied strongly – it imposed high duties on Belarusian-imported dairy products, confectionery goods, beer, fertilisers, refrigerators and tires.

In a few days time the Belarusian government conceded and issued a new regulation that exempted Ukraine and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) states from originally introduced anti-import measures. Such a prompt climbdown, very atypical for Minsk, became the latest indication of how much Belarus values good relations with Ukraine.

Lukashenka speaks honestly when he promises to do everything he can to achieve a lasting truce between Russia and Ukraine. That is why Lukashenka speaks honestly when he promises to do everything he can to achieve a lasting truce between Russia and Ukraine. They say big money loves silence. So does Belarus' fragile economy and entangled relations with neighbours.

Talks' Implications Seem Overestimated

After the negotiations in Minsk, the Russian ambassador to
Belarus Alexander Surikau said that future rounds of these talks might also take place in Belarus. In fact, there are very few other benefits Belarus can expect to receive from its status as a neutral party.

Lukashenka can neither contribute much to the conflict's resolution, nor hope for notable improvements in his relations with the West as a result of his good offices.

As for a possible truce between Kyiv and Russian-backed separatists, only united international efforts, together with the political will of the Russian and Ukrainian leadership will be able end the war. Given the Ukrainian military's success over the past weeks, Kyiv will unlikely agree to curb its relatively successful anti-terrorist operation.

Talking about humanitarian and other secondary (in terms of military situation) issues in Minsk has little effect on the armed conflict itself. Some say that Belarus could do more and serve as a mediator, but Alexander Lukashenka himself has publicly refused ever to become one, saying he "hates mediation".

Many Belarusian political analysts during the first hours following the Minsk talks' announcement concluded that the West would want to reward Minsk for facilitating the negotiations and improve its attitude to Belarusian authorities. However, this all seems a little too optimistic.

British Ambassador to Belarus Bruce Bucknell disagreed with such a forecast in his latest interview with the BelaPAN news agency: "If we act hastily trying to speed up improving our relations... Russia may not like it. And we don’t want to destabilise the situation in Belarus and the region in this way".

He also said that for Belarus merely providing a neutral venue for talks cannot abolish the existing obstacles (political prisoners, lack of rule of law, death penalty etc.) for
improving its relations with the EU.

Thus, the contact group talks in Belarus, of course, have drawn the country into the conflict's resolution, but Minsk's role seems marginal and will most likely remain so. Alexander Lukushenka has a strong desire, but almost no leverage to end the Russian-Ukrainian clash.

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Belarusians Pop Car Tires to Express Ukraine Sentiments

On 23 July, the main Belarusian portal TUT.by blew the Internet up with an article about Belarusians who were going around popping car tires with Russian number plates in Minsk.

The site's administration removed nearly two thousand comments for inciting ethnic hatred.

The attitude of some Belarusians towards Russia is getting more radical due to the conflict in Ukraine, and these tires appear to be just one example of their growing displeasure.

In a turn of events unheard of in Belarus previously, people are also target cars with Ukrainian symbols and historical Belarusian white-red-white flag symbols.

Radicalisation is not only a result of the Ukrainian conflict or boom of Russian organisations now active in Belarus, but also from the authoritarian political climate in the country.

The authorities have banned basically any political protests from taking place, so many feel they have no way to express their dissent other than by piercing the wheels of cars.
Fighting in The Streets

On 23 July, TUT.by tells published an article describing how at least three cars were in Minsk, all of which were carrying either Russian numbers or symbols.

The vandals have made use of different means of inflicting damage: popping tires or breaking out windows, scratching the side of the car or pouring buckets of mud on them.

Last year, the Belarusian media wrote about several cases where drivers of public buses hung Russian flags on the window and activists sought their withdrawal. On 30 October 2013, police even detained an activist in Minsk for a few hours as the driver accused him of debauchery.

Not only cars with Russian symbols become victims

Later, however, the police released the activist, and Minsk's public transport service apologised "for the inconvenience" and the driver remove the flag.

However, not only cars with Russian symbols have become victims in the latest wave of hooliganism. Recently, a driver who had a Belarusian white-red-white and Ukrainian flag in their, said that someone since May 2014 has been puncturing his tires repeatedly in Minsk.

Until Lukashenka came to power the white-red-white flag served as the official symbol of Belarus. Now the Belarusian diaspora and nearly all opposition parties in Belarus consider it as the only true flag of Belarus.

Country of Intolerant People

Most of these events are, to a large extent, the result of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. While a few Belarusians are fighting on both sides in the Donbass, some continue to battle with one another Belarus, albeit typically in a much less
violent form.

This ongoing, growing conflict helps to debunk one of the most popular myths about Belarusians – their tolerance.

Belarus occupies 92nd place in the Global Peace Index. This ranking makes use of three main criteria: the level of safety and security in society, the extent of its domestic or international conflicts, and the degree of a nation's militarisation. Belarus is better positioned than Russia (152nd place) and Ukraine (141st position), but worse than its EU neighbours Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

Moreover, recent these offences have ties to another important myth – that of the Belarusian partisans. After the Second World War communists portrayed Belarus as a “guerrilla country”, one that knows how to fight under occupation.

These recent events suggest a growing trend of anti-Russia sentiments. A driver of one of the damaged cars quoted on TUT.by said that, "he had never seen people in Belarus have such a strong dislike for the Russians [before]".

The current radicalisation of Belarusian society has its roots in the absence of democratic institutions and open forums within the country. According to Freedom House's criteria, Belarus has the same freedom rating as China. Belarus needs public debates to help society let off some of its steam.

Pro-Russian organisations supply free Russian flags for distribution in Belarus

However, the authoritarian regime provides few chances for genuine public discussions to take place, as Lukashenka likes to call virtually all pro-democracy organisations a "fifth column".

Therefore, many have only one way of expressing themselves – popping the tires of those who have different political views
as expressed by the national insignia of this or that country.

Thus, while most Belarusians hold pro-Russian sentiments, some Belarusians have become sensitive to the Kremlin's barrage of anti-Ukrainian propaganda which has served as a catalyst to revitalise dormant pro-Russian organisations in Belarus.

As part of their work, pro-Russian organisations supply free Russian flags for distribution in Belarus at every turn possible. Although Russian organisations previously did not spread Russian national symbols in the past, in recent months the Belarusian media has reported on a serious spike in their distribution in at least five cities, including Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

Although Belarusians call the police to try to get them to stop people from handing out Russian flags on the street, there is obviously not much that they can to do. On one such occasion, on 15 July, the police acted and detained people distributing Russian flags in Orsha, a town in east Belarus.

They turned out to be deaf people who were either selling or giving away the flags in exchange for a miniscule wage, as they have an extremely difficult time finding other jobs in Belarus.

Since distributing the symbols of another country remains legal according Belarusian law, the police were obliged to release them, since they had nothing to hold them on.

**Belarusian Hooligans and Russian Organisations**

Who is responsible for the damage done to the cars remains unknown. In the case of the cars with Russian symbols, suspicion may fall on football fans. Despite a spike in pro-Russian sentiments, Belarusian football fans have much better ties with their counterparts in Ukraine than in Russia.

This is why most football fans support Ukraine today. Their
support has only grown in the months since protests broke out in Kyiv last winter. In one instance the police **arrested several BATE fans** for merely having taken a photo in solidarity with Maidan.

With regards to the cars vandalised that were carrying Ukrainian symbols, activists of pro-Russian organisations would appear to be the most logical and likely perpetrators.

Lately, organisations such as Rumol (Russian youth) have intensified their activities in Belarus through their usual events such as holding sports competitions or tourist rallies.

since late 1990s, Belarusians have been deprived of any real form of participation in the nation's political life

Their last event took place in Minsk region on July 2014. The Belarusian authorities pay close attention to these associations, but do not interfere with their activities. Their hands-off approach is likely due to the fact that Rossotrudnichestvo, a Russian federal government agency, is financing these organisations.

Still, it can be ruled out that ordinary Belarusians may also be responsible for these acts of vandalism. An increasingly propagandistic Russian television, which is very popular in Belarus, has created an **atmosphere of hatred** presenting Ukrainians as fascists or a people who support a junta.

At the same time, since late 1990s, Belarusians have been deprived of any real form of participation in the nation's political life.

As a result, some people may view vandalising someone else's property as an opportunity to express their stifled political views.

No matter who committed these offences, they show that the Russian war against Ukraine will shape not only high level
politics in the region, but also affect the relationship between thugs, football fans, youth organisations and ordinary people.

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The Split Between Belarusian Elites and Society on Ukraine Widens

On 17 July, Belarusian state media tried to strike a balance between Russia and Ukraine's respective positions when reporting on the MH17 crash.

Russian media clearly stated that it was Ukraine which had shot down the plane and the majority of Belarusians seem to believe it.

The Russian war against Ukraine has shown that the Belarusian elite and society see the world very differently.

Nearly all members of the Belarusian elite (both the authorities and the opposition) have a negative perception of the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine. It seems that Lukashenka's position is the closest it has ever been to that of pro-European democrats and the business elite of Belarus.

However, the majority of ordinary people seem to support Russia's narrative. The Kremlin's propaganda has found fertile soil for its world view in a Soviet mentality that has been perpetuated and cultivated over the years by Lukashenka’s regime.

As of late, it appears that the authorities are trying to
strengthen Belarusian identity, but despite their efforts, it is clearly not enough to turn back the tide of 20 years of propaganda. Whether they realise it or not, the only way to remedy the issues facing Belarusian society is for Lukashenka’s regime allowing society an opportunity to develop intellectually and co-operate other groups of elites.

Otherwise, the gap between the political decision-makers and the people will only continue to widen.

**Elites Support Ukraine**

The conflict in Ukraine has become perhaps the singular issue in which the entirety of the Belarusian elite hold virtually the same opinion.

Though the Belarusian authorities have made several concessions to the Kremlin, they managed to maintain neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and be supportive of the Kyiv leadership.

As a gesture of Belarus' committment to Ukraine, Lukashenka came to Kyiv as the only president from the Commonwealth of Independent States to be in attendance at Piotr Poroshenko’s inauguration.

Lukashenka calls on Ukraine to wipe out the militants in Eastern Ukraine

Moreover, the Belarusian head of state has time and again shown that he has a much more pro-Ukrainian stance than many politicians from the European Union. While Angela Merkel advises Poroshenko to call for another ceasefire and negotiate with the separatist forces, Lukashenka calls on Ukraine to wipe out the militants in Eastern Ukraine.

Pavel Yakubovich, editor in chief of Soviet Belarus, the main propaganda newspaper of the regime, criticised Russian media for warmongering in one of his latest columns. Belarusian
state media has maintained a certain level of balance in its coverage of the events in Ukraine, while many independent media outlets like Belgazeta, previously neutral, took the side of Ukraine.

The business elite in Belarus are typically silent in public, but unofficially many of them are very upset with Russia's actions, actions that have been to the detriment of the private sector throughout the whole region. For example, shares of the US-Belarusian IT corporation EPAM Systems fell by a third due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The company has many offices, but its largest ones are located in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia.

All of the significant opposition politicians have been supporting Ukraine since the conflict began, although some marginal figures have been trying to flirt with Russia. For example, Ihar Drako of the Tell the truth campaign said Ukraine's division into three parts is in the best interest of Belarus.

The similarity of the entirety of the Belarusian elite has its roots in their common interests. They view Belarus as an independent, united nation and realise that by protecting Ukraine, they are also protecting themselves.

**Society Supports the Kremlin**

While the elites are preoccupied supporting Ukraine, a large section of the society is doing quite the opposite. Sociological data made available from the Belarusian Analytical Workshop show that 65.7% of Belarusians support the Russian annexation of the Crimea.

Only 15% of Belarusians consider it illegal. It seems logical to believe that that their views on the Donbas may be much the same. The vast majority of people have a negative attitude towards the new Ukrainian authorities.
Russian media dominates Belarus' airwaves, presenting only the Kremlin's views on the events in Eastern Ukraine.

This is the result of aggressive Russian propaganda and the absence of any adequate attempts to bring about some form of informational balance from the Belarusian authorities. Russian media dominates Belarus' airwaves, presenting only the Kremlin's views on the events in Eastern Ukraine. As the Russian media is much better funded and offers higher quality products, most Belarusians choose them over their Belarusian counterparts when given a choice.

A restricted-access sociological study to which the author has access shows that the programme 'News of the Week with Dmitry Kisilev' remains the most popular informational television programme of its kind in Belarus. This Russian television program has become one of the main mouthpieces of the Russian information war against Ukraine.

The Belarusian authorities have been cultivating a Soviet way of thinking for a considerable period of time, an issue that they are now having to contend with. The regime has systematically weakened Belarusian national identity, reducing the value of its national history and symbols, and as a result Belarusians tend to perceive the world through the lens of Russian interests.

At that moment, as Western scholars are almost entirely absent from Belarusian academic institutions, universities host guests like hardcore Russian nationalist Alexander Dugin. Other similar phenomenon have long been accepted in most arenas of public life. As a result of this isolation and identity maintenance, even the authorities are finding that they lack qualified and capable people for public service.

**How the Elite Can Fix Belarus' Problems**

The Belarusian authorities grew afraid of the war in Ukraine not only for a fear of Putin, but also because the Belarusian
public appear much more pro-Russian than their own elites. Hence, the regime has recently begun to quietly work on developing Belarusian national identity.

Earlier this month Aliaksandr Lukashenka, for the first time in many years, spoke Belarusian in public.

On 3 July, Independence Day, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, for the first time in many years, spoke Belarusian in public. This month Vitsebsk officials erected a monument to Algerd, the Grand Lithuanian Duke. The Mahiliou city authorities announced the renaming of their Soviet Square, reasoning that the name was now obsolete. But these gestures all appears to be too little, too late.

Every year, the Kremlin every strengthens its role in Belarus and Lukashenka seems to be unable to stop curb its growing influence, though he does try to slow its growth as much as he can. The Belarusian economy hums along largely thanks to Russian money. The Kremlin controls Belarus in almost every aspect of its existence, including its culture. Belarus remains the only country from the former Soviet Union where the Russian language was given official status.

If the state elites want to have public opinion be closer to their own, they should support the national identity of the people and the intellectual development of society to greatest extent possible. The regime, over time, could find ways to cooperate with other elites, at least on a basic level, to help develop the nation's identity and bring it out of isolation.

Previous efforts in this direction can be found in the creation of the Advisory Board at the Presidential Administration, which functioned between 2008-2010, and could be a means to open up societal dialog once more. Another idea would be to invite members of the business elite to high positions in the government of Belarus. Improved relations
with the West would also bring no harm.

On the one hand, the authorities would have to carry out their new policy quietly in order not to draw the wrath of the Kremlin for a pivot west. On the other, they need to do so quickly, as no state can function if the elite and society maintain largely opposing perceptions about their national and civic identity.

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**Poroshenko and Lukashenka: Will the Ukrainian President Defend Belarus in the West?**

On 26 May the future President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko stated that Belarus and his country can cooperate to help Lukashenka take steps towards establishing a democracy. Poroshenko also said that Lukashenka could consider him a friend, and their countries share common interests.

The president-elect of Ukraine knows Belarus better than any other ruler in Europe except, of course, Putin. Poroshenko was one of the main advocates of improving relations between Belarus and the West during the reign of Orange Revolution president Viktor Yushchenko. He also solved several economic issues between the two countries during his time in office on Yanukovych’s team as the Minister of Economy and previously had business interests in Belarus.

The election of a new president in Ukraine gives both sides hope for the restoration of trade relations between the two countries to previous levels. However, it remains unlikely
that Ukraine will become an example for democratic transition for Belarusians. Ukraine brings up feelings of fear, not admiration, among many Belarusians.

Deepening cooperation between the countries may worsen the relations between Minsk and Moscow, but improve the image of Lukashenka’s regime ties with the West. Still, it seems highly unlikely that Poroshenko will once more champion Belarus’ case with the West.

Old friends?

On 25 May Petro Poroshenko stated that he has maintained friendly relations with Alexander Lukashenka. From his years of service in the government, Poroshenko has gotten to know the Belarusian political class quite well. Moreover, their cooperation has brought about many benefits for both countries both economically and politically.

Poroshenko visited Minsk in 2009 as Ukraine's foreign minister, when the Ukrainian authorities were advocating for a dialogue between the European Union and Lukashenka’s regime. Lukashenka's visit to Kyiv, the only one during the reign of Yushchenko, was the apparent result of these negotiations. At that time the Belarusian authorities considered their improved relations with Ukraine as part and parcel of normalising relations with the West.

Poroshenko has also worked with Belarusian Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich and his deputy Uladzimir Semashka. As a result of the negotiations between the parties, both countries removed restrictions on the import of meat, dairy products and beer.

the president-elect of Ukraine often visited Belarus promoting the interests of his machine construction and confectionery companies

Moreover, the president-elect of Ukraine often
visited Belarus promoting the interests of his machine construction and confectionery companies. Poroshenko's Roshen holds a commanding position on the Belarusian chocolate market.

Poroshenko worked on both Yushchenko's and Yanukovych's teams, so he has seen Belarus from different perspectives. Most Ukrainians, and Poroshenko as well, feel grateful for Lukashenka’s support and opposition to the country’s federalisation, the most important demand of Kremlin’s policy towards Kyiv since the interim government took over. Thus, the Belarusian-Ukrainian relations have plenty of room for improvement.

**How the Ukrainian Elections Can Affect Belarus**

Ukraine's pro-European choice remains unlikely to become an example of change for Belarusian society. Economically and socially Ukraine remains behind Belarus and the war in the east of the country will destabilise it for a long time. According to the Institute of Socio-Economic and Political studies April study, 70% of Belarusians do not want such a transition to occur in Belarus.

If Poroshenko’s team stabilises the country and improves the welfare of Ukraine, Belarusians may begin to view these changes more favourably. Ukraine has already shown its willingness to change for better. For example, the levels of transparency and voter engagement during the Ukrainian elections were themselves something that Belarusians would find enviable.

Belarusians perceive the world through the lens of Russian TV. However, even with the possible success of Ukraine, Belarusians perceive the world through the lens of Russia. A restricted-access sociological study to which the author has access to shows that programme 'News of the Week
with Dmitry Kisilev' remains the most popular informational television programme of its kind in Belarus.

This Russian television program has become one of the main mouthpieces of the Russian information war against Ukraine. At the same time, the authorities cut Ukrainian TV from cable packages in some Belarusian cities. In May Brest was hit, a city in the west of Belarus that has a large Ukrainian minority.

While these elections hardly affect Belarusian society, the Belarusian authorities expect improvements in the realm of economic cooperation. Indeed, it is the main reason why they want to see the situation in Ukraine stabilise as soon as possible. On 26 May even the Belarusian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on twitter about the Ukrainian elections under the hashtag #UnitedforUkraine (a hashtag created by the U.S. State Department).

The crisis in Ukraine has already affected the Belarusian economy. Ukraine remains the second largest trading partner of Belarus. However, for the first quarter of 2014, when compared with the first quarter of 2013, Belarusian exports to Ukraine declined by more than 5%, while imports from Ukraine dropped by 30%. Shares of US-Belarusian IT corporation EPAM Systems fell by a third due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Will Poroshenko Become Belarus’ Advocate in the EU?

Belarusian-Ukrainian cooperation can greatly influence Belarus-Russia and Belarus-EU relations.

While the Kremlin remains reluctant to state as much, but it seems worried that Lukashenka supports the new Ukrainian authorities and opposes the decentralisation of its southern neighbour. If the Kremlin chooses to take a rough approach in its relations with Ukraine, a strengthening of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations could become a big irritant for Moscow.
Lukashenka-Poroshenko relations can soften the image of the Belarusian authorities in the West

Simultaneously, Lukashenka-Poroshenko relations can soften the image of the Belarusian authorities in the West. Already many European politicians have stated their appreciation of Belarus’ policy towards Ukraine. The head of the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry Lynas Linkyavichus said that the "statements of the Belarusian leadership are very independent".

On 26 May, the future president of Ukraine declared the necessity of reviving the Eastern Partnership, which "can be a major motivation behind the development of democracy in Belarus." Poroshenko also hopes "to cooperate with Belarus for democratic change".

These statements should not be exaggerated. The Belarusian authorities thoroughly know that to normalise relations with the EU they have to release all political prisoners. Naturally, this does not require any participation of the Ukrainian authorities.

Ukraine also has too many problems of its own at the moment, so it remains unlikely that they will have the time to promote the interests of Belarus in the West. But at least the Belarusian authorities have found an ally, one which the West is listening carefully to.

The article has been written in the framework of the project "Election observation: theory and practice" upon the results of the Belarusian observation mission in Ukraine. The material is a part of the analytical document about the election in Ukraine which will be published soon.
Will the Belarusian Authorities Learn from the Ukrainian Crisis?

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has brought some benefits to the Belarusian authorities.

Due to the instability outside Belarus, Lukashenka's position in his dealings with the West has been strengthened. His recent phone conversation with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk proves this point. Belarus plans to capitalise on its role as an intermediary in certain sectors of Ukrainian-Russian relations. Meanwhile Lukashenka's approval rating has hit 39.8%, the highest it has been in some time.

However, long-term losses exceed the potential benefits. Lukashenka can no longer predict the actions of Putin, who despite expecting further sanctions presses on, a point that Belarus has yet to concede. The long-term slowdown of the Russian and Ukrainian economies will greatly damage Belarus.

If the conflict deepens, Belarus will lose even more. Therefore, Lukashenka's regime must reform the country and begin to gradually increase cooperation with the West. The European Union must recognise the limits of cooperation with the Belarusian authorities, but also be ready to consider a bailout for Belarus.

Short-Term Benefits

According to the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, Lukashenka's approval rating over the last three months has increased by 5% and his trust rating exceeded his distrust rating.

On the background of the events in Ukraine, the Belarusian
state leader appears to be a stable and effective leader, while relatively portraying Belarus' slowing economy as not particularly threatening to the nation. Moreover, Lukashenka’s popularity extends not only to Belarus. During an interview on Ukrainian TV, 100% of the audience voted in agreement with the Belarusian head of state on some of the statements he made.

The West is also beginning to look at the Lukashenka's regime differently

The West is also beginning to look at the Lukashenka's regime differently. In April, the first time after the 2010 elections, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk talked with the Belarusian ruler for a few hours. Over the last month, Deputy Foreign Minister Alena Kupchyna held consultations in Slovakia and Germany. On 28-29 April, she also participated in the meeting of foreign ministers of the Visegrád Group and of the Eastern Partnership, where Kupchyna had a bilateral meeting with Štepfan Füle.

At the moment Lukashenka looks better than the weak Ukrainian authorities or imperialist Putin. At least insofar as the Belarusian authorities are causing fewer problems for the rest of the world.

If the conflict between Ukraine and Russia deepens, Belarus can lay claim to being an intermediary in the economic relations of the countries. Belarus played this role for Russia and Georgia for a while, but on a small scale. Belarusian Airlines flights between Minsk and Tbilisi are always full of Georgians going to and from Russia, particularly when there were no direct flights between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Belarus has already declared its readiness to develop military-industrial cooperation with both countries to find contacts (and contracts) from both sides. It seems that
Russia and Ukraine will continue to sell weapons to each other, but through an intermediary Belarus.

**Long-Term Losses**

Although Lukashenka’s regime has already won something from the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the future costs for Belarus may be substantial.

First of all, the Belarusian authorities have lost confidence. For many years, Minsk looked at Moscow as a cash cow – a sometimes tough partner, but not an aggressive one. Now Lukashenka does not know what to expect from Putin.

The Kremlin’s possible military intervention in Belarus has become one of the scenarios that the authorities and the opposition are becoming increasingly aware of. On 22 April, Lukashenka even demanded that law-enforcement agencies “immediately eradicate any speculation about the violations of Russians’ rights in Belarus”.

Any growth in Russian imperialist fervour will only further subordinate Belarus to their eastern neighbour. Many hoped that Putin would abolish duties on Belarusian oil to maintain the loyalty of Minsk. However, it seems that the Kremlin has chosen the path of sanctioning Lukashenka’s regime rather than make concessions to him.

On 22 April, Alexander Lukashenko said he would not sign a landmark agreement on the Eurasian Economic Union if Russia leaves keeps its restrictions on the oil and gas market. However, only a week later, Lukashenka, Putin and Nazarbayev agreed to sign the treaty, although Russia will liberalise these markets only in 2025.

The Belarusian economy in the long-term will lose much as a result of the conflict.

The Belarusian economy in long-term will lose much as a result
of the conflict. The **International environment** was unfavourable for Belarus even before the conflict. Now the deteriorating economies of its largest trading partners will push Belarus into a recession. Foreign exchange reserves **decrease monthly**, and the authorities need to take steps such as privatisation or devaluation to simply stay afloat.

**Where is Belarus’ Place in the New Cold War?**

The Belarusian authorities, although they garnered some benefits from the conflict, crave the stabilisation of Ukraine. Moreover, they have become very weary of a new Cold War. If a new Cold War is launched, Lukashenka's regime will no longer be able to continue his long observed balancing act policy between the East and the West. Putin's refusal to abolish duties on key goods that boast the Belarusian economy shows that the Kremlin's strategy towards Belarus may yet become even more severe.

Russia in such circumstances seems like a natural choice, as Belarus **militarily, energetically, economically** and **even culturally** deeply dependent on it. If Belarus chooses the West, Russia may send more troops into Belarus.

Therefore Lukashenka’s regime should take real action, release political prisoners and start economic reforms. On 22 April, Lukashenka said that Belarusian nation should stay united and said that if "we lose our language, we will disappear".

This was quite a step for a pro-Soviet ruler who claimed in 1994 that the "Belarusian language is an impoverished one". National identity remains one of the most important elements of the nation's overall system of self-defence. It alone can act against the massive currents of Russian propaganda to which Belarusians are exposed to through popular Russian TV channels daily. It is precisely for this reason that Lukashenka should implement his words into practise.

Belarus' relations with the European Union must be based on
mutual trust between both parties, not just a goal of irritating Russia. Modernisation projects can be a good start. The West must be aware of the limitations of Belarus, but also be prepared to confront Russia in case of regime change or increased pressure.

Unfortunately, independent and democratic Belarusian government as a result of a regime change hardly looks realistic after what Russian is doing in Ukraine. The European Union and the United States should strengthen their positions inside Belarus and help stabilise the Belarusian economy in case of a severe crisis.

However, the Ukrainian crisis should serve as a wake up call for everyone in Belarus. Belarus as a country has a difficult task ahead of it in trying to learn some lessons from Ukraine and react to growing threats to its future.

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**State Analysts Discuss Crimea, Corruption, Freedom Day Coverage – Belarus State TV Digest**

Recently state TV widely covered Alexander Lukashenka’s official statements regarding events in Ukraine.

Journalists also reminded the harm to the state and society which corruption could pose. However, in their opinion Belarus, unlike Ukraine, is successfully combating the problem.
The Belarusian opposition commemorated Freedom Day, organising a rally through Minsk. On this occasion, it expressed its support for Ukrainians. State TV journalists depreciated the rally and compared with nationalistic movement.

Internal Affairs

The Belarusian opposition praises the Ukrainian nationalists? On 25 March, the Belarusian opposition commemorated Freedom Day, unrecognised by the state authorities. Journalist reported that it organised a rally through the centre of Minsk with slogans praising the Ukrainian nationalists.

‘Usually they celebrate the so called ‘Freedom Day with symbols that remain distant to the Belarusian history’, journalist critically noted. In his opinion, the annual rally also this time gather just a few people, and it did not present neither ideas nor historical facts.

In his coverage, reporter was persistently comparing the Belarusian opposition and the participants of the rally with nationalists. reminding the viewers that nationalists helped Hitler in Nazi operations in Belarus and Ukraine.

How to make small business driving the Belarus economy? The authorities want to increase the role of small companies in energising the state economy. In the opinion of (unnamed) experts small business’ contribution in GDP will increase twice, even up to 50%, until 2020. To achieve that, the authorities want to significantly reduce the cost of loans, and offer loans in the Belarusian rubbles, not only in the foreign currencies.

Corruption remains a serious threat to the state and society. However, the state successfully deals with it, unlike in the neighbouring Ukraine where it led to overthrow of the authorities. According to journalist, Belarus has a good legislation that prevents the corruption. ‘Other countries use
our experience’, he proudly emphasised. Journalist presented the most critical statements of the Belarusian leader addressing the problem of corruption.

Lukashenka met with representatives of media. He widely discussed Ukraine and Crimea. The head of state sadly commented the developments in the neighbouring country, a ‘third part of our Slavic world’.

‘That was not a legal a constitutional process (...). This is not a normal thing when the legal authorities are overthrown and they establish the new authorities’, Lukashenka stated.

Although he took a note that the new Ukrainian government consisted of both professionals and shouters, he is ready to work with any authorities.

Commenting on Crimea, he noted that it has already become a part of Russia. ‘You can recognise it or not, but nothing will change because of that’, he strongly argued. The head of state laughed at the imposition of sanctions on Russia’s officials, who anyway did not travel that often to Europe.

Ukraine

Lukashenka’s interview to the Ukrainian talk show ‘Shuster’ is widely commented. The head of state gave the interview to the ‘most popular, democratic and liberal’ talk show on Ukrainian TV.

Political scientists and economists commenting upon Lukashenka’s interview, praised him for his adequate reaction to the development in Ukraine. Referring to Crimea, reporter pointed out that it has de facto become a part of Russia, and thus any negations of that appeared senseless.

Belarusian journalist reported that the audience gathered in the studio applauded and wholeheartedly supported Lukashenka. But also the Internet users in Russia and Ukraine also praised
the Belarusian leader for his position in regard to the conflict between Kiev-Moscow. This unanimity brings hope that a dialogue between the neighbours will once again be constructive, journalist concluded.

**The Ukrainian Maidan was scrupulously prepared.** Journalist informs that the ‘main driving force of Euromaidan, the Ukrainian radical organisation "the Right Sector" has become a political party'. It embraces now a number of nationalistic organisations. Reporter also pointed out that the events on Maidan were not such spontaneous, as presented, but scrupulously prepared in advance. TV showed videos, found on the Internet, presenting people complaining that were not paid for their participation in Maidan.

**ONT talk show Pazicija (Position)** covered the recent developments in Ukraine. The first show called ‘The choice of Crimea’ focused on referendum.

**How legitimate is referendum.** The host of the talk show, Vadzim Hihin, invited the regime-friendly politicians, but also the opposition-minded analysts, including Aliaksandr Klauskouski, Andrej Jelisejeu, and journalist, Viktar Marcinovich, to comment on the Crimean referendum. The pro-regime guests did not express any concerns regarding its fairness and legitimacy.

Some argued that Crimea, as a part of Russia, would be able to improve the economy. Klaskouski noted that the official statistics on the referendum looked suspicious. In his opinion, it was impossible to organise a real political agitation within such a very short period of time, and clearly the violations took place.

**The new Ukrainian authorities.** Participants of the talk show argued also that the new Ukrainian authorities hold neo-Nazi views. Vadzim Hihin and the vast majority of his guests shared this opinion. He did not comment the opposing views.
Sanctions on Russia. ‘Some countries which criticised Russia that had acted in a similar way before’, one of the discussants argued. All economic sanctions will be harmful for Europe, Russia, but not for the US. Thus, Europe is not interested in imposing sanctions and nothing like that would happen – as one of the guest speakers emphasised.

On the other occasion, in ‘Lessons from the Ukrainian conflict’, participants of Pazicija talk show discussed how Belarus should get involve and help Ukraine.

The Orthodox Church and events in Ukraine. Participants commented upon the recent statement of Lukashenka on the situation in Ukraine. There was unanimity among participants and hosting the programme, Vadzim Hihin – all praised the Belarusian leader for his position on the conflict. An Orthodox priest, father Fiodar Pouny, also noted that Lukashenka felt the situation in Ukraine deeply. He presented the Orthodox Church’s statement, prepared by Synod in Istanbule, calling all who care about Ukraine to cease violence and further disorder.

Is Maidan likely to take place in Belarus? In the opinion of all discussants the Maidan scenario is hardly possible to happen in the country. Primarily it is because countries chose different paths in the early 1990s. According to one overwhelming opinion of the participants, the parliaments in both countries work differently, and in Belarus it works more efficiently than in Ukraine.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State Television 1 (BT1). 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.