

# Belarusians Had to Mourn Chavez for Three Days

Alexander Lukashenka took part in the funeral of Venezuelan former President Hugo Chavez. Standing together by the coffin of their friend, Lukashenka and Ahmadinejad could not stop the tears.

Isolated from the West, the Belarusian ruler does not have much choice when it comes to finding foreign friends and partners.

According to the Belarusian state news agency BELTA, Chavez had closer friendly relations with Lukashenka than with any other foreign leader. The Belarusian authorities announced three days of mourning in the country. All TV and radio stations were recommended not to air entertainment programmes and state flags had to be flown at half-staff starting on 6 March.

That shocked many observers – when the greatest modern Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau died, the authorities announced no mourning at all. Just one day of mourning followed the Minsk metro bombing on 11 April 2011 that left 15 dead and hundreds wounded. Lukashenka is trying to demonstrate how highly he appreciated his personal relations with the Venezuelan leader, a stranger to most Belarusians.

Hugo Chavez used to be one of the most liberal friends of Lukashenka. At least Chavez never falsified elections in his own country. Other friends of Lukashenka, like Moammar Gaddafi and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have a much worse record.

Lukashenka likes to cooperate with other authoritarian leaders, although that brings little financial gain to Belarus. Anti-Americanism and “resistance to the single-polar

world” rhetoric are the main uniting factors here. Such cooperation serves the purpose of support for one another in the international arena and secures internal legitimisation.

Lukashenka’s regime often uses connections like that to show its autonomy from Russia and independence from the West. Further, these relations remain important for the internal stability of the countries. Unofficial sources claim that the special services of Belarus, Iran and Venezuela cooperate with one another and share the experience of preventing the “coloured revolutions”.

### **Lukashenka-Chavez Friendship**

The leaders of Belarus and Venezuela made friends in 2006, when Chavez visited Minsk for the first time. Chavez suggested to Lukashenka that they form a “combat team”, and Lukashenka replied that they could create “a team in football, hockey or basketball”. That friendship looked very doubtful then, and the numbers confirmed it. In 2006, Belarusian exports to Venezuela totalled \$6.0m, and imports zero.

Due to the personal friendship, the situation then changed drastically. In 2012, Belarusian exports to Venezuela totalled \$254.4m, while Venezuelan exports totalled \$326.4m. Moreover, in 2010 and 2011, imports from Venezuela surpassed one billion dollars. Unlike any other of Lukashenka’s partner, Chavez made Belarus a priority over Russia and irritated the Kremlin by selling oil to Belarus. Lukashenka promised to never to forget it.

Venezuela has become a great market for Belarusian goods. Often their quality is so low that only a friend would buy them. The majority of Belarusian economic projects may have to be cancelled after Chavez’s death. The new President is unlikely to sympathise with the Belarusian leader so much.

Whoever becomes the new Venezuelan president , he will never become as popular as Chavez. Moreover, he will have to solve

several complex internal issues and is unlikely to spend money on Lukashenka instead of his country's other mates.

At first, Lukashenka did not plan to participate in his friend's funeral personally. His close aide Victar Sheiman was supposed to go to Venezuela. However, the Belarusian leader decided to put off festive ceremonies dedicated to International Women's Day (an official holiday in Belarus) and flew to Caracas. He probably did this not only because he wanted to say goodbye to his friend, but also to try to support Belarusian interests in Venezuela.

### **Other Authoritarian Friends of Lukashenka**

The more negative Lukashenka's relations become with Vladimir Putin or the West, the more he tries to create the impression of friendly relations with other countries. Lukashenka always liked to demonstrate his good relations with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Moammar Gaddafi, Robert Mugabe, Slobodan Milošević and even Fidel Castro.

Relations with Iran looked the brightest. Close relations with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad secured access to the Iranian market for Belarus. Belarus is now actively selling not just traditional potassium fertilisers, but also agricultural equipment, synthetic fibre and metal products to Iran. Moreover, Belarus got an opportunity to develop an oil field in Juffair while Iranians opened their "Samand" automobile factory in Belarus.



In 2006, Ahmadinejad told Lukashenka that he considered him his best friend ever. However, several years later the Iranians broke the contract for oil production with Belarusians, while the quality of "Samands" appeared so low that the Belarusian authorities decided to close the factory.

Today, Belarusian-Iranian relations are waiting for a new

start. Ineffectiveness of economic cooperation overcame friendship.

Lukashenka also had close relations with Moammar Gaddafi. He even called him his brother in public. Like Chavez.

In 1999, Lukashenka visited Slobodan Milošević during the NATO operations against Yugoslavia, in order to support him and even to discuss Yugoslavia's joining the Union State of Belarus and Russia.

### **Why Lukashenka Needs Such Friends**

Lukashenka has been on the EU travel ban list for many years and cannot travel to most European countries or to North America. Therefore, the Belarusian authorities like to portray any minor international meeting or trip as a major international event. Lukashenka has no particular reason for hugging Mugabe, but he does it.

The second problem comes from the first one: the absence of recognition. The Belarusian regime makes a lot of fuss about its international relations in order to send a signal to Belarusian society that the international community recognises the Belarusian authorities and communicates with them.

Thirdly, the quality of some Belarusian products remains so low that other countries agree to buy them only on the basis of really friendly relations – they have to buy the goods in order not to destroy the friendship.

Nobody knows how real the friendship between the Belarusian and the Venezuelan leaders was, but Lukashenka will definitely miss Chavez. The Presidente indeed supported Lukashenka and asked for nothing in return. Chavez, Gadaffi, Milošević – those are friends whom Lukashenka will never see again.

Every year the Belarusian ruler leader keeps losing friends, and the list of his foes continues to grow.

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# **New Rapprochement of Belarus with Cuba and Venezuela**

Struggling with problems in its foreign policy towards the West and Russia, Belarusian government looks for partners elsewhere. Last month, top Belarusian officials visited several South American capitals. Lukashenka personally went to Cuba, Venezuela and Ecuador. But despite various speculations and loud rhetoric, form dominates over substance in these relations.

He came for the third time to Caracas. Trade volumes with Venezuela rose from USD 6 million in 2006 to USD 1.3 billion in 2011. Cooperation with Venezuela is, indeed, a major issue for Belarusian foreign policy to be compared to friendship with China. But while relations with Beijing were established immediately after independence and gradually developed all these years, Belarusian interaction with Latin America remained somehow chaotic and sidelined till mid-2000s.

## **Fidel Castro in Khatyn**

Since Soviet times Belarus has continued to cooperate with Cuba. On a rare occasion of direct international contact with Soviet Belarus, Fidel Castro came to Minsk in 1972, and in 1978 the leader of Soviet Belarus Piatro Masherau paid a visit to Havana. No wonder, the first Belarusian mission in Latin America opened in Cuba. Nevertheless, even decade-long links did not prevent recession in relations since early 1990s. Cuba simply did not have money.

For a while Minsk developed relations with Peru then under authoritarian president Alberto Fujimori. Belarus could

sell Fujimori some weapons, yet the cooperation lasted only a few years and came to a halt by 2000s when Fujimori had been ousted.

Then, the Belarusian government discovered a completely new partner – Venezuela. Actually, in this case the interest was mutual. Belarus needed new markets to earn money and diversify its economic links. New Venezuelan leadership sought know-how and technologies for rapid modernisation which had been once achieved in Soviet Belarus.

Moreover, the wishes and opportunities corresponded well with one another. Oil-rich Venezuela had money – unlike some of Belarus' other friends like Cuba or Nicaragua – and needed rather simple commodities, equipment and technologies which Belarus actually could supply. And it does not matter that Belarusian and Venezuelan leaders have different visions of what they are doing. While Chavez solemnly proclaimed, "In recent years we have built up not merely a strategic union yet brotherhood," Lukashenka preferred to elaborate on the mundane issue of diversification of Venezuelan economy.

### **Are They Friends Against the West**

The opposition in both countries speculated a lot about ideological foundations of such alliance. Yet, the Belarusian regime has [no ideological backbone](#) at all. Though Minsk repeated some ideological mantras about "besieged Venezuela" – avoiding explicit anti-American rhetoric – the Belarusian government refused to really engage in ideological and geopolitical alliances of Hugo Chavez.

Speaking in late June on Venezuelan TV about foundations of bilateral relations Lukashenka unwillingly admitted the ambivalence of their situation. "With Chavez, we are people of the same ideology. Those who struggle against us, follow another ideology. But this is not an issue of ideology. Here we have an economic issue!"

Moreover, allegedly “left-wing” Lukashenka failed to build relationships with proven leftist leaders like that of Brazil and Argentina. Relations with Ecuador and Bolivia have been pursued only after Chavez made it clear that cared about them. At the same time, Minsk had tried to develop relations with Columbia, an old nemesis of Chavez and a symbol of a pro-American regime in the region.

In May the deputy foreign minister Siarhei Aleinik of Belarus in Havana exchanged “opinions about the tendencies in development of post-Soviet states and trends in Latin America” with his counterparts. Together with Cuban foreign minister, they “studied the key aspects of development of political dialogue between Belarus and Cuba.” But there are no reason to argue that such issues were somehow interesting for Minsk, as they look much more as a lip service. Official Belarusian reports rarely mention such topics at all, focusing instead on economic issues.

### **New Horizons – Ecuador and Bolivia**

However, such details remained largely unnoticed by many analysts and critics of the Belarusian regime. The murky business deals of Lukashenka and Chavez caused suspicion in the West and East. When in 2010, against the background of a new tension between Belarus and Russia, Chavez started shipping oil to Belarus, it embarrassed Moscow which used its powerful spin capacity to discredit the idea.

Through Venezuela, the Belarusian government rather successfully attempts to establish links with other Latin American nations. Actually, Chavez could revive relations between Belarus and Cuba. During the recent visit Belarusian ruler admitted: “As part of this trip, according to our and Chavez' plan, I intend to visit Cuba. And I am going to conduct dialogue on cooperation between our three nations: Belarus, Venezuela and Cuba. It should be mentioned that Chavez has done a lot to make my visit to Cuba possible.” Of

course, the issue at stake is Venezuela's paying for Belarusian goods and services delivered to Cuba.

It might be different with other countries where Belarus needs even simple mediation to establish links to ruling and business elite. Such links provides Venezuela and it helps in promoting Belarusian goods and services on the distant continent. Commenting on his trip to Ecuador, Lukashenka said, "we shall talk about trilateral cooperation: Ecuador-Venezuela-Belarus». Moreover, "We are studying a series of projects on other directions of cooperation – Nicaragua, other Caribbean states. In the past, Hugo Chavez has done very much to help us open up a dialogue with Brazil, Argentina and Chile."

### **Belarusian Exports: Beyond Potash**

So far Belarusian exports to the region has been primarily fertilisers. Due to these commodities – mainly potash-based – always being in demand throughout the world, trade with Brazil has been constantly making Belarus hundreds of millions of US dollars. But it poses very hard questions before the nation as such a reliance on non-sophisticated mineral products with minimal added value threatens the sustainability of its development.

In early 2000s, Belarusian trade with Venezuela followed the same pattern. Yet, the close cooperation between the countries enabled Belarus to diversify products it exported to Venezuela. Now, Belarus sells significant quantities of machinery and equipment, as well as undertakes construction projects for residential buildings and industry. That is apparently considered by Belarusian government as a promising model in relations with other Latin American nations.

In reality, cooperation with Latin America can be profitable, but these profits will never really compensate for the long-term troubles in relations with Western countries, and even



less with Russia. After all, in a very successful 2010, Venezuela's share of Belarusian foreign trade made up just 2.5%.

### **Lukashenka Like Genosse Honecker**

Speculations of both the regime and the Belarusian opposition about cooperation with Venezuela and other Latin American nations are often inflated. They miss the evident point of Belarus being located geographically and historically between Russia and Europe and integrated into their respective economic structures. Chavez and Lukashenka can neither carry out global projects as official propaganda argues, nor conspire against America as its opponents reiterate.

Discussing the essence of Belarusian regime requires distinguishing between the rhetoric and the reality. Lukashenka's policy in the Third World, including in Latin America, has nothing to do with ideology. He will never help anyone without good pay, much less risk to mess with the West – even for money. His government will never send its people to fight for any kind of cause like Castro's did when he dispatched his troops to fight for Marxist movements in Africa in 1980s.

To describe Lukashenka's line, the model of Eastern Germany's policy in the developing world is much more suitable. The government of German Democratic Republic just kept selling anything it could. It spoke a great deal about helping Angola, yet delivered ten times more to Iraq which was undermining Communist movements at that time. The reason was simple – money.

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# The Times: Hugo Chávez defends the 'bad guys' of the world



Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez tightens bonds with US foes: from Castro to Lukashenka, the influential British newspaper The Times states.

## *Hugo Chávez defends the 'bad guys' of the world*

*By Hannah Strange*

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*President Hugo Chávez has risked international ire by lauding Carlos the Jackal, the Venezuelan terrorist notorious for a series of bombings, kidnappings and hijackings across Europe, as a "revolutionary fighter" unjustly imprisoned for trying to defend the Palestinian people.*

*The leftist Venezuelan leader praised Carlos – whose real name is Ilich Ramirez Sánchez – as "one of the great fighters of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation", denying he was a terrorist and claiming his lifetime imprisonment in France was unfair.*

*"I defend him," he said during a speech on Friday night. "It doesn't matter to me what they say tomorrow in Europe."*

*Ramirez was incarcerated for life in France in 1997 for the 1975 murders of two French secret agents and an alleged informant, after being captured in Sudan three years earlier by French agents acting on a CIA tip and whisked to Paris in a sack. Mr Chávez said that this amounted to "kidnap".*

He has admitted to leading a 1975 attack on the Opec headquarters in Vienna that killed 3 people, and has been linked to the 1976 hijacking of an Air France jet en route to Uganda. He is also blamed for a series of bomb attacks in Paris and a grenade attack on the English headquarters of an Israeli bank.

Most famously, it is believed that he was the "godfather" behind the murders of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972.

Ramirez has also expressed support for al-Qaeda and spoken of his "relief" at the 9/11 attacks. It is not the first time that Mr Chávez has waded into controversy over Carlos the Jackal, who retains a small but ardent following in socialist Venezuela.

After taking office in 1999, the former paratrooper provoked international uproar when he wrote to Ramirez in prison, addressing him as "Dear Compatriot", and has previously described him as a friend. Addressing Friday's gathering of socialist politicians from 40 countries, Mr Chávez claimed that Ramirez had paid the price for his defence of the Palestinian cause. "How many Palestinians keep dying?" he added. "They accuse him of being a terrorist, but Carlos really was a revolutionary fighter," he said.

The fiery anti-American leader sought to defend leaders he said were wrongly branded "bad guys", heaping praise on Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is to visit Venezuela later this week, and the Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe, who he called "brothers".

He drew the wrath of Ugandans after casting doubt on the crimes of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. "We thought he was a cannibal," said Mr Chávez of Amin, whose regime was notorious for torturing and killing suspected opponents in the 1970s. "I have doubts ... Maybe he was a great nationalist, a

*patriot."*

*Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's secretary, Tamale Mirundi, reminded Mr Chávez on Sunday of the brutality of the Amin regime, under which around 300,000 Ugandans died, including one of Mr Mirundi's wives.*

*Never one to shy away from controversy, Mr Chávez has during his decade in office built up close alliances with foes of Washington around the globe, most famously the former Cuban leader Fidel Castro, whom he regards as his ideological mentor.*

*He recently hosted Mr Mugabe at a summit on Margarita Island in Venezuela and invited the Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir to Caracas after claiming that the international warrant for his arrest over the genocide in Darfur was based on racism.*

*He has also forged ties with President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, often said to be Europe's last dictator, and has built a military alliance with Moscow, visiting both countries as part of a recent tour that also included Iran, Syria, Algeria and Libya.*