

Getting the Travel Ban Right

Lukashenka invites the West to participate in a "tug of war" with Russia. He wants to persuade the West that Belarus is significantly strengthening cooperation with Russia, and thus push the West towards cooperating on his terms: extension of loans, development of trade and economic cooperation without significant steps towards political liberalization. Russia's generous loans, heavily discounted gas prices and imprisonment of Bialiatski are two recent steps in this game.

Despite some emotional reactions in Belarus, the new Eurasian economic integration does not mean significant changes in relations between Belarus and Russia. Lukashenka expects increased subsidies from Russia, including lower energy prices, and also improved conditions for Belarusian exports.

At the same time, he refuses to meet a number of commitments towards Russia, undertaken by Belarus as Russia's partner in the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space. He refuses to sell enterprises to Russian companies and thus to make the first important step towards the genuine integration, as it is seen by Moscow. He refuses to open the Belarusian market to exports of integration partners from the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space.

This blackmail against the West is successful to some extent. The West is afraid ofing push Lukashenka into the arms of Russia. However, the threats by the West to expand the list of banned Belarusian officials play into Lukashenka's hands. It is in his interests that his fortress has a larger garrison, which would defend itself to the last round.

On 14 November 2011, the EUobserver on-line periodical (Brussels) reported with a reference to information sources in EU diplomatic circles that the EU could include the Prime Minister of Belarus Mikhail Miasnikovich, the First Vice-

Premier of Belarus Uladzimir Siamashka, and the Head of State Border Committee of Belarus Ihar Rachkouski on the existing visa ban list.

Businessmen

Moreover, it was noted by EUobserver that Lukashenka's close business allies might find themselves on the list as well. The group of candidates consists of Triple Co. owner Yury Chyzh, head of Minsk-based machine-building plant Amkador and a member of the Council of the Republic Alyaksandr Shakutsin, Tabak-Invest cigarette plant and retail chain Karona owner Pavel Tapuzidzis, and Director General of Brest-located fish-packing plant Santa Impex Alyaksandr Mashenski.

Out of the all the heads of enterprises and businessmen mentioned in the EUobserver list, only Yury Chyzh clearly represents the interests of Lukashenka's family. He is Viktor Lukashenka's de facto business manager.

In addition, the success of Pavel Tapuzidzis' business has become possible due to the auspices of Lukashenka and his family. However, it is not quite correct to regard him as 'Lukashenka's ally'.

The application of sanctions against Chairman of Amkodor Board of Directors Alyaksandr Shakutsin

and milk and seafood seller Alyaksandr Mashenski is not sufficiently justified. They have created their successful businesses practically from nothing and mainly due to their own efforts.

Officials

The on-line newspaper doublestressed that a "tough reaction was almost inevitable" if human rights defender Ales Byalyatski was imprisoned as a result of a tax evasion trial.

The author underscored in the previous reports that inclusion

of state officials on the visa ban list could not be regarded as a tough reaction anyway.

Taking into account that the visa ban list is among the main EU signals to Lukashenka regime, it seems to be relevant to put Lukashenka and a wide range of his supporters, involved in repressions and election frauds, on the list.

However, the broadening of visa ban list has reached a point where the measure could become counterproductive. It is necessary to take pains in order to determine carefully the people that can be included into the list.

It is absolutely irrelevant to include the First Vice-Premier Viktor Siamashka on the list. For his part, he has made a lot of efforts to develop cooperation with the West. In particular, Siamashka noted in 2009 that Belarus should initiate negotiations with the EU on creating a free market zone. At the same time, he is a consistent adversary of selling Belarusian enterprises to Russian companies as well as other steps towards real integration with the Eastern neighbour (as Russia sees it), including amalgamation of monetary systems etc.

Furthermore, this decision will do more bad than good if the Head of State Border Committee Ihar Rachkouski is included. It's worth mentioning that Rachkouski obtained quick promotion with Viktor Lukashenka's assistance, when around 40 senior officers from the State Border Committee with Vadzim Zaytsau at the head were appointed to high offices in KGB in July 2008. However, this fact does not create sufficient grounds for applying sanctions against Rachkouski. There is no information available about a connection between the State Border Committee leadership and repressions in Belarus.

In 2009, Rachkouski stated on his own initiative that Belarus would take retaliatory measures in response to the tightening of border control by Russia. It is also remarkable that

Rachkouski often delivers his speeches in Belarusian. A developed national conscience is a rare occurrence among those who are [wearing](#) uniform in Belarus.

Andrei Liakhovich

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Who Rules Belarus?

Last summer over half of Belarusians polled by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies said that Alyaksandr Lukashenka based his authority primarily on the police, the military and the KGB. A closer look at who actually runs the security services and other governmental agencies in Belarus reveals interesting facts and trends.

It appears that those who were born outside of Belarus and educated in Russia heavily dominate the leadership of the police, the military and the KGB, while most 'technocrats' were born and educated within Belarus. Another notable fact is that most Belarusian officials are old and age is an important indicator in predicting their views. Younger ministers tend to be more liberal and less hawkish than their older colleagues.

Mercenaries in Charge of Security Services?

Nearly all top officials of the Belarusian security services

were born outside of Belarus and came to the country following their studies in Moscow. In this respect Belarus is a unique country.

Yury Zhadobin, the current Minister of Defense and a former KGB chief, was born in Ukraine. In 2004, he obtained his most recent degree at the Academy of the General Staff of the Russian Federation. According to his official biography he has never studied in Belarus. The current KGB chief Vadim Zaitsev was also born in Ukraine. He has three degrees from various Russian military institutions and none from Belarus.

Anatol Kulyashou, the Minister of Interior who is also in charge of the police, was born in Azerbaijan. Although he has lived most of his life in Belarus, his most recent degree is also from a Moscow-based institution – the Russian Academy of the Interior. The head of the Presidential Security Service Andrei Vtiurin was born and educated in Russia and has never studied elsewhere.

Belarus is an ethnically homogenous country where Belarusians constitute over 85% of the population. An even larger majority of the current population was born in Belarus. This majority is clearly underrepresented among the leadership of the security services.

Many in the opposition call those who lead the security services in Belarus Lukashenka's mercenaries. It is not surprising – all officials mentioned above are on the EU travel ban list because of their active involvement in human rights violations and political repression.

According to a popular theory, the Russian/Belarusian security services manipulated Lukashenka and provoked the post-election [crackdown](#) on 19 December 2010. Many think that Moscow was the main beneficiary of last year's crackdown and subsequent imprisonment of hundreds, including nearly all opposition presidential candidates. As a result of the

crackdown Belarus has become more internationally isolated and dependent upon Russia.

But the influence of the Moscow loyalists may soon diminish. Although Lukashenka granted additional powers to the KGB recently, he also established a new security agency – the Investigations Committee of the Republic of Belarus, which is supposed to keep an eye on all other security services. Belarusian-born and educated Valery Vakulchyk was appointed as its head last month.

Lukashenka's son Viktor was sitting next to Vakulchyk as his father announced the appointment. The influence of Viktor, who acts as Lukashenka's senior security advisor, is growing, often at the expense of other players.

'Technocrats'

Belarusian ministries not in charge of security are a mixed bag. Ministers of emergency situations, architecture, labour and information were born in Russia. Sergei Martynov – the Foreign Affairs Minister – was born in Armenia and completed his university education in Russia.

It is interesting to note that the ministries of information and foreign affairs – the most ideologically charged agencies – are under control of those who were born outside Belarus.

But the Prime Minister Mikhail Miasnikovich and sixteen other ministers were born and educated in Belarus. These include the "technocrat" ministers of economy, finance, tax and industry.

In stark contrast with the Belarusian security services and those in charge of ideology, all seven regional governors were born and educated only in Belarus. The governor of Mahiliou region also has a degree from Dresden Technical University. All regional governors except one are in their 50s and 60s.

The other notable Belarus-born and Western-educated official is the head of the Presidential Administration Uladzimir Makey. He studied at the Diplomatic Academy of the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the early 1990s.

Belarusian-Style Gerontocracy

According to independent public opinion polls, older people are the main support base of Lukashenka. Not surprisingly, they are overrepresented in the country's leadership.

According to the Belarusian independent weekly Nasha Niva which surveyed the top 60 Belarusian officials, their average age is 54.4 years. Belarus can lay claim to having the oldest leadership of any country in the region. According to Nasha Niva, the average age in Russia is 45 years and in Estonia many ministers are younger than 40.

Belarus has only one minister under 40 – the Minister of Culture Pavel Latushka. He is also the only minister who uses primarily Belarusian in his official speeches. Other younger officials are concentrated in the Government – Deputy Prime Minister Siarhei Rumas and Minister of Economy Mikalai Snapkouski were born in Belarus and are in their early 40s. They all have a reputation as [liberals](#).

At the other end of the spectrum is the head of the upper chamber of the Belarusian Parliament Anatol Rubinov. The 72 year old is known to have almost Stalinist political views.

The Bigger Picture

When earlier this month British historian Norman Davies presented his new book "Vanished Kingdoms," he used Belarus as an example of a nation without a mature elite. According to him, a fragile Belarusian state emerged after World War I, but Stalin [purged](#) nearly all its national elite in late 1930s. In his opinion this is the main reason why today Belarusians cannot govern themselves other than by a "teapot dictator"

such as Lukashenka. Norman Davies added that it usually takes time to form a demos and a self-sufficient political entity.

Today the new Belarusian-born elite is almost absent in the leadership of the security services. In terms of its age, the governing elite looks more like a Soviet Politburo. But this may change soon. Despite obstacles which the Belarusian government and Western visa barriers [create](#), many Belarusians can travel abroad and get uncensored information on the Internet. And the current level of political repression is incomparable with Stalin's purges.

It means that in the future the Belarusian authorities may not have enough properly Sovietized people to run the country. The younger Belarus-born bureaucrats tend to be more liberal and market-oriented. Some even openly speak Belarusian. They are gradually replacing the older generation who still have sentimental feelings about the Soviet past.

Those who want to see Belarus respect the rule of law and human rights need to think about how to influence and engage the new and future generations of the Belarusian elite. Sometimes Western governments and donors focus solely on how to punish or change the current political regime and forget about the bigger picture. Putting pressure on the regime is important but so is implementing concrete [measures](#) to integrate Belarusians into the rest of Europe.

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Cracks Inside the Belarus Regime?

This November Belarusians observed highly unusual political developments. On 8 November Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich denounced the Presidential Administration and the President's aide on economic affairs Siarhey Tkachou personally for systemic mistakes in economic policy.

Myasnikovich argued that the Presidential Administration and Tkachou had personally been the key contributors to all the previous programs of socio-economic development. He also clearly hinted that those programs had paved the way for the present-day economic turmoil.

On 10 November a reaction to those accusations came from Aliaksandr Lukashenka. He publicly reprimanded Myasnikovich and blamed the Government for the plummeting living standards in the country. 'If the government wants to introduce the market everywhere and give everything away to private hands, then we don't need such a policy', emphasized Lukashenka.

For the first time in many years it has become obvious even for ordinary citizens that there are cracks inside the governing elites.

Why did it go public?

Inconsistencies in the economic policy of different government institutions such as the Presidential Administration, Council of Ministers and National Bank have been visible to keen observers since the spring of this year. Several conflicting statements and uncoordinated decisions, such as the one on the exchange rate, signaled misunderstandings or even tensions. But only now has it become so visible.

It looks like two factors can explain what happened. First, in the midst of the rampant crisis and overall uncertainty about the future, the 'bubble of intra-institutional contradictions' started leaking at some point. Under the present circumstances the major corporate interests of each institution is to look less guilty for the socio-economic failures. Therefore, the more severe the crisis becomes the more decisively the conflicting institutions act to defend their corporate interest.

Secondly, only one and a half months are left until the New Year. It means that the core documents that will determine the life of the country in 2012 (like the budget and the outlook for socio-economic development) need to be adopted as soon as possible. And since the Presidential Administration and the Government have different views on what should be in those documents, the pressure of time only worsens those contradictions.

Who is who among the Belarusian elites?

Naturally, there is very poor information about the state of political elites in a non-transparent political system, such as that of Belarus. The events of 8 and 10 November shed some light only on the state of the 'economic block' of the governing elites, while, the 'siloviki block,' for example maintains its cover of secrecy.

When speaking of the 'economic block' we can identify two major competing groups. The first one is represented by those who want to prevent any significant changes to the 'Belarusian model'. The top ideologues of this '**status quo group**' are Anatoli Rubinau, speaker of the upper chamber of the Parliament, and Siarhey Tkachou, the president's economic aide. These two persons are said to be convinced Marxists who have very nostalgic feelings about the Soviet command economy.

Their position was articulated by Rubinau: 'Our economy works

well. Nothing has happened to it. And the GDP is growing'. It is important to note that this group is also supported by numerous members of the elite who pursue rent-seeking in the situation of their privileged access to insider information, decision-making and distribution of resources. As recent events have shown, the group is mainly concentrated in the Presidential Administration.

The other competing group is often referred to as the '**reformists**'. Their leaders are deputy Prime Minister Siarhey Rumas and Economy Minister Mikalai Snapkou. They [stress](#) the need for macroeconomic stabilization because, in the words of Rumas, 'the level of inflation in Belarus is a shame for the government'. It looks like reform-minded officials are scattered throughout various institutions. Nearly all of them work for the Government.

Where is Lukashenka in this confrontation?

It is too early to talk about a real confrontation within the regime. In the public eye at least, Lukashenka is still capable of keeping all intra-elite conflicts under control. But his main problem is that he no longer remains the outside mediator.

In the past, different groups in his entourage simply sought additional rents at the expense of one another. And Lukashenka just had to make sure that none of the groups became too powerful. His own position was comfortably safe. But now that the whole system is so shaky, Lukashenka has become a hostage of the mutually excluding interests of the conflicting elites.

On the one hand, those who want to keep the economic status quo offer him a road of minimal socio-political risk tomorrow, but without external credit (as all potential creditors demand reforms) and with the prospect of an instant total collapse one day. On the other hand, the 'reformers' want him to agree to some form of 'shock therapy' that will probably save the

economy but would be accompanied by a myriad of socio-political risks that could come as soon as tomorrow.

There is no doubt that mentality-wise and intellectually Lukashenka is much closer to the first group. And at any critical point he will most likely take their side, which is more understandable and familiar to him. However, this will not give him back the psychological comfort he used to have. That is why Lukashenka is now doomed to constant and highly neurotic 'jumping' from one side to the other.

What are the implications?

There are several implications of this public confrontation. But the central one is that Belarus is entering a crisis of governance. Decision-maker number 1 is in a trap of inevitably risky decisions. He is paralyzed in his ability to be an effective outside mediator between the conflicting elite groups.

As a result, even despite the evident need for economic reforms, under the existing political conditions Belarus will never have a consistent and adequate economic policy. Any reform-oriented initiatives will surely face two insurmountable obstacles. First, Lukashenka's fear of the socio-political repercussions of market reforms. And, second, multiple clashes of interests among the governing elites.

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Policy Towards Belarus: Russia is Pressing, Europe is Watching

While Russia is increasing its efforts to push Belarus in its geostrategic orbit even further, Europe appears to have taken the "wait and see approach". As a result, those who wish to see changes in Belarus are losing the momentum.

Russia is pressing Belarus to obtain its most lucrative assets. The most profitable Belarusian state enterprise Belaruskali may end up in the hands of the Russian tycoon Kerimov. Russia intends to keep higher prices for energy supplies, undermining the main cornerstone of the Belarus "economic miracle" which was based on cheap Russian oil and gas. They also warned that if Belarus further restricts Russia's media outlets it would have difficulties with securing Russian loans in the future. Kremlin is in the process of getting nearly everything it wants.

Europe is loosing on nearly all fronts because of its passivity. Symbolic [sanctions](#) or traditional condemnations have little effect on official Minsk. Some in the European Union think that the relations with Belarus have reached their lowest point and can only grow from there. This may not be the case because the human rights situation may further deteriorate as Lukashenka is trying to resist growing public unrest. The EU's involvement rarely goes beyond declarations, and modest support for NGOs which is far lower than in any other region of Europe.

Although Moscow is likely to wait until the Belarusian leader is on his knees and then bail him out, keeping Lukashenka on its balance sheet may become expensive for Russia. Oil prices are high these days because of the unrest in the Arab world,

but Kremlin needs money before the next election cycle. Moreover, Russia has to feed not only its impoverished South with separatism and Muslim extremists, but also other regions such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This is why Belarus will have to keep looking for money elsewhere. It was Russia's Finance Minister Kudrin who recommended Belarus to apply for an IMF loan a few months ago. Belarus has done so, but the chances of getting more money from the IMF look uncertain.

Given the role of Russia in Belarus, it is important to keep talking to the Russians and help them understand that if Belarus has another president, it will not be the end of the world for Belarus-Russia relations. The fear that Russian-speakers will be prosecuted if Lukashenka goes have little substantiation. Unlike in Ukraine or the Baltic States the vast majority of Belarusians in cities speak Russian as their first language and it will not change any time soon. If Belarus becomes a market economy, joins the World Trade Organization, and freely trades with both Russia and the European Union this will only help Russia's own economy.

However, talking to Russia should not be main policy tool of the West because there are nearly 10 million people in Belarus who need to be reached. With reduction in economic subsidies from Russia, many Belarusians for the first time have seen that their king is naked. Public dissatisfaction grows and there appears to be no quick fix for the Belarusian economy.

The West needs to make sure that Belarusians understand why this is happening and have access to uncensored information. It is not enough to allocate funds for Belsat or radio stations based in Poland. It is important to monitor whether what they produce actually reaches an average Belarusian.

If media only reaches opposition activists, the effect will remain limited. With some of the most prominent Belarusian opposition leaders in prisons, frequent blockades of Internet

web sites and traditional media on the brink of survival, cross-border broadcasting, as in the Soviet times remain the only way to spread uncensored information. Given that Belarus is a relatively small country, signals from neighbouring Poland and Lithuania can reach many people and help them understand what is going on.

Second, the West needs to continue [supporting](#) nation building in Belarus. One of the reasons why Ukraine is more independent now is because at some point of its history the Austria-Hungarian Empire actively supported nation building in Western Ukraine. Many historians agree that this helped mature the nation.

In Belarus the situation was different. Over the last three centuries Belarusians were regarded as Poles by the Polish and as Russians by the Russians. Now it is in Europe's interests to help Belarus people to mature from Soviets to Belarusians. Helping them mature as a European nation would serve the long-term goal of the country's independence. On practical level, the West should set up programs to facilitate translation of movies and books into Belarusian and encourage teaching in Belarusian language – both in Belarus and at the institutions such as the European Humanities University. If the Belarusian government is not doing that, there are good reasons for the West to take this role.

Finally, Europe should simplify and make less expensive visa procedures for Belarusians. It is unacceptable that Belarusians have to pay 60 euro for a Schengen visa, while Russians and Ukrainians pay merely 35 Euros. Rapid impoverishment of the Belarusian population creates an insurmountable travel barrier for many Belarusians. Moreover, it is easier to get a multiple entry Schengen visa for a citizen of Russia with a population of over 140 million people fighting against Islamic terrorists than a relatively small and safe Belarus.

Facilitation of free movement of persons would help Belarusians appreciate advantages of democracy and market economy. Coupled with ensuring better access to uncensored media, this could achieve more than yet another round of declarations from Brussels.

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Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act Passes US Congress Committee

The headlines of stories about the US Congress like the one above are among the few opportunities for the words “Belarus” and “democracy” to stand next to each other. Last week, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee approved yet another piece of legislation on Belarus – “The Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011” sponsored by Representative Christopher H. Smith. The bill is now heading to the full House of Representatives for a vote.

This legislation, H.R. 515, supports human rights in Belarus. Importantly, the bill authorized aid for pro-democracy forces and funding for broadcasting to the country. H.R. 515 also calls for blocking assets owned by senior Belarusian officials, and their families, involved in anti-democratic actions. The bill supports targeted sanctions and demands the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners. It also requires the US administration to report to Congress on Belarusian arms sales abroad, censorship or surveillance of the internet, as well as the personal assets and wealth of governmental figures.

Smith, the sponsor of the bill, has championed Belarusian rights also in previous sessions of Congress. A republican senator currently in his 16th term in the U.S. House of Representatives, Smith chairs the Human Rights Subcommittee and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). He authored the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 and the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006—passed the House and Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support. In his Apr. 14 opening statement, Smith was unequivocal in his denunciation of the Belarusian regime. He said, “Lukashenka’s dictatorship has the worst democracy and human rights record of any government in Europe.” He stressed that the sanctions were “aimed at the senior leadership” and that the United States stood “with the Belarusian people against their oppressors.”

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The Democracy Acts condemning Belarus human rights violations have a long history. The first Act was introduced to the U.S. Congress in November 2001 after the controversial presidential elections. The bill legislated the freeze of the Belarusian assets in the United States, prohibited trade with Belarusian government-run businesses, denied Belarusian officials entry in the United States; and proposed a \$30 million appropriation to support democratic institutions and organizations in Belarus. The March 2003 version of the legislature increased the amount to \$40 million. In contrast, the 2004 Belarus Democracy Act contained no prohibitions of the travel of Belarusian officials or U.S. exports to Belarus. It also omitted reference to Russia’s role in promoting democracy in Belarus. The 2004 act was reauthorized in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

The primary value of the previous US Democracy Acts is in increasing U.S. aid for democratic institutions and civil society initiatives in Belarus. To date, the aid that the US provided through other channels has been modest (\$11.5 million in FY2009, and \$15 million (allocated) in FY2010). Moreover, its efficiency has suffered from the noncooperation of the Belarusian regime (for example, the U.S. diplomatic staff in

Belarus has been reduced to five people after a diplomatic dispute). The Obama administration has requested \$14 million in aid in FY2011, but only \$9.6 million of this amount is designated for “political competition and consensus-building” and “civil society.”

What impact will the bill have if it passes Congress and becomes law? Smith hopes it will serve as a “signal to Lukashenka” and “propel[s] this policy forward amidst the administration’s competing priorities.” Yet history shows that economic leverage rarely translates into political gains. In fact, if the sanctions do have any effect in Belarus, it may be strengthening the authoritarian regime. After all, it would be naïve to think that the Belarusian officials would be eager to make a trip to the United States or that they would not know better than to keep their assets in the US and EU banks. Back in 2004, President Lukashenka would say he “could not get a better gift.” His reasoning went as follows, “If you scold me for seeking internal and external enemies, why are you giving me a pretext for finding such an enemy outside the country? Why are you supplying me with such a chance?”

The most the sanctions can accomplish is signal the United States’ resolve to exert pressure and its intolerance for human rights violations globally. Unfortunately, they impose little strain or cost on Washington, and therefore lack weight and credibility, which was acknowledged by Lukashenka himself in 2009 when he told the US delegation visiting Minsk, “If you are strong people, you should repeal this law and abrogate these sanctions that are meaningless to the US.”

However, the sanctions do irk the authoritarian leader. For instance, in 2009, Lukashenka said lifting the US sanctions and repealing the Democracy Act were the preconditions for returning the US ambassador to Minsk. Most importantly, the increased aid toward civil society development and the pro-democratic forces in the country will have an immense positive effect in the long run.

Russia, NATO and Belarus: Real Money and Unreal Threats



For Belarus, an agreement between Russia and NATO will once again underline the problem of being outside this process of pan-European integration. Belarus can not continue to be a black hole between Russia and Western Europe. The Belarusian government can't afford to play on the contradictions between them and can't rely on the support of only one of these subjects any more.

The confrontation between Russia and NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union has always been a political chess game, in fact, somewhat devoid of real motivation. It is obvious that the possibility of a real armed conflict between modern Russia and Western Europe is entirely unrealistic. The tough talk on the regulation of armaments and the stationing of troops has always sounded unnatural.

The real agenda of these talks has always been the desire of both parties (especially Russia) to save face in the course of reformatting relations on the continent after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty Organization. The rapid expansion of NATO, which until recently was openly seen as an enemy, was immediately seen as a defeat for the Russian leadership. Former Soviet satellites (and even former republics of the USSR) joining NATO meant their escape from Russia's sphere of influence – or at seemed so. All this harmed the domestic image of the Russian government and

embittered the post-imperial sentiment of public opinion in the country.

At some point in the early 1990s the West seems to have missed the right moment to invite Russia become member of the alliance and to start building up the European security system involving all affected parties. Therefore the process had required some time to ripen, which eventually took more than one and a half decades.

The phantom possibility of war with the NATO has all these years been a dubious argument in the internal politics of Russia.

Certain conservative political forces have been the most active to emphasize this threat: hard core Soviet hawks in think tanks close to the government, the military lobby of the Soviet-era generals. In addition, the Russian public opinion has been walking away from Soviet stereotypes quite slowly, while mastering the market economy and Western standards of consumption. It seems, though, that in a way there has been a somewhat symmetric situation in the U.S., with a Cold-War-mindset dominating a large part of the policy making.

The progress in relations between Russia and the NATO has only become possible after an overall political and economic stabilization in Russia, as well as a change of generations. There is reason to believe that these things have more or less been achieved now. The recent economic crisis, in turn, has stimulated Russia to compromise and calmed down the conservative revenge pathos among Russian political circles.

In the security sphere, Russia and the West have quite obvious common interests, that are far more real and serious than any differences and political games.

The fight against terrorism, maintaining stability in Central Asia requires the active cooperation and it is good that Russia and NATO have finally come to this.

In this context, the recent demonstrative refusal of the Belarusian authorities to sign the agreement on the joint Russian-Belarusian regional military group looks naive and helpless.

For Russia, the military block with Belarus is of very small value in terms of guaranteeing real security. Moreover, by sponsoring Belarus' military, Russia has to spend real money in order to be protected from an extremely unrealistic threat. With declarations of readiness to protect Russia from NATO's tanks with their bodies, the foreign political rhetoric of the current Belarusian government in this regard is irrelevant.

Belarus needs to change its relations with the West and with Russia. Ahead of the presidential election coming up in December it is now the best time to once again think about this.

[Read the original article here](#)

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Young European Federalists Plan New Action of Solidarity with Belarus



Ahead of the upcoming presidential election in Belarus, the Young European Federalists plan to organize a pan-European solidarity action to demand the Belarusian government to hold the election free and transparent. Considering that the European leadership has virtually

given up demanding this and seems to have nearly accepted the new reelection of the current Belarusian president, this action is especially important.

New elections will be held in Belarus on 19 December. Media, academics and NGO representatives announce already that they will be neither free nor fair.

This is why JEF is organising the 6th edition of its pan-European Belarus action on Thursday 16 December! All sections, NGOs and activists in Europe and across the globe are called upon to join in a massive protest against the last dictatorship on the European continent and ask for the democratisation of the country. The people in Belarus must be given a real choice as well as a voice to speak up!

The action will consist of:

- The traditional gagging of statutes in the streets. Pictures will be uploaded on JEF's Flickr account.
- A number of Press Releases, also in Russian and Belarussian
- Facebook and Twitter campaigns. Follow us on Twitter via: @freebelarusjef
- A dedicated week of articles about Belarus on www.thenewfederalist.eu
- Lobby actions among political decision-makers in Brussels or elsewhere

Stay tuned for more info coming soon! We are counting on your support and involvement!

[Read more on jef.communicate-europe.co.uk](http://jef.communicate-europe.co.uk)

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Belarus Breaks Russia's Energy Monopoly in Eastern Europe



The massive PR campaign against Lukashenka was launched by Moscow for good reasons. Lukashenka not only repeatedly denied Russian businesses access to some Belarusian state-owned enterprises, which Lukashenka treats as his own. More importantly – Lukashenka threatens the fundamentals of the Russian might and power in Europe – its energy supply monopoly.

On November, 18, oil pumping for Belarus began in Ukrainian Odessa. It means that efforts to supply Belarus with oil from new non-Russian sources reached a new and more advanced stage. Though technically this oil has still Russian origin, effectively it is a swap oil which could be bought thanks to a new arrangement with Venezuela.

Shipments of Venezuelan oil started at the beginning of this year. However, Belarus as a landlocked country faced obstacles in getting crude oil from the Baltic and Black seas to its refineries. Rail transportation evidently was not the best option. This month, after negotiations with Ukraine, Belarusian leadership managed to get Ukrainian pipeline Odessa-Brody for oil transit. The transportation costs will be lower and the shipment volumes will rise, which will result in lowering costs due to the economy of scale.

Is It Serious?

This transit breakthrough means that the Russian monopoly is no longer unshakable. Today the propaganda war waged by Russian oil interest groups depicts the whole Belarus-Venezuelan oil

cooperation as a ridiculous adventure by two buddies – presidents Lukashenka of Belarus and Chavez of Venezuela. Among many contras the lack of real interest on Venezuelan side and lack of economic feasibility for Belarus were most frequently mentioned.

However, there are clear reasons why Caracas sends oil for Belarus. It is interested in diversifying its oil markets and avoid dependency on North American market – rather logical act given volatility and even hostility in relations between US and Venezuela. But diversifying in oil markets is not an easy task at all, if not even dangerous. A good example for that could be pre-revolutionary Iran when such attempts resulted in turmoils both under Mossadegh and Shah.

Secondly, Venezuela needs modernization. Belarus as a model republic for Soviet forced and brutal nonetheless effective modernization serves as a source of specialists and technologies, and is eager to help for some oil in exchange. In addition, Minsk is willing to help Chavez in military modernization as well – after all, Belarusian army is regarded as rather efficient example for modernization of Soviet military.

As for supposed Belarusian losses in deals with Venezuelan oil, it is worth reminding that as so often in quite secretive oil business, not all the data necessary to estimate profits and losses are available. Furthermore, it is merely too early to talk about it, since with shipments rising, the efficiency will increase too. And Belarusian pay for South American oil anyway not only with money but at least partly with services and goods. Venezuela itself is interested first of all not in Belarusian money but in reprocessing its oil on Belarusian refineries – technically the most sophisticated facilities in the region – in order to sell oil products afterwards outside of Belarus and share profits with Minsk.

The new move by the Belarusian government to establish the

transportation system for non-Russian oil can improve the prospects not only of the pipeline Odessa-Brody, but also many other pieces of former Soviet pipelines in Eastern Europe. Over the last years, Russia tried to avoid transit troubles with countries like Belarus and Ukraine by switching off partly or completely many pipelines in the region between Baltic and Black Sea, and is actively working on constructing new pipelines which should deliver oil and gas to Central and Western Europe, as well as Balkans, while bypassing traditional transit countries, like Belarus, Ukraine or Poland.

Nevertheless, what was a problem, can become a new opportunity, since idle pipelines let post-Soviet countries to more easily break Russian monopoly on oil and, possibly, gas in the Eastern Europe. While shipments of Venezuelan oil may be insufficient for the region, projects to bring Iranian oil developed by Minsk under current political conditions will surely be blocked by the United States. However, it will remain as a very attractive opportunity for the future.

Iraqi Oil Crushing Russian Influence

Hardly anyone remembers, but the pipeline Odessa-Brody at the very beginning has been conceived and projected for transporting Iraqi oil in particular from Iraqi Kurdistan. Then, however, sanctions were imposed on Saddam's regime in Baghdad. The pipeline has been saved by newly explored Caspian Sea oil deposits, and pipeline was built to use them. However, Caspian oil deposits had been overestimated and pipeline even did not get further continuation westward from Brody. For a while it was out-of-use, later the Russians used it to pump oil in opposite direction. Now it is finally used for initial aim to break out of energy captivity. For a moment through Venezuelan oil.

Yet it can be complemented with the same Caspian oil, which alone did not suffice but the export volume of which may

perfectly enough to fill the pipeline when combined with shipments from other sources. A propos, on November, 19, Lukashenka [discussed](#) possible buying Azerbaijani oil with the president of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Rounagh Abdullayev.

But the most important option is Middle Eastern oil, first of all Iraqi one. Technically, no obstacle stays in the way of getting that oil to Eastern Europe, because there is already rather developed network from Iraqi Kirkuk to Turkish coast. It currently lacks the access to Black Sea coast, yet there are projects to construct such pipeline (e.g. route Ceyhan-Samsun). Such plans were [discussed](#) in Ukraine in 1990s and again in early 2000s after American occupation of Iraq. The last time the issue was publically [raised](#) by the government of Viktor Yanukovych was in summer 2007. Then it caused a wave of concern and criticism in Russian media.

Whoever brings Iraqi oil to the pipeline Odessa-Brody, will ensure easy and rather cheap access to Iraqi and Middle Eastern oil not only for Belarus, but for the Eastern and Central Europe. And it will put an end to Russian energy monopoly in the region, resulting to collapse of its influence in the region, given the tight link between Russian foreign policy and energy exports. Russian Siberian oil has absolutely no chance against Middle Eastern oil in cost and quality terms. Moscow presumably will do anything it can to stop it coming to the Europe.

Therefore, the whole enterprise can be implemented only by joint efforts of some countries. It is highly unlikely that Belarus and Ukraine can do it on their own. But with the engagement of the EU, the Middle Eastern oil can soon become a very feasible option for Eastern Europe energy supply.

And Lukashenka can be at the center of the new consortium. As Dzyanis Melyantsou of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies noted [recently](#):

Presently, we see the same situation of the year 2008, when under the impact of the international political circumstances the European Union decided to unfreeze its relations with Minsk, despite its failure to comply with the previous EU demands. The EU now essentially got addicted to the engagement policy (not Lukashenka got addicted but the EU) and it is difficult for him to renounce it... it is absolutely probable next year to expect Belarus-EU negotiations on economic integration with the EU. With Lukashenka as the main negotiator.

These developments and probabilities give political economy and geopolitical calculations of future Belarusian presidential elections new greater dimension. After all, the question is not only who will run the country. The question is, whether the Eastern Europe is possible without the tight grip of Moscow.

SB

Prominent Belarusian journalist found dead in his summer cottage



Aleh Byabenin was one of the founders and leaders of charter97.org website.

According to the Belarusian independent news portal

charter97.org *, the body of Aleh Byabenin was found on September 3, at 5.30 p.m. in his summer cottage not far from Minsk. The reason of death is not clear.

Aleh Byabenin was born in 1974. He graduated from the Belarusian State University, department of journalism. In 90s he occupied the position of the deputy chief editor of Imya, an independent Belarusian newspaper. Since 1998 he was the founder and head of charter97.org website. Aleh Byabenin had a wife and two sons.

In just few hours after publication of sad news about two hundred visitors of the website have expressed their deep condolences and concerns that the Belarusian government could be involved in this tragic incident.

VB

How Much Having an Embassy in Minsk Costs

It is hardly a secret that establishing diplomatic relations with an authoritarian state is a gamble. One never knows what one's embassy in Minsk may suffer if it crosses swords with the Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

On the night of August 30, two Molotov cocktails were thrown into the compound of the Russian Embassy in Minsk. Three days later, an obscure anarchist group said the attack was a reaction to Russia's crackdown on activists protesting the plans for a new highway around Moscow. But the uproar caused

by the bombing is unlikely to end so simply and so quickly.

In fact, it is unclear whether the attack was an act of hooliganism or a premeditated political move. Political or not, once it happened, the incident has become a part of the whirlpool of politics. It is interesting to observe of what Russia and Belarus make of the attack to advance their political goals.

The initial rumor that the embassy was attacked by the Belarusian hooligans in response to the Russian movie "Godfather" seems to have already played out in Lukashenka's favor. Whether or not they are true, the rumors of this sort will undoubtedly help Lukashenka gain additional support in the upcoming presidential elections.

Incidentally, a high percentage of the Belarusian population choose not to believe the movie and continued to stand by Lukashenka. Instead, these people are likely to believe Lukashenka's claim that the embassy attack was the work of Russian agents. The Belarusian police has been seriously considering the possibility that Russia bombed its own embassy to escalate the so-called "media war" with Belarus. According to Lukashenka, as quoted by Interfax, the Russian "thugs and scoundrels" needed the attack to say, "Look at the [Belarusian] government, at Lukashenka, who almost himself masterminded this terrorist act, as they call it, and torched the Russian embassy car."

More careful with language, the Russian Foreign Ministry somewhat vaguely accused "certain forces" of trying to "bring distrust and tensions to [Russia-Belarus] bilateral relations." Moscow seems to be viewing Lukashenka's claim as yet one more sign that its former strategic partner cannot be trusted, is unreliable, and even, at times, irrational.

This view will unlikely result in Moscow's throwing its weight behind the Belarusian opposition all of a sudden. The Kremlin

knows that Lukashenka will remain in power for the indefinite future and has to learn to work with him, foreseeing and mitigating the consequences of his vagaries. To make such vagaries less frequent, Moscow is already becoming less shy about applying economic and political pressure. Of course, the Belarusian leader has so far excelled at turning even this pressure to his benefit, increasing his popularity by claiming that Moscow “wanted the [Belarusian] president to bend [to their will] – but they got just the opposite.”

This is not the first attack on a foreign embassy in the Belarusian capital. The previous embassy accidents had either happened in the midst of a diplomatic crisis between the Belarus and that embassy’s home country, or were suspiciously close to presidential elections in Belarus.

In 2001, a few months before Lukashenka’s reelection, a grenade blew a 17-centimeter hole in the Russian embassy grounds as leaders of former Soviet republics, including Russian leader Vladimir Putin, were flocking to Minsk for a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Belarusian regime was able to turn the 2001 incident to its advantage. Minsk upped the pressure on the opposition by having the KGB interrogate the leader of the “Youth Front,” Paval Sevyarynets, as a suspect.

Interestingly, the embassies of the democratic countries in Minsk seem to have much more civilized incidents with the Belarusian government (although with far greater consequences). In 2008, angered by the continuation of US sanctions against Belnaftakhim and by US criticism of Belarus’ human rights violations, Belarusian authorities gave US ambassador Karen Stewart 24 hours to leave the country before she would be declared persona non grata. Shortly afterward, Washington was accused of organizing a spy ring in Belarus and was [asked](#) to cut the staff of its 35-employee embassy in Minsk by half. A month later, ten more US diplomats were ordered to leave.

In 2006, as Belarusian-Polish relations reached a yet another low, Belarus' state-controlled media accused the Polish embassy in Minsk of mediating between the Belarusian opposition and the West. Throughout the last decade, Poland was accused of spying in Minsk just as often as the human rights abuses and repressions in Belarus were denounced by Warsaw.

Russia Is Not Willing to Pay for its Imperial Prestige

This week, after a bitter gas transit conflict with Belarusian government, Russian Gasprom declared that preliminary gas prices for Belarus next year should be about USD 250. Now it pays 185 dollars. Even some naïve oppositional analysts welcomed what they considered 'European' prices, joking of Lukashenka's 'stupid' wish to live 'of Russian cost'.

The prices for gas and oil, they forgot, are specific prices. Since gas and oil depend on infrastructure to ship them to consumers, therefore the Russian gas price for Belarus shall be different one than tariff for more distant Germany or Belgium. Furthermore, the prices for such strategic commodities are anyway politically influenced. So, Belarus which has allied itself with Russia since 1995, has all reasons to demand be given cheaper gas and oil than other countries.

And at least it should not be suddenly hit by arbitrary Russian decisions to increase price by almost 100 dollars. After all, the Belarusian side has carried out its part of agreement with Kremlin – it gave Moscow a small bit of

imperial grandeur by agreeing to be a 'small brother' and ally, it secured a segment of Russian borders and followed most Russian foreign policies. So why Russia agreed to sell China its gas considerably cheaper than Belarus?

It seems that this time it is Russia that wants to live as an empire 'of Belarusian cost', by giving Lukashenka nothing for it, and even openly threatening and abusing him. Russian elites' greed is stronger than imperialistic appetites? As a columnist Vitaly Portnikov put it in his article published on grani.ru,

... if there are no money, why to play an empire? If Belarusians and Russians are almost one people, then is it acceptable to send brothers an ultimatum? Freeze them [by cutting gas supplies in winter]? Threaten with sanctions? Indeed, that state, whose abolishment has been named a biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century by Medev's predecessor [Putin], that state began to fall apart not the moment when US President Ronald Reagan declared it to be 'an evil empire', and not the moment General Secretary Gorbachev proclaimed 'glasnost' and 'perestroika'. It has fell apart when Moscow decided to put a blockade on Lithuania [which was then a part of the USSR].

Something similar is now happening with integration initiatives of Belarus and Russia from previous years. Really, Moscow presently pursuing a greater aim – Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan – did not even bother to do anything with numerous previous agreements with Belarus – on integration and establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia – which legally stay in the way of new Russian endeavor to reconquest lost lands.

They were not cancelled, nor amended, nor even mentioned by anyone, as Belarusian political analyst Vitali Silitski points out in his article on the website of BISS. It seems, that for

Russian not only pathetic alliances and brotherhood but even solid legal documents are just empty papers to be torn anytime deemed necessary. Or as a Russian proverb put it,

A guy is a master of his word, he can give it and he can take it back.

Or as Silitski said,

All treaties concluded with today's Russia and its leadership preoccupied with [imperial] greatness can remain just a useless scrap of paper, if Kremlin sees an opportunity to act according to the right of the strong. The [European] enthusiasts of various 'Streams' [projects to build pipelines to ship Russian gas and oil into Europe – Nord and South Streams] should think better on it.

Such behavior makes today's Russian government a clear security threat not only for former Soviet republics, but even for Europe as a whole. The post-Soviet countries realized it, and Moscow does not allow them to forget – going from aggression against Georgia to gas conflicts with Belarus and Ukraine and continuing with coup d'etat in Kyrgyzstan.

So far, European Union did not react to Russian policies strongly enough to stop Kremlin. Eastern Europe clearly lost its importance for European strategists, preoccupied with southern and southeastern flanks of European foreign policy. Yet the time might show that Russia and aftermath of its activities in former Soviet countries will pose much bigger threat to European security. After all, it is Russia which while ever more supplying Europe with oil and gas, demonstrates outright contempt for agreements with partner countries and maintains a lawlessness on its own territory.

SB

Belarus Not Worried about Losing Key National Companies

The news on a legal move by the Belarusian parliament to allow privatization of most profit-making public property objects – the Belaruskali Company and strategically important oil pipelines – generated little publicity. However, it is these assets that make up a major part of the Belarusian economy: the enterprise Belaruskali makes Belarus the world's third largest producer of potash mineral fertilizers, and the pipelines give Belarusian government a certain leverage in its relations with Russia and Europe. In addition, both Belaruskali and the pipelines are a major source of foreign currency for Belarus, which badly needs foreign capital.

As always, the rationale for the Parliament's decision was not announced widely and openly, as should happen when the companies of such strategic importance are involved. The Interfax news agency informed that the pipelines and Belaruskali will be excluded from the list of obligatory state property objects and that the latter will be transformed into a joint stock company. The decision has been taken by the Parliament that lacks independence due to the nature of the Belarusian political system and usually just rubber-stamps the bills upon the executive's request.

Will the Belaruskali and the pipelines be sold to the insiders and the cronies of the Belarusian regime or to other interested clients? There are good reasons to suspect that Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government is going to handle these trading matters secretly, as had happened in the so-called 'Oman deal' when a huge plot in historical area of Minsk has recently been sold – at unexpectedly low cost and under

favorable conditions – to someone from the Middle East.

Many Western experts view privatization as a major step in the post-Communist transition process. They blame the failure to privatize for the consolidation of the current Belarusian regime. The Russian experience of the 1990s, however, suggests that privatization without strong legal basis, robust law enforcement agencies and transparent property administration system may have catastrophic consequences. In Russia, it ended with the destruction of the national economy and the enrichment of a few unscrupulous “businessmen” of criminal nature who had connections to the Russian government.

Today’s Belarus lacks the basic legal and law enforcement preconditions for privatization. It seems that, not unlike their Russian colleagues two decades earlier, Belarus’ ruling elite is reaching consensus on the ownership issues behind the closed doors to hedge against an emergency departure from power. Because even the most durable non-democratic regimes one day expire, it makes perfect sense for the incumbent elite to worry about the future: to buy some state-owned objects for themselves, to sell them and divert some money to black accounts, or – last but not least – to prolong the regime’s lifetime and trade some public property for loyalty of economic, administrative and local elites.

Such privatization will definitely cause only fatal economic and social degradation of the country. Nevertheless, the prospects of losing the national potash company and the pipelines hardly seems to cause any public concern in Belarus. Even during the presidential election campaign, the Belarusian opposition is so preoccupied with its internecine calamities that it pays no attention to the news about the imminent privatization of the key Belarusian companies.

Such behavior proves the conceptual and expert weakness of the Belarusian democratic opposition, which does not seem to have enough able professionals to run the country after the long

period of political marginalization. Undoubtedly, any government due to come after Lukashenka will have no opportunity to reconsider dubious privatization deals or misused credits. It will have to pay for it by working under the constraints of the sold-out and degraded national economy.

SB

Belarus in Amnesty International's Report 2010

Bellow we provide excerpts from the chapter.

Background European institutions continued their engagement with Belarus. In June, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe voted to restore Special Guest Status to the Belarusian parliament on several conditions. Besides a moratorium on the death penalty and registration of the human rights organization Nasha Viasna (Our Spring), terms included the immediate and unconditional lifting of sentences of restricted freedom imposed on several young people for their participation in a peaceful demonstration in January 2008. However, these terms were not met by the end of the year. In November, the EU Council reviewed the decision made in October 2008 and decided not to end the travel restrictions on senior Belarus officials, but to extend the suspension until October 2010. The majority of printed and electronic media remained under state control, and the state press distribution system maintained its monopoly. Two independent newspapers – Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) and Nasha Niva (Our Field) – were allowed once again to use the state press distribution system. **Death penalty** On 29 June, the House of

Representatives set up a working group to draft proposals on imposing a moratorium on the death penalty. However, Belarus continued to hand down death sentences despite international pressure. Two men were sentenced to death for murder in the course of the year. On 29 June, Brest regional court sentenced 30-year-old Vasily Yuzepchuk to death; and on 22 July, Minsk regional court sentenced 25-year-old Andrei Zhuk to death. Both death sentences were upheld on appeal. – In January, Vasily Yuzepchuk and another unnamed man were detained and charged with first-degree murder, following the murder of six elderly women between November 2007 and January 2008. On 29 June, both men were found guilty by Brest regional court. The second man, convicted as his accomplice, was sentenced to life imprisonment. Vasily Yuzepchuk was sentenced to death. On 2 October, the Supreme Court turned down his appeal and he subsequently applied for clemency. Vasily Yuzepchuk, originally from Ukraine, belongs to the marginalized Roma ethnic group, and may have an intellectual disability. His lawyer stated that the investigation and trial were fundamentally flawed and that Vasily Yuzepchuk had been beaten to force him to confess. On 12 October, the UN Human Rights Committee called on the Belarusian government not to execute Vasily Yuzepchuk until it had considered the case. **Freedom of assembly** The authorities continued to violate the right to freedom of assembly by not permitting demonstrations and public actions in accordance with the very restrictive Law on Public Events. There were allegations that excessive force was used to disperse non-violent demonstrations, and peaceful demonstrators were detained. – On 12 February, an application by a group of 20 people to hold a small public awareness action about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues was refused by the Gomel city administration. They said that the application did not include copies of contracts with the local police department, the health clinic and the waste disposal services to cover the expenses of ensuring public order, safety and for cleaning up after the action. Gomel District Court held that

the application had been refused in accordance with the Law on Public Events and turned down the appeal. – Peaceful legal demonstrations to mark the anniversary of the disappearance of leading opposition figures Viktor Hanchar and Anatoly Krasouski, held on the 16th day of every month, were regularly dispersed using force. Viktor Hanchar and Yury Zakharenko, as well as businessman Anatoly Krasouski and journalist Dmitry Zavadsky, were subjected to enforced disappearances in 1999 and 2000. On 16 September, police officers in Minsk allegedly used excessive force to disperse demonstrators and detained 31 people for over three hours before releasing them without charge. The demonstrators reported that they had been standing silently holding portraits of the disappeared when approximately 40 men in plain clothes approached and started to beat them, closely followed by riot police who detained them and took them by bus to Tsentralny District police department. According to one demonstrator, police officers did not explain the reason for their arrest and some of the detainees were beaten in the bus. At the police station they were reportedly made to stand facing the wall for three hours and subjected to verbal abuse, threats and beating. On 17 September, the Presidency of the European Union expressed concern about the crackdown on peaceful demonstrations in Minsk the previous day and urged the Belarusian authorities to refrain from excessive use of force in dealing with peaceful demonstrations.

Prisoners of conscience Several people continued to be held under “restricted freedom” following participation in a peaceful protest in January 2008. The conditions of “restricted freedom” are so severe that they amount to house arrest. Furthermore, although the sentence of “restricted freedom” is imposed by a judge, the details of the restrictions can be changed arbitrarily by the police officer in charge of the case without any possibility to appeal. This makes it very difficult for those convicted to comply with the conditions of their sentence. – On 7 July, Artsyom Dubski was sentenced to one year in prison by the Asipovichy

district court in the Mahilyow region, and on 15 June Maxim Dashuk was sentenced to one year and three months of further "restricted freedom" by the Maskouski district court in Minsk. Both were convicted for violating the terms of earlier sentences imposed for their participation in the January 2008 protest and Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience. These young men had been among 11 people who were given sentences of up to two years of "restricted freedom" for "taking part in or organizing actions that gravely disturb public order". As of November 2009, five out of the original 11 had received amnesties, one had had his restrictions reduced, and three remained abroad.

Human rights defenders Civil society organizations faced many obstacles in registering with the authorities before being permitted to operate. – On 26 January, the human rights organization Nasha Viasna (previously known as Viasna), applied for registration and was refused for a third time. The Ministry of Justice rejected the application on several grounds: previous convictions of the group's members on administrative charges; inaccuracies in the list of founders; the failure to describe the mechanism for electing the Chair and the Secretary; the absence of the organization's name on one document; and that the headquarters were too cramped. On 22 March, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of the Ministry of Justice after an appeal by the founders on 19 March. On 25 April, the founders applied again and on 28 May, registration was again refused by the Ministry of Justice. In addition to the reasons cited in previous refusals the Ministry of Justice claimed that the second part of the organization's name was not in line with its statute. On 16 June 2009, the founders of Nasha Viasna appealed against this decision, but refusal of registration was again upheld by the Supreme Court on 12 August.

Violence against women On 21 January, a new Law on Crime Prevention came into effect which for the first time specifically referred to domestic violence and called on state bodies including the Ministry of Internal Affairs to investigate all cases of domestic violence and to

prosecute the perpetrators. However, adequate structures and resources to respond to violence against women were lacking. At the end of the year only two shelters for victims of domestic violence were financed from a combination of state and non-governmental funding. VB

Customs Union: Economically Sound, Politically Harmful?



Russian business daily *Vedomosti* reported today that the Customs Union negotiated between Moscow, Minsk, and Astana may come into effect without Belarus. The paper quoted BNP Paribas official as saying that Kiev would make a more desirable union partner for Russia than Minsk.

The Customs Union between Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia is missing a second deadline this year. However, when it does come to fruition, the Union will lead not only to the adoption of a common external tariff, but also to eventually creating a free trade agreement and single economic space like the European Union by 2012.

Today, the main bone of contention is Minsk's insistence on the abolition of duties on Russian oil and petroleum that are exported to Belarus. Although it already owes \$192 million to Russia for its gas for the year 2010, Minsk claims to be gradually acquiring [energy independence](#) from Russia. It does not seem to realize that without export duties its energy dependence on Moscow would only grow.

Ironically, it is the currently obdurate Belarusian leadership who has been the most enthusiastic advocate of the Customs Union between the three post-Soviet states. The Belarusian government claimed the Union would help the national economy by mitigating the difficulties related to the adaptation to the new energy prices. Russia's refusal to provide this benefit by lowering energy prices and abolishing export duties in the new union made President Alyaksandr Lukashenka say in his April State of the Nation Address that Russia was putting Belarus "on the verge of survival."

Because a formal customs union between Russia and Belarus already exists, it is unclear what effect the failure to agree to union conditions with Russia and Kazakhstan would have on Belarus' economy. However, were such a union to materialize, it would hardly alleviate the country's economic troubles.

Theoretically, customs unions are created with an economic and political benefits in mind. While the short-term economic benefits are easy to see, political and economic benefits in the long term are typically unclear and vary with time. More often than not, creating a big common market within a customs union allows to depoliticize economic cooperation between the participating countries. However, entering into a customs union with a big and powerful former empire like Russia often results in a much more politicized market than that typical for a Western free trade zone.

Even if participation in the Customs Union brings some short-term economic benefits for Minsk, it will undermine Belarus'

economy in the long run and draw Belarus dangerously close into the Russian orbit. Just like the Soviet experience created problems for the economy of the independent Belarus, the Customs Union with two large energy-rich countries is likely limit the country's indigenous industrial capacity and skew its development. Russia already controls more than half the Belarusian economy and is buying shares in its oil processing industry, and the Customs Union will make Minsk even more dependent on Russian resources, especially if the oil export duties were abolished upon the Belarusian leader's request.

Belarusian President Wants to be European Nazarbayev?

Why, really, should he change anything, according to his Realpolitik logic, well-known to any observers of politics in developing countries. Belarusian leader wants to be treated in the West at least as good as Nazarbayev, Aliyev or Karimov, which have undoubtedly worse, even shocking human rights and democracy records but have now almost no major troubles with the West. They are too important for the world power centers to be criticized. So wants to be also Belarusian leadership, and Lukashenka particularly emphasized the importance of his country for the West in his last interview.

He elaborated on it

So what, do other nations, our partners in Eastern Partnership, have no such problems as Belarus? Hey, they have

even more. Why do you treat them so, and us otherwise?

However, Belarus is all too close to the West geographically and Lukashenka is surely not considered as an Eastern European Nazarbayev, i.e. another bad guy indispensable for the Western interests.

Yet, to change his policies in order to be welcomed in the West means for Belarusian president a near end of his political life, for his regime predictably cannot survive after adopting the measures demanded by Europe, like changes in electoral law and practice, providing more freedom for media or NGOs. Asking of Lukashenka to do it, means asking of him to go. No wonder, Belarusian leader will not accept such proposals unless he decides to finish his carrier.

Nevertheless, the relations between Lukashenka and the West are not yet in a dead-end, and are unlikely to be there anytime in the near future. Belarusian regime has many ways to avoid such predicament. First, it can continue its rather successful attempts to sell "security and stability" for Western toleration as well as offer its services for containment of Russia. Second, there many ways to do business, both political and economic, unofficially, with the same results, as Belarusian history of recent years has shown.

Third, even confronted one day with fatal necessity to negotiate with the West on its current terms, Minsk has a lot of things to sell without risking to cause a crash of Belarusian political model. Let's compare the risks encountered by Lukashenka in accepting, say, current European conditions.

Thus, while liberalization for media and NGOs (including Polish minority organizations) or free and fair elections could be fatal for Lukashenka's survival, such points as setting free political prisoners (anyway not so numerous) probably does not endanger the regime and could be swapped for

some new Western credits, visits or other benefits. Another point, articulated by the West – capital punishment (not stopped in Belarus regardless repeated Western demands) is also not so crucial and its suspending or abolishing are only a question of price Belarusian authorities wish to get from their Western partners.

So far, this strategy of Belarusian government worked. Belarus managed to get loans with Western support. EU lifted travel restrictions for Belarus government officials and the US trade sanctions have been suspended, the country has been invited to join Eastern Partnership and Lukashenka visited European capitals.

SB