

How to Please the "Russian Bear" – Belarus Politics Digest

Belarusian authorities intensified their efforts to please their Russian counterparts by publicly praising the idea of the Russia-dominated Eurasian Union. They also continued repression of political opponents. Several opposition activists involved in actions of solidarity with political prisoners were arrested last week. Two journalists working for popular Poland- and Russia-based media were also targeted.

Lukashenka: Belarus Stability Depends on the "Russian Bear". President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenka [believes](#) that the stability of Belarus is largely dependent on stability in Russia. He said on October 26 "If the Russian bear is doing well, we'll be fine, too. But if Russia is shaking and unstable, as it did at the end of the last century, hard times will come for us".

Makei: Eurasian Union to be in Real Competition with the EU. Head of Presidential Administration of Belarus Uladzimir Makei [said](#) that the idea of Eurasian Union, voiced by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and supported by Alexander Lukashenko, was taken by West very cautiously. According to Vladimir Makei, Western countries fear the Eurasian Union to become a real competitor in foreign markets.

Lukashenka: Belarus has learned to combat «revolutions through social networks». Belarus has learned to combat "revolutions through social networks," Alyaksandr Lukashenka [said](#) while meeting on October 26 in Minsk with members of the Council of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Russian journalist deported from Belarus. On October 26, [Igor Karmazin](#), reporter of the Moskovsky Komsomolets Russian newspaper, was [deported](#) from Belarus after arranging a number of interviews with former Belarusian political prisoners and their families. Karmazin was given a paper saying his entrance to Belarus would be banned within a year.

Belsat journalist warned by General Prosecutor's Office. On October 27, independent journalist Alina Radachynskaya was [accused](#) of cooperation with the foreign media, in particular, of working for the Polish TV-channel Belsat without accreditation. Two more Belsat journalists – Alyaksandr Barazenska and Aleh Razhkou – were summoned to the General Prosecutor's Office but no warning was issued to them.

Actions of solidarity. From October 21 to October 29, the civil campaign "European Belarus" [held](#) daily pickets to demand freedom for the political prisoners. At least 1.5 dozen people were detained during the actions of solidarity in Minsk. Some of them were sentenced from 5 to 15 days of administrative arrest under for "violation of the order of organization or holding mass actions or picketing". Gomel Court [sentenced](#) local activist Vital Pratasevich to 10 days of administrative arrest for staging an unauthorized picket of solidarity in Gomel.

Opposition activists detained. On October 27, Gomel Savetski District Court [sentenced](#) local activist Illia Mironau to 10 days of administrative arrest for involvement organizing the People's Assembly scheduled for November 12. On October 27, Barysau district court [sentenced](#) a former prisoner of conscience Aliaksandr Malchanau to 10 days of administrative arrest for allegedly resisting arrest. On October 30, a former Head of the "Right Alliance" Yury Karetnikau was [detained](#) in Minsk. He was charged with disorderly conduct.

Total number of political prisoners – 11+3. Now in prisons there are not less than eleven political prisoners: ex-

presidential candidates Andrey Sannikov, Nikolay Statkevich; leader of the campaign “European Belarus” Dmitry Bondarenko; Pavel Seviarynets; Head of the Human Rights Centre “Viasna” Ales Byalyatsky; youth leaders Zmitser Dashkevich and Eduard Lobov; entrepreneur Nikolay Autukhovich.

Anarchists Igor Olinevich, Nikolay Dedok and Alexander Frantskevich are [recognized](#) as political prisoners of the Belarusian regime by human rights organizations *Viasna* and *BHC*. Three more anarchists from Babrujsk including Yauhen Vaskovich, Pavel Syramalotau and Artiom Prakapenka are under [discussion](#).

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Belarus Needs CSTO, CSTO needs Belarus

Six out of seven member states attended an unofficial summit meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Astana, Kazakhstan, on August 12-13. □ Isolated from the West and in the midst of an economic crisis, Belarus was one of the most enthusiastic summit participants. CSTO chair this year, Belarusian president used the floor as to draw attention to his immediate concerns: social unrest and the power of internet.

While other CSTO members were also concerned about violence in

Afghanistan and US troop withdrawal plans, Alyaksandr Lukashenka brought the situation in North Africa and the Middle East into focus. Even though Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Egypt and Yemen are far from Belarus and far beyond the CSTO immediate sphere of interests, the protests in those countries hit close to home, and he stressed that an adequate CSTO response to anti-government protests is necessary.

The Belarusian leader believes social inequality, corruption, and political conflicts rather than political repression and authoritarianism as the primary sources of protests. The Belarusian side also thinks that outside tinkering has played a role. Drawing lessons from the protesters' use of internet and social networks (the case even in Belarus) Lukashenka called on CSTO members to strengthen their capabilities in cyber warfare and internet surveillance.

Today Lukashenka seems the most enthusiastic CSTO advocate. He is actively campaigning for increasing in the role of the CSTO and strengthening the Collective Rapid Response Forces. CSTO is the only military block in which the isolated Belarus takes part, and as a result the country takes its responsibilities with utmost seriousness. As Lukashenka noted, Belarus "does not have a single CSTO document that is still not ratified".

In contrast to Uzbekistan, whose President Islam Karimov didn't attend the summit as he was busy flirting with NATO and disappointed with CSTO, Belarus not only played a leadership role at the summit, but has devoted the front pages of its official newspapers and web sites to the meeting. Gone are the times when Minsk would take liberties and boycott CSTO meetings (as happened in 2009 after Russia's ban on Belarus' dairy products). Today CSTO is the only forum where Belarus is still welcome.

The organization's focus is on Central Asia, but Belarus fits right in, at least as far as the regimes of member states are

concerned: in 2011 out of the seven CSTO members only Kyrgyzstan and Armenia were classified as “partly free” while the rest were considered “not free” by the Freedom House. All of CSTO members are also leaning toward Russia; not surprisingly, some Western analysts suggest CSTO could become an anti-NATO alliance.

Convenient for Belarus, CSTO has a right to offer expedient aid to member states, which includes sending “peacekeepers” to member-states territories in cases of anti-governmental protests. It can only do so when officially asked for help, which takes care of the situations in which such “help” could be unwelcome. Belarus’ position on such interventions became clear last year when Lukashenka appealed for intervention in Kyrgyzstan to restore Kurmanbek Bakiyev to power.

Interestingly, among the priorities proposed by Belarus at the nonofficial summit was creating a legal framework for drafting a list of personae non gratae on the territories of CSTO countries. Denying visas to US and EU officials as well as international human rights advocates on a unilateral basis is clearly not enough for Belarus.

Belarus’ activism in CSTO is also useful for Russia. Busy taking to the West and preparing for presidential elections, Moscow can safely leave CSTO diplomacy to beleaguered Minsk and avoid potential accusations of imperialism.

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