

# Belarus Strengthens Ties With Europe, Preaches Morality to the World – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

Belarus has asserted its displeasure with Russia's new 'Russian world' policy while maintaining its solidarity with Ukraine. All of this unfolded against a background of strengthening ties with "New Europe".

The Foreign Ministry has resorted to Soviet-style meetings as a tool to promote Belarusian exports. While lacking any real leverage on the nation's foreign trade figures, diplomats have to obey [Lukashenka's direct instructions](#).

## **Sending Messages to Russia**

President Alexander Lukashenka sent an official greeting to Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's president-elect. In the absence of a similar step from Russia, this gesture proves Belarus' intention to work with the new Ukrainian authorities.

Earlier, Lukashenka sent other bold messages about Belarus' independence from Russia on foreign policy matters. On 15 May, he received Mykhailo Yezhel, Kyiv's ambassador in Minsk.

The president very rarely gives audience to foreign envoys outside of the ceremony for the presentation of their official credentials. The meeting could have been easily kept secret but the press service covered it at length.

The Belarusian president also gave a lengthy interview to the Russian TV channel Dozhd. This media outlet is known best for its opposition to the Russian authorities and has been under heavy pressure from the authorities lately.

Lukashenka used both opportunities to reiterate his [commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine](#). He described the 'referendums' organised by pro-Moscow separatists as "having no meaning at all from a legal point of view". Quite audaciously he also said he would fight any invader "who would arrive on Belarusian soil... even if it is Putin".

The Belarusian president clearly realises that statements of this nature will not endanger Belarus' ties with Russia. Meanwhile, they will help to improve its relations with the West and secure the appreciation of the Ukrainian authorities.

Lukashenka has expressly mentioned the former Georgian president in this context: 'Nobody fought for us in the West like Saakashvili did'. Saakashvili, for his part, owed him a debt of gratitude for the non-recognition of Georgia's breakaway regions.

### **Maintaining Dynamics in Relations with Central Europe**

The Belarusian diplomacy is tireless in its efforts to strengthen relations with Central and Eastern European countries. While the avenues for the top-level contacts remain closed, Belarus and most 'New Europe' countries actively interact with one another at a working level.

Over the second week of May, Belarus held consultations and meetings between its own deputy foreign ministers and those of the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Croatia and Poland. The key topics of these talks were trade, investment, cross-border cooperation and loosening up the nation's visa regime.

The most prominent event was the 6th meeting of the Belarusian – Czech Joint Commission on Economic, Industrial and Scientific and Technical Cooperation held on 13 May. The two countries managed to increase their bilateral trade turnover to an all-time high of \$600m in 2013. More than 40 investment projects are currently under discussion.

Belarus' position on Ukraine has helped to improve its relations with Central and Eastern European countries. New Europe, unlike Old Europe, is very sensitive to other countries' stance on Russian expansion. In his interview to Radio Liberty, Lithuania's Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius even described some Lukashenka's statements on Ukraine as 'truly independent'.

### **Weekly Dialogue with Vatican**

Lately, there have been signs of increased diplomatic activity in relations between Belarus and Vatican. On 7 May, Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) received Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, Apostolic nuncio in Belarus. While meetings of ambassadors with the minister are not unusual, normally they meet with lower-level diplomats for daily business.

Two weeks later, Vladimir Makei met Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-Fai, Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, who came to Belarus to attend a Salesian symposium.

The most important event in this sequence was a one-day visit by Deputy Foreign Minister [Alena Kupchyna](#) to Vatican on 14 May. She met Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State. According to the foreign ministry's press service, the parties discussed a range of bilateral and regional issues.

It should not be overlooked that Cardinal Parolin is the head of the Vatican's executive. The audiences at his level normally serve to discuss only the most pressing matters. This increased diplomatic activity may indicate that Belarus and the Holy See are preparing some important bilateral event. It may well be President Lukashenka's meeting with Pope Francis or Cardinal Parolin's visit to Minsk.

### **Futile Exercise of Merchants' Diplomacy**

The Foreign Ministry called up a meeting of counsellors for trade and economic affairs. The diplomats who work at the Belarusian missions in Russia, CIS countries, Africa and Latin America spent five days in Minsk. They met with the managers of several large state-run enterprises and government officials and visited some export-oriented companies.

On the last day, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei held a concluding meeting with the trade counsellors. He urged them to intensify their efforts aimed at promoting Belarusian exports and attracting foreign investment in Belarus.

Former Prime Minister [Siarhiej Sidorski](#) introduced such meetings in early 2000s. He always chaired them personally. These annual events quickly evolved into dressing-down sessions with public scoldings and even a ritual sacking of diplomats.

Under [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#) the government dropped these meetings altogether. Vladimir Makei decided to resume them this year in a new format. Regarding the reason for re-launching the annual gatherings, he cited rather bluntly that it was necessary because Belarusian exports have fallen for the second consecutive year.

The Belarusian diplomats, despite the ministry's claims, have no real leverage over the export figures. They lack proper training, resources, tools and motivation to do so. Thus, these 'merchants' diplomacy' meetings are a mere window-dressing or a training exercise at best.

### **'The Most Powerful Woman in the UN' visits Minsk**

Helen Clark, the UNDP Administrator, visited Minsk on 28 – 30 May. Helen Clark is the third highest-ranking official of the United Nations and the highest UN official to visit Belarus during Lukashenka's presidency.

The Administrator's visit focused on Chernobyl-related issues.

For the first time, the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Chernobyl took place in an affected country. Helen Clark went to the Chernobyl-affect area. She also met President Lukashenka and Foreign Minister Makei.

The development cooperation, which includes the Chernobyl issue, remains the centrepiece of Belarus' agenda in the UN. Helen Clark's visit became a true achievement of the Belarusian diplomacy. Andrei Dapkiunas, Belarus' Permanent Representative to the United Nations, can take personal credit for its success.

### **Preaching Morality to UN Members**

Andrei Dapkiunas made a brief but eloquent statement at an open meeting of the UN Security Council held on 7 May. The meeting was dedicated to non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The ambassador spoke about the need to eliminate double standards – the message usually addressed to Western countries. However, his passage on 'an environment ... where honouring one's word is not considered a virtue' can be interpreted as a reference to Russia's failure to abide by its obligations under the Budapest Memorandum.

Andrei Dapkiunas' core message was that 'a long-term non-proliferation strategy must have a solid moral core'. He defended Belarus' right to 'preach morality' to other nations. The ambassador spoke about suffering endured by Belarus as a result of the World War II and the Chernobyl disaster. He also listed the steps taken by the country in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of WMD.

However, the Belarusian envoy failed to mention the repeated statements of Alexander Lukashenka on the topic. The Belarusian head of state qualified the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Belarus in the mid-1990s as an 'egregious blunder'. As recently as in March 2014, he called the Budapest

Memorandum an 'ignominious document'.

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# Fuel Prices Rise, Gazprom's Social Projects – Belarus State TV Digest

Fuel became more expensive in Belarus, but is still cheaper than in neighbouring countries. Channel BT1 extensively covered a meeting of Lukashenka with the head of Russia's largest bank Sberbank and the head of Gazprom and Gazprom's support for social projects in Belarus.

State TV also reported that the European Union expressed its interest in rapprochement with the countries of the Eastern Partnership. Recently thousands of Belarusian pupils have shown interest in learning Belarusian language rather than Russian.

## Domestic Affairs

[The voice of Belarus on Syria](#). State TV reported on a round table of Belarusian experts, a Syrian diplomat, a Syrian businessman and unnamed international experts that took place in Minsk. The participants thanked Lukashenka for his "attention and contribution to a global settlement of the crisis". A Syrian businessman based in Belarus commented on the Russian proposal to the crisis, saying "we can barely trust the American politicians". The Belarusian TV channel noted that in the aftermath of the "confrontation between the authorities and armed insurgents, every third citizen of Syria has lost his house", which amounts to about 7 million people in total.

### [Gazprom sells energy to Belarus and supports its financially.](#)

The state channel widely covered the meeting of the head of Gazprom, Alexei Miller, with Lukashenka. Journalists commented that regardless of the bad press it has received, this week proved that the Russian business still had a vital interest in Belarus. Lukashenka also met with the head of the Sberbank of Russia, Herman Gref. The head of the state confirmed that gas supplies would increase in the next year and discussed with Miller the future development of the gas transportation system.

At the meeting “special attention was paid to the social projects of Gazprom in Belarus”. Lukashenka thanked Miller for years of support and strong co-operation. In Miller’s words, financial support to social projects in Belarus would increase by 5 times as much”. These social projects relate to sport and cultural events for children, but also support for hospitals. The state TV journalists recalled that the Russian company Gazprom planned to donate 1m USD to purchase expensive modern equipment for Belarusian hospitals. This equipment would help with an early diagnosis of hearing loss in babies.

Gazprom was also involved in the raising of a new Orthodox Church in the town of Polack. It also supported financially the construction of a house for families with multiple children. It continues to support children’s cultural and sport events. According to the journalist, the Belarus-Gazprom is a “good partnership in both the social and economic spheres”.

[A new energy supplier to Belarus?](#) The head of the Rosneft met with the head of Belarusian company Belneft, Igor Zhylin. They discussed the supply of Rosneft gas to the “Hrodna Azot”, but also potential supplies to Belarus by the end of 2013 and in 2014.

[The state supports talented youth.](#) Lukashenka visited the Minsk City Olympic Tennis Centre. The state television

reported that the number of Belarusian interested in playing tennis is increasing. The journalist emphasised that Lukashenka had ordered the establishment of a proper system for the selection and training of young talented athletes.

Lukashenka wants more Belarusians to be trained and then successfully represent Belarus in international sport events. He stated that the proper conditions should be created for both athletes and trainers. He said, "I cannot understand how we could not train around 50 players".

[Green economy in Belarus and Kazakhstan](#). A forum of Belarusian and Kazakh scholars, diplomats and experts took place in Minsk. The participants of the event discussed alternative energy, bio-resources and the development of more efficient technology. According to experts, transition to a new ecological model would allow not only to increase the GDP of the state, but also to create new workplaces and a completely new branch of production.

[Lukashenka is concerned about the construction of new houses in Minsk](#). The head of the state met with the Minsk mayor, Mikalai Ladutka, to discuss the construction of new houses in Minsk. Lukashenka expressed his concern over the long term of construction of the houses. The mayor confirmed that in the next year nearly 1 million new houses would show up in Minsk.

[More expensive fuel, but in other countries it is worse](#). Prices for fuel increased in Belarus. According to experts, "this increase is related to an increased excise rate of the petrol". At the same time, experts stated that after the increase, prices in Belarus still would be lower than in other countries of the Customs Union. In Ukraine a litre of fuel costs \$1.34. In Poland and Lithuania pay over \$1.80. The fuel in Belarus costs slightly over \$1 per litre.

[The European Union rapprochement?](#) Belarusian state television



reported that the plenary session of the European Parliament encouraged the countries of the Eastern Partnership for rapprochement. It said the EU would “be searching for a way for a normative rapprochement also with the members of the Customs Union”.

Stephen Fule, a commissioner responsible for the enlargement of the union and European neighbourhood, said that “EU is interested in traditionally strong relations with its Eastern neighbours and with Moscow”. The state TV added that Brussels would help the Customs Union to adjust the standards and norms to meet European and worldwide law regulations”.

**EU supports Belarusian border service.** State television informed that the EU supported Belarus with new equipment to operate its border service on the Belarus-Ukraine border. The journalists pointed out that the EU helped within a project of international technological assistance. It added that a vector for Belarus-Ukraine interests the Europeans for a good reason.

The border is difficult to control and became recently popular way for illegal migrants and “uninvited guests” on their way to the EU. The border service guards say that the new equipment is not just a luxury, but a necessity to decrease border crimes. In total, the EU budget for the international technological assistance for Belarus-Ukraine is estimated to be around 1.3m EUR.

**Education in Belarusian is getting more popular.** State TV reported that a thousand pupils have begun their education in the Belarusian language. Already 14 schools in Minsk, and in 200 other places across the country, are offering education exclusively in Belarusian. The TV channel added that it was “possible also to study in Belarusian abroad. Today Belarusian schools exist in neighbouring Lithuania, Latvia and Poland”.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State*

*Television 1 (BT1). Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.*

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# **Radioactive Mushrooms, Civil Magistrate, Mova ci Kava – Digest of Belarusian Civil Society**

Belarusian civil society organised a number of discussion events on topics ranging from cancer to media wars. Other initiatives included the promotion of the Belarusian language and examining radioactive mushrooms.

The Liberal Club attracted 100 practitioners to its event on information wars in the media, including representatives of state and independent media. NGO Assembly gave awards to Civil Society Champions, among them Andrzej Paczobut and Valer Bulhakau. Mahiliou activists formed a “civic magistrate” to help citizens deal with local issues.

## **Media**

**[Discussion on information wars in the media](#)**: On 7 February the Liberal Club organised a discussion on how to overcome the information war in Belarusian media? The event was held at the hotel Europe and attended by about a hundred people, including well-known representatives of state and independent media:

blogger Victor Malishevski, a political columnist Pavlyuk Bykovsky, the Belarusian Thought chief editor Vadim Gigin, TUT.by founder Yuri Zisser and others.

**Cancer topic in media:** On 4 February the Belarusian Organization of Working Women together with a team from [oncopatient.by](http://oncopatient.by) website conducted a roundtable *Cancer Topics in the Media, What Information Helps Belarusians to Beat Cancer?* The discussion was timed to correspond with the International Day Against Cancer and was attended by experts from oncology centres, patients and journalists.

**TUT.BY offers its versions of Minsk brand:** After [the sensational story](#) with the official Minsk brand developed by the British company INSTID, an alternative Minsk team decided to offer other ideas for branding the city. Belarusian portal [TUT.BY](http://TUT.BY) has also joined the initiative of designers and PR specialists and suggests own versions.

**BAJ presents Anatomy of freelance:** The book *The Anatomy of Freelance* sums up of the journalistic experience with and knowledge of freelancing, received over the first year of the thematic campaign implemented by the Belarusian Association of Journalists. The book is designed to help freelance journalists to overcome existing obstacles.

## **Social Campaigns and Initiatives**

**Radioactive mushrooms video:** Gomel Democratic Forum with the support of the Green Alliance created a short film with a story about how radioactive mushrooms end up in Gomel residents' households and what tricks illegal collectors use to circumvent restrictive measures.

**In defense of Belarusian Wetlands sums up their first results:** On 1 February public campaign *In Defense of Belarusian Wetlands* held a press conference. The meeting summed up the interim results of the campaign, designed to attract the attention of people

and CSOs to the destruction of eight Belarusian wetlands.

**Kurapaty will be promoted**: On 6 February the BPF office hosted a meeting of the members of the Kurapaty Rescue Initiative. An expert in the field of PR and advertising, Yulia Lyashkevich, presented a draft of Kurapaty promotion which aims to inform Belarusians what Kurapaty is by using the norms of advertising.

**NGO Assembly named Civil Society Champions**: The 4<sup>th</sup> annual award ceremony of The Assembly of NGOs of Belarus – *Civil Society Champions 2012* – was held at the Minsk Lohvinau bookstore on 1 February. The Civil Leaders of the year were journalists Andrzej Paczobut and Valer Bulhakau; the award for the Years Most Creative was given to the Swedish airdrop of teddy bears; the Venue of the Year went to the Office of Human Rights Center *Viasna*; as the most important Regional Event of the year the establishment of independent union trade structures at the Hranit factory was honored, amongst others.

**Mogilev activists form a “civic magistrate”**: Activists from Mogilev city created a public discussion platform, which they call a “civic magistrate”, in order to help citizens deal with local issues. The magistrate is positioned as a non-political intermediary between residents, experts and local authorities and seeks to establish dialogue in the city around the most pressing issues. One of the recent successes of the initiative, reported on the [magistrate’s website](#), was authorities’ decision not to shut down local markets.

**Marketplace undertakes local trips**: Capacity Building Marketplace continues a series of local trips throughout Belarus in order to inform Belarusian CSOs about the possibilities and the importance of capacity development. The meetings with CSOs and service providers were held on 31 January [in Grodno](#); on 5 February [in Mogilev](#); the next meeting is scheduled for 12 February in Gomel.

**Antimak visited addicts:** Activists of the public campaign Antimak continue to draw attention to the problem of drug abuse in Belarus. This time they together with Telegraph correspondents visited the apartments where addicts live and talked to their residents.

**CSOs to establish organization in response to the disregard for the decisions of the UN Human Rights Committee.** On 12 February Gomel gathered civil and political activists, the violation of whose rights by Belarusian authorities have been officially confirmed by decisions from the UN Human Rights Committee or whose complaints are pending at the Committee. The participants of the meeting decided to establish a national public organisation which would change the practise of neglecting to undertake actions under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by Belarus.

**A special hot line – 10 years.** A joint project of the Business Women Club and the International Organization for Migration celebrates the 10 years of the anti traffic hotline. For 10 years, the call-centre specialists have received more than 20 thousand calls; 110 people were able to return home.

**Football clubs asked to more widely use the Belarusian language.** On the eve of the beginning of the Belarusian football championship in the higher league, activists of the civil campaign *Office Work in Belarusian!* addressed twenty football clubs with a proposal to extensively use the Belarusian language during the organization, holding and elucidation of the matches.

**Modern life of Muzhytskaya Prauda:** Brest activists have resumed publication of the first revolutionary-democratic newspaper in Belarusian. In the period from 1862 to 1863 seven numbers were published. Newspaper #8 is coming in February 2013. This is the way of celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Kalinouski Rebellion in the Brest region.

## Workshops and Conferences

[Master class from Talaka:](#) On 9 February Gomel youth NGO Talaka and Vetka Museum invited for a master class in creating a marriage of guardian dolls. In ancient times, this amulet guarded the union of two people and was presented to bride and groom at the wedding day. The event was scheduled to correspond with Valentine's Day.

[Mova ci Kava.](#) On 18 February in Minsk educational free courses *Language or Coffee (Mova ci Kava)* will be launched. The courses are designed for people who want to improve their Belarusian language. The teachers are journalist Gleb Labadzenka and philologist Alesya Litvinovskaya who taught Stefan Eriksson to speak Belarusian. The courses will be held in a cafe once a week.

[Round table on human capital.](#) BISS launches a series of presentations on the results of the research project *Human Capital as a Source of Competitiveness and Modernization*. The first round table is to be held on 15 February at the Minsk hotel Victoria. The event presents two research papers: *The Returns to Education and the Evaluation of Human Capital in Belarus* and *Belarusian Higher Education in Cross-country Perspective*.

## Awards

[New award for researchers.](#) The Organizing Committee of the International Congress of Belarusian Researchers announces the establishment of an annual award for the best publication in the field of social sciences and humanities during the year. The award is designed to celebrate the achievements in the social sciences and humanities during the year, as well as improve the quality of scientific work.

[I Love Belarus award.](#) On 16 February Young Front invites to

the ceremony of its annual award *I Love Belarus*. The prize is awarded in six nominations – Belarusization, Pro-Belarus, Journalism, Culture, Politics, Civil activity, Fighter of the Year, and Sports.

[Lyubow Kavalyowa voted Person of 2012 in Vitebsk](#). The mother of a man executed over the 2011 subway bombing in Minsk has been voted the Person of the Year 2012 in Vitebsk. A [local news website's](#) readers had been asked to choose the person who was of the greatest use to Vitebsk or who contributed to promoting the city in the world in 2012.

**[BEROC awarded](#)**: BEROC was awarded by *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus* as an organization which actively formed the informational sphere in Belarus in 2012. Among other winners were the National Bank, Investigative Committee, Ministry of Emergency Situations, Ministry of Statistics, etc.

**[Svetlana Naumova Award](#)**: *Tell the Truth* campaign has completed the nomination of candidates for the Svetlana Naumova Award. The award is given in three categories – political journalism, political analyst and best young politician of the year. Among others, the short list of 2013 includes journalist Andrei Poczobut, BISS academic director Alexei Pikulik, journalist Alexander Klaskovsky, etc. The award ceremony will take place on 1 March 2013.

*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.*