

Pressure against Activists and Independent Media – Digest of Belarusian Politics

Belarusian authorities maintain their pressure against independent media and activists. Last week was marked by new measures against political prisoners Syarhey Kavalenka and Milakay Autukhovich as well as Vitsebsky Kurier and Arche independent outlets.

Hunger-striking opposition activist Syarhey Kavalenka being force-fed in Vitsyebsk jail. On January 16, the administration of a detention center in Vitsyebsk began [force-feeding](#) Syarhey Kavalenka to abort the opposition activist's month-long hunger strike. In May 2010, Kavalenka was given a three-year suspended prison sentence after creating a scandal by putting a white-red-white flag on top of Vitsyebsk's tallest Christmas tree. On December 19, Kavalenka was arrested at home on a charge of violating probation rules four times. He has been on hunger strike since then.

Mikalay Autukhovich to be moved to cell-type prison. On January 17, a judge of the Ivatsevichy District Court has ordered the transfer of [Mikalay Autukhovich](#) to a cell-type prison. In a trial that was held in Correctional Institution No.5 in Ivatsevichy, Brest region, the judge found Autukhovich guilty of persistent violations of prison rules. The ruling means that the man will have to serve the remaining 27 months of his sentence in a prison where there is higher security and more restrictions.

Organizers of Narodny Skhod rallies launch boycott campaign ahead of parliamentary elections. On January 14, people's representatives elected during "Narodny Skhod" (People's Assembly) rallies at the end of 2010 have [launched](#) a campaign

of actively boycotting the "imitation of elections" to the "puppet House of Representatives" scheduled for September, Viktor Ivashkevich, one of the main organizers of the rallies, told. The campaigners plan to promote measures to overcome the current crisis and demand freedom for all political prisoners, fair elections and the abolition of the system of fixed-term employment contracts.

Co-workers back down on threat to quit in solidarity with trade union activist. Alyaksey Paulouski's co-workers have [backed down](#) in a row with the management of a Mogilev-based state-owned construction company that intends to sack the bricklayer and trade union activist. The company management held one-on-one meetings with all of the other 15 members of Paulouski's bricklayer team and nearly all of the men eventually reversed their stance and stopped making any demands.

Independent trade unions may launch campaign for EU's boycott of Belarusian imports. Belarus' independent trade unions are considering the possibility of launching a campaign for the European Union's [boycott](#) of Belarusian imports. "If attempts to crush the independent trade union movement in Belarus continue, we should be able to carry out such a campaign in response," Alyaksandr Yarashuk, chairman of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, told on January 18.

Media

Arche magazine warned by Information Ministry. The latest issue of the Arche magazine (No.10, 2011) violated Article 22 of the Mass Media Code. The independent journalists reportedly misspelled the name of the Ministry of Information. Apart from that, Arche's date and number of registration are said to be incorrect. As a result of the alleged violations, on January 10, the magazine's editorial board received an official [warning](#) by Minister of Information.

Vitsebsk road police seize independent newspapers. On January 14, Vitsebsk road police [seized](#) 10,000 copies of the Vitsebsky Kurier independent newspaper featuring an article "Six facts on Ales Bialiatski's case that BT and SovetskayaBelorussia fail to cover".

The state-run media have more than 45 million euros in their budget for 2012. This follows from the Law "On Republican Budget for 2012", as [BAJ reports](#). Most of the money goes to television and radio – about 34 million euros.

International

Outgoing president of European Parliament disappointed by EU's failure to influence situation in Belarus. The European Parliament's outgoing president, Jerzy Buzek, has expressed disappointment that Europe's efforts to influence the situation in Belarus are not successful. While speaking in Warsaw on January 15, Mr.Buzek [emphasized](#) the need to support the country's pro-democratic forces, saying that only civil society could change the situation in Belarus.

EU, Belarusian politicians call for moving 2014 world hockey championship from Belarus. A group of European Union and Belarusian politicians have petitioned the heads of national ice hockey federations and the EU leadership to move the 2014 Ice Hockey World Championship from Belarus to a different country over human rights abuse and the persecution of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's political opponents. The petition has been [signed](#) by Belarusian opposition figures Natallya Kalyada, Mikalay Khalezin, Iryna Krasowski, playwright Tom Stoppard, etc.

Swedish politician not allowed in Belarus. Embassy of Belarus in Sweden [refused](#) to grant visa to the head of the regional structure of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Sweden, Lars Ove Yangson. The Swedish politician had planned to arrive in Brest on a working visit at the invitation of the regional

organization of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) and the Free Trade Union of Belarus in Brest.

December 19 once again recalled in Vilnius. On January 16, Belarusian Human Rights House in conjunction with the Human Rights Centre *Viasna* and the civil campaign "Our Home" [presented](#) the book, calendar, children's colouring book, postcards, and a number of video clips dedicated to the participants of 2010 Ploshcha.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.

Who Needs the Eastern Partnership?

While the European Union is yet again considering using sticks against the Belarus regime, it is unclear what carrots it can offer. Lukashenka's opponents often point to the de-facto exclusion of Belarus from the Eastern Partnership after the post-election crackdown. The question is whether Eastern Partnership has ever been of any value for Minsk – economic or political.

Belarusian regime is unwilling to get closer to Europe due to its background and worldview differences. Very often Europe pays only lip service to the Belarusian issue. The head of the European Parliament Jerzy Buzek recently said in Tbilisi that

“the worst situation is in Belarus. The EU has shown willingness to dialogue with Minsk. However, the response to our openness was police and prisons for the opposition”. Yet such openness does not cost much in economic and political terms. Politically, the European Union has done next to nothing in its Belarusian policy. No wonder, Belarus borders on no major European state, except for Poland, which has its own problems with the rest of Europe because of its pro-American stance.

The Polish analytical journal 'Nowa Europa Wschodnia' recently published an article criticizing Eastern Partnership. The article authored by Przemysław Zurawski vel Grajewski concluded that this EU initiative has never been a serious undertaking. Now it is so hopeless that even Poland which has been one of its main proponents should better put it aside altogether. So what is wrong with Eastern Partnership?

The Eastern Partnership has been conceived by Poland and Sweden in 2008 to respond to the French idea of 'Union for the Mediterranean'. Poland, Sweden and Germany were particularly worried about that French idea. Yet, when Poland and to a lesser extent Sweden were always interested in dealing with Eastern Europe, the German government probably was motivated by competition with France, argues the Polish scholar. This French-German quid pro quo allowed for the European Partnership to proceed behind the realm of thought.

Russian aggression in the Caucasus in August 2008 caused a wave of protests in the West which created a favorable momentum for the new European policy towards post-Soviet nations. Yet that shaky foundation has predetermined the future of this endeavor. No other major EU country displayed any interest in it, and even Germany effectively disengaged itself by the very first summit of the Partnership in Prague, in May 2009. Germany did not send any high rank officials to that meeting, reminds Zurawski. Russia again became an acceptable partner for the EU. Strong Eastern Partnership

risked to become just a nuisance in the EU-Russian relations.

No wonder, that the Eastern Partnership initiative failed to receive significant financial support from Brussels. To fund cooperation with all six Eastern European countries the EU was willing to spend just 85 million Euro in 2010, 110 million in 2011, 175 million in 2012 and 230 million in 2012. And though further funding can be available from other parts of the EU budget, it is obvious that the Eastern Partnership was never at the top of the EU agenda.

It appears that the only serious proposal to Belarusian government was made during the visit to Minsk by foreign ministers Sikorski of Poland and Westerwelle of Germany prior to the 2010 presidential elections. They offered 3 billion Euro for election process minimally acceptable for the EU. Belarus authorities eventually decided that it would be a suicidal move for them to follow those minimum standards. Instead, Lukashenka is hoping to get financial support from Moscow without taking the dangerous European route. Ironically, he hopes now for the similar sum from Moscow, and has also to accept some not completely disclosed conditions which may be not less dangerous for his political survival than the Polish-German proposal.

It is clear that at the moment and in the foreseeable future the EU is unlikely to make any major changes in its policy towards Belarus. Perhaps, only the threat of total economic collapse and political instability in the country will make the European politicians change their minds. Jerzy Buzek pointed out other potential troubles that the Belarusian regime may cause, "what is attempted there will be copied by other countries in some other regions of the world. Belarus is becoming a social and political laboratory for non-democratic forces. This is why we cannot be indifferent". Do not forget, however, he is Polish and very often Polish voice has been neglected by western Europeans.

€3 Billion for Development of Civil Society in Belarus?



In April 2010 Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorski promised Belarus authorities €3 billion in international aid. The condition was that the country would adhere to basic democratic standards. Now that Belarus authorities have started a full-scale war against the civil society and political opponents, they are unlikely to get any financial aid. If the Belarus regime is not going to get it, should the money then go to the Belarusians and the civil society of Belarus directly? That would be a logical thing to do. Even a fraction of this figure would help tremendously provided that the money reaches the recipient.

Belarusian civil society badly needs help from outside. They cannot get any support from within Belarus where everything is tightly controlled by the state. Nor it is easy for them to access resources abroad. It is important to make more funds available, but also to understand conditions in which Belarus NGOs and other civil society groups have to operate. These conditions are far from those in which NGOs operate in Belgium, Ukraine or even Russia. The government imposed restrictions similar to those which existed during the Cold

War. The support strategy of international donors should be adjusted accordingly.

Increase funds and simplify procedures

Currently, Belarus civil society groups applying for use of EU funds have to undergo lengthy registration procedures in Belarus and which eventually end in arbitrary rejections. On the other hand, NGOs have to comply with strict bureaucratic criteria of the EU agencies in charge of resource allocations. The EU goals are clearly undermined when the projects approved for funding are vetoed by Minsk or when the EU assistance is given to government-controlled organizations, eligible for EU grants. The EU procedures need to be revised taking into account the constraints imposed by the official Minsk.

The main weapon of the Belarus regime is not beating by the police, harassment by the KGB or prison sentences. They have something more effective. First, it is propaganda and, second, the fear of people to lose their jobs. Both can and should be addressed by the international community.

Breaking through the information blockade

Despite the recent progress with the TV channel Belsat broadcasting from Poland and efforts by Deutsche Welle and European Radio for Belarus, independent media penetration remains low and does not reach the general population. The EU needs to step up its support for independent media and increase TV and FM broadcasting to Belarus from Poland and Lithuania. If the Belarus regime will lose the propaganda battle, it will lose the war. The Belarusian regime understands that and uses more repressions against journalists than against any other group. Like the Soviet society, the Belarus society is based on lie, which can be effectively exposed by independent and accessible media.

Helping activists inside Belarus

It is also important to help the repressed activists stay inside Belarus. The Belarus authorities tightly control virtually all employers in the country and many people are dismissed for their political activities. In the absence of any other opportunities in the country, those people have to leave Belarus. Most of them would be happy to stay if they could earn at least something to make ends meet in Belarus. The international community can and should help such people to stay in Belarus and remain active in their communities.

One way to do it is to create jobs for activists inside Belarus (e.g. research projects). Also, it is possible to create temporary job opportunities abroad so that people could leave, earn some money and go back to their families and communities. It is much more difficult to bring up a new generation of activists than to retain those who are already active. In addition, many European countries would benefit from cheap labour force from Belarus.

Helping Belarusians travel and work abroad

To that end, European countries should also radically simplify procedures for obtaining visas and work permits for Belarus citizens. Currently, to get a Schengen visa Belarusians need to collect many documents showing that they have stable income. But how can a Belarusian civil society activist struggling to find a job and make ends meet produce all those documents?

According to the 2009 monitoring report by Stephan Batory Foundation, with the adoption of the Schengen visa regime by new EU Member States in December 2007, the number of visas issued to Belarusians to travel to neighboring Poland and Lithuania has decreased by 73% and 52% respectively. This amounts to "a new 'Iron Curtain' on the eastern Schengen borders," according to the Foundation's assessment. As a result, many have to leave the country, often illegally, seek political asylum never to return to Belarus again. Traveling


from Belarus and back to Belarus should be made as easy as possible.

New scholarship programs and incentives to return to Belarus

The EU also needs to establish new scholarship programs for Belarusian students. Ideally, these programs will not only teach the young people about democratic norms, but also encourage them to return in Belarus and share their knowledge with others. Special programs for those people, for instance research grants or funding for civil society initiatives, would help tremendously. Such help should be offered bypassing the official Minsk. This involves risks for those people but there are many courageous people willing to take those risks.

It is time to become realistic about the Belarus authorities. Following the unprecedented violence in December, Belarus authorities still keep most of presidential candidates in prison, make more arrests and searches of human rights and opposition activists every day. Activists are thrown out of jobs, opposition parties are kicked out of their offices. The international community should recall how it supported Polish dissidents and democratic organizations during the Cold War and apply those lessons to Belarus today.

Instead of Landing in Minsk, Kaczyński's Plane Crashed in Smolensk

 In September 2009, the President of Poland Kaczyński sent his condolences to the President of Belarus because of the death of two Belarusian pilots in a crash of Su-27 fighter

plane at an air show. Today, state leaders around the world are condoling with the Poles at the loss of President Lech Kaczyński and 95 others in a plane crash near Smolensk.

On April 10, Lech Kaczyński was flying to commemorate the deaths of thousands of Poles murdered by the Soviet Union and buried in the Katyn Forest just across the eastern border of Belarus. On March 5, 1940, Joseph Stalin signed an order to execute 25,700 Polish prisoners of war in the camps of Ostashkov, Starobelsk, and Kozelsk. Only in 1990 did the Soviet authorities admit responsibility for the Katyn murders.

Because of the fog, it was difficult for the pilots to land in Smolensk airport, near the Katyn Forest. Polish media report that air traffic controllers had advised the Polish pilots not to attempt to land at the airport, but turn around and head for Minsk, the capital of Belarus. The obscure military aerodrome near Smolensk lacked the necessary navigational equipment to receive planes in heavy fog. Despite these warnings, Polish pilots, apparently under pressure from their VIP passengers, decided to take the risk of landing in Smolensk. Perhaps, the Polish delegation had its own reasons not to land in Belarus.

Few people outside Warsaw and Minsk know that Lech Kaczyński was one of the staunchest defenders of human rights in Belarus and a vocal critic of its president. Just last month, condemning the detentions and trials of activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus, Lech Kaczyński wrote a personal letter to Alyaksandr Lukashenka defending the Polish minority. Having received no response from the Belarusian authorities, Lech Kaczynski appealed to the European Union's institutions through the President of the European Union Herman Van Rompuy and European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek.

Notably, Belarus did not send a delegation to the earlier ceremony in Katyn. This is despite the fact that Katyn's victims included hundreds of Belarusians who served in the Polish Army in 1940 when Western Belarus was a part of Poland.

If the Belarus president were to fly to Smolensk, he would not have used an old Soviet plane for that. Ever mindful of what losing their leader would mean for the Belarusian people, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has long ago switched to the sleek and safe US Boeing. Lech Kaczyński was flying a 20-year old Tupolev Tu-154. Tupolev's long history of crashes has never been a secret, but the Polish leadership considered buying a new US-manufactured Boeings an unnecessary indulgence during the financial crisis.

Seventy years after the massacre orchestrated by Stalin, the Polish people once again lost some of its best compatriots in the cold foggy forest near Katyn.

VC & YK

How can Brussels Help the Union of Poles?



Gone is the time when Belarusians were one of the smaller ethnic groups in the Polish-Lithuanian

Commonwealth. And it is clear that the decades of Soviet rule made Belarus lose the traits that the *Rech Pospolita* was so famous for: ethnic diversity, religious tolerance, and democratic attributes of political system.

A brief thaw in the Belarusian-Polish relations came to an end once the Belarusian authorities cracked down on the Union of Poles in Belarus. Forty ethnic Poles in Belarus have been arrested, some sentenced to five-day jail terms, and Andzelika Borys, the leader of the Union of Poles, was fined for \$360.

On February 17, the Belarusian court ruled that the Union's headquarters must be turned over to a pro-Minsk Polish group that is not recognized by Warsaw. In short, the Union of Poles has suffered the fate of a typical Belarusian NGO.

Polish President Lech Kaczynski and Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, who had in the past led the European effort to improve relations with Belarus, both chastised Minsk over its boorish behavior with regard to ethnic minorities. EU Parliament President Jerzy Buzek, a Pole, also called on Minsk to mind its manners when dealing with NGOs.

Even the EU's foreign representative Catherine Ashton joined in and warned that Belarus' place in the Eastern Partnership will be jeopardized if Minsk persists in violating minority rights. She said she was very "disappointed." Unfortunately, Ashton's "disappointment" will hardly make the Belarusian leadership lose sleep. Neither will it help the Belarusian Poles and other civil-society groups in Belarus sleep better and feel safer.

In the unequal match between the Union of Poles in Belarus and the Russia-Belarus Union state it is clear who will prevail. Of course, the Union of Poles has the entire EU on its side. But as long as Brussels continues to seek improvement in its relations with Minsk more than Minsk itself does, the EU's support for human rights in Belarus will matter little.

Reaching out to Belarus as it bites the offering hand is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. It will not take this hand in earnest unless it indeed needs to be rescued, as had happened for a brief period in the beginning of the global economic crisis when the opportunity was missed.

The Union of Poles Mistreated in Belarus

Ethnic Poles rising in western Belarus was what Minsk and Moscow happened to choose as a scenario for their 2009 joint military exercise. As if ashamed of its lack of judgment last year, the Belarusian leadership is now doing everything possible to make such a far-fetched plot more plausible.

On February 8, Belarusian police burst into the Polish House in Iyvanets, owned by the Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB), and ordered the staff to vacate the building. This wasn't the first attack on the Union of Poles and the Polish House by the Belarusian authorities. In 2005, Hrodna militia took the office of the Union of Poles forcing a change of leadership.

In January, Minsk also started a criminal prosecution against Taresa Sobal, the director of Polish House in Ivianiec. Sobal is being accused of failing to properly register a 2004 financial grant received by the Polish House from the former leader of Polish Union Tadevush Kruchkouski.

Actions of the Belarusian authorities evoked sharp criticism by the president of the EU Parliament Jerzy Buzek, who is Polish. Speaking in Stasbourg on Feb. 10, Buzek urged Minsk "to stop taking drastic measures against the Polish minority." He said "acceptance of EU norms with regard to ethnic

minorities" was essential for improving the EU-Belarus discourse. Outraged by Minsk's treatment of the Polish cultural group, Poland recalled its Ambassador to Belarus

Henryk Litwin for consultations. In its turn, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus has complained to Litwin over Poland's statements regarding the oppression of the Belarusian Poles.

Poles constitute the third largest ethnic group in the country after Belarusians and Russians. There are 12 newspapers and magazines in Polish and 2 schools (in Hrodna and Valkavysk). With about 20,000-members, 75 registered primary organizations, and 17 "Polish Houses," the Union of Poles in Belarus is the largest public association of a national minority in Belarus. Founded in Hrodna in 1988, it aspires to promote the Polish language and traditions.

In 2005, the ZPB split, with a pro-Minsk alternative registered as the Union of Belarusian Poles. The unrecognized branch of ZPB elected Anzhelika Borys as its chairwoman; the recognized and pro-Minsk branch elected Stanislau Syamashka. Warsaw recognizes Borys's ZPB as the sole legal representative of the Polish minority in Belarus, but the Belarusian government favors the union led by Syamashka.

According to the web site of the Belarusian Embassy in the United States, the issue "lies outside the sphere of inter-ethnic relations or those between the state and the Polish national minority in Belarus." Blaming the power struggle among the leaders of the Union, the Embassy claims that "instead of seeking a solution to this situation, complicated in terms of law, one of the conflicting sides started to actively politicize the situation and brought the conflict inside the Union to the international level."

According to the Embassy, "maintaining sustainable inter-religious and inter-ethnic peace is what the Belarusian state

can pride itself on.” Article 15 of the Belarusian Constitution requires the state to “bear responsibility for preserving the historic, cultural and spiritual heritage, and the free development of the cultures of all the ethnic communities that live in the Republic of Belarus.” Such exemplary behavior has rarely been the case in Belarus, however.

The position of the Polish minority in Belarus started to worsen after a 1995 referendum, which reintroduced Soviet-era symbols and Russian language as a second national language of Belarus. In 1997, the Belarusian authorities accused the Union of Poles of organizing political provocations, and in 1999 the Union complained of being discriminated to the representatives of the Polish parliament. Authors of the 2003 assessment by the Minorities at Risk Project warned the situation was “likely to deteriorate in the future” as Belarus grew dependent on Russia. So far, this prediction has proven accurate.

Polish presence on what today constitutes Belarusian territory started to form in the times of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1569-1795). The Commonwealth was partitioned by its neighbors Austria, Prussia, and Russia in the late 18th century. Most of the future Belarus was annexed by the Russian Empire. As a result of the 1921 Treaty of Riga, Polish influence over the Western Belarus was restored for nearly two decades. However, in 1939 the Soviet Union invaded Poland under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Germany, and West Belarus was incorporated into the Belarusian SSR. After the WWII, the Poles who remained on the Belarusian territory faced four decades of Soviet repressions and discrimination.