

Freedom Day protests, human rights violations, Iranian oil imports – world press digest

Over the past few weeks, the world media largely focused on the protests against the so-called 'social parasite' tax when covering Belarus. The government's reaction, which involved numerous arrests and brutal suppression, alarmed the West and international human rights organisations. They condemned the actions of security services and demanded the release of arrested demonstrators.

The press also took note of the changing dynamics in Belarusian-Russian relations and their implications for the West. The hike in Russian oil and gas prices, as well as the import ban on certain Belarusian agricultural exports, show that Belarus and Russia can no longer maintain the status quo in bilateral relations.

Belarus has begun importing oil from Iran and introduced a limited visa-free travel regime to reduce its economic dependence on Russia. Russia's response to potential political unrest in Belarus remains unpredictable, and is likely to have an effect on Russian-Western relations.

Domestic politics

['Social parasite' protests are brutally suppressed by security forces](#). *BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Reuters* covered the 'social parasite' protests, which culminated on March 25th as an unofficial 'Freedom Day' demonstration. The Belarusian authorities toughened their position and violently detained

hundreds of people, including journalists and passersby. *New York Times* reported on protests in regional centres, which went without serious incidents. Meanwhile, *Al-Jazeera* highlighted the implications of the nationwide nature of the protests, proposing that Lukashenka appears to have lost support in provincial areas.

[Human rights organisations report violations of protesters' rights](#). *The Guardian* reported on human rights organisations which are calling on the Belarusian government to release arrested writers and journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists estimated that at least 32 journalists were detained as of 3 March. Security forces detained several famous oppositional figures, such as historian [Uladzimir Arloŭ](#), publisher Miraslaŭ Lazoŭski, and others. Whereas the Western media condemned the suppression of protests, *Russia Today* questioned the legitimacy of the demonstration, also stressing the fact that March 25, 'Freedom Day', was instituted under German occupation in 1918.



[Lukashenka blames Western-backed 'fifth column' for plotting his overthrow](#). The international media quoted Lukashenka's blaming of a 'fifth column' for organising the protests. *Deutsche Welle* referred to Belarusian state television, which backed up Lukashenka's claim by reporting on the discovery of weapons intended for use at the protest. The Russian *Vesti* news reported that dozens of professional fighters were detained. Lukashenka also claims that camps were established to train fighters in Belarus and Ukraine, with money coming

from Lithuania and Poland. While *Bloomberg* media called such claims paranoia, Russian propaganda source *Sputnik* went along with Lukashenka's theory, stating that the US organisation USAID is behind the protests.

International relations

[Response from Russia expected should protests continue.](#) In an attempt to predict the development of Russian-Belarusian relations, analysts in several media sources examined the recent Belarusian demonstrations. *Bloomberg* discussed Lukashenka's desire for a rapprochement with the EU and mitigated economic dependency on Russia, which, according to the source, is caused by the president's fear of becoming the 'next Crimea'. New Belarusian visa regulations allowing citizens of 80 countries to visit Belarus visa-free for five days irked Moscow, which set up checkpoints on the Belarus-Russia border in response.

The *LA Times* interpreted Russia's reaction to the visa decree, the rise in oil prices, and the ban on meat and dairy imports as clear signs of its unwillingness to tolerate Lukashenka's Westward turn. *Politico* magazine emphasised the West's unpreparedness for a regime change in Belarus, the unpredictability of Russia's actions, and the possibility of its intervention. At the same time, *Bloomberg* suggested that Lukashenka's accusations that Poland and Lithuania were involved in Belarusian protests might indicate a re-orientation in Belarusian politics back to Russia.

[Response from Russia to Belarusian political change to shape Russian-Western relations.](#)

Forbes discussed the Belarusian protests, suggesting that political change is inevitable and is likely to affect Russian-Western relations. The



nature of Belarusian political change, along with Russia's and the West's response, is likely to reshape politics in both places. If protests continue, forcing Lukashenka to leave, Russia will have to renegotiate its domination of Belarusian politics with a new government. To prevent the emergence of a pro-European leader, Russia might intervene to retain its position in Belarus.

On the other hand, given Russia's current military involvement in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, intervention in Belarus could come at an unpalatable financial cost. What's more, Russian involvement in Belarusian domestic affairs may lead to the first open confrontation between Putin and Trump, scrapping any chance at better Russian-US relations. Intervention would also worsen Russia-EU relations, which are already strained given the fear of Russian political ambitions in the Baltic countries and other Eastern European states. Nevertheless, if Moscow is not able to secure its interests in Belarus, some kind of action on its behalf can be expected.

[Belarus receives first oil cargo from Iran.](#) *United Press International* and *Iranian Press TV* reported on the delivery of 600,000 barrels of Iranian oil to Belarus through the port of Odessa in Ukraine, which is slated for processing at the Mazyr oil refinery. For the first time, Bel Oil purchased crude oil from National Iranian Oil Company with a view to find an alternative oil supplier after Russia cut oil exports. According to *Press TV*, in December 2016 Iran's Oil Minister

had stated that Iran was looking into cooperation with Belarus in manufacturing oil industry equipment and oil trade.

Technology

[Lukashenka expresses support for tech industry](#). *Red Herring* reported on Lukashenka's support for the IT sector and start-ups during an event organised by successful IT businessman [Viktar Prakapeinia](#). Lukashenka spoke of his commitment to technology, but warned that the IT business should work in a legal and transparent framework. The source quoted Aliaksiej Liavončyk, who insisted that despite improvements in the process of business registration, numerous obstacles remain. For example, it is still necessary to have an informal network of contacts and to pay concessions to certain people to ensure a business's survival.

Belarus - Iran : Noisy Friendship Without Real Results

Belarusian State Oil Company "Belarusnafta" can no longer extract oil in Iran. According to official statements released this week the Iranian side decided that the Belarusian company had not fulfilled the contract's conditions and revoked its extraction permit. This case illustrates the nature of Belarus-Iranian relations – they are deprived of any real meaning despite all efforts by political leadership to fill them with content.

Could it be a kind of 'quid pro quo', after Belarus declared its intent to shut down the Iranian Samand cars assembly line in the country? The plant existed since 2008, but failed to

organize a sustainable production of cars. Nevertheless, the project was important for the image of the Iranian company which tries to go beyond national borders and become a global player.

The Iranian regime certainly used new contacts with Belarus in its propaganda – as a demonstration of a "breakthrough to a new European market." Iranian pro-government media devoted significant attention to projects, visits and exhibitions in Minsk. The negative aspects were omitted – even the opposition Iranian media this February did not notice the statement by the Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Semashko that the project of producing "Samand" cars in Belarus failed and the assembly line facilities may be given to another, Chinese automaker.

Iranian news agency "Fars" still vigorously writes about global success of "Iran Khodro" – the company implementing the project. Now, it exports cars to thirty countries and its production plants are located on four continents – in Syria, Venezuela, Belarus, Egypt, Senegal and Azerbaijan. "The Senegal plant procures the needs of the African market and the Belarus plant meets the demands of the Commonwealth of Independent States." At the same time Iranian media periodically discuss the possible bankruptcy of the company.

The economic effect of the Belarusian-Iranian relations is modest. Just last year the bilateral trade volume has exceeded the symbolic mark of \$100 million – although this target for trade volume has been set long ago in 2004, during a visit to Minsk by then Iranian President Khatami. For the Belarusian side, however, more important is that out of approximately one hundred million dollars more than ninety million are Belarusian exports to Iran. For a nation with a chronic negative foreign trade balance it is a noticeable sum.

There are few large projects underway between Belarus and Iran. The oil extraction has been a point of pride for

president Lukashenka, yet it never has had tangible economic effect. Iranian investments in Belarus materialized only in form of quite ordinary construction, logistics, and low-technology production projects.

Of course, while working with Iran, some Belarusian companies were sanctioned by the US government. However, the sanctions had a more preventive than punitive nature. In 2004, it was Belvneshpromservis, in 2011 – Beltekheksport, BelOMO and Belarusnafta [were](#) also subject to sanctions. Some experts even believe that Belarusnafta decided to voluntarily leave Iran to avoid American sanctions rather than thrown out by the Iranian government. Anyway, recently some Belarusian officials began to criticize projects with Iranian involvement.

The Iranian side, too, was not satisfied with the relationship. The current Iranian ambassador in Minsk Abdullah Hosseini said in summer 2009, "The administration system of this country [Belarus] is not too smooth (ravan), it has a peculiar bureacracy and lack of regular sea route with the Iranian side is a noticeable problem." Another problem, according to Mr. Hosseini, is that "the English language in this country is not widespread."

Of course, the Iranian ambassador always had trust in Lukashenka. In the same speech two years ago Mr. Hosseini said, "Now, taking into consideration the political situation in Belarus, it seems to me that in the five-year perspective, we will not see major changes in this country and its interests are so intertwined in a knot with Russia that it is not capable to separate its political structure from Russia."

At the same time the Belarusian regime is extremely careful in dealing with Tehran. In particular it avoids high-level military-related contacts with Iranian officials. This approach contrasts with usual policy of the Belarusian government which prioritizes military and security-related issues in its cooperation with developing countries. Despite

numerous allegations, Belarus most likely never tried to sell Iran anything sensitive, as anti-aircraft S-300 systems or radars. Last time when Minsk sold Iran military equipment was in early 2000s. Then Belarus supplied several T-72 tanks.

The contracts were concluded with support from Iranian reformist president Khatami. The statements on these contracts were duly filed with the UN conventional arms trade register.

Lukashenka always distanced himself from the ideological and geopolitical premises of Iranian regime, including its anti-Americanism and anti-Israeli rhetoric, especially after Ahmadinejad's came to power. Lukashenka's attitude towards Iran, as towards the developing world in general, has always been opportunistic – to work wherever possible using capacities already existing in Belarus. And the Soviet-era capacities rather limited his choice of partners. Unlike Hugo Chavez or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the Belarusian leader has no stable ideological preferences.

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