

No Longer the Last Dictatorship in Europe

The Kremlin's war in Ukraine and the rise of Russian authoritarianism have made it clear that Belarus is neither the only dictatorship in Europe, nor the worst of them.

While Lukashenka's authoritarianism causes problems primarily for Belarusians, Putin is now threatening all of Europe, if not the entire world. Putin's recent wars in Ukraine and Georgia have taken lives of thousands of people.

The human rights record in Russia is becoming similar to that of Belarus, as the number of political prisoners and violent attacks against political opponents rises.

The Kremlin, unlike Belarus, has more leverage on the EU and the United States due to its oil and gas exports as well as its nuclear arsenal. Russia's size ensures that will not become as isolated as its smaller Customs Union partner.

Lukashenka now has a chance to improve his image in the West. His neutral stance in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict may contribute to a better understanding between the West and Belarus. Due to its dependence on authoritarian Russia, however, Belarus is unlikely to shed the dictatorship label any time soon.

Competitors in Human Rights Violations

Labelling Belarus as the last dictatorship of Europe remains popular not only among journalists. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice coined this phrase in 2005. Since then it has become a cliché. In 2012 alone, two books with titles including "last dictatorship" appeared in English – one by academic and think tank expert Andrew Wilson and the other by

former British ambassador in Minsk Brian Bennett.

Putin's regime has for a long time had a better reputation than Lukashenka's. However, the number of political prisoners in Russia suggests this was not due to greater respect for human rights. Today Belarusian Human Rights Centre 'Viasna' counts seven [political prisoners](#) in Belarus. The Russian organisation 'Memorial' states there are about 45 political prisoners in Russia. While this difference is partly explained by Russia's larger population, the number of political prisoners in Russia keeps growing at the time when in Belarus it is slowly decreasing due to the 2015 presidential election.

A number of Russian and Belarusian opposition politicians chose to emigrate. Garry Kasparov, Russian chess player and oppositionist, remains in exile, as well as Belarusian prominent public figures like [Andrei Sannikau](#) and [Zianon Pazniak](#).

In Belarus, four Belarusian public figures mysteriously disappeared in 1999-2000. In Russia's Chechnya, scores of people have disappeared and were tortured, a phenomenon that continues even today, many years after the Chechen wars officially came to a close. In fact, the Russian law does not extend to the northern Caucasian republic; Chechnya is ruled by strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. According to the Human Rights Watch, the Chechen president's security agencies continue to punish the relatives and suspected supporters of alleged insurgents. Nothing of the sort can be found today in Belarus.

To be fair, non-governmental organisations in Russia enjoy better working conditions at the moment than their Belarusian counterparts. World renowned groups like the Amnesty International that openly work in Russia, cannot work in Belarus.

Russian organisations can officially receive money from the West, while in Belarus this is beyond the realm of

possibility. Most, if not all, Belarusian NGOs acquire their financing illegally as far as the Belarusian law is concerned. Moreover, the Belarusian authorities refuse to register many civil society organisations receiving funding from the West. Russia registers such organisations, even though it considers them to be "foreign agents".

In the Freedom House rankings, [both Belarus](#) and Russia are "not free". Russia, however, has a slightly higher rating than Belarus.

At the end of the day, however, while the Belarusian authoritarianism affects nearly exclusively Belarusians, Russia has threatened an entire region.

On 29 August, the United Nations reported that at least 2,593 people were killed in the East of Ukraine since April 2014. Hundreds of Georgians died during the Russian invasion in 2008. The Kremlin's anti-Western mass media hysteria made it easy to mobilise Russian public opinion against the neighbours who choose democracy and European integration over other alternatives. It is difficult to imagine Belarus waging a war against any country, while Russia has been annexing territories of the neighbouring states throughout history.

Economic Freedom: Not Much Better

Although Russia joined the World Trade Organisation in 2012, and Belarus has not, the levels of economic freedom in both countries are similar. According to a study by the Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal, even as the two countries are slowly liberalising, their economies remain "mostly unfree".

[Corruption levels](#) are high in both countries, but Belarus is better off than Russia. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, Belarus ranks 123rd while Russia ranks 127th.

Unpredictable authoritarian regimes in both countries deter many foreign investors. Some prime examples include the Kremlin illegally expropriated the Yukos oil company and the Belarusian authorities [did something similar](#) to the Kamunarka and Spartak confectioneries. Few people know what the Kremlin will do next.

A Normal Dictatorship?

Neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian war and the weakening of democracy in Russia has helped to improve Lukashenka's reputation. When Russia becomes Europe's second dictatorship, the Belarusian model of repression may seem a more attractive alternative.

Belarus, it would seem, has never been Europe's lone dictatorship. It is arguably less authoritarian than Azerbaijan, which is a member in the Council of Europe. Azerbaijan has about 100 political prisoners of its own and a much more dire situation with the rule of law. And still, there are [no international sanctions](#) against the Azerbaijani authorities.

Despite its relatively cleaner human rights record, Lukashenka's regime is unlikely to become less of an outcast than Russia. The fight against a small European dictator can help garner political profits for those politicians fighting for a good cause.

The imposition of sanctions against Putin's regime will result in serious losses to the European economy. The West needs Russian markets, oil and gas and is scared of Russia's nuclear arsenal. The recent postponement of anti-Russian sanctions for its aggression in Ukraine clearly demonstrates their apprehension.

The Kremlin's war against Ukraine may, however, contribute to a new level of understanding between the West and Belarus. To this day, Lukashenka remains but a reluctant vassal of Putin.

He has more interest in maintaining Belarus' neutrality and [re-exporting western](#) agricultural goods than in participating in the ongoing conflict or maintaining the full support of the Kremlin.

The war in Ukraine should become a wake up call for Western politicians who should do what they can to increase people-to-people contacts, liberalise the visa regime, and help Belarusians strengthen their national and civil identity.

[Is Belarus a European North Korea? – Top Three Myths about Belarus in Western Media](#)

Describing Belarus as the "last European dictatorship" in Western media has become a tradition. In many cases it is justified by real human rights abuses and the absence of any real democracy in the country.

However, often authors and journalists go far beyond objective analysis or describing the true situation in Belarus. They prefer to portray the country as a big concentration camp in the middle of Europe.

Typical myths about Belarus include the complete absence of free expression in the country, total governmental control and repressive terror for disobedience, and people being unable to leave the country or, occasionally, they turn to reports of Belarusians' readiness to rebel.

Belarus Digest presents an overview of the most popular myths about Belarus in Western media and a short guide on how to avoid taking up this mythology when covering it.

Myth No 1: European North Korea

The image of Belarus as a totalitarian [dictatorship](#) in the centre of Europe occasionally circulates some Western media.

"Mr. [Lukashenko](#) has steadily turned Belarus into something akin to a prison colony", – writes a journalist from The New York Times. The title of the French Le Figaro speaks for itself: "In Belarus it is better to be silent in order to stay alive."

These and other numerous exaggerated assessments certainly contribute a lot to general misunderstanding of the Belarusian political reality in the West.

In fact Belarus lives under an authoritarian personality-cult style political regime. According to human rights organisations, eleven political prisoners are serving time in jail. No elections since 1994 have been recognised as fair or transparent by Western observers.

The political opposition remains completely marginalised and has no legal instruments for influencing governmental policy. Police and the secret service keep track of [political activists](#) and prevent or disrupt almost every and any public political event.

However, the killings or indefinite imprisonment of political opponents is not a practice common to the Belarusian regime. Several cases of mysterious disappearances of notable politicians and a journalist in the late 1990s did take place, however nothing similar has happened since.

Administrative arrest (up to 15 days) or fines for "hooliganism" remain the usual punishment for "political

offenders." The authorities resort to real criminal imprisonment very seldomly, especially in comparison to other post-Soviet states. Russia – about 65 political prisoners (according to Memorial NGO) or [Azerbaijan](#) – about 140 political prisoners (according to local human rights NGOs). As mentioned above, Belarus currently has eleven political prisoners.

Expressing one's critical opinion of the government, membership in an oppositional political party or movement alone is almost never used as grounds for persecution. Only persistent political activism can get people in trouble.

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Freedom of speech is restricted but has been not abolished. Many reporters from unregistered media outlets indeed are subjected to serious pressure. However, several independent newspapers (Narodnaya Volia, Nasha Niva, BelGazeta, Belorusy i Rynok etc.), news agency BelaPAN, and other numerous oppositional and independent web-sites legally work within the country. Journalists from these media outlets get invitations to most public events including Lukashenka's regularly held press conferences.

Therefore, the widely used nickname for Belarus – "the last European dictatorship" – seems quite dubious. The Belarusian political regime may be the toughest in Europe in many ways, but it is sufficiently softer than nearly any other regime in the world that has received the "dictatorship" label: North Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Myanmar, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Syria etc.

Myth No 2: Belarusians Cannot [Travel Freely](#)

"The youth in this country, closed off from most of the world, cannot speak their minds freely and in the open", – states the EUobserver, promoting one of the most ludicrous myths about

Belarus, namely, the existence of an [iron curtain](#) at the Belarus-EU border.

Belarusians can not only travel to Western countries, indeed they are some of the most active travellers. Since 2010 Belarus has held 1st place in the world for the number of Schengen visas issued per capita. In 2012 this number exceeded 700,000 (or more than 7.3% of the population). Some soon-to-be published data from 2013 will show even higher figures.

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Nearly 1,400 students of EHU (a Belarusian [university in exile](#) in Vilnius) are Belarusian citizens, which means frequent crossing of the border for many of them as well as for many lecturers from Belarus.

Even key oppositional figures can (with [extremely rare exceptions](#)), freely travel to Europe and meet with Western politicians. [Some experts](#) even say that they spend too much time abroad while being passive inside the country.

Shopping-tourism to neighbouring countries has become so widespread that Alexander Lukashenka had to propose a rather unpopular and, yet not adopted measure, of a [\\$100 exit-fee](#), in order to stop the vast currency outflow.

Myth No 3: Belarusians Strive For Freedom and Ready to Rebel

In a recent article to Washington Post one ex-candidate for Belarusian presidency argued that in Belarus "it is not a question of if but when Belarusians will rid themselves of Europe's last dictatorship".

This waiting for a soon-to-come and unavoidable [revolution in Belarus](#) means, once again, ignoring the political reality on the ground.

The December 2012 IISEPS (Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies) poll showed that only 3% of Belarusians support the idea of a revolution.

A survey done by the NOVAK Laboratory in January 2010 indicated that 62% consider themselves free, while 57% say they live in a free country. Even after the latest 2012 parliamentary elections 47.5% of Belarusians called them "free and fair" and only 25.5% disagreed with this statement (IISEPS).

In a June 2013 poll IISEPS that asked respondents what would they prefer: to sacrifice a certain amount of freedom for economic well-being or to sacrifice their well-being to be free, 46% appeared to prefer well-being over freedom, while only 38% value freedom more.

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Finally, in a September 2013 IISEPS poll 28% said that Belarusians "sometimes (e.g. now) need a firm hand to rule them" and 26% believe "Belarusians always need a firm hand rule" (54% combined). Only 38% said it dangerous to concentrate all power in one individuals' hands.

Although the latest polls show that Belarusian society is [slowly maturing](#), in reality the majority of Belarusians still prefer stability and prosperity to democracy. "Liberals" compose about 30-40% of the population, and the idea of any sort of revolution remains [highly unpopular](#).

How to Avoid Mythology When Covering Belarus?

The author of this article, himself a journalist, completely understands his colleagues' desire to come up with sharp titles and shocking descriptions of a poorly-covered, politically odd and almost exotic country, such as Belarus.

At the same time, the audience of serious periodicals expects facts and decent analysis rather than fantasies.

Here are several tips on how to properly cover Belarus from the outside:

Rely more on news agencies that have their own reporters in Belarus (Bloomberg, Reuters, AP).

Avoid portraying politics as something important to Belarusians. Most of them have little interest in them and are not facing the "dictatorship" in their everyday lives.

The Belarusian opposition is seriously [divided](#), never trust anyone who claims to be "the leader of Belarusian democratic forces".

Double check all the information from [political exiles](#) with the help of activists based in Belarus.

Understand your responsibility. Belarus has little proper coverage abroad. By propagating catchy myths you disorient decision-makers who fail to work out effective policies and thus contribute to strengthening of authoritarian rule in Belarus.

Belarusian Politicians in Social Networks – Digest of Belarusian Analytics

Politicians in social networks, civil society in politics, geopolitical preferences of Belarusians and the state of small business were, among other topics, in the focus of Belarusian

analysts over the last few weeks.

[Belarusian Politicians Have Nothing to Catch in Social Networks?](#) – Naviny.by analyses what Belarusian politicians do in social networks and blogs: reveal personal secrets or promote their parties and movements. Most of the politicians use Facebook, broadcasting the same messages for Twitter and "VKontakte", as a form of communication with the people. However, so far there are not many politicians in the networks: during the parliamentary elections of 2012 only about 6% of the registered 364 candidates to the House of Representatives used the capabilities of the new media, mainly the opposition and independent candidates.

[The Return of Europe](#) – BISS presents the seventh issue of the polling memorandum series based on the public opinion poll data of the Independent Institute for Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS). Surprising good news for Europe: for the first time since June 2011 Belarusians would prefer a European choice. No winner appeared in the opposition's controversy whether to boycott parliamentary elections or to participate. BISS considers those to be the two main outcomes of the latest polling data provided by IISEPS.

[Belarus' Foreign Policy Index №10](#) – Kremlin retains the full political support of Minsk. Ukrainian vector after summer activation returned to zero. The relations with developing countries improved a bit, especially with China. The relations with the European Union re-entered the stage of "vacuum of events". These are the main conclusions presented by BISS in the latest issue of Belarusian Foreign Policy Index, covering September and October of 2012.

[Mikita Likhavid: People Need a "Fairy Tale" about "Iron Man"](#) – a former political prisoner, Mikita Likhavid, during the "Belsat" program, answers the questions, why he does not try to make a political career in opposition, and how to raise

the topic of political prisoners to achieve results. In particular, Likhavid notes that above all the opposition should become systematic and strong; otherwise all talks about political prisoners remain speculation.

[Belarus Leader Relishes Reputation as Dictator](#) – Alexander Lukashenka gave an interview to Reuters, an international news agency (November 26). The journalist shares his observation that Belarusian president is a pariah in the West, viewed suspiciously by Russia and loathed by opponents in exile or jail, but he is relishing his notoriety as Europe's last dictator.

[The Main Battle will be After Lukashenka](#) – Alexander Klaskovsky refers to Alexander Lukashenka's thesis that it is time "to bring to power normal young politicians." The journalist makes a sad conclusion that the hour "X", which is so expected of change agents can be stupidly missed: "Belarus is lack of truly educated, hardened in a real fight, polished by practice, disciplined by responsibility political cadres. It's difficult to consider as such members of Parliament who do not solve anything, or languishing in the ghetto, the maximum – the leading online internecine wars, opposition figures.

[Pro-Russian Column in Belarus](#) – historian Victor Yevmenenko fixes the facts that on the basis of some non-governmental Belarusian organisations Russia plans to build a force that involves gaining widespread support among the Belarusians. The author predicts that this force can be transformed into a pro-Russian political movement so he wonders why Belarusian civil society, adhering to national-democratic positions, is passive and indifferent to the mentioned processes.

Society

[Does Civil Society Need the Political Track?](#) – Naviny.by is

trying to understand, whether civil society should follow the path of politicization or continue to do their civil work, despite pressure from the government. Referring to the recent adoption of the concept of the National Platform, the author notes some politicization and warns that "CSOs on the political field, would not be able to fully engage in their activities, also have the risk to narrow the chances of public recognition...and will not be able to fulfill their primary function – to show the people the possibility of self-organization."

[Evolution of Images of "Enemy" and "Friend" in the Post-war Belarus and Ukraine, 1945 -1953](#) – the research shows that people born in the 1920-30, call Stalin a friend of the people, and in today's Belarus this place is taken by Alexander Lukashenka. Belarusian opposition is called as enemy, following with such epithets as "useless", "zero", "stupid". The study was presented at a round table held by the International Consortium "EuroBelarus" and the Centre for European Transformation in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Germany).

[Public Opinion in Belarus on the Project "Modernization for Belarus"](#) – In July and August 2012, the Belarusian Analytical Workshop conducted a qualitative study using a remote method of focus groups. The study summarised the opinions and judgments of different social groups on the socio-economic and political situation in Belarus, the geopolitical orientation of residents, their assessment of the initiative "European Dialogue on Modernization". The main conclusion of the study is that people consider the political leadership of the country as a root cause of poor economic situation and related social problems.

[News without News](#) – Mediakritika.by presents its monitoring of state and non-state TV channels for the period August-October 2012. The experts note that most of the materials of the

state-run TV news programs generally were not news. The only reason for the broadcast was Alexander Lukashenka who's ideas were supported by video illustrations. The violation of the standard of efficiency was also frequent in the news on the independent TV channel "Belsat".

[Belarusians' Ideas of Human Rights and Rights Defense Activities](#) – the study was conducted by the Centre for European Transformation on the initiative of Belarusian human rights organisations in April-June 2012. The purpose of the study was to identify concepts that exist in the Belarusian society regarding the relationship between the man and the state, human rights and their defense. The initial hypotheses were generally affirmed that: a) the set of issues that is being researched is not actualized in practices and beliefs of the respondents; b) the level of competence of the respondents as to the specified issues is not very high.

[Damocles Sword of Anonymous Donations](#) – Yuri Chausov, based on case of the magazine ARCHE which is now under financial investigation, expresses concern that formal suspicion of violating the law in the economic sphere can be a reason for the persecution of civil society institutions. The expert, in particular, draws attention to the legislative nonsense whereby anonymous donations in Belarus are not prohibited, but are treated as foreign aid, the use of which is tightly regulated.

Economy

[State Budget 2013: a Collection of Surprises](#) – Denis Lavnikovich, [BEL.BIZ](#), analyzes the national budget for 2013 and comes to the conclusion that it is more like a set of good intentions. The expert believes that it will be possible to avoid the fiscal crisis in the next year only under two conditions: if Russia continues to supply Belarus with energy on current prices, and if the government finally seriously

undertakes the privatization. The expert also cites Andrei Porotnikov, Belarus Security Blog, who points to the fact that next year's budget continues the trend of the last 20 years of chronic under-funding of the national army.

[Business in Belarus 2012: Status, Trends, Prospects](#) – IPM Research Center prepared an annual report on the status and prospects of small and medium business in Belarus in 2012. The issue considers the economic situation of small and medium enterprises and their development prospects, including analysis of the influence of the integration agreements with Russia and Kazakhstan in this field.

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.

[19 December 2010: The Election Day Atmosphere in Minsk](#)

Source: [nn.by](#)