

Ukraine Becomes More Important as a Factor in Belarusian-Russian Relations

In the last months Ukraine has significantly increased its importance in the European part of the CIS. The new president Viktor Yanukovich enjoys a honeymoon with Russia: Ukrainian-Russian cooperation has started booming after previous president Viktor Yushchenko had left office. Ukraine and Russia have agreed on lower gas prices for Ukraine*, on the Russian Black Sea Fleet staying based in Ukraine till 2042.

Vladimir Putin has even made a sensation by speaking of a possible merger of Russia's Gazprom and Ukraine's Naftogaz. Added to this, there come smaller initiatives to establish cooperation (or to sell relevant Ukrainian assets to Russians) in nuclear power, shipbuilding, aviation construction, power generation and supply.

At the same time, since the times of president Yushchenko Ukraine is an important partner for the largely isolated Belarus. Ukraine remains one of the very few European countries having official political contacts with the authoritarian Belarusian government and the contacts have only [intensified](#) with Yanukovich becoming president. Ukraine has recently become the transit country for the important Venezuelan oil supplies to Belarus. In April the Belarusian parliament has finally ratified the border treaty with Ukraine, which has been the key issue of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations since the collapse of the USSR.

Relations between Belarus and Russia are currently in a crisis [since Russia has imposed duties on oil supplied to Belarus](#). This came despite establishing a customs union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan at the very same time. The

disappointment with absence of progress in the Russian-Belarusian integration have led to Russia [unilaterally transforming](#) the relations with Belarus into a more pragmatic and market-based form. Ukraine could threaten Belarus as a new strategic ally for Russia in Europe, for it would be psychologically easier for Russia to impose a hard line on Belarus when it isn't the only faithful satellite on the European continent. On the other hand, Ukraine could potentially act as intermediary between the two. In any case, Ukraine seems to become a more important actor not only in [Belarus' relations with the EU](#), but also in Belarusian-Russian relations.

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Belarus Remains a Bad Student of Democracy

After a discussion about the situation in Belarus, PACE noted that the former Soviet republic has shown "a lack of progress towards Council of Europe standards" and "a lack of political will" to make progress in this direction. "In particular, the Assembly condemns the executions of Andrei Zhuk and Vasily Yuzepchuk, which were carried out in March 2010 in conditions of total secrecy and at a time when the United Nations Human Rights Committee had requested a stay in the executions pending its examination of their cases," the resolution said. [Read the full report](#)

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No Official Mourning In Belarus After Death of Kaczyński So Far



Today Belarus is the only country in the region that has not declared a day of national mourning following the death of the Polish president in a plane crash Apr. 10. Lithuania, Ukraine, Czech Republic, and Russia have all declared mourning, and events in Lech Kaczynski's memory will be held by the EU official bodies. Even Brazil and [Canada](#) have joined in. However, the Belarusian government has so far limited its reaction to a brief statement of condolences.

To the contrary, the Belarusian civil society is actively expressing its solidarity with Poland. Many people have come to the Polish embassy to lay flowers (see a photo [report](#) by *Naša Niva*), and the leaders of both the Orthodox and the Catholic Church in Belarus have held memorial services.

The Belarusian authorities did help Poland after the plane crash. An airplane with relatives of the victims of Saturday's tragedy landed in the Viciebsk airport, and the Belarusian government provided the relatives of the victims with a visa-free entry into Belarus as well as a transportation means to Smolensk.

It seems that nothing more should be expected from the Belarusian officials. Poland was and remains an unfriendly country to Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime. After all, Warsaw actively supports the democratic opposition in Belarus and

criticizes human rights violations and repressions against the Union of Poles of Belarus. In addition to that, the Polish state television sponsors independent Belarusian satellite TV channel Belsat.

Lech Kaczyński's unwillingness to contact the Belarusian authorities could have been one of the reasons why the pilots of the Polish presidential plane [refused](#) to land in Minsk, neglecting the advice of the Russian dispatchers at Smolensk airport.

On the day of the funeral ceremonies, flags on official buildings in Germany will be lowered to half-mast. On Monday, the EU flags in front of the EU and EC buildings in Brussels, Strasbourg, as well as capitals of all the 27 EU states were lowered to half-mast in sign of mourning.

The Council of Europe has also declared Monday a day of mourning and lowered flags in front of its seat in Strasbourg. In front of NATO headquarters in Brussels, the Polish flag was hoisted half-mast since Saturday. On Monday, flags there were lowered by Lithuania, Estonia and Great Britain.

A number of countries declared national mourning. Among them are Brazil and Lithuania, which declared a three-day mourning. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Turkey will mourn the Polish president on the day of his funeral. Estonia, Ukraine, Spain, and Latvia have declared mourning on Monday. In Moldova, national mourning will be observed on Tuesday. Flowers were laid and candles were lit in front of the Polish mission in Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

[Read the story at People's Daily.](#)

Today is the Alternate Independence Day of Belarus



On March 25, 1918, the Council of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, a representative body formed as a result of a nationwide congress in 1917, has adopted its Third Charter declaring independence of Belarus from the Russian Empire.

Formally, from that very moment till modern days Belarus has legally been a sovereign state: first as the Belarusian Democratic Republic (also known as the Belarusian People's Republic or the Belarusian National Republic), then as the Belarusian Soviet Republic and since 1991 as the Republic of Belarus.

The day is actively celebrated by the Belarusian democratic opposition and by the Belarusian diaspora in the West but is ignored by Belarusian officials. Here the official address by Ivonka Survilla, President of the Council of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, the [Belarusian government in exile](#):

Dear fellow Belarusians! On behalf of the Council of the Belarusian Democratic Republic I congratulate you with the great national holiday, Freedom Day. I wish you to spend it with faith and hope for a better future. The Belarusian people will gain freedom and democracy just as it has gained independence.

Living in the free world, we always knew that no evil can be eternal. We have read the Third Charter of the Belarusian Democratic Republic which proclaimed the independence of Belarus, and believed that if in 1918, in such difficult

circumstances, our people have managed to express their desire to be free among the free nations of the world, it will find the strength to endure Soviet oppression and regain independence.

Today I would like to share with you an excerpt of the Third Charter, which I consider particularly inspiring: "Now we, the Council of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, are canceling the yoke of dependence, which the Russian tsars had violently thrown on our free and independent land. From this moment the Belarusian Democratic Republic is declared an independent and free state. Hereby we declare as invalid all previous state unions, which enabled an alien government to sign on behalf of Belarus the Treaty of Brest, which kills the Belarusian people to death, dividing his land into parts." Dear compatriots, let's remember these words. Only an own independent free state can protect the land from foreign aggression, wherever it may come from.

Only a democratic government will be able to give the people a peaceful foreign policy. Only a national government will save national language and culture from decline. From the depths of my heart I wish you strength, love to your beautiful land, faith in the future and the courage that characterizes all the people of the free spirit. The time will come when our nation will celebrate its grand triumph of independence and freedom and proudly remember its ancestors, who have overthrown "the last yoke of state dependence" on March 25, 1918. [Read the original in Belarusian](#)

Жывіе Біелару́! А́Ч

Internet Censorship in Authoritarian Belarus

Belarusian Review
Spring 2010

GUEST EDITORIAL

by Viachaslau Bortnik

Something that every internet user in Belarus feared has finally happened. On February 1, 2010, Alexander Lukashenka signed a decree imposing censorship on the internet, approximately one year before the next presidential election. Lukashenka had previously been criticizing “anarchy on the internet”. After placing most of the traditional media under its control, the regime is pursuing an offensive against new media. The presidential election is scheduled to take place in early 2011 and Lukashenka plans to “win” again, (the last two presidential elections wherein Lukashenka retained power were widely viewed as fraudulent). Thus far, the internet has been one of the last places to express independent opinion in Belarus. The political opposition is fearful of being without any media access during the upcoming elections.

Under the new decree, internet providers, websites and internet users will be strictly controlled by the government and a special unit of the Presidential Administration – the Operating and Analytical Center. According to the decree “On Measures for Revising Use of the National Segment of the World Wide Web”, through an agreement with the President, the Center will define the list of “telecommunication operators, which have the right of direct access (interconnection) to international telecommunication systems, and authorized Internet service providers”. Any activity of a provider can be

stopped by a decision of the Council of Ministers. The Center will be able to forbid access to information considered to be illegal according to Belarusian legislation and will control the registration of “.by” domain names. An internet service provider will be able to stop rendering internet service to anyone in cases that they find to constitute a “gross violation of law, further violation of the decree, and other acts of legislation”.

Although it is not yet clear how the decree’s provisions will be utilized in the new legislation, which takes effect on July 1, 2010, there is no doubt that behind the extensive control over internet access and online content, President Lukashenka has the obvious intention of reducing free expression in Belarus. Comments of Belarusian officials suggest that there is nothing positive on the horizon. The Belarusian Minister of Communication, Mikalai Pantsyalei, pointed out that visitors of internet cafes will have to show their passports for identification. Natallia Pyatkevich, the deputy head of Lukashenka’s Administration, said that the ideologists should serve as the original source of information, not oppositional websites. Behind the extensive control over internet access and online content President Lukashenka has the obvious intention to reduce free expression in Belarus.

Introduction of the scandalous decree resulted in criticism by the international community including the EU, OSCE, human rights organizations and the Belarusian Diaspora worldwide. The EU’s foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, said that the decree “is going to further restrict freedom of speech and freedom of media in Belarus after it takes force”. The EU regards this issue as an important step in the wrong direction and hopes the Belarusian authorities will review it. The OSCE has prepared an expert assessment of the decree, and provided the Belarusian government with a set of recommendations that include the following:

- Abolish mandatory identification of internet service users

and their technical means used to connect to the internet.

- Clarify the meaning and procedure of introducing limitations and bans on spreading illegal information.

- Clarify the scope of responsibility of internet service providers in the event of failure to comply with an order by a relevant body to eliminate violations or to suspend internet services.

- Envision requiring state bodies and other public organizations to publish information not only on their activities, but also information which results from these activities.

- Abolish the requirement to include hyperlinks to the original information source in media outlet materials disseminated via the internet.

At the same time, activists of the Belarusian-American Association staged numerous protests against internet censorship in Washington and New York. The recent protest in front of the Newseum in the U.S. capital was supported by the international press watchdog group, Reporters Without Borders and covered by Voice of America. "Last year, the Belarusian government claimed that China was a model in terms of internet control. This year, President Lukashenka signed a decree subjecting online access to an identity check or to prior online authorization dependent on the content and the applicant. Now, in Minsk, people will censor themselves, which is the worst violation you can impose on freedom of speech", said Clothilde Le Coz, Washington Director of the Reporters Without Borders, in her address to the protesters. In its monitoring of online freedom, Reporters Without Borders has, until now, classified Belarus as a country "under surveillance" because it has only one internet service provider, (Beltelekam), because access to opposition websites is blocked during major political events, and because internet café owners are required under a February 2007 decree to alert the police about customers who visit "sensitive" sites and keep a record of all the sites visited during the previous 12

months on each computer, making the information available to the police if requested. If more far-reaching internet censorship is imposed in Belarus, as contemplated by the new Decree, the country would be added to the list of countries such as North Korea, China and Iran, which are notorious for blocking internet freedom.

The Decree “On Measures for Revising Use of the National Segment of the World Wide Web” is to take effect on July 1, which does not leave much time to work out a comprehensive strategy. For years, the internet has been viewed by international experts as a key vehicle for promoting democracy in Belarus. In a worst case scenario, the internet will not be an area of free speech anymore. This would force the international community to find answers to tough questions. The U.S. and the EU should work together to facilitate international pressure on the Belarus government to compel a review of the onerous decree. The international community should promote public discussion on internet censorship in Belarus by organizing information campaigns, protests, conferences, mobilizing media and other grassroots activities. In this difficult situation, sufficient support should be provided to satellite TV and FM radio broadcasting.

Viachaslau Bortnik is currently pursuing an MA in Public Administration at the American University in Washington, DC.

**Today is the 70th Anniversary
of the Katyn Massacre**

Decision



On this day 70 years ago, on March 5, 1940, the politburo of the Communist Party of the USSR has passed the decision to kill several thousands officers of the Polish army. The killings are now known as Katyn Massacre, named after the first known place of where the executions have taken place. The Katyn Massacre is a historical episode where the role of Belarus is usually understated or, better said, ignored at all. This has its reasons.

Among the officers of the Polish army killed in Katyn there were many people from West Belarus that was part of the Second Polish Republic before 1939. In particular, one of two generals killed by the Soviets was Bronisław Bohatyrewicz from Hrodna, who had also been a commander of Belarusian national self-defence units in 1918-1919. According to historians' estimates, about a quarter of the 14.5 thousands people killed in Katyn were Belarusians.

A delegation of Belarusian NGO activists and opposition politicians has visited Katyn in August 2009 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Soviet-Nazi alliance that has preceded the joint invasion to Poland. The current Belarusian officials, however, ignore the Katyn massacre. The state ideology rather sympathizes with the Soviets. September 17, the day of the Soviet invasion to West Belarus, is still officially called the Day of Reunification of Belarus.

Several years ago the city authorities of Minsk have constructed a road through Kurapaty, an execution site similar to Katyn, ignoring all protests. Unfortunately, there is no place for the history of West Belarus in the current state ideology of the Belarusian government. Belarus is viewed as the descendant of only the BSSR and not as well of West

Belarus (and thereby partly of mid-war Poland). All issues around Katyn and the Soviet invasion to Poland in 1939 are therefore viewed as a matter of Polish-Russian relations, ignoring the geographically obvious fact that Belarus, the land between Poland and Russia, has been in the very centre of the events of 1939 and 1940 as well.

There is no sign of Belarusian officials planning to participate in Katyn commemoration ceremony planned for April 2010. It seems like organizers of the event don't even think of inviting high-ranked Belarusian officials. Read a story by thenews.pl and [a petition](#) by the Russian human rights organization Memorial to president Dmitry Medvedev to open archives and to officially rehabilitate the victims of Katyn.

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Kraków City Council Declares Lukashenka Persona Non-Grata

The council of the Polish city of Kraków has declared Aliaksandr Lukašenka, the President of Belarus, persona non grata in the city. It is a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the Union of Poles in Belarus. The city council has passed a resolution which appeals to the European Parliament to take all possible effective action against the Belarusian state to protect the rights of persecuted Poles in Belarus. The [conflict](#) around the Union of Poles of Belarus is quite far from what it may look like at the first glance. The specific is that the conflict has no nationalistic background at all.

In principle, one can find potential grounds for Polish-Belarusian nationalistic tensions on historical and geographic issues, just as there are tensions between Poland and the Republic of Lithuania around the Vilnius region or between Poland and Ukraine on the role of Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the 2nd World War. Polonization and repressions against Belarusian national movement in Poland-occupied West Belarus in 1919-1939, transfer of the city of Bielastok (Polish Białystok) and surroundings from Belarus to Poland by Joseph Stalin in 1945 or the fact itself that Poles are the only ethnic minority in Belarus that was largely formed not as a result of migration of people from mainland Poland but from Roman Catholics of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania adopting Polish self-identification – all these controversial historical episodes could have been used by a nationalistic Belarusian government as a reason for tensions with Poland.

As a tradition from Soviet times, September 17, the day of the Soviet invasion to Poland in 1939, is still commemorated as the Day of Reunification of West Belarus with the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, but nothing more than that. Belarus has avoided a wave of nationalistic self-esteem buildup all other newly independent states, like Ukraine or the Baltic states, have been through. The regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka is far from being nationalistic. To the contrary, it seems more cautious about the Belarusian-speaking minority, that is mostly represented by urban intelligentsia and youth in opposition to Lukashenka, than about the Polish minority. There is an official Union of Poles of Belarus led by Stanislau Siamashka that is loyal to the government and that gets support from it.

The prosecution of the unofficial Union of Poles of Belarus led by Anžalika Borys is first of all a prosecution of an organization that is independent from the government and refused to demonstrate loyalty. It should be viewed together with the government's reluctance to register political parties

(like the Belarusian Christian Democracy) or repressions against free press in Belarus – and not along with nationalistic tensions between certain parties in Poland and Ukraine or the Republic of Lithuania. Read stories by [Belorusskie Novosti](#), [Gazeta.pl](#) (in Polish) and [TVP](#) (in Polish). See also a [background story by Deutsche Welle Russian edition](#)

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Opposition May Be the Only Party to Represent Belarus in EURONEST PA



An attempt to influence the Belarusian regime through the Eastern Partnership has failed. At least so far, at least the first attempt of it. Russian newspaper Kommersant [reports](#) that the negotiations between a delegation of the European Parliament and the Belarusian officials on Belarus' participation in the parliamentary assembly of EU and its Eastern neighbours (EURONEST PA) were unproductive.

It is now likely that the Belarusian delegation will be formed from the opposition parties and NGOs, Kommersant quoted MEP Justas Paleckis.

This means that once again the democratic opposition is likely to represent the country at an international forum. It would be virtually the same as if on such forum during the Cold War the USSR would be represented by the Soviet dissidents. The

dissidents were brave and dignified individuals but they were neither politically influential nor representative of the whole country.

Belarus has been under authoritarian rule over 15 years. All these years the opposition has practically been deprived of any opportunities to influence on the government's policies let alone representation in the parliament. The opposition has now practically transformed into a semi-dissident movement. It is able to give a picture of what is going on in Belarus and give advise to the EU in what policy to pursue with Belarus – but these consultations and even some financial and organizational support to Belarusian NGOs can hardly be considered a realistic policy.

It seems that in order to facilitate real change in the country one has to cooperate with the Belarusian authorities and try to influence them. To be exact, one must communicate with president Lukašenka, who is the primary decision maker in the country. As cynical as it sounds – a form of cooperation with the Belarusian government must be developed where officials would be present regardless of the democratic progress in the country. EURONEST PA should become such place.

The officials have refused to form the Belarusian delegation together with the opposition, on a 50/50 representation basis. It is a question whether the European Parliament should have followed the Belarusian officials' demands and let them have more than just 5 seats in the Belarusian delegation.

Maybe it did not play a significant role at all, as it seems that the political liberalization in Belarus is over anyway, at least till after the presidential elections of 2011, as a political expert quoted by Kommersant said. This sounds very realistic indeed.

Read stories by [Kommersant](#) (in Russian), [Lenta.ru](#) (in Russian), [Deutsche Welle Russian edition](#); [Belorusy i rynok](#) (in

Russian), [Belorusskie novosti](#).

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BBC Interviews Ivonka Survilla – President of Belarusian Government in Exile

BBC features Ivonka Survilla, the President of the Council (Rada) of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in a special broadcast on governments in exile.



According to the program author, Clive Anderson, the Rada is the longest-serving government in exile in the world. The Belarusian Democratic Republic's independence was declared on March 25, 1918 during World War I, when Belarus was occupied by the Germans according to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

After the Germans retreated from the territory of Belarus and the Russian Red Army started moving in to establish the Socialist Soviet Republic of Belarus, in December 1918, the Rada (Council) of the Belarusian Democratic Republic moved to Hrodna, which became the centre of a semi-autonomous Belarusian region within the Republic of Lithuania. During the subsequent 1919 Polish invasion, the Rada went into exile and facilitated an anticommunist struggle within the country during the 1920s.

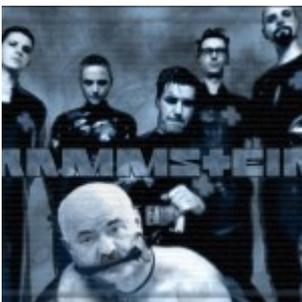
The BBC program examines interesting examples from around the world, which vary from the serious to the apparently ridiculous.

Clive Anderson examines one of the potentially strangest corners of international politics, the lesser-known governments or rulers in exile – a paradoxical area of international relations and surreal part of international law.

In Toronto, for example, a Belarusian government holds court, run by the charismatic Irvonka Survilla. Their version of Belarus only existed for nine months in 1918 before it was assimilated by the Soviet Union. Now that Belarus is independent, is there any reason for their continued existence?

The broadcast is available at BBC Radio 4 until 1 March 2010. To listen, click [here](#).

Belarusian Ideologist Makes PR for a Concert of Rammstein



A senior ideologist Mikalaj Čarhiniec, who had proposed to impose censorship restrictions on a concert of the German industrial rock band Rammstein, has demonstrated what the ideology of the current political regime in Belarus is.

Official ideology of today's Belarus can be described as post-Soviet left-wing conservatism. The Belarusian government is principally averse to democracy and civil liberties. Therefore it also has a very negative attitude towards any cultural or social phenomena like drugs legalization or the LGBT rights movement.

Belarusian bloggers and foreign media have been actively discussing the prospectives of the concert's cancellation. However, Andrej Hiro, Ambassador of Belarus to Germany, pointed out [today](#) that members of Rammstein had all received visas for Belarus and that the proposal to impose censorship restrictions on the concert had been "a private initiative".

A scandal of this kind is nothing new for Rammstein. It could only increase the popularity of the band, which is probably more famous in Belarus than in Germany itself. In show business there is no such thing as bad PR after all.

Not content to oppress the country's democratic opposition or rail against Western imperialism, the autocratic regime of Belarus has declared the German industrial rock band Rammstein to be an enemy of the state.

The country's Morality Council announced on Monday that the Berlin-based group's songs were propaganda for "violence, masochism, homosexuality and other perversions" that could "destroy the Belarusian state order." The official opprobrium calls into question a planned concert in the capital Minsk on March 7.

The Belarusian moral authorities said "permission for a Rammstein concert is a mistake that can cost us greatly" and that the band would have to have its set list approved ahead of time in order to prevent "extremism" and to ensure the "dignity" of the venue.

[Read the full story](#)

See also stories by [Deutsche Welle](#), [EU Observer Blog by Maryna Rakhlei](#), [RIA Novosti](#)

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The Union of Poles Mistreated in Belarus

Ethnic Poles rising in western Belarus was what Minsk and Moscow happened to choose as a scenario for their 2009 joint military exercise. As if ashamed of its lack of judgment last year, the Belarusian leadership is now doing everything possible to make such a far-fetched plot more plausible.

On February 8, Belarusian police burst into the Polish House in Iyvanets, owned by the Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB), and ordered the staff to vacate the building. This wasn't the first attack on the Union of Poles and the Polish House by the Belarusian authorities. In 2005, Hrodna militia took the office of the Union of Poles forcing a change of leadership.

In January, Minsk also started a criminal prosecution against Taresa Sobal, the director of Polish House in Iyvaniec. Sobal is being accused of failing to properly register a 2004 financial grant received by the Polish House from the former leader of Polish Union Tadevush Kruchkouski.

Actions of the Belarusian authorities evoked sharp criticism by the president of the EU Parliament Jerzy Buzek, who is Polish. Speaking in Stasbourg on Feb. 10, Buzek urged Minsk "to stop taking drastic measures against the Polish minority." He said "acceptance of EU norms with regard to ethnic minorities" was essential for improving the EU-Belarus

discourse. Outraged by Minsk's treatment of the Polish cultural group, Poland recalled its Ambassador to Belarus

Henryk Litwin for consultations. In its turn, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus has complained to Litwin over Poland's statements regarding the oppression of the Belarusian Poles.

Poles constitute the third largest ethnic group in the country after Belarusians and Russians. There are 12 newspapers and magazines in Polish and 2 schools (in Hrodna and Valkavysk). With about 20,000-members, 75 registered primary organizations, and 17 "Polish Houses," the Union of Poles in Belarus is the largest public association of a national minority in Belarus. Founded in Hrodna in 1988, it aspires to promote the Polish language and traditions.

In 2005, the ZPB split, with a pro-Minsk alternative registered as the Union of Belarusian Poles. The unrecognized branch of ZPB elected Anzhelika Borys as its chairwoman; the recognized and pro-Minsk branch elected Stanislaw Syamashka. Warsaw recognizes Borys's ZPB as the sole legal representative of the Polish minority in Belarus, but the Belarusian government favors the union led by Syamashka.

According to the web site of the Belarusian Embassy in the United States, the issue "lies outside the sphere of inter-ethnic relations or those between the state and the Polish national minority in Belarus." Blaming the power struggle among the leaders of the Union, the Embassy claims that "instead of seeking a solution to this situation, complicated in terms of law, one of the conflicting sides started to actively politicize the situation and brought the conflict inside the Union to the international level."

According to the Embassy, "maintaining sustainable inter-religious and inter-ethnic peace is what the Belarusian state can pride itself on." Article 15 of the Belarusian

Constitution requires the state to “bear responsibility for preserving the historic, cultural and spiritual heritage, and the free development of the cultures of all the ethnic communities that live in the Republic of Belarus.” Such exemplary behavior has rarely been the case in Belarus, however.

The position of the Polish minority in Belarus started to worsen after a 1995 referendum, which reintroduced Soviet-era symbols and Russian language as a second national language of Belarus. In 1997, the Belarusian authorities accused the Union of Poles of organizing political provocations, and in 1999 the Union complained of being discriminated to the representatives of the Polish parliament. Authors of the 2003 assessment by the Minorities at Risk Project warned the situation was “likely to deteriorate in the future” as Belarus grew dependent on Russia. So far, this prediction has proven accurate.

Polish presence on what today constitutes Belarusian territory started to form in the times of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1569-1795). The Commonwealth was partitioned by its neighbors Austria, Prussia, and Russia in the late 18th century. Most of the future Belarus was annexed by the Russian Empire. As a result of the 1921 Treaty of Riga, Polish influence over the Western Belarus was restored for nearly two decades. However, in 1939 the Soviet Union invaded Poland under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Germany, and West Belarus was incorporated into the Belarusian SSR. After the WWII, the Poles who remained on the Belarusian territory faced four decades of Soviet repressions and discrimination.

Belarusian State TV Accused of Ripping US Sitcom

Something the Belarusian bloggers have been laughing about during the past week: the state media had been actively explaining the necessity for the recently introduced [regulation of the Internet](#) by the need to fight copyright breach. And here we go – the state television itself is now being accused of the same, with ripping a whole sitcom being a much more serious thing than downloading pirate music from the web.



This scandal is not going to influence the introduction of internet regulations in any way but is simply more than illustrative.

The creator of Big Bang Theory has accused the Belarusian government of ripping off his sitcom.

The East European country has just launched its own sitcom called The Theorists based around the same premise as Chuck Lorre's American series – in which two socially awkward geeks live opposite a hot waitress.

In the CBS original, shown on E4 in Britain, the main character are called Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, Raj and Penny; in Belarus they are called Sheldon, Leo, Hovard, Raj and Natasha.

Lorres pointed out the similarity on a '[vanity card](#)' – a mini-essay which flashes on the screen at the end of each episode, too quickly to be read. However, he also publishes

the text on his website.

He said that even the opening credits – a fast montage from the dawn of time to the present day – are a carbon copy of the original.

[Read the full story](#)

See also stories [here](#) and [here](#)

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President Signed Decree on Regulation of the Internet

The Belarusian government's plans to regulate Internet have finally taken a form: last week president Lukašenka has signed a decree on "measures regarding improvement of the national segment of the Internet" (see Russian text of the decree [here](#)). The decree sets less strict regulation than in the [draft earlier published by Belarusian media](#), but creates a wide area for potential pressing on freedom of speech on the internet. It seems like the decree would not affect the work of experienced internet-users but may scary regular users from accessing pro-opposition websites. According to the decree, many details regarding identification of internet users and licensing of internet providers are still to be defined by the Government by May 2010.



A Belarusian official says that people will only be allowed

to enter Internet cafes with their passports beginning this summer, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reports.

Belarusian Communication and Information Minister Mikalay Pantsyaley said at press conference in Minsk that according to a February 1 decree by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, all Belarusians wanting to enter Internet cafes must have a passport starting on July 1.

Pantsyaley said the decree – which has been criticized by human rights organizations and many Western countries – obliges Internet cafe owners to identify those who enter cafes.

[Read the full story at RFERL.org](http://www.rferl.org)

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Corruption in the Belarusian Democratic Opposition Provokes Scandals



The Belarusian opposition seems to be heavily dependent on financing from abroad. During the past 15 years the Belarusian government has cut all the possibilities for it to get sponsors inside the country.

Belarusian businessmen attempting to sponsor the opposition are being persecuted. The best known case is that of Anatoł Krasoŭski, a businessman who, together with the opposition

leader [Viktar Hančar](#), was abducted and presumably killed in 1999.

Foreign financing of the opposition in Belarus is conducted in accordance with the US [Belarus Democracy Act](#), among other regulations. According to the widespread rumours, foreign financing for the opposition comes through organizations in Poland and Lithuania. The scope of corruption that accompanies financing of the Belarusian democratic opposition is unknown.

The lack of transparency has caused scandals. For instance, former head of the Lithuanian Republic Parliamentary Committee on National Security recently said that the death of a Lithuanian state security officer in 2006 could be related to his investigation of the corruption involved in financing the opposition in Belarus. This hypothesis, however uncertain, [has appeared immediately](#) after the officer's death in 2006 and came up again in late 2009 ([Read the story on Delfi.lt](#)).

It seems difficult to accuse the opposition of the situation: in today's authoritarian Belarus its material and moral degradation is, unfortunately, a natural process.

On the one hand, foreign financing helps keep afloat several organizations that would have vanished otherwise. Existence of these organizations is important for the promotion of human rights, democratic values, and a vision of a different Belarus.

On the other hand, dotations prevent the opposition from regeneration and adaptation to the current conditions. And, of course, where there is money, there is corruption – not only within the Belarusian opposition, but also among relevant parties in Poland and Lithuania.

In the past, there have been scandals around the Kalinoŭski Education Programme. The programme was created after the presidential elections campaign of 2006 to provide study places abroad for students expelled from Belarusian

universities for political activism. In fact, according to numerous evidence the programme had soon started accepting applications from regular students providing them with false evidence of political repressions against them.

How similar this situation is to dozens and hundreds of people queuing up for a status of a political refugee in the US and several European countries – also, with only a small part of them having really experienced repressions in Belarus. For instance, the Swiss Russian-speaking newspaper Nasha Gazeta reports of 76 Belarusians that have applied for political asylum in the country in 2009 ([see story in Russian](#)). This is much more than the number of political refugees from countries like Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan that seem far more authoritarian. There has hardly been any news in the Belarusian media of notable Belarusian political activists asking for political asylum in Switzerland in 2009.

This does not diminish the gravity of political repressions that do take place in Belarus. However, it is obviously wrong to conceal economic reasons for emigration behind political martyrdom. It just seems much like the wrong people often getting help instead of those who really need it.

Neither corruption related to financing, nor the pseudo-political emigration have ever been seriously investigated by the Belarusian media. Being primarily a propaganda tool, the state media lacks objectivity and professionalism, while the opposition media is largely dependent on foreign financing itself. An investigation of these facts – either by the Belarusian media, or even by a foreign agency, is necessary, although it seems hardly possible before the political climate in Belarus improves.

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Reporters Without Borders is concerned about the government's plans to tighten control of the Internet in Belarus



Belarus authorities has threatened to introduce censorship on the Internet about a year before the next presidential election. Under a recently published draft decree "On Measures for Revising Use of the National Segment of the World Wide Web", websites and Internet users would be strictly controlled by the government and a special unit of the Presidential Administration.

The international press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders has made a statement of protest expressing its concern over the plans of the Belarusian government to tighten control over the Internet:

Government tightens grip on Internet

Published on 6 January 2010

Reporters Without Borders is worried about the government's plans to tighten control of the Internet in a country where free expression is already restricted. President Alexander Lukashenko acknowledged on 30 December that his government is putting the final touches to a bill to this effect. The draft decree was leaked to the media on December 14, 2009. The discussions around it remain secret.

“We must emphasize our concern about this bill, which threatens online free speech and everyone’s right to express their views anonymously without fear of government repression,” Reporters Without Borders said. “After placing most of the traditional media under its control, the regime is pursuing an offensive against new media.”

The press freedom organisation added: “The president’s attempts to be reassuring cannot hide the repressive nature of this bill, which is liable to make netizens censor themselves. It should be abandoned so that Belarus is not added to the list of countries such as North Korea, China and Iran that Reporters Without Borders has identified as Enemies of the Internet.”

The bill would require all online publications to be registered and everyone going online to be identified, both in Internet cafés and at home. Internet café clients would have to show an ID document in order to go online, while Internet Service Providers (ISPs) would have to keep a record of this information and report it to the police, courts and the special agencies that monitor all news content published in Belarus.

Each website would have to register under a procedure to be defined by the cabinet and approved by the presidential office’s Centre for Operations and Analysis, which would be in charge of monitoring site content. If the site has information about Belarus, it would have to be registered under a Belarusian domain name (with the .by suffix).

Finally, ISPs would be forced to block websites deemed by government agencies to be “extremist.” This would be done without referring to any court.

Read the full text at Reporters Without Borders [web site](#).