

Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act Passes US Congress Committee

The headlines of stories about the US Congress like the one above are among the few opportunities for the words “Belarus” and “democracy” to stand next to each other. Last week, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee approved yet another piece of legislation on Belarus – “The Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011” sponsored by Representative Christopher H. Smith. The bill is now heading to the full House of Representatives for a vote.

This legislation, H.R. 515, supports human rights in Belarus. Importantly, the bill authorized aid for pro-democracy forces and funding for broadcasting to the country. H.R. 515 also calls for blocking assets owned by senior Belarusian officials, and their families, involved in anti-democratic actions. The bill supports targeted sanctions and demands the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners. It also requires the US administration to report to Congress on Belarusian arms sales abroad, censorship or surveillance of the internet, as well as the personal assets and wealth of governmental figures.

Smith, the sponsor of the bill, has championed Belarusian rights also in previous sessions of Congress. A republican senator currently in his 16th term in the U.S. House of Representatives, Smith chairs the Human Rights Subcommittee and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). He authored the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 and the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006—passed the House and Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support. In his Apr. 14 opening statement, Smith was unequivocal in his denunciation of the Belarusian regime. He said, “Lukashenka’s

dictatorship has the worst democracy and human rights record of any government in Europe.” He stressed that the sanctions were “aimed at the senior leadership” and that the United States stood “with the Belarusian people against their oppressors.”

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The Democracy Acts condemning Belarus human rights violations have a long history. The first Act was introduced to the U.S. Congress in November 2001 after the controversial presidential elections. The bill legislated the freeze of the Belarusian assets in the United States, prohibited trade with Belarusian government-run businesses, denied Belarusian officials entry in the United States; and proposed a \$30 million appropriation to support democratic institutions and organizations in Belarus. The March 2003 version of the legislature increased the amount to \$40 million. In contrast, the 2004 Belarus Democracy Act contained no prohibitions of the travel of Belarusian officials or U.S. exports to Belarus. It also omitted reference to Russia’s role in promoting democracy in Belarus. The 2004 act was reauthorized in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

The primary value of the previous US Democracy Acts is in increasing U.S. aid for democratic institutions and civil society initiatives in Belarus. To date, the aid that the US provided through other channels has been modest (\$11.5 million in FY2009, and \$15 million (allocated) in FY2010). Moreover, its efficiency has suffered from the noncooperation of the Belarusian regime (for example, the U.S. diplomatic staff in Belarus has been reduced to five people after a diplomatic dispute). The Obama administration has requested \$14 million in aid in FY2011, but only \$9.6 million of this amount is designated for “political competition and consensus-building” and “civil society.”

What impact will the bill have if it passes Congress and becomes law? Smith hopes it will serve as a “signal to Lukashenka” and “propel[s] this policy forward amidst the administration’s competing priorities.” Yet history shows that

economic leverage rarely translates into political gains. In fact, if the sanctions do have any effect in Belarus, it may be strengthening the authoritarian regime. After all, it would be naïve to think that the Belarusian officials would be eager to make a trip to the United States or that they would not know better than to keep their assets in the US and EU banks. Back in 2004, President Lukashenka would say he “could not get a better gift.” His reasoning went as follows, “If you scold me for seeking internal and external enemies, why are you giving me a pretext for finding such an enemy outside the country? Why are you supplying me with such a chance?”

The most the sanctions can accomplish is signal the United States’ resolve to exert pressure and its intolerance for human rights violations globally. Unfortunately, they impose little strain or cost on Washington, and therefore lack weight and credibility, which was acknowledged by Lukashenka himself in 2009 when he told the US delegation visiting Minsk, “If you are strong people, you should repeal this law and abrogate these sanctions that are meaningless to the US.”

However, the sanctions do irk the authoritarian leader. For instance, in 2009, Lukashenka said lifting the US sanctions and repealing the Democracy Act were the preconditions for returning the US ambassador to Minsk. Most importantly, the increased aid toward civil society development and the pro-democratic forces in the country will have an immense positive effect in the long run.

VC

Another Attempt to Civilize the Belarusian Leader Failed

Blood on the Streets as Belarus Authorities Announce Election Results

Between thirty and fifty thousand people gathered in the center of Minsk on Sunday to protest against the officially announced results of presidential elections. Despite the freezing cold, people gathered in the center of Minsk and marched towards the headquarters of the Central Elections Committee demanding fair elections. Tens of thousands of people were chanting “Go away!” to the incumbent president Alyaksandr Lukashenka who is running for the fourth turn.

After the protesters gathered at the Central Elections Committee on the Independence Square they started negotiations with the police. Then, as eye witnesses report, a group of people who looked like undercover security agents suddenly stormed a government building and smashed its glass doors. Vital Rymasheuski and other presidential candidates announced that those people had no affiliation with the protesters and were most likely sent by the authorities to create appearance of violent protests and thus justify using force against demonstrators.

Because of the cold temperature many people began to leave the main square. Their plan was to come back on the next day. Mr

Rymasheuski was promised by the police that if the organizers remove the loudspeakers they would not use violence against the crowd. The organizers removed the loudspeakers but the police shortly thereafter started to beat and arrest the remaining people. Thousands of riot police personnel were deployed to suppress the protesters.

According to multiple sources, police was using excessive violence, many protesters and journalists were heavily beaten and blood was seen on the protestors' faces and on the snow. There were no clashes because the protestors did not even try to resist the overwhelming police force. Earlier this Sunday, Vladimir Neklyaev, the most charismatic presidential candidate, had been attacked and knocked unconscious by a group of men apparently affiliated with the Belarus authorities. Vital Rymasheuski and Andrei Sannikau had also been severely beaten by the riot police. Most opposition presidential candidates are now under arrest. Hundreds of other protestors are also detained.

Although the protests are not yet over, the turnout of more than 50 thousand people despite years of intimidation and cold weather is truly remarkable. Belarus has not seen anything close to these figures since 1996. Apparently, the authorities were seriously concerned that the protest will turn into a true revolution. This is why they decided to use provocations and excessive force to ensure that the results they announced are not going to be questioned.

✘ Although announcement of a very high percentage for the current president and serious election irregularities were expected, the police brutality had not been expected by most Belarus analysts. Most experts predicted that authorities would just wait until the protesters disappear because of very cold weather conditions. An appearance of more democratic elections could have won more friends for the Belarus regime in the West. This is unlikely to happen now.

It is already clear that the Belarus authorities will face the consequences of their brutality. Although the levers against the Belarus regime are limited, more economic and political sanctions may follow. However, it is not clear whether the international community is going to increase support of media directed to Belarus and other civil society groups in the country. The high turnout of protesters suggests that changes in Belarus will come sooner rather than later.

Belarus: from Democracy to Dictatorship through Elections

✘ Charismatic Alyaksandr Lukashenka was elected 1994, when Belarus had its first and so far the only relatively free presidential elections. Lukashenka won giving promises of cash, refrigerators and TV sets to Belarusians impoverished as a result of the Soviet Union collapse. Following the decades of Soviet rule, the country had no well-rooted traditions of democracy or even its own statehood. As a result, civil society and national identity in Belarus was weaker than in any other Soviet republic. The prospects of populist politicians such as Lukashenka looked particularly bright.

The Role of Russia

As a highly industrialized and export-oriented country, Belarus depended in early 1990-s on Russia's markets and raw materials. President Lukashenka skillfully courted the Russian political elite by introducing Russian as the second official language, favoring Russian military bases in Belarus and constantly promising Russia a reunification. The country's

pro-Russian foreign policy starkly contrasted with those of Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine were increasingly pro-Western and pro-NATO. The post Cold War political elite of Russia viewed Belarus as its only outpost in the West. Lukashenka's hope was that Russia would support Belarus in the West a similar manner as the United States supported Israel in the Middle East.

Russia was happy to pay for this demonstration of loyalty. For many years, the Russian Government has been heavily subsidizing the Belarus economy by providing subsidized natural gas and oil. The cheap natural gas helped inefficient Belarusian enterprises to survive. The discounted oil had been processed and sold to the West at much higher prices. In addition, Belarus was often used by Russia as an intermediary for selling military equipment to "rough" states and other murky dealings. All that helped the Belarus regime to survive and keep the economy under state control without almost any foreign investments.

Belarusian Civil Society

Unfortunately, cheap oil and gas are usually detrimental to democracy and Belarus was not an exception. Its political parties were turned into small clubs of dissidents, opposition received zero access to state electronic media and virtually all employees were transferred to short-term contracts which made them dependent upon their employers. With most of the economy owned by the state that meant that people were afraid to protest because of the fear to lose their jobs.

While courting Russia, Lukashenka tried to make sure that the civil society in Belarus, particularly media, and political institutions were under his tight control. As a result, by the end of the 1990-s the parliament and the courts had been replaced with rubber-stamp institutions bowing to the presidential administration. The nearly wiped-out civil society makes Belarus very different from Ukraine and Georgia

which had relatively independent media, parliaments and judiciary during their “revolutions”.

Russia was always helping the Lukashenka regime at difficult times. When he was nearly impeached by the Belarusian Parliament during very early years of his rule, the Russian prime minister and speakers of both Russian houses of Parliament came to Minsk to rescue Lukashenka. Quite often, when the United States or the European Union imposed sanctions against Belarus for human rights violation, Russia’s immediate response was to provide even more economic aid.

Russia or the West?

Recently Russia started to demand something more tangible than anti-Western rhetoric from Belarus for its economic aid. In particular, Russian businesses are interested in privatizing Belarusian companies and the Russian political elite cannot see any real steps towards the promised re-unification of two countries. Reducing subsidies to the Belarusian economy made Alyaksandr Lukashenka look elsewhere to keep the economy going. Meetings with top European politicians, joining the Eastern Partnership and launching more creative projects such as exporting oil from Venezuela were the steps in that direction.

It is difficult for the European Union to ignore Belarus which borders three EU member states and is an important European transit hub. It is also not in Europe’s best interest to leave Belarus to Russia. For Russia Lukashenka is still better than an uncertain alternative president, no matter how pro-Russian he sounds. Almost a decade ago, Russia supported Miloshevich not because he was the most pro-Russian politician of the region, but because he was the most isolated from the West. Lukashenka understands what drives Europe’s and Russia’s policy towards Belarus and tries gain something both from Europe and from the West to ensure that his regime survives.

The 2010 Presidential Elections

It would be naive to expect that this presidential elections are going to be fundamentally different from the ones it had in the past. True, Belarus authorities registered a number of alternative presidential candidates, introduced some minor changes to its elections regulations and the police so far seems to be less brutal. However, this cosmetic refurbishments have not affected the substance of these elections. According to the Organization on Cooperation and Security in Europe around 86% of all information in electronic media is about Lukashenka and is positive. All nine alternative candidates have just 14% and they are portrayed almost exclusively in negative light.

In addition, the votes are unlikely to be counted. The election committees consist of the very same people who falsified elections in the past. The central election committee is chaired by the notorious Lidia Yermoshina, who was banned from traveling to the European Union and the United States for rigging Belarusian elections. In her safe hands the result is going to be exactly as Mr Lukashenka wants it to be.

The opposition candidates urged their supporters to come to the main square of Minsk to protest. Thousands will come out tonight. But it would take tens of thousands to make any real impact. Not surprisingly, the elections are held at the end of December, when Belarusian winters are particularly cold. The authorities even took care of removing tents and sleeping bags from Minsk shops and made a huge skating rink in the middle of the square where the protests will take place.

What should be done?

First, if the elections are rigged they should not be recognized. Europe and the United States did it many times in the past and there appears to be little reason not to do it this time. Second, it is important to help Belarusian civil

civil society, and in particular its media. If the eyes and the ears of the Belarusians are closed how can they make a choice in favour of democracy, let alone defending it? After all, most people in Belarus do not really know what democracy is.

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Is Europe Ready to Tolerate an Anti-Russian Dictatorship?

✘ According to the Economist, some European politicians would be happy to accept dictatorship in Belarus as long as it is not pro-Russian. Mr Lukashenka's anti-Russian rhetoric has recently impressed some Europeans. In particular, Dalia Grybauskaitė, Lithuania's president, reportedly told European Union diplomats that a victory by Mr Lukashenka would safeguard stability and limit Russian influence.

Europeans traditionally keep promising rewards to Belarus authorities if the elections are free and fair. However, all signs are that the authorities approach to elections will be as usual despite some cosmetic changes. Although this time there are many alternative candidates and the police tolerates demonstrations, two most important prerequisites of free and fair elections are missing. First, alternative presidential candidates are almost never seen on TV. Neither is there a free discussion about elections. It is difficult to see how voters can support an alternative candidate when they have no access to free information.

Second, the votes are unlikely to be counted. Nearly all elections committees – those who do the actual vote counting –

consist of the same people who falsified Belarusian elections in the past. Usually these are employees of state-owned enterprises and their immediate superiors. They know that if something goes wrong, there will be immediate consequences for their employment.

With high unemployment (not acknowledged by the official statistics) and most employers being state-owned the prospect of loosing a job looks scary to most people in Belarus. The vast majority of employees in Belarus work on the basis of short-term fixed-term contracts. The system was introduced to make sure that those who are not loyal can be easily made jobless. It is not even necessary to dismiss the dissidents. Their fixed-term contracts are simply not extended.

The alternative presidential candidates view these elections use more as a self-marketing opportunity rather than as a real fight for power. However, it is difficult to blame them. The civil society in Belarus has been nearly wiped out over the last decade. However, the roots and the seeds of the real civil society are still there. Alternative candidates are just tips of those roots which need to be supported.

The alternative candidates should think long-term and instead of promoting their short-term goals, seek donors' support for independent media and other elements of civil society for the years to come. Presidential elections are an excellent opportunity to attract attention to Belarus once again. Hopefully, other European leaders will not follow Ms Grybauskaite's pro-Lukashenka position. It is better to make long-term investments in Belarusian civil society, instead of immoral short-term investments in dictatorship. The European history shows than either anti-Russian or pro-Russian, dictatorships are inherently unpredictable and unstable.

YK

Lukashenka Plays the Ace Up His Sleeve

✘ Two days ago, on the sideline of an OSCE meeting in Kazakhstan, Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov met with U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to announce that Belarus intends to get rid of all of its remaining highly enriched uranium (HEU) which just a few months ago seemed so [unlikely](#).

The terms of the deal are not completely clear, but it was noted in the joint communiqué that the “The United States intends to provide technical and financial assistance to support the completion of this effort as expeditiously as possible.”

It is not exactly clear why the Belarusian administration has decided to take this opportunity to utilize one its last few negotiating chips, but it could likely be in order to gain favor with the West prior to the December elections. As Digest readers know, Lukashenka has had a [falling out](#) – to say the least – with its one-time benefactor Russia. In all likelihood, Lukashenko has decided to follow Kenny Roger’s [advice](#) and play the ace up his sleeve as Belarus Digest already [discussed](#).

However, the Belarusian leader should not count on this buying him anything more than an invitation to the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, South Korea, which he has already received, and certainly not anything along the lines of what he likely has in mind – acquiescence from the West when the upcoming election turns out to be less than free and fair. In the spirit of not counting my money while I’m still at the

table, I won't go quite as far as the [The Economist](#) and declare the election over because crazier things have happened, but I would also not recommend the reader to hold his or her breath.

by Andrew Riedy, contributing writer

Russia, NATO and Belarus: Real Money and Unreal Threats

✘ For Belarus, an agreement between Russia and NATO will once again underline the problem of being outside this process of pan-European integration. Belarus can not continue to be a black hole between Russia and Western Europe. The Belarusian government can't afford to play on the contradictions between them and can't rely on the support of only one of these subjects any more.

The confrontation between Russia and NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union has always been a political chess game, in fact, somewhat devoid of real motivation. It is obvious that the possibility of a real armed conflict between modern Russia and Western Europe is entirely unrealistic. The tough talk on the regulation of armaments and the stationing of troops has always sounded unnatural.

The real agenda of these talks has always been the desire of both parties (especially Russia) to save face in the course of reformatting relations on the continent after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty Organization. The rapid expansion of NATO, which until recently was openly seen as an enemy, was immediately seen as a defeat for the Russian leadership. Former Soviet satellites (and even former

republics of the USSR) joining NATO meant their escape from Russia's sphere of influence – or at seemed so. All this harmed the domestic image of the Russian government and embittered the post-imperial sentiment of public opinion in the country.

At some point in the early 1990s the West seems to have missed the right moment to invite Russia become member of the alliance and to start building up the European security system involving all affected parties. Therefore the process had required some time to ripen, which eventually took more than one and a half decades.

The phantom possibility of war with the NATO has all these years been a dubious argument in the internal politics of Russia.

Certain conservative political forces have been the most active to emphasize this threat: hard core Soviet hawks in think tanks close to the government, the military lobby of the Soviet-era generals. In addition, the Russian public opinion has been walking away from Soviet stereotypes quite slowly, while mastering the market economy and Western standards of consumption. It seems, though, that in a way there has been a somewhat symmetric situation in the U.S., with a Cold-War-mindset dominating a large part of the policy making.

The progress in relations between Russia and the NATO has only become possible after an overall political and economic stabilization in Russia, as well as a change of generations. There is reason to believe that these things have more or less been achieved now. The recent economic crisis, in turn, has stimulated Russia to compromise and calmed down the conservative revenge pathos among Russian political circles.

In the security sphere, Russia and the West have quite obvious common interests, that are far more real and serious than any differences and political games.

The fight against terrorism, maintaining stability in Central Asia requires the active cooperation and it is good that Russia and NATO have finally come to this.

In this context, the recent demonstrative refusal of the Belarusian authorities to sign the agreement on the joint Russian-Belarusian regional military group looks naive and helpless.

For Russia, the military block with Belarus is of very small value in terms of guaranteeing real security. Moreover, by sponsoring Belarus' military, Russia has to spend real money in order to be protected from an extremely unrealistic threat. With declarations of readiness to protect Russia from NATO's tanks with their bodies, the foreign political rhetoric of the current Belarusian government in this regard is irrelevant.

Belarus needs to change its relations with the West and with Russia. Ahead of the presidential election coming up in December it is now the best time to once again think about this.

[Read the original article here](#)

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Young European Federalists Plan New Action of Solidarity with Belarus

☒ Ahead of the upcoming presidential election in Belarus, the Young European Federalists plan to organize a pan-European solidarity action to demand the Belarusian government to hold

the election free and transparent. Considering that the European leadership has virtually given up demanding this and seems to have nearly accepted the new reelection of the current Belarusian president, this action is especially important.

New elections will be held in Belarus on 19 December. Media, academics and NGO representatives announce already that they will be neither free nor fair.

This is why JEF is organising the 6th edition of its pan-European Belarus action on Thursday 16 December! All sections, NGOs and activists in Europe and across the globe are called upon to join in a massive protest against the last dictatorship on the European continent and ask for the democratisation of the country. The people in Belarus must be given a real choice as well as a voice to speak up!

The action will consist of:

- The traditional gagging of statutes in the streets. Pictures will be uploaded on JEF's Flickr account.
- A number of Press Releases, also in Russian and Belarussian
- Facebook and Twitter campaigns. Follow us on Twitter via: @freebelarusjef
- A dedicated week of articles about Belarus on www.thenewfederalist.eu
- Lobby actions among political decision-makers in Brussels or elsewhere

Stay tuned for more info coming soon! We are counting on your support and involvement!

[Read more on jef.communicate-europe.co.uk](http://jef.communicate-europe.co.uk)

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Minsk in Top 10 Eastern European getaways

✘ For years Eastern Europe was the undiscovered half of the continent, where architectural gems, wonderful landscapes and buzzing cities saw only a fraction of the number of visitors heading to Western Europe.

Things have changed, with Eastern Europe now drawing travelers by the trainload, but the diversity and appeal of the region's highlights remain the same. Whether you're discovering them for the first time or coming back for a second dose, you won't be disappointed.

Lonely Planet placed Minsk on the closing position in its top 10 Eastern European getaways.*

Minsk, Belarus: Minsk will almost certainly surprise you. The capital of Belarus is, despite its thoroughly dreary sounding name, an amazingly progressive and modern place. Here fashionable cafes, wi-fi-enabled restaurants and crowded bars and nightclubs vie for your attention. Sushi bars and art galleries have taken up residence in a city centre totally remodelled to the tastes of Stalin. There are relatively few traditional sights in the city but myriad places of interest for anyone fascinated by the Soviet period, and plenty of cosmopolitan pursuits to keep you entertained come the evening.

Belarus Breaks Russia's Energy Monopoly in Eastern Europe

✘ The massive PR campaign against Lukashenka was launched by Moscow for good reasons. Lukashenka not only repeatedly denied Russian businesses access to some Belarusian state-owned enterprises, which Lukashenka treats as his own. More importantly – Lukashenka threatens the fundamentals of the Russian might and power in Europe – its energy supply monopoly.

On November, 18, oil pumping for Belarus began in Ukrainian Odessa. It means that efforts to supply Belarus with oil from new non-Russian sources reached a new and more advanced stage. Though technically this oil has still Russian origin, effectively it is a swap oil which could be bought thanks to a new arrangement with Venezuela.

Shipments of Venezuelan oil started at the beginning of this year. However, Belarus as a landlocked country faced obstacles in getting crude oil from the Baltic and Black seas to its refineries. Rail transportation evidently was not the best option. This month, after negotiations with Ukraine, Belarusian leadership managed to get Ukrainian pipeline Odessa-Brody for oil transit. The transportation costs will be lower and the shipment volumes will rise, which will result in lowering costs due to the economy of scale.

Is It Serious?

This transit breakthrough means that the Russian monopoly is no longer unshakable. Today the propaganda war waged by Russian

oil interest groups depicts the whole Belarus-Venezuelan oil cooperation as a ridiculous adventure by two buddies – presidents Lukashenka of Belarus and Chavez of Venezuela. Among many contras the lack of real interest on Venezuelan side and lack of economic feasibility for Belarus were most frequently mentioned.

However, there are clear reasons why Caracas sends oil for Belarus. It is interested in diversifying its oil markets and avoid dependency on North American market – rather logical act given volatility and even hostility in relations between US and Venezuela. But diversifying in oil markets is not an easy task at all, if not even dangerous. A good example for that could be pre-revolutionary Iran when such attempts resulted in turmoils both under Mossadegh and Shah.

Secondly, Venezuela needs modernization. Belarus as a model republic for Soviet forced and brutal nonetheless effective modernization serves as a source of specialists and technologies, and is eager to help for some oil in exchange. In addition, Minsk is willing to help Chavez in military modernization as well – after all, Belarusian army is regarded as rather efficient example for modernization of Soviet military.

As for supposed Belarusian losses in deals with Venezuelan oil, it is worth reminding that as so often in quite secretive oil business, not all the data necessary to estimate profits and losses are available. Furthermore, it is merely too early to talk about it, since with shipments rising, the efficiency will increase too. And Belarusian pay for South American oil anyway not only with money but at least partly with services and goods. Venezuela itself is interested first of all not in Belarusian money but in reprocessing its oil on Belarusian refineries – technically the most sophisticated facilities in the region – in order to sell oil products afterwards outside of Belarus and share profits with Minsk.

The new move by the Belarusian government to establish the transportation system for non-Russian oil can improve the prospects not only of the pipeline Odessa-Brody, but also many other pieces of former Soviet pipelines in Eastern Europe. Over the last years, Russia tried to avoid transit troubles with countries like Belarus and Ukraine by switching off partly or completely many pipelines in the region between Baltic and Black Sea, and is actively working on constructing new pipelines which should deliver oil and gas to Central and Western Europe, as well as Balkans, while bypassing traditional transit countries, like Belarus, Ukraine or Poland.

Nevertheless, what was a problem, can become a new opportunity, since idle pipelines let post-Soviet countries to more easily break Russian monopoly on oil and, possibly, gas in the Eastern Europe. While shipments of Venezuelan oil may be insufficient for the region, projects to bring Iranian oil developed by Minsk under current political conditions will surely be blocked by the United States. However, it will remain as a very attractive opportunity for the future.

Iraqi Oil Crushing Russian Influence

Hardly anyone remembers, but the pipeline Odessa-Brody at the very beginning has been conceived and projected for transporting Iraqi oil in particular from Iraqi Kurdistan. Then, however, sanctions were imposed on Saddam's regime in Baghdad. The pipeline has been saved by newly explored Caspian Sea oil deposits, and pipeline was built to use them. However, Caspian oil deposits had been overestimated and pipeline even did not get further continuation westward from Brody. For a while it was out-of-use, later the Russians used it to pump oil in opposite direction. Now it is finally used for initial aim to break out of energy captivity. For a moment through Venezuelan oil.

Yet it can be complemented with the same Caspian oil, which

alone did not suffice but the export volume of which may perfectly enough to fill the pipeline when combined with shipments from other sources. A propos, on November, 19, Lukashenka [discussed](#) possible buying Azerbaijani oil with the president of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Rounagh Abdullayev.

But the most important option is Middle Eastern oil, first of all Iraqi one. Technically, no obstacle stays in the way of getting that oil to Eastern Europe, because there is already rather developed network from Iraqi Kirkuk to Turkish coast. It currently lacks the access to Black Sea coast, yet there are projects to construct such pipeline (e.g. route Ceyhan-Samsun). Such plans were [discussed](#) in Ukraine in 1990s and again in early 2000s after American occupation of Iraq. The last time the issue was publically [raised](#) by the government of Viktor Yanukovych was in summer 2007. Then it caused a wave of concern and criticism in Russian media.

Whoever brings Iraqi oil to the pipeline Odessa-Brody, will ensure easy and rather cheap access to Iraqi and Middle Eastern oil not only for Belarus, but for the Eastern and Central Europe. And it will put an end to Russian energy monopoly in the region, resulting to collapse of its influence in the region, given the tight link between Russian foreign policy and energy exports. Russian Siberian oil has absolutely no chance against Middle Eastern oil in cost and quality terms. Moscow presumably will do anything it can to stop it coming to the Europe.

Therefore, the whole enterprise can be implemented only by joint efforts of some countries. It is highly unlikely that Belarus and Ukraine can do it on their own. But with the engagement of the EU, the Middle Eastern oil can soon become a very feasible option for Eastern Europe energy supply.

And Lukashenka can be at the center of the new consortium. As Dzyanis Melyantsou of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic

Studies noted [recently](#):

Presently, we see the same situation of the year 2008, when under the impact of the international political circumstances the European Union decided to unfreeze its relations with Minsk, despite its failure to comply with the previous EU demands. The EU now essentially got addicted to the engagement policy (not Lukashenka got addicted but the EU) and it is difficult for him to renounce it... it is absolutely probable next year to expect Belarus-EU negotiations on economic integration with the EU. With Lukashenka as the main negotiator.

These developments and probabilities give political economy and geopolitical calculations of future Belarusian presidential elections new greater dimension. After all, the question is not only who will run the country. The question is, whether the Eastern Europe is possible without the tight grip of Moscow.

SB

**Belarus Hosts Another EU
Visitor**

Do Belarusians Really Want Changes?

✘ The most recent opinion poll issued by the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research (NISEPI), conducted on September 2-12, 43.2 percent responded think that the future president of Belarus should be a supporter of cardinal changes to the present path; as opposed to 38.2 percent who thought that the current course should be maintained. Almost 40 percent consider the country should be led by a president who will bring the country closer to the European Union, whereas less than a quarter believes that the leader should support closer integration with Russia.

David Marples is a professor at the University of Alberta, Canada and a President of the North American Association for Belarusian Studies. In the new article for the Jamestown Foundation* he reflects on possible outcomes of the Belarusian presidential election analyzing the most recent opinion poll results and discussing campaign of the former Deputy Foreign Minister, Andrej Sannikau.

Belarusians Want Changes: But How Badly?

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November 8, 2010

By: David Marples

There are several indications that the relatively passive Belarusian population favors fundamental changes in political and economic life. Some activists, such as presidential candidate, Andrei Sannikau, perceive a groundswell of popular sentiment that could sweep away the Lukashenka leadership in the presidential elections to be held on December 19. But how likely is such a development? Are there genuine possibilities of change in Belarus after the long presidency of Alyaksandr

Lukashenka?

The most recent opinion poll issued by the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research (NISEPI), conducted on September 2-12, based on 1,527 respondents and with a margin of error of no more than 3 percent, provides some revealing results. Over one-third agreed that a personality cult of Lukashenka exists in the country, while a further 28 percent saw increasing signs of such a development. Less than a quarter maintained that no such cult existed (www.iiseps.org/data10-391.html).

Asked what sort of person should be the future president of Belarus, 43.2 percent responded that it should be a supporter of cardinal changes to the present path; as opposed to 38.2 percent who thought that the current course should be maintained. Almost 40 percent consider the country should be led by a president who will bring the country closer to the European Union, whereas less than a quarter believes that the leader should support closer integration with Russia. Almost 60 percent favor a leader who supports a market economy, with less than 15 percent preferring a backer of a planned economy, (the sort of model to be discussed at Lukashenka's forthcoming "All-Belarusian Congress") (www.iiseps.org/data10-391.html).

Many observers have perceived a mood of dissatisfaction in Belarus. Most notable perhaps is former Deputy Foreign Minister, Andrej Sannikau, whose campaign has now gathered more than 150,000 signatures, making him one of ten major opposition figures to have attained the 100,000 barrier, along with Uladzimir Neklyayeu, leader of the "Tell the Truth" movement and Mikola Statkevich of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party. Sannikau uses the phrase "For a normal Belarus!" on the European Belarus website, a satirical play on government propaganda, but also one that highlights the idiosyncratic path taken of late by the incumbent president (www.europeanbelarus.org, October 24).

On the website of Charter 97, Sannikau has been expanding his ideas as the campaign to collect signatures gathers pace. Most notably he focuses on the severed relations with Russia and describes Lukashenka's economic model as "doddering" and impeding regional cooperation. Discussions of Belarusian official politicians with members of state associations in Russia have been quite common, but in mid-October, Sannikau was invited to attend a round-table debate at the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian foreign ministry, along with several delegates from "official" Belarus. During the discussion, the conference, according to Sannikau, divided into two sections: one adhered to the "old approach" and defended the recent actions of Lukashenka; but the other (the majority) focused on how Russian-Belarusian relations could be brought back to "normal." Most notably, many delegates perceived that the state systems of Belarus and Russia were increasingly moving further apart, thanks to the decrepit economic system prevailing in the former state (www.charter97.org, October 22). In other words, economic weaknesses in Belarus elicit the need for political changes.

Sannikau bolstered his argument by commenting on the new rapprochement between Russia and the EU, citing French president Nicolas Sarkozy's support for a common economic space between the two, with a visa-free regime (www.charter97.org, October 22). However, the Belarusian side could only participate in such a venture if there is a leadership change in Minsk. Sannikau thus appears to be relying on Belarusians' genuine support for closer links with Europe without alienating Russia. On the contrary, he sees Russia as a close ally in the movement toward Brussels.

Meanwhile, Lukashenka seems to be rooted to the same spot. On October 22, he took part in the "Question to the President Campaign" organized by the Republic Union of Youth and the Belarusian Pioneer organization, two youth organizations officially supported by the authorities and declared that

“Belarus is an island of peace and stability,” citing as he has always done the economic upheavals that occurred directly after independence in the early 1990’s and comparing that period with his own achievements. He referred to the young people, who occupy the former building of the Komsomol in Minsk, as “the first generation” to have “grown up in our young sovereign and independent state” (Belarusian Telegraph Agency, October 22). In this setting, no doubt, he felt secure from any uncomfortable questions.

In theory, then, a disgruntled population seems ready to embrace change while a president who has relied on force and manipulation to remain in power has run out of ideas. The difficulty, however, in addition to the moribund and corrupt election procedures in Belarus is the attitude of the people. Most want economic reforms, including the white-collar elite. According to one observer, everyone wants to see change, but no one believes that he/she personally is able to impart much influence or that the elections will bring it about (Belaruskiy Partizan, October 22). The task of Sannikau and others, then, is to convince the electorate that success is possible and to inculcate faith in the movement for change.

However, two qualifiers need to be made. First, a route to Europe alongside Russia does little to guarantee the continuing independent course of Belarus. And second, the Europeans now seem more prepared than ever to welcome Russia regardless of what happens in the Belarusian elections.

VB

Free Elections for 3 Billion Euros?

For many years a persona non-grata in Europe, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka hosted Guido Westerwelle of Germany and Radek Sikorski of Poland in Minsk last week.

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The foreign ministers came to encourage Belarus to come closer to the European Union and said in the next three the EU could offer up to 3 billion Euros in aid to Belarus if its presidential vote on December 19 is free and fair.

Unsurprisingly, President Lukashenka promised that the vote would be fair, reassuring Westerwelle and Sikorski that the “vote legitimacy is more important to us now than to anybody else.” It surely is, especially since it is so easy to obtain. The upcoming election is an excellent opportunity for the leader to get a pat on the back by playing by the EU rules. After all, the ‘man of the people’ will be running against 10 (!) opposition candidates who have no access to the media and use whatever resources they scrape together to bicker with each other.

Rapprochement with the EU could indeed bring tangible benefits for the country and its people. Economic cooperation would help increase living standards, help rebuild the country’s infrastructure, and allow Belarusians to travel to Western Europe more easily.

However, the need to abide by liberal democratic norms would impose high costs on the authoritarian regime in Belarus. In fact, history shows that a regime that ventures a partial political opening risks a dramatic rise in citizens’ demands

and expectations. Coupled with the effects of economic and technological developments, a slight relaxation of Minsk's grip on the Belarusian society could substantially increase the resources available to the political opposition and empower the people to mobilize against repression.

Interestingly, in the opinion [poll](#) issued by the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research (NISEPI) this fall, nearly 40 percent of the 1,527 respondents said Belarus should be led by a president following pro-EU policy and almost 60 percent favored a leader who supports a market economy.

EU Shows Support for Belarusian Gov't Before Elections

✘ Amid tense waiting for presidential elections in Belarus and possible Russian attempts to influence the situation, 20 October, the President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania visited Minsk. It was a good sign for Belarusian president Lukashenka. After talks, his Lithuanian counterpart made some meaningful [statements](#):

Lithuania is an EU member and next year it will preside in the OSCE. Using it, we want to help Belarus, be alongside it during the elections. We want to help it to be more open and recognized in Europe.

While Moscow is clearly continuing anti-Lukashenka information campaign and is allegedly trying to reign him in or even oust

him altogether, such a visit from the EU and NATO country should be considered as a prudent support from European side. Due to particular nature of relations between Belarus and Russia the West cannot move too openly in supporting Minsk against Cremlin's pressure. Belarusian leader himself [admitted](#):

We are in unfavorable conditions now, and we should think about how we could ensure our independence.

In addition to general strategic support, Belarusian and Lithuanian leaders discussed more specific issues. Minsk has recently enhanced and intensified its regional diplomacy and this time it declared the intent to increase trade with Lithuanian up to one billion US dollars. What about democracy? Ms. Grybauskaitė [told](#) of her hopes for Belarus becoming more open and defend human rights after elections.

Lithuania as well as the EU is hopefully looking to Belarus and new elections. Europe is willing to recognize the elections' openness, if you will demonstrate it.

She elaborated more on it,

For a decade Europe as if built a Chinese Wall between itself and Belarus, and it should not be there.

There was also one more important point. Lukashenka publicly emphasized that two countries can successfully cooperate in energy. Lithuania could provide transit route for Venezuelan oil bought by Belarus to balance the country's dependence on Russian resources. While Venezuela is interested in new markets for its oil, it uses Belarus as a pilot partner to explore Eastern European market. Anyway, Lithuania could gain a lot on transporting oil for Belarus, though Lithuanian route is not definite choice since Minsk is also considering such transit option as Ukraine (dangerous one now that pro-Russian

party came to power), Estonia and Latvia.

Of course, Russia does not like Belarusian oil endeavor, since Moscow is considering the region its own backyard. Interestingly, Lukashenka in his quest for non-Russian oil could really make some difference in the region, in particular by implementing his second oil idea – in the Middle East. Minsk could bring first oil by tankers, yet it is quite feasible to merge Caspian oil stream and Middle Eastern and send them for Europe.

Bringing Middle Eastern oil into pipelines meant for Caspian one would be a historical moment for the whole Europe. Especially easy it would be for Iranian oil – there is some infrastructure in place already – but the US are strictly opposing any projects with Iranian involvement. There are nevertheless other sources of oil in that region as well – like in North Iraq. This project could not be implemented by Belarusian or any other single government, but it requires creation of an international consortium. Belarus, however, could show the way by importing Middle Eastern oil. It is not easy for a landlocked nation to use tanker option, but the energy security issues can interest the neighboring countries. The Lithuanian president showed interest in regional energy cooperation.

It is, of course, the entire Baltic Sea region, where we can be useful for you [Belarus] regarding the sea access. Both Belarus and Lithuania are interested in energy independence, or at least in having choice regarding energy resources.

Furthermore, she added,

I am glad to find common language with the Belarusian president as for ensuring energy independence of both states. ... We are willing to openly cooperate. It does not contradict European interests. The EU is interested in energy independence and in maximal diversification of its [energy resources] shipments dependency.

Regardless of oil ambitions, it seems that after a series of Russian moves, the EU finally decided to react and actively engage in Belarus. If so, a Great Game in Eastern Europe is going to be really big one.

SB

Venezuelan oil for Belarus

☒ On October 16, the Belarusian and Venezuelan rulers had three-hour long talks behind closed doors in Minsk. Lukashenka thanked the Venezuelan leader for Venezuela's aid to Belarus. In his turn, Chavez stressed: "Together we are building an alternative to world imperialism."

Yuras Karmanau of The Associated Press [*](#) reflects on the results of the Minsk visit.

Chavez pledges oil to Belarus for 200 years

By YURAS KARMANAU

The Associated Press

Saturday, October 16, 2010; 12:02 PM

MINSK, Belarus – In one of his typical flamboyant gestures, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez on Saturday promised to provide oil to the former Soviet republic of Belarus for the next 200 years.

Chavez, who was visiting Belarus on Saturday, promised that Belarusian refineries – the backbone of the country's economy

– “would feel no shortages of oil in the next 200 years.”

Venezuela in March agreed to ship 80,000 barrels of heavy crude a day to Belarus as well as create a joint venture to develop oil and natural gas projects in this South American country.

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, who critics have dubbed “Europe’s last dictator,” is anxious to diversify away from Russian oil supplies as his relations with Moscow grow increasingly sour. Lukashenko is facing a presidential election in December but Moscow has so far refrained from endorsing his bid.

Chavez was in Moscow earlier this week, where he reached a deal with Russia to build Venezuela’s first nuclear plant and signed a few energy pacts.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Friday Russia would soon deliver 35 sophisticated tanks to Venezuela, but did not elaborate. Venezuela has since 2005 spent \$4 billion on Russian arms, including helicopters, warplanes and Kalashnikov assault rifles.

Chavez also used his visit to Minsk as yet another occasion to lambast global capitalism:

“There are no debtors in our relationship,” he said. “We are comrades and we are building an alternative to imperialism – a multipolar world.”

VB