

# Trump support in Belarus, MFA staff cuts, legal education reform – Ostrogorski Centre digest

During December and January, the Ostrogorski Centre analysed the ongoing dispute between Belarus and Lithuania over the Astraviec nuclear power plant (NPP), Belarusian army reforms, and the national immigration policy.

Our analysts also commented in the media on growing support for Donald Trump among Belarusians, a 30% staff cut in the central apparatus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, personnel renewal trends in the government establishment, and the implications for Belarus of a new escalation in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Centre also held a conference on legal education in cooperation with the Belarusian State University's law faculty, supported by the Embassy of the United Kingdom in Minsk.

## Analytics

[Ryhor Astapenia](#) analyses whether the [West will join Lithuania's crusade](#) against Belarus's nuclear power plant project. On the one hand, many Western politicians see Lithuania's campaign against the Belarusian NPP as politicised and even panicked. On the other hand, perhaps thanks to Lithuania's position, any cooperation (except on security issues) between Belarus and the West in the atomic sphere has become less feasible. Therefore, while Lithuania loses the conflict diplomatically, Belarus does not win either.

[Siarhei Bohdan](#) describes how Minsk [silently builds a new army](#). The Belarusian government has adapted its policies in response to the Kremlin's staunch refusal to provide Belarus with heavy weapons. Official Minsk continues to build an army better suited to its limited needs and financial constraints, while quietly discarding its Soviet-era, heavier arms without replacement. The simplification of existing army structures automatically follows, which will also reduce offensive capacities.

[Alesia Rudik](#) discusses [Belarus's immigration policy](#) and how it perpetuates the country's demographic crisis. In the context of low birth and high death rates, the Belarusian population can only grow through increased immigration. However, Belarus still has no clear policy to encourage labour migration. Moreover, bureaucratic procedures, such as work permits, remain difficult to obtain for the majority of foreigners apart from citizens of CIS member countries, especially Russians, who have special conditions for working in Belarus.

## **Reform of legal education in Belarus and the UK: the exchange of experience and vision for the future**

On 28 December 2017, the Ostrogorski Centre, in cooperation with the Faculty of Law of the Belarusian State University and supported by the Embassy of the United Kingdom in Minsk, conducted a conference under the title "The reform of legal education in Belarus and the UK: the exchange of experience and vision for the future."

✘ The 16 speakers included representatives of the British Embassy, the Ministry of Education of Belarus, the Belarusian

State University, Hrodno State University and Brest State University. They comprised legal academics and administrators as well as practitioners from Belarus. In addition, three speakers came from UK-based institutions, namely the British Institute of International and Comparative Law, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the University of Liverpool.

Conference guests included representatives of various government bodies, academics from public and private universities, as well as representatives from Belarusian NGOs (around 40 people in total). The conference proved an opportunity not only to share the experiences of Belarusian and UK-based academics, but also to help shape the debate on legal education reform in Belarus.

The Ostrogorski Centre broadcast the conference live on YouTube and Facebook, and has made videos of each panel available on its [YouTube channel](#) (links below). The conference languages were Belarusian and Russian.

## Comments in the media

The Atlantic magazine quotes Yaraslau Kryvoi in its recent article about decreasing global support for Donald Trump. Belarus, however, shows the opposite trend: [growing Belarusian approval](#) for Trump likely has more to do with the American president's leadership style than any U.S. policies. According to Yaraslau, the Belarusian leadership sees Trump as a macho leader similar to the one Belarus has itself. Like Trump, Alexander Lukashenka promotes himself as someone fighting on behalf of the people against the elite.



Igar Gubarevich on Belsat TV

Commenting to Belsat TV, Igar Gubarevich opines that the 30% staffing cut in the central apparatus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has become a big stress for Belarusian diplomats. The Ministry's comprehensive tasks require not only good quality experts, but also a sufficient quantity, otherwise the cuts will damage the interest of Belarus as a country.

Siarhei Bohdan, interviewed on Polish Radio, argues that the government establishment renews itself more efficiently than the opposition. It now includes completely different people than it did two decades ago. They value independent Belarus more than the Soviet Union, and MP Ihar Marzaliuk presents a good example. 'I am convinced that Ihar Marzaliuk is not a lone wolf, but rather the tip of the iceberg, an example of generational change in the Belarusian power elite,' says Siarhei.

On Radio Liberty, Siarhei Bohdan discusses the consequences of a new escalation in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the role of

Iran, and the implications for Belarus. In the Iranian-Saudi confrontation, Belarus has sided with the conservative Arab coalition that it thinks has a higher chance of winning, and which is clearly the wealthier side.

## Belarus Policy

The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update its database of policy papers on BelarusPolicy.com. The following papers from partner institutions have been added this month:

- Uladzimir Kavalkin. [Handbook on researching violations and corruption in public procurement in Belarus](#). BIPART, 2017.
- Darya Urban. [Influence of the legal and judicial system on doing business in Belarus](#). IPM Research Centre, 2017.
- Maryia Akulava, Hanna Ahinskaya. [Barriers and drivers of women's entrepreneurship in Belarus](#). BEROC, 2017.
- Valiery Zhurakouski, Katarzyna Mirecka, Izabela Styczyńska. [Review of the situation of children and young people with disabilities in Belarus](#). CASE Belarus, 2017.
- Aleh Mazol. [Determinants of poverty with and without economic growth. Explaining Belarus's poverty dynamics during 2009-2016](#). BEROC, 2017.

*The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its projects include Belarus Digest, [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#), [BelarusProfile.com](#) and [Ostro.by](#).*

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# What does Trump's presidency mean for Belarus?

On 9 November, Aliaksandr Lukashenka congratulated Donald Trump on his victory in the US presidential election. He praised Trump's "active and sincere position", hoping to restore Belarus-US relations; he also warned Russians against rejoicing over Trump's triumph.

However, people on the streets seem to interpret his victory through the lens of the Russian media, echoing the sentiment that Trump will pursue a friendly policy towards Russia and Belarus.

The Belarusian media enthusiastically reported on Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, whose ancestors came from Belarus and whose father visits the country regularly.

Many people noted the similarities between the leader of Belarus and the new leader of the US: both embrace elements of populism and opposition to the establishment, and both have a habit of bringing their young sons to official meetings. But despite these details, most experts agree that Belarus will hardly be a high priority on the US agenda.

## Lukashenka: Trump is no friend of Russia

On 9 November Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka congratulated Trump on his victory. Lukashenka highlighted that Americans voted for a responsible, fair candidate who will bring change, saying: "You shook up American society and returned it to real democracy." The Belarusian leader expressed hopes that relations between Belarus and the US

would continue on the path of normalisation.

At the same time, Lukashenka warned Russians against rejoicing too much over Trump's victory. "He is not a gift for Russia. Trump wants to make America great, but where does that put Russia?", he said. Interestingly, Lukashenka predicted Trump's victory earlier in September. "American society is not yet ready to elect a female president, even one as experienced as Hillary", he argued.

Other executive officials remained silent about the event, as the rules of the Belarusian political system restrict such public comments. In contrast, MPs were more open about sharing their views.



Recently elected oppositional MP [Alena Anisim](#) expressed her belief that Trump's victory is evidence of the democratic nature of the US political system. Although Anisim anticipates changes in the internal politics of the US, she does not predict major alterations in external policy. Pro-governmental MP [Mikalaj Ulachovič](#) expressed hope that Trump would lift the sanctions against Belarus. However, claims about making America great disturbed the politician.

## People in the streets echo Russian TV

The Belarusian media outlets Belsat, Euroradio, and Sputnik interviewed people in the streets of the Belarusian capital. Most respondents expressed happiness about Trump's victory. The most popular reason for this concerned the close ties between Belarus and Russia: "Of course, Trump. Trump is closer to Russia. Consequently – to us." Another person stated that

Trump would definitely advocate friendship with Moscow, thus strengthening cooperation with Belarus.

Some people, however, maintained that the effect of the US election on Belarus would be invisible. As one of the respondents said, "It will hardly impact us, since there are no contacts between Belarus and the US, no trade between us". Although some hoped to see Clinton as the new president, many Belarusians still mistrust women in politics: "If she could not control her husband, how does she plan to run the US," said one passerby. Another woman argued that "Woman in politics is like a monkey with a grenade."

## Media focus on Trump's son-in-law

One of the most popular stories about Trump in the Belarusian media concerned the heritage of his son-in-law Jared Kushner, a real estate mogul and media tycoon from New York. As it turns out, Kushner's great grandparents originated from the Belarusian town of Navahrudak. During World War II they escaped from the Navahrudak ghetto to join a Jewish partisan squad in the forests.



After the war they moved to the US, where Jared's father Charles was born. Charles Kushner has a tradition of visiting Navahrudak with his grandchildren on the eve of their adulthood to show them the family's history. Belarusians are hoping to see Trump's grandchildren in

a few years on their traditional trip.



As for the reasons for Trump's victory, *Naša Niva* called Hillary a “cold and uninteresting candidate”, who caused American society to vote for Trump “with their heart”.

A writer at *Belarus Segodnya*, one of the largest official dailies, mentioned that people are tired of democrats in the US, and this explains the success of Trump's campaign. Although the newspaper generally demonstrates its support for the new US president, it did mention one particular threat his presidency could pose. If Trump stops investing money in NATO, Russia could gain unencumbered control of the region.

## Two populists?

Some experts draw parallels between the populism of Trump and Lukashenka, both of whom oppose elite groups and seek out the support of the common people. Much like Trump, Lukashenka came to power unexpectedly in 1994 using populist slogans, while the establishment did not consider him a serious rival.

Similarly, the two leaders both rely on a certain trick – they bring their little sons to official meetings. The Belarusian president regularly takes his son with him on his trips abroad, including to the UN, North Korea, the Vatican, and to military parades in Beijing. Analysts argue that Lukashenka appears in public with his son in order to soften his image as a severe ruler. Likewise, Trump brought his youngest son to his first public meeting after the announcement of the election results.

However, there is a principal difference between them – Trump will have to work within the system of US democratic institutions, checked by the Congress, judiciary and various interest groups; he is also entitled to no more than two terms in power. Meanwhile, Lukashenka has been the sole ruler and decision-maker in Belarus for the last 20 years and shows no intention of stepping down.

As for the prospects of Belarus-US relations, experts do not think that the two presidents' vivid personal similarities will lead to much progress. [Valieryj Karbalievič](#) argues that Trump's administration does not plan to touch on the issue of Belarus in the upcoming years. The development of bilateral cooperation will continue down its existing path.

[Dzianis Mieljancoŭ](#) argues the US is highly unlikely to prioritise Belarus. Consequently, US-Belarus relations will develop according to a similar model to the last two years, focusing on human rights and security issues.



It is not yet certain whether the American president-elect will renege on his promises and bring significant changes to US internal and external policy. Most likely, Belarus will not see dramatic changes under Trump's presidency. Nevertheless, the government has hopes for the new US leader, while common Belarusians replicate Russian media discourse surrounding Trump as a pragmatic friend of Russia and Belarus.

*Alesia Rudnik and Vadzim Smok*

*Alesia Rudnik is an intern at the Ostrogorski Centre and MA student at Stockholm University.*

*Vadzim Smok is an analyst and project coordinator at the Ostrogorski Centre.*