

Covering protests: a new epoch for the Belarusian media

On 25 March, a record number of Internet users visited the website of the independent Belarusian newspaper *Nasha Niva*. 109,000 Internet users read articles describing the protests against the [social parasite law](#). In Belarus, this is nothing to sneeze at.

The state media either ignored the March protests or covered them in a negative light. Thus, the independent media became the only source of information for the public about the countrywide demonstrations against the social parasite decree.

Despite 120 cases of detention or arrest of journalists between 10 and 30 March, the independent media managed to cover the protests with great degree of professionalism. Due to the arrest of oppositional leaders in smaller cities, reporters found themselves in the spotlight.

Unorganised protesters gathered around journalists to express their discontent with the government and hundreds thousand Belarusians followed online streams of people meeting to criticise the economic policy of the authorities on camera.

Due to the rapid developments in media technology, Lukashenka's propaganda machine can no longer keep up with real journalists.

How free is the press in

Belarus?

Unlike in many authoritarian states, in Belarus the public has free access to local and foreign news portals. Nevertheless, human rights organisations are highly critical of Belarus when it comes to freedom of press issues.

The country traditionally occupies the lowest rungs of media freedom indices. In 2016, the World Press Freedom Index, published by Reporters without Borders, assigned Belarus 157th place out of 180 countries. According to Freedom House, Belarus occupies the 194th position. Only Crimea, Eritrea, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and North Korea earned a worse ranking.

✘ Indeed, the state controls all TV and Radio stations in the country and has a monopoly on print media distribution. Nevertheless, independent media has found much more success on the Internet. The most popular private news portal, *TUT.by*, is accessed by 46.42 % of Internet users in the country. According Google Analytics, in March 2017 the *TUT.by* news service attracted almost 6 million unique users.

According to a Belarusian rating of web-pages, *Akavita.by*, the most popular state news portal in the country was the official news-agency *Belta.by*. Approximately 470,000 users visit the page each month.

Media experts within the country agree that the media situation is not as drastic as international ratings claim. According to human rights organisations, no journalists are currently under arrest. The last killing of a journalist occurred 13 years ago in 2004. According to Belarus Association of Journalists chair Andrei Bastunets, the situation in Belarus is much better than in Azerbaijan or Syria, which rank above Belarus in many indices.

The highly restrictive nature of media legislation is the main

reason for such low ratings. Several influential Belarusian media outlets, such as satellite TV channels [Belsat](#) and Euroradio, are based in Poland. To hinder their work, authorities introduced a law prohibiting journalists from working with foreign media companies without government accreditation.

This legislative norm is often used to target freelancers working for these stations or other 'foreign' media organisations forced to work without Belarusian accreditation. As a result, fines for freelance journalists have become a common practise. The law also allows the Ministry of Information to block websites containing articles harmful to the interests of the state. Websites can even be blocked because of unsavoury comments under articles.

Covering protests

Protests against the parasite law and the following [crackdown on 25 March](#) have politicised Belarusian society. Naturally, this provoked a huge amount of interest on behalf of the independent media. The last time non-state media enjoyed such wide popularity was during the Silent Protests of 2011. While state TV stations broadcast propagandist programmes comparing the demonstrations to Nazi riots, independent journalists streamed online coverage from the ground.

☒ However, the scale of repression of journalists in 2017 was much larger than in 2011. Between 10 and 30 March, 120 journalists were detained, arrested, or fined. Nevertheless, after 25 March, some media analysts started to talk about a new era of journalism in Belarus. Indeed, the media was able to not only cover protests, but also mobilise protesters.

Due to the absence of oppositional leaders at the demonstrations in small cities such as Pinsk, Slonim, or Rahachou, people gathered around journalists and openly

criticised the government on camera. Somewhere between 20,000 to 350,000 people followed *Radio Liberty* and Belsat TV live-streams of the protests all over the country. Some journalists even managed to broadcast their own arrests and continued live-streams from inside police stations.

Commenting on the work of the media on 25 March, editor-in-chief of Euroradio Viktor Malisheuski admitted that this was the first time that journalists managed to be so brazen. They worked in the same way that journalists in democratic countries do. Thus, media consumers received much higher-quality material than the authorities expected.

The state media responds

The professionalism of the independent media was especially notable when compared with the state media. On 25 March, Internet users actively discussed developments on the website of the largest state-controlled Belarusian newspaper, *Belarus Today*. On a day when at least 700 protesters were detained in the centre of Minsk, the headline of the publication read '25 March. Everything is calm in Minsk'. The reaction of the public led to the post being deleted on 27 March.

In online broadcasts for state TV, the authorities provided low quality [propaganda movies](#). A recent documentary, broadcast on 12 April, linked activists suspected of inciting riots to ISIS and Nazi groups. Internet users were quick to respond with ironic comments and jokes comparing the documentary to science fiction.

Only a fraction of the public retains an interest in politics during lulls in repression

Experts agree that unlike state media, independent journalists showed a high level of professionalism. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the free media really expanded its

audience. After crackdowns on protests come to an end, interest towards politics usually declines.

Only a fraction of the public retains an interest in politics during lulls in repression, and this group remains the primary target audience of the non-state media. Just as in 2011, interest towards independent media is expected to fall for this reason.

Nevertheless, the work of journalists this time around is evidence that the techniques of protest coverage have forever changed. New technology allowed the public to watch the demonstrations and witness police brutality online in real time. This gives the journalistic community immense power. The arrests, fines, and police attacks on the offices of Belsat TV in Minsk which occurred on 31 March are proof that the authorities are well aware of this danger.

A U-turn in Poland's policy towards Belarus?

On 20 December, Polish MP Robert Tyszkiewicz publicly stated that Poland will hold parliamentary debates on the future of Belsat, an independent Belarusian TV channel based in Poland.

According to Tyszkiewicz, 'the termination of Belsat TV would mean a U-turn in Polish foreign policy, we would consider this a political mistake.'

Nearly all Polish politicians, journalists, and analysts covering Belarus share this stance. Moreover, Belarusian civil society, including leading figures in the Belarusian Polish minority, condemn the Polish Ministry for Foreign Affairs'

proposal to cut support for Belsat.

It appears that due to the growing uproar against the possible closure of Belsat, Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczywski may reverse his decision.

Policy change in the Polish government

A few years ago it would be difficult to imagine that the Polish government would develop such [a good relationship](#) with the Belarusian authorities. In 2016 the [Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs](#), the Deputy Prime Minister and the Head of the upper chamber of the Polish parliament all visited Minsk.

As one Polish diplomat privately told Belarus Digest, 'The Minsk embassy is actually understaffed for such an intense relationship.' It seems that even the President or the Prime Minister of Poland would consider meeting with Lukashenka if they could ensure it would not damage their reputations.

Together with the thaw in relations between Minsk and  Warsaw, the Polish authorities have begun treating Belarusian pro-democratic groups [with greater scepticism](#). The lack of prospects for political change, along with the decrease in repression, makes Belarus seem like a less urgent cause for many donors.

Nevertheless, few people expected the Polish MFA to be so harsh to Belsat TV. The ministry has not disclosed any information about its plan [to cut next year's support](#) for the channel by two-thirds, although there are only two weeks remaining in 2016. This information first came to light on 15 December thanks to [Agnieszka Romaszewska](#), head of Belsat TV, and was based on her sources.

Ironically, even the Belarusian authorities are not demanding that the Polish side close Belsat; it has in fact become more tolerant of the station. In 2016, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry even accredited four Belsat TV journalists for the first time.

No one is happy with Waszczykowski's idea

On 18 December, Minister Waszczykowski explained that after reformatting Belsat, the Polish government hopes to persuade the Belarusian authorities to allow TVP Polonia to join Belarusian TV cable networks. TVP Polonia is a Polish-language channel tailored to Poles living abroad. This would arguably strengthen the position of Poles living in Belarus.

However, the Polish minority in Belarus has expressed dissatisfaction with this idea. On 19 December, [Anżelika Borys](#), leader of the Union of Poles in Belarus, stated that 'the closure of Belsat will be a blow to Belarusian civil society.'

On the same day, [Andrzej Poczobut](#), another important representative of the Polish minority, published an article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* claiming the Polish foreign policy has lost its credibility, and that 'the closing of Belsat comes at a fatal time and in a fatal style.'

The possible closure of Belsat TV also caught Polish politicians by surprise. Last week, the Commission for Foreign Affairs of the Polish Sejm passed a resolution to support the Belarusian independent media.

Even Robert Winnicki, a prominent Polish nationalist who previously called for the closing of Belsat, sees no point in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' decision, as this

change would be a move 'from being stupidly anti-Lukashenka to being stupidly pro-Lukashenka'.

Polish analysts are also dismayed. Adam Eberhardt, director of the influential Polish think tank Centre for Eastern Studies, tweeted that 'the possible extinction of Belsat would be a great gesture to Lukashenka. The problem is that he does not usually reciprocate gestures and respect agreements.' According to Witold Jurasz, a Polish analyst and former diplomat in Minsk: 'if the Polish government plans to cut the subsidy for Belsat, I can confirm that someone has gone crazy.'

Needless to say, Belarusian civil society also opposes the Polish minister's decision. Movement for Freedom has launched an online petition addressed to the Polish president which has already been signed by thousands of Belarusians. Opposition groups also held a demonstration in Minsk on 20 December.

While Belarusian civil society wields little influence, the emerging coalition of pro-Belsat politicians, journalists, and analysts may prove more effective. The negative political fallout of the decision may exceed the desire of Witold Waszczykowski to close Belsat TV.

The two main reasons not to abandon Belsat TV

Why the Belarusian television channel should continue to receive support from the Polish government boils down to two arguments.

Firstly, the closure of Belsat TV will further delay the  democratisation of Belarus and hinder its movement towards the West. Belsat, as well as other projects, plays a large role in supporting Belarusian national identity, and

Belarusian identity remains the basis for the existence of a Belarusian state.

Belsat remains for Belarusians the only TV alternative to the official views propagated on Belarusian and Russian television. While the station cannot democratise the country alone, Belsat's journalists play an important role at a grassroots level. For example, in 2016, a corrupt official from Slonim came under investigation thanks to Belsat.

Now, even the Belarusian authorities are feeling the heat of Russian nationalism. Just this week the Belarusian Foreign Ministry officially protested statements by Leonid Reshetnikov, the Kremlin-linked head of the influential Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, who claimed that Belarus remains a part of Great Russia.

It seems that nowadays Lukashenka's regime has more problems with Russian TV broadcasts than with Belsat. The authorities are no longer seriously afraid of a pro-Western colour revolution, but are more concerned about the threat from the East. Incidentally, the Russian-backed Sputnik.by welcomed the possible closure of Belsat calling it "a remnant of the past".

Secondly, de-funding Belsat will deprive Poland of its most important instrument of influence in Belarus, into which it has already invested around \$40m. Furthermore, Poland will lose its moral credibility. When Polish politicians first launched Belsat TV, they gave speeches about solidarity and alluded to the help Poland received from the Western countries during the communist times.

Poland certainly has a right to set its own foreign policy priorities, but compromising its values and abandoning such a huge project will make Warsaw less credible and predictable to many countries. Diplomats from other Western countries have privately expressed to Belarus Digest their concern over the possibility of such a sharp U-turn.

Over the course of Lukashenka's rule Poland had 12 different foreign ministers. Some of them believed that they could engage Lukashenka and others wanted to isolate him. However, never has the Polish Foreign Ministry come this close to abandoning the long-term moral commitment of Poland to support Belarusian statehood, democracy, and independence.

Poland Improves Links with Minsk at the Expense of the Opposition?

According to Polish MP Robert Winnicki, Poland should stop funding the Belsat TV channel and improve relations with Lukashenka. Although Winnicki remains a marginal figure in Polish politics, his statement is indicative of a new political climate in Poland.

Many Belarusian NGOs hoped that the new Polish Government, run by the conservative Law and Justice party (PiS), would return to its policy of 2005-2007, when it last had control of the government.

At that time, Poland invested heavily in support for Belarusian democracy by creating the Kalinowski Scholarship programme for students experiencing political repression, and Belsat TV, the only independent channel broadcasting for Belarusians.

However, Poland has recently been reducing its level of support for pro-democracy groups and is trying to improve relations with the Belarusian authorities. Currently, the

Polish Parliament has two separate groups on Belarus, one of which frequently lobbies to curry favour with Aliaksandr Lukashenka.

The changes in Polish policy cannot be explained only by attempts to improve relations with Belarusian authorities. The lack of chances for democratic changes as well as brutal repression reduces interest in Belarus among many donors, including Polish ones.

Polish support for Belarusian democracy

The change in policy towards Belarus after PiS's victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections took many by surprise.

Belarusian civil activists expected that the new conservative government would return to its previous policy of 2005-2007, when PiS ruled in Poland and played a crucial role in promoting Belarusian democracy. Poland supported [Alexander Milinkevich](#) during the 2006 presidential elections and continued to invest heavily in Belarusian democratic projects.

Belsat probably has the largest budget of any project directed at Belarus

A few days after the dissolution of the mass protests of 2006 in Belarus, Poland announced the creation of the [Kalinowski scholarship](#). The program granted Belarusian democratic activists an opportunity to study in Polish universities with monthly scholarships of about \$400 – a considerable sum in Poland at the time. A total of 244 students took advantage of this opportunity in 2006, when the scholarship first came in to effect.

A year later, Poland launched the satellite television station

[Belsat](#), with probably the largest budget of any project directed at Belarus. In 2007, the channel received about \$6m for launch.

The government of the liberal Civic Platform (PO), which began to rule in Poland in late 2007, continued supporting these projects but gradually decreased their size. On the other hand, the liberal Polish government also increased spending on support of democracy in Belarus in 2010-2011, in connexion with the presidential election and the wave of repression which followed.

According to some sources, Poland then became a mega-donor for the presidential campaign of democratic candidate [Uładzimir Niakliajeu](#), making it perhaps the most well-funded political campaign in Belarus so far.

Poland changes its priorities

Despite expectations, PiS has not returned to its old policy and the budgets of projects aimed at democratising Belarus have started to decrease.

Polish authorities have discontinued the Kalinowski Scholarship programme, creating in its place a smaller programme to support researchers without a political focus. Belsat remains uncertain about its long-term funding. In June, [Agnieszka Romaszewska](#), director of Belsat TV, said that she is worried about the financial stability of the channel "due to the "warming of relations" with Belarus as well as a lack of vision for the prospects of such projects as Belsat TV."

Less is known about political groups which previously received money from the Polish authorities. However, according to rumours, the Polish authorities have decreased support for the [Belarusian House in Warsaw](#), which unites Belarusian émigré politicians holding oppositional views.

These changes are taking place as the Polish government tries to improve relations with the Belarusian government. In March, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczykowski [visited Belarus](#) and met with Lukashenka. Later, a delegation of the Belarusian parliament came to Warsaw; this was a real achievement for the Belarusian authorities.

The Polish Parliament currently has two groups focused on relations with Belarus. One of them lobbies in support of more democracy projects, while the second supports more cooperation with Belarusian authorities.

A member of the latter group, nationalist MP Robert Winnicki, recently stated that Poland should stop funding Belsat TV and interfering in Belarusian politics. Although Winnicki is a marginal figure, up to this point such views were absent in the public space.

What is behind the policy change

The Polish authorities make no secret of their desire to improve relations with Lukashenka. Unlike other Eastern European countries, such as Ukraine, Lithuania and Russia, Poland has no painful historical disputes with Belarus and would like to restore trade. According to official Belarusian data, imports from Poland in 2015 decreased to \$ 1.1bn compared to \$ 1.5bn in 2014.

At the same time, Polish authorities value Lukashenka's role in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. On 8 July, during the NATO summit, the Polish Foreign Minister said that "his country would like to be a mediator in rapprochement between Belarus and NATO."

Trade between Belarus and Poland is perhaps currently based on

mutual concessions. Among the possible issues which can be worked on, the most realistic and interesting for the parties may be the Polish minority in Belarus, which [remains repressed](#) by Lukashenka's regime.

However, an attempt to improve relations with Lukashenka is not the only explanation behind the change in policy. The lack of prospects for political change as well as a decrease in repression makes Belarus less interesting for many donors. For example, in the last year Belsat lost a quarter of its funding. The money was mainly coming from Western European countries, which redirected the funds to help refugees from the Middle East.

Thus, Poland remained the only donor to Belsat and is now re-assessing whether or not to fund such projects. The conservative government, even if it wanted to, remains unlikely to shut down a project as large as Belsat in which Poland has invested so heavily. But funding smaller and more politicised initiatives are less likely to be perceived as being in Poland's interests.

However, despite the lack of severe repression or significant progress, Poland should continue supporting Belsat and the Kalinowski programme, as they can change the climate of ideas inside Belarus. It remains difficult to assess the impact of these projects, but they have certainly done much to cultivate a Belarusian identity separate from Russia. And even Lukashenka's [soft belarusization](#) may not bear fruit if Belarusian civil society has not first strengthened its own national identity with the help of Poland.

Fixing Housing and Communal Services in Belarus: A New Minister is Not Enough

As of 17 November, the Ministry of Housing and Communal Services has a new head – Aliaksandr Cierachaŭ. However, this new appointment will unlikely fix the serious problems which the sector is facing.

Housing and communal services swallows up 8% of the Belarusian budget and remains a hotbed of corruption. Over the past half year, the police have identified more than 100 crimes in this sector.

The authorities want to reform the sector to make public utilities more effective. Yet, they are concentrating more on punishing corrupt officials and implementing patchwork fixes instead of reforming the entire system of housing and communal services.

A Little Known Hotbed of Trouble

On 17 November, [Aliaksandr Lukašenka](#) appointed a new minister of housing and communal services. Thirty-six-year-old Aliaksandr Cierachaŭ, former first deputy minister, will manage one of the most corrupt wings of the Belarusian state. On 14 May, [Aliaksandr Jakabson](#), an aide to the President, stated that 10% of the expenditures of the Ministry of Housing and Communal Services are criminal in nature.

The expenditures on housing and communal services remain enormous, running up a bill of about \$3.5 bn — the equivalent of 8% of the consolidated budget of Belarus. Even according to the official Belarusian Economy magazine, established by the Council of Ministers, "the Belarusian housing and public

utilities sector needs to be streamlined its management structure and performance standards like its man-hours and number of employees." In other words, the authors of the article are calling for firing people whose jobs are redundant.

Moreover, a chunk of the state's tax revenues has a tendency to disappear inside the ministry. Last month, Independent Belarusian television Belsat covered a low-level corruption scheme, exposing just one of many similar schemes. Residents of Slonim, a town in western Belarus, decided to privatise a housing building in which they had lived for a long time. However, the price they were asking for the building appeared grossly exaggerated by the local officials.

The building's residents learned that, according to the available documents, the government had spent \$60,000 on renovations for the building. The money they had used on the renovations, however, had mysteriously vanished, and the actual repairs done to the property were minimal.

Furthermore, local officials forged documents showing that the its residents refused to instal boilers and plumbing at the expense of the state. These facts would have remained unknown if the people had not appealed the decision with the police demanding to see all of the available documentation.

Currently, the police and the Committee of the State Security (KGB) are investigating the case. At the same time, the authorities intend to fine Belsat journalist Aleś Zalieŭski, who broke the story, for working without the required press accreditation.

A System That Promotes Corruption and Inefficiency

There are three main factors that make Belarus' housing and communal services system susceptible to corruption: its a state monopoly, the absence of public oversight over its expenditures, and chronic mismanagement.

The state remains a monopolist in the housing and communal services industry and serves 95% of all apartments in Belarus. This lack of competition leads to a lower quality services, overpricing and a lackluster performance by many municipal workers.

Andrej Tyčyna, a democratic activist from [Salihorsk](#), explained to Belarus Digest that the renovation of his apartment building's entrance — which required a the walls to be painted and replacing windows and a door — went on for six months.

The lack of public oversight over its expenditures only makes matters worse. This is partly due to the fact that Belarusians formally pay directly, according to Naviny.by web-site, 31% of the total cost of the housing and communal services. Taxes cover the rest. The recent piece by Belsat revealed that people may simply not know how much is officially being spent to repair their buildings.

Poor management, in this case, is a natural consequence of the state's monopoly in this sector, to say nothing of the lack of accountability or the absence of proper incentives. The higher the costs and needs of state monopolies, the more subsidies they receive from the budget. Therefore, local authorities often prefer to carry out long-term or ongoing repairs.

The Authorities Working on Reforms

This year housing and communal services became a priority for the government. In February 2014, Aliaksandr Lukašenka created a working group on the issue headed by Aliaksandr Jakabson.

From February to May the group held 30 meetings. In 2013-2014, law enforcement agencies identified more than 100 crimes in the sector. Officials from the Committee for State Control say more than half of the irregularities led to criminal cases being opened. This peak of interest may have something to do with the economic slowdown, so the authorities have no choice

but to combat corruption to stay afloat.

While it appears that the authorities are attempting to fix the system, they still prefer to struggle with the consequences, rather than fixing the root of the problem. On the one hand, the government wants to punish corrupt officials, cut expenses and jobs and get rid of bad assets.

Still housing agencies have to preserve detrimental properties that have nothing to do with communal services. For instance, the Ministry of Housing and Communal Services is currently keeping sunflower-seed frying operation afloat as its owner went bankrupt. Despite its unprofitable nature, the state still wants to keep it open.

Under the reforms being proposed currently, the state wants to clean up its finances in order to avoid cross-subsidies and to introduce superintendent jobs for housing throughout Belarus. This superintendent will be an electrician, locksmith, plumber, painter and carpenter – and responsible for several buildings. These steps by the government may seem rational, but the regime can do much more if it really wants to improve the situation.

The authorities should allow for more private service providers to work on the housing and communal services market. A public-private partnership, like the one between [German company Remondis](#) and Belarusian public enterprises, shows that sharing responsibilities with the private sector has its benefits. Together they created a [waste management](#) system in Minsk. Many EU countries forbid housing and communal services companies to engage in supplying gas, water, heat, and electricity all together in order to avoid one firm becoming a monopoly.

Moreover, the state can make the financial system more transparent. The government's belief that people should pay 100% of the total cost of the housing and communal services

actually makes sense if, in return, people receive high quality services for their money. Rather than prosecuting corrupt officials, it would be more efficient to deprive them of their opportunities to steal from the state coffers.

Is Time on the Side of the Belarusian Regime?

Last week Alexander Lukashenka declared his interest in good relations with Western countries.

His statement came against the backdrop of active contacts between Belarusian officials and their European counterparts in the past two months. Involved in these meetings were a director of a department of the EU External Action Service, a delegation of the Council of Europe, representatives of the Lithuanian foreign ministry, a delegation from the Swedish foreign ministry, and a Czech foreign minister.

Two weeks ago, Lukashenka said at a meeting with US experts that Belarus seeks “normal” relations with Washington, as well. Though all these developments are far from a breakthrough in relations with the West – frozen after 2010 – they demonstrate that the Belarusian government is aware that it cannot just stick to Moscow. At the same time it does not display any haste in improving its relations with the West. It hopes that the time is on its side in the international arena.

No Democracy for a Nickel

Sure, the prospects for a genuine rapprochement between Belarus and the West currently look bleak. The interests of

all parties apparently do not require the urgent mending of fences. The Belarusian regime feels secure with its Russian protection and assistance. The European politicians who tried to strike a deal with Lukashenka in 2008-2010 are not likely to risk it again. The European Union has more important problems to sort out and is quite happy to just demonstratively punish the ugly, yet rather harmless (for Europeans), dictatorship in Belarus.

Having tried to democratise Belarus and bring it closer to Europe in 2008-2010, the EU never offered Minsk a [serious deal](#) capable of changing the situation in the country. After all, Belarus needs to compensate for the possible loss of enormous Russian subsidies in the potential aftermath of eliminating the existing model of relations with Moscow which has been so fundamental to the existing regime.

European politicians failed because they ignored basic the political economy of Belarusian state

To change this reality, extensive and expensive modernisation is needed. Yet European politicians wanted to do it on the cheap. Of course they ,because they ignored the basic political economy of Belarusian state.

So, the EU began to fight against the Belarusian regime using isolation, threats and restrictive measures. Cutting links with Minsk, the West played into the hands of Moscow and Lukashenka. The isolation brought the regime closer to Russia and did not threaten its existence. On the contrary, it drastically diminished opportunities for political alternatives to Lukashenka to emerge among the Belarusian [nomenclatura](#) and business community allied with the state.

Removal of the current regime cannot be achieved without changing the political economy of the nation. Currently there is very little hope for such changes. Yury Drakakhrust of Radio Liberty quoted an anonymous Western diplomat who said

while “your modernisation costs big money, the defence of democratic values costs nothing.”

The EU continues to condemn Minsk and demand the release of political prisoners yet is not ready to seriously invest in changes. Thus, last year the Polish-based Belsat TV – the only TV [project](#) supporting the opponents of Lukashenka – had to suspend its operations for weeks as much of its 2012 annual budget for broadcasting had been spent before the year ended.

Lukashenka's Dream

Of course, two EU members – Lithuania and Poland – will always have interests in neighbouring Belarus, yet they are by far not the most relevant actors in the EU's foreign policy. Other EU countries, and all major EU members, have no interest in a small post-Soviet country lacking any major assets like oil or gas, a country that is not threatening anyone in its own neighbourhood.

However, a country which is not important today may become important tomorrow. In better times for Russian-Western relations, the West could neglect Belarus by dealing just with Russia. Worsening relations with Russia will increase the geopolitical significance of the region and of Belarus. The deterioration of these relations has been evident in recent years and this tendency will likely continue given the increasingly authoritarian methods of the Kremlin.

It was Russian aggression in the Caucasus in 2008 which brought Western politicians round to the idea of negotiating with the Belarusian strongman. He knows it, and anticipates a new change in the current geopolitical reality. Moreover, if this time the confrontation between Russia and the West lasts longer, Lukashenka could become for the West something like Ceausescu of Communist Romania in the time of the Cold War, i.e., a man with dubious views and background, yet who is indispensable for geopolitical reasons.

Putin's efforts to establish the [Eurasian Union](#) in the post-Soviet world by 2015 are just adding to a series of collisions between Moscow and the West in the Middle East and on ever recurring questions of human rights and democracy in Russia itself. Actually, Western countries may have to accept not just Lukashenka. The EU has also to deal with the increasingly authoritarian Ukraine run by Viktor Yanukovich who may join Lukashenka in his defiance of democracy.

Dangerous Russian Ally

The hopes of the Belarusian ruler for a new confrontation between Russia and the West make him seek contacts with the EU without giving in to European demands concerning liberalisation and release of political prisoners. At the moment he is using contacts with the EU merely as leverage in negotiations with Russia. For the Belarusian ruling elite is clear that, though Russia is their main sponsor, they shall [beware](#) of the Kremlin.

Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makey](#) once said that there is a brutal "jungle law" in the international environment surrounding Belarus. Some commentators were quick to interpret it as a reference to the Western pressure on the regime, yet there are signs that Belarusian officials consider relations with Russia in similar terms.

At a meeting with experts representing the Jamestown Foundation, an American think tank, Lukashenka emphasised the contradictions in Russian-Belarusian relations. He stated that Russia had changed its imperial thinking, yet Belarusians were vigilant and constantly defended their independence. He brought up an example of a "forceful attempt [by Russia] to introduce a common currency" which had been defeated.

This understanding is a positive development which created a precondition for a new age in Belarusian relations with the West. Just a dozen years ago, the Belarusian ruling

establishment did not see the country outside the Russian realm at all. Yet no government in Minsk – neither authoritarian nor democratic – can introduce significant changes in foreign alignment of the country without changes in its political economy, i.e., freeing the economy from its total dependence on [Russian energy subsidies](#).

Only when this strong dependence on Moscow has been overcome can Belarusians change their country and build a functioning democracy. Belarusian independence and democracy require serious investments and risky deals. And these investments and risk-taking initiatives by the West can materialise when Belarus becomes more important due to changes in its geopolitical situation.

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Freedom House Labeled Belarus as “Worst of the Worst”



Washington-based think tank Freedom House was unimpressed by liberalization recently declared by Belarusian authorities. Fair enough – Belarus does not have a single TV or radio station which would be critical of the its government. Poland did a good job in supporting

Belsat, the only independent TV station broadcasting to Belarus, but its influence is still marginal. Watching Belsat requires a satellite dish or Internet – a luxury which most Belarusians cannot afford. Although a few independent

newspapers are still allowed to circulate, their impact is negligible. Government-run newspapers are heavily subsidized and state institutions are required to subscribe to them and to force employees to do the same.

Constant repressions against [journalists](#) and [media](#) turned Belarusian information landscape from a flourishing garden of early 1990-s into a desert. It is not surprising that Belarus is the only country in Europe which Freedom House put on its list of shame:

Worst of the Worst The world's 10 worst-rated countries are Belarus, Burma, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In these states, independent media are either nonexistent or barely able to operate, the press acts as a mouthpiece for the regime, citizens' access to unbiased information is severely limited, and dissent is crushed through imprisonment, torture, and other forms of repression.

Read Freedom House press release at freedomhouse.org.

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.](#)

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Repressions against Media in the Wake of Presidential Elections in Belarus



As presidential elections are getting closer, Belarus authorities have stepped up their efforts to silence

media not under their control. Over the last few days, the Council of Ministers imposed additional restrictions on accreditation of foreign media, the President of Belarus adopted a decree imposing new limitations on internet providers and earlier today police raided the informal office of Warsaw-based Belsat television channel. The office is informal because the authorities refuse to give Belsat accreditation.

Control over media is crucial for any authoritarian regime's survival. Belarus authorities have effectively shut down all meaningful alternative media within the country years ago. Although a few independent newspapers are still allowed to circulate in the country, they do not have any real impact on public opinion. Heavily subsidized state-controlled television, radio and printed periodicals completely dominate the media market of Belarus.

On the first day of February, after months of speculations, Belarus President signed a decree aimed at restricting activities of internet providers in Belarus. The decree makes it easier for Belarus special services to access information transmitted via Internet. The decree also requires internet providers to store the data of individual internet users, which could be later retrieved by Belarus authorities.

The Council of Ministers of Belarus has also restricted distribution of foreign media in Belarus. Among other things, the government has forbidden to distribute any "foreign products" which contain information "the distribution of which is forbidden or access to which is limited in accordance with legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus". This effectively means that any state organ may outlaw foreign periodicals without even having to give any explanations.

Both the decree and the Council of Ministers' regulations will be subject of future interpretations by the courts and other state bodies. It is unclear how zealous they will be in enforcing these new rules.

What is clear is that the Belarus authorities are trying to restrict access to foreign media, because they see it as a real threat to their political monopoly. Another brick in the information wall they are building is an attempted raid of Belsat office in Minsk. Belsat is an independent satellite channel headquartered in Poland. It is the only Belarusian-language TV broadcaster not under the government control. The number of people who can actually watch Belsat it is relatively small because of the expense of installing a satellite dish. However, it the broadcaster gaining more popularity and is perhaps the most influential independent electronic media in Belarus.

Last month, a large number of international organizations and NGOs protested against a warning, which the Ministry of Justice issued to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). This warning may potentially lead to closure of this organization. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has even devoted a special paragraph in its recent resolution condemning pressure on the BAJ. But instead of listening, the Belarusin authorities put even more pressure on independent media.

There is nothing new for the Belarusian authorities in resolutions full of condemnations or even in economic sanctions, which make Belarus even more dependent on Russia. What Europe and the United States have not yet tried, is to take the issue of supporting foreign-based media seriously. This includes increasing FM- and TV broadcasting from the neighboring countries, so that Belarus population has access to uncensored information.

The National Endowment for Democracy hosts an event on Belarus



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Presentations by

Olga Kazulina *Activist and daughter of opposition leader, Alyaksandr Kazulin*

Alyaksandr Klaskouski *Director of Analytical Projects, BelaPAN news agency*

Introduced by

Rodger Potocki *Director for Europe and Eurasia, National Endowment for Democracy*

Please RSVP by email to <bobbiet@ned.org> or

by telephone to (202) 378-9525.

Despite the controversial September 2008 parliamentary elections in Belarus, which were widely denounced by western

observers as undemocratic, the European Union has followed through on pre-election pledges to loosen travel restrictions on Belarusian government officials, including President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Over the past year, Belarus has taken steps to release political prisoners and says it wants improved relations with the West. Is Belarus, which continues to actively repress domestic criticism and has reportedly offered to host Russian missiles on its territory, sincere in its stated wish to improve relations with Europe and America?

Olga Kazulina is the daughter of political prisoner and former presidential candidate

Alyaksandr Kazulin, who was arrested in March 2006 and sentenced to 5 1/2 years of imprisonment for his political actions against the Lukashenko regime. She is a member of the Social Democratic Party and the commission "Freedom for Kazulin and All Political Prisoners." Ms. Kazulina was the deputy director of the firm Alaktiv from 2005 until 2007, when she was fired after attending an opposition conference in Lithuania.

Alyaksandr Klaskouski is Director of Analytical Projects for the news agency BelaPAN and Editor-in-Chief of BelaPAN's Elections website. He also runs a popular political blog for the e-weekly *Nasha Niva* and writes a column for *Naviny.by*. Mr. Klaskouski is a regular contributor to RFE/RL's Belarus Service and BelSat, a Warsaw-based satellite television channel. Both speakers are in the U.S. at the invitation of the International Republican Institute to participate in events marking International Human Rights Day.

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