

Trump support in Belarus, MFA staff cuts, legal education reform – Ostrogorski Centre digest

During December and January, the Ostrogorski Centre analysed the ongoing dispute between Belarus and Lithuania over the Astraviec nuclear power plant (NPP), Belarusian army reforms, and the national immigration policy.

Our analysts also commented in the media on growing support for Donald Trump among Belarusians, a 30% staff cut in the central apparatus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, personnel renewal trends in the government establishment, and the implications for Belarus of a new escalation in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Centre also held a conference on legal education in cooperation with the Belarusian State University's law faculty, supported by the Embassy of the United Kingdom in Minsk.

Analytics

[Ryhor Astapenia](#) analyses whether the [West will join Lithuania's crusade](#) against Belarus's nuclear power plant project. On the one hand, many Western politicians see Lithuania's campaign against the Belarusian NPP as politicised and even panicked. On the other hand, perhaps thanks to Lithuania's position, any cooperation (except on security issues) between Belarus and the West in the atomic sphere has become less feasible. Therefore, while Lithuania loses the conflict diplomatically, Belarus does not win either.

[Siarhei Bohdan](#) describes how Minsk [silently builds a new army](#). The Belarusian government has adapted its policies in response to the Kremlin's staunch refusal to provide Belarus with heavy weapons. Official Minsk continues to build an army better suited to its limited needs and financial constraints, while quietly discarding its Soviet-era, heavier arms without replacement. The simplification of existing army structures automatically follows, which will also reduce offensive capacities.

[Alesia Rudik](#) discusses [Belarus's immigration policy](#) and how it perpetuates the country's demographic crisis. In the context of low birth and high death rates, the Belarusian population can only grow through increased immigration. However, Belarus still has no clear policy to encourage labour migration. Moreover, bureaucratic procedures, such as work permits, remain difficult to obtain for the majority of foreigners apart from citizens of CIS member countries, especially Russians, who have special conditions for working in Belarus.

Reform of legal education in Belarus and the UK: the exchange of experience and vision for the future

On 28 December 2017, the Ostrogorski Centre, in cooperation with the Faculty of Law of the Belarusian State University and supported by the Embassy of the United Kingdom in Minsk, conducted a conference under the title "The reform of legal education in Belarus and the UK: the exchange of experience and vision for the future."

✘ The 16 speakers included representatives of the British Embassy, the Ministry of Education of Belarus, the Belarusian

State University, Hrodno State University and Brest State University. They comprised legal academics and administrators as well as practitioners from Belarus. In addition, three speakers came from UK-based institutions, namely the British Institute of International and Comparative Law, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the University of Liverpool.

Conference guests included representatives of various government bodies, academics from public and private universities, as well as representatives from Belarusian NGOs (around 40 people in total). The conference proved an opportunity not only to share the experiences of Belarusian and UK-based academics, but also to help shape the debate on legal education reform in Belarus.

The Ostrogorski Centre broadcast the conference live on YouTube and Facebook, and has made videos of each panel available on its [YouTube channel](#) (links below). The conference languages were Belarusian and Russian.

Comments in the media

The Atlantic magazine quotes Yaraslau Kryvoi in its recent article about decreasing global support for Donald Trump. Belarus, however, shows the opposite trend: [growing Belarusian approval](#) for Trump likely has more to do with the American president's leadership style than any U.S. policies. According to Yaraslau, the Belarusian leadership sees Trump as a macho leader similar to the one Belarus has itself. Like Trump, Alexander Lukashenka promotes himself as someone fighting on behalf of the people against the elite.



Igar Gubarevich on Belsat TV

Commenting to Belsat TV, Igar Gubarevich opines that the 30% staffing cut in the central apparatus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [has become a big stress](#) for Belarusian diplomats. The Ministry's comprehensive tasks require not only good quality experts, but also a sufficient quantity, otherwise the cuts will damage the interest of Belarus as a country.

Siarhei Bohdan, interviewed on Polish Radio, argues that the [government establishment renews itself](#) more efficiently than the opposition. It now includes completely different people than it did two decades ago. They value independent Belarus more than the Soviet Union, and MP Ihar Marzaliuk presents a good example. 'I am convinced that Ihar Marzaliuk is not a lone wolf, but rather the tip of the iceberg, an example of generational change in the Belarusian power elite,' says Siarhei.

On Radio Liberty, Siarhei Bohdan discusses the [consequences of a new escalation](#) in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the role of Iran, and the implications for Belarus. In the Iranian-Saudi confrontation, Belarus has sided with the conservative Arab coalition that it thinks has a higher chance of winning, and which is clearly the wealthier side.

Belarus Policy

The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update its database of policy papers on BelarusPolicy.com. The following papers from partner institutions have been added this month:

- Uladzimir Kavalkin. [Handbook on researching violations and corruption in public procurement in Belarus](#). BIPART, 2017.
- Darya Urban. [Influence of the legal and judicial system on doing business in Belarus](#). IPM Research Centre, 2017.
- Maryia Akulava, Hanna Ahinskaya. [Barriers and drivers of](#)

[women's entrepreneurship in Belarus](#). BEROC, 2017.

- Valiery Zhurakouski, Katarzyna Mirecka, Izabela Styczyńska. [Review of the situation of children and young people with disabilities in Belarus](#). CASE Belarus, 2017.
- Aleh Mazol. [Determinants of poverty with and without economic growth. Explaining Belarus's poverty dynamics during 2009-2016](#). BEROC, 2017.

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

Will Lukashenka Survive his Worst Term in Office?

On 11 October 2015 it was officially revealed that Alexander Lukashenka had won his fifth presidential election. Five months post-election it appears obvious that it is set to be his most difficult term in office yet.

Despite a very vague election manifesto, the Belarusian state leader has already managed to break some of his promises. For instance, the platform promised that the government would not introduce any new taxes over the next five years, but the authorities have reneged on this and already passed several laws introducing new taxes.

What makes this situation even worse is that Lukashenka seems

to lack any real plan on how to resolve the crisis, a strategic weakness which may lead to the greatest fall yet in his electoral support.

Lukashenka's election manifesto: promises already broken in several areas

Unlike the manifesto for the 2010 election, Lukashenka's team wrote a rather vague programme for the 2015 election. It lacked the outlining of specific goals and focuses on unclear notions of peace and independence. It can be predicted that many promises will be violated, although it is too early to be certain which. Nonetheless, in the five months since the elections, at least some of the promises have already clearly been broken.

For instance, the program clearly imposes a ban on the introduction of new taxes and an increase in existing taxation rates over the next five years. But, to name but a few, the government has already introduced a tax [on bank deposits](#), a tax [on parcels from abroad](#) and also increased taxes for motorists.

Such steps have been taken not only by the central government, but also by local authorities. For instance, in February the Executive Committee of Salihorsk introduced a tax on dog owners. Depending on the size of the dog, owners will now be forced to pay between \$5 and \$15 per month.

The programme also mentions a commitment to the "uncompromising fight against corruption". However, the Belarusian authorities have, in reality, reneged on this fight and are instead working in opposition to this promise. Lukashenka [has pardoned](#) at least six officials who were

sentenced for corruption and instead appointed them as managers of unprofitable state-owned enterprises.

Further renouncing of promises is sure to follow if the current actions of the government are anything to go by. For example, the programme says that Belarus will reduce its public debt, but in the near future the state is set to receive a new loan from Russia and plans to continue negotiations for another loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in April.

What will the situation in Belarus look like by 2020?

In 2015, the economic recession in Belarus intensified, according to the Belarusian Statistics Committee by as much as 3.9 per cent. The IMF predicts that the decline in 2016 will amount to another 2.2 per cent. In addition, World Bank economists have also forecasted that "the Belarusian economy is likely to stagnate" in the next two years.

[Aleś Alachnovič](#), Vice President of think-tank CASE Belarus, told Belarus Digest that a conservative prediction is that the authorities will implement some limited reforms and by 2020, Belarusian GDP will increase slightly (by approximately 5 per cent) compared to 2015.

Because of this limited growth, the state will then be unable to support all state enterprises and fulfil its social-welfare promises due to forced cuts. For 2016, however, the government has already decreased the budget for housing and communal services by 20 per cent and at least discussed the implementation of other measures, such as increasing the retirement age or reducing maternity leave.



Unlike Lukashenka, many top officials support the implementation of more complementary reforms. In the words of political commentator [Yury Drakakhrust](#), "the throne legs want changes".

A few high-level Belarusian officials, such as Deputy Prime Minister [Vasil Maciusheuski](#) or Lukashenka's economic advisor [Kiryl Rudy](#), have more connections to the West as they have previously [studied or had work experience](#) in Western states. Many of these officials have a liberal stance on economic issues, remain more open to the advancement of civil society and are sympathetic to assertions of national identity.

Prior to the 2010s, Lukashenka's bureaucracy imitated his way of thinking and supported him unquestioningly – in 2004 one official even reportedly told the Belarusian state leader that "he is a little higher than God".

Now, however, many officials see the world in a very different light to Lukashenka. For instance, while Lukashenka keeps asserting that Belarusian economic problems are a direct consequence of the global economic crisis, on 20 February his advisor Rudy admitted to state media that "there is no crisis in the world economy."

And the more worrying state policy gets, the greater the tensions between the Belarusian state leader and the establishment will be.

The lack of a survival plan

It was easy for Lukashenka to introduce his authoritarian regime policies while there was a growing economy, a like-minded establishment and support from many Belarusians. But now he lacks ideas on how to fix the current situation – more and more people think that Belarus is moving in the wrong direction. Every discussion on the economy that the Belarusian

state leader has held has been devoted to [condemning](#) the government's actions without proposing anything new to save the struggling economy.



If the current trends continue, Lukashenka's policy will cost him by prompting what is predicted to be the lowest presidential approval rating ever in 2020. In 2011, when the Belarusian financial crisis occurred, distrust in Lukashenka passed the 60 per cent mark, according to results from the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), a well-regarded Belarusian opinion polling organisation. The situation looks set to worsen if the economy does not recover.

Lukashenka will certainly still be able to rig elections, but the problem is that now he will be forced to commit electoral fraud more brazenly. Once Lukashenka loses his popularity, the opposition and the state's actions in response will become more unpredictable. Moreover, foreign countries, especially Russia, may be tempted to use Lukashenka's unpopularity as leverage.

In October 2015, the Central Election Commission announced that Lukashenka had won the presidential election with 83.5 per cent but, according to IISEPS, the actual percentage was only 50.8 per cent. If his true rating is only about 30 per cent, insisting that he won the election with over 80 per cent could be quite dangerous.

Thus far, Lukashenka's position seems strong, but the next five years appear set to be a real challenge. The Belarusian strongman may survive, but the many challenges facing him and the country this term seem guaranteed to cause more trouble than ever before.

Alyaksandr Myazhuyeu – Fresh Faces Come to the Government?

On 5th December, Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka appointed Alyaksandr Myazhuyeu the State Secretary of the Security Council.

Prior to that Myazhuyeu served as Chairman of the parliamentary Permanent Commission on National Security. This position in the Security Council previously always belonged to somebody from Lukashenka's old guard like Sheiman or battle-proven officials like Maltsau. The new secretary, however, definitely does not fit into either of these categories.

As the Belarusian leadership taps into new cadre reserves, it increasingly relies on people with pragmatic views and ideological flexibility like Myazhuyeu and Makey. It proves once more that the [Belarusian regime](#) long ago has become anything but radical.

Lukashenka's new general is associated with a recovery after a hurricane and receptions for foreign delegations. In stark contrast to such close associates of Belarusian leader as veteran Viktor Sheiman, Myazhuyeu made it to the top of power by hard, yet peaceful work.

Romantic Start and Philistine Continuation

[Alyaksandr Myazhuyeu](#) was born in 1959 in Lyakhavichy of Brest province. He got out of this backwater South Belarusian town and went on to become a Soviet officer. His path to the top

began when Myazhuyeu entered one of the oldest Soviet military schools – the Kyiv High Joint Commander School. This educational institution has trained tactical intelligence specialists since the late 1960s.

After such a romantic start, Myazhuyeu managed to have astonishingly calm career. Although he joined the army in early 1980s, he did not participate in the Afghanistan war. Doubtless, this military campaign was a crucial life experience for tens of thousands of Belarusians who took part in it and gave rise to veterans' solidarity beyond the battlefield, but also in business and politics. This point is important as it demonstrates the fact that Myazhuyeu failed to share this experience with his military brethren, which characterises him as a more pragmatic rather than an ideology-driven person.

According to his official biography, he simply rose through the ranks starting as a platoon commander in the Soviet army and finishing as head of Western operative command in Belarusian army. During the first years of the country's independence, Myazhuyeu graduated from the Russian General Staff's Academy – an ordinary experience for high-ranking Belarusian military officers.

In independent Belarus, a state servant has many [more opportunities](#) to ascend to the top of state power serving in the presidential security service or at least state security organs. Still more remarkable is the fact that Major General Myazhuyeu managed to do it through a career in the military.

The decisive role apparently which would elevate him further was his appointment in 2010 as the director of the Chief Military Inspectorate of the Armed Forces. In 2012, Myazhuyeu was elected to the Belarusian parliament from several rural districts near Hrodna – a sinecure granted in Belarus as a temporary reward or honorary retirement. In parliament he predictably specialised on national security

matters.

Last autumn, Myazhuyeu became chairman of the Belarusian Officers' Union which unites more than 24 thousand active and retired officers. That is one of very few public associations which have any role in the Belarusian political system. The Union members collect signatures in support of Lukashenka's policies, working as members of territorial election commissions.

He Makes No War

Major General Myazhuyeu is decorated with two dozen medals. He comments on them as a "result of hard work." He especially likes to tell journalists about the medal for a recovery operation after the 1997 hurricane in Brest region, and an [Orthodox Sergii Radonezhskii order](#) medal for helping to restore a church.

The new Security Council secretary avoids fierce militant rhetoric. He openly expressed scepticism concerning the military threats to the country in his interview with the state-owned Narodnaya Hazeta. "Of course, there is now no military menace as such, though NATO's activity in neighbouring states causes some concern."

Myazhuyeu sees danger elsewhere. "Without the destabilisation of political and social situation within the country, to launch an armed conflict in it is all but impossible." According to him, among the main tasks of the Belarusian parliament members is to, "resolve together with local authorities the social problems in the constituencies which elected them," especially housing and amenities issues, housing construction and employment generation.

On the other hand, Myazhuyeu criticised the idea to reduce military service from 18 to 12 months as in Russia. For him, the army shall apparently function more as a social cohesion

institution, a “must-do” life experience for every citizen rather than the iron fist of the government. Meanwhile, he became famous for praising women, “I would say so – a woman is the best soldier. She does not violate military discipline, carefully executes her service duties, you do not need to repeat anything to her twice.”

No Zealots For Lukashenka Anymore

A prominent oppositional politician Major General Valery Fralou very positively characterises his former subordinate, the new Security Council secretary in professional terms. But when recounting Myazhuyeu's merits, Fralou chose to tell Nasha Niva weekly about Myazhuyeu's warm reception of a American delegation, not about any heroic battle deeds of his.

Naviny.by, a web-site of the Belapan news agency, commented on the new appointment by pointing out that Lukashenka apparently still has [fresh cadres](#) to renew the state bureaucracy. It also called it remarkable that the sixth secretary of Security Council did not only not come from among Lukashenka's close associates, but not even from among the friends of his associates.

Indeed, all predecessors of Myazhuyeu's either belonged to the initial “old fighters” retinue of Lukashenka from 1994 ([Viktar Sheiman](#) and Ural Latypau), or served in the presidential security service (Henadz' Nyavyhlas and [Yury Zhadobin](#)) or served previously at very senior positions (like Defence Minister [Leanid Maltsau](#)).

Myazhuyeu is a new face, but definitely no outsider to the [ruling elites](#). Firstly, he belongs to the generation of provincial mavericks which came to power with and through Lukashenka. Secondly, he worked hand-in-hand with the former head of the Hrodna province [Syamyon Shapira](#), and they became friends. They came to Minsk together, as well. Myazhuyeu got elected to Parliament, Shapira – appointed to run the Minsk

province.

Lukashenka's newest appointee demonstrates the evolution of the Belarusian regime. In its beginnings, it was populated with people like Afghan war veteran Sheiman or youth radical [Usievalad Yancheuski](#) who did not hide his inspiration from French extremist urban guerrilla group Action Directe. Other Lukashenka zealots, like Viktor Kuchynski, swore to defend their leader "even with an RPG in [his] hands" and tinkered with the Pan-Slavic and Soviet restoration plans.

The president's new man, Myazhuyeu, is talking about housing and boasts of achievements like retaining a provincial military hospital or opening a military branch in a university in Hrodna. The radicalism and missionary visions of Belarusian regime passed away silently years ago. Belarusian officials display little [ideological affiliations](#) but the aspiration to continue business as usual or as they once learned.