

# Belarusian Vacationers Will Avoid Crimea This Summer

On 9-12 April an exhibition called Holiday 2014 took place in Minsk. Unlike in previous years, people do not appear to be particularly interested in purchasing what are usually popular offers for getaways to Crimea.

In the past, almost half a million Belarusian tourists annually travelled to Crimea for the summer holidays. This tradition began back in the Soviet Union and continued on afterwards due to the low prices found in Ukraine, the absence of a language barrier and a visa-free regime.

But the recent developments in Ukraine have destroyed the plans of many Belarusians for this summer.

Problems with transportation and the peninsula's insecurity have forced Belarusians to seek out other Black Sea resorts, primarily in Bulgaria and Turkey. Many who cannot afford to travel to these more expensive destinations will stay at their dachas and villages this summer.

## A Famous USSR Resort

According to the Autonomous Republic of Crimea statistics, from 2009 to 2013 the number of Belarusian tourists in the Crimea grew twofold. Tourist companies report that in 2013 around 400,000 Belarusians visited Crimea. Belarus took third place, after Ukraine and Russia respectively, with regard to the number of tourists who spent time on the Black Sea peninsula.

Crimea traditionally played the role of a USSR-wide resort, with people from all parts of the union going there during the holiday season. A true Soviet brand, after the USSR collapsed,

it remained among the top destinations for many from post-Soviet countries. With no language barrier or visa regime, thousands of Belarusians have travelled to Crimea each year to enjoy a little rest and relaxation. Even people with modest wages were able to afford a stay, and as such, Crimea has long served as a popular and affordable option.

But the recent developments in Ukraine have Belarusians changing their summer plans. A storm of negative stories on Ukraine in the Russian media tell people that tourists are robbed and their cars are being stolen. Belarusians worry that their favourite destination has become a dangerous place and now they have to think about finding another place to spend their summer vacation. As a result, tourists are returning their pre-paid tourist packages and are demanding their money back.

### **Instability Scares Belarusians**

On 9-12 April Minsk hosted an exhibition called Holiday 2014. In the past, trips to Crimea were at a part of the main showcase. Yet this time few Crimea offers from Belarusian companies appeared at the exhibition. As representatives of these companies have explained, they simply cannot guarantee the safety of their clients due to the instability in Ukraine. Lacking a stable and legitimate authority and law enforcement institutions, Ukraine has become too dangerous to travel around.

Belarusian aircraft company Belavia cancelled its only flight to Crimea.

It remains unclear whether people will be able to get to Crimea via Ukraine. The Belarusian aircraft company Belavia recently cancelled its only flight to Crimea. Furthermore, beginning 27 May the national Belarusian railroad company will stop selling tickets on Belarusian trains to Ukraine.

This is, in part, a result of the the Crimean government not synchronising the peninsula's train schedule with the national Ukrainian railroad system, with the latter being required to stop all trains in its network to be able to update the schedule and bring them in sync. Since this was not Belarus' initiative, no one can predict the time of its the two countries renewing their ties, an issue which is problematic for Belarusian tourists looking to get away from home this summer. Another alternative is to go through Russia, but to do so, one will need additional time and money.

Not only are trips to Ukraine suffering from the unfolding crisis. Trips for children to Bulgaria, which usually necessitates travel through Ukraine, are at risk of falling apart as well. Parents are setting terms with tourism companies as well: either they make a detour around Ukraine or they will refuse to pay for the trip. The companies are going to be forced to help their clients acquire Polish visas in case the situation in Ukraine will not improve.

As Siarhej Dalhanaŭ, director of the Dolsan company, says, "We have become hostages of the information war. The president says that we remain friends with Ukraine, but people come home and turn on Russian TV. If we do not persuade the tourists now, they will never come back." Indeed, Russian propaganda depicts Ukraine as a place where rule of law does not exist anymore and everything is descending into chaos. If you go Ukraine, "Banderite extremists" and the "Right Sector" will certainly stop and rob you on the road. And many Belarusians believe this.

However, Vadzim Karamzin, an official at the Ministry of Tourism and Sports is not too concerned about the current trends developing in the tourist industry. He thinks that Belarusians will prefer the resorts of Bulgaria and Krasnodar Krai of Russia over their traditional Ukrainian destinations.

## **Ukraine Trying Not to Lose Tourists**

For Ukrainians though, especially in the seaside regions, tourism accounts for a large portion of their revenues and people are not so inclined to just sit back and watch their livelihood be forsaken so easily. On 11 April the Ukrainian Embassy in Minsk gave a press conference on tourism and travel in Ukraine during the coming summer season. Ambassador Mikhail Ezhel urged the audience not to believe the Russian TV and Internet tales that portray Ukraine as being lawless and dangerous.

Ukraine cannot guarantee the safety of Belarusians in the Crimea, but suggests that Belarusians visit other seaside regions on Ukraine's mainland, like in Kherson, Berdyansk and Odessa, or enjoy other resorts like those found in the Carpathian mountains. Moreover, Belarusians will be able to benefit from Ukrainian holidays also because of Ukraine's ongoing currency devaluation.

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Representatives of Ukrainian tourist business have also visited Belarus in order to persuade Belarusians that Ukraine remains safe. They even announced a plan to organise a tour around Ukraine for Belarusian companies to show them that Ukraine presents no danger to tourists.

However, the Chair of Republican Union of Tourist Organisations of Belarus Valiancin Cechmeister predicts that this season Belarusians are not only likely to not visit Crimea, but Ukraine in general because of the nation's instability and unrest. This has also been confirmed by a spike in demand for trips to Bulgaria and Lithuania, according an interview with Cechmeister on Deutsche Welle Radio.

## **The European Alternative**

Last week around 40 Lithuanian tourist companies came to Belarus to present their products, and the Ambassador of Lithuania himself took part in the presentation. He told the audience that the number of Lithuanian visas issued in 2013 grew by 20% to 232,000. 420,000 tourists from Belarus visited Lithuania in 2013, and each tourist spent €150 on average during their stay.

In recent years Lithuania and Belarus have been developing a railroad project to reduce the travel time between Minsk and Vilnius. What was a 4 hour journey previously now takes only 2.30 – and the authorities are hoping to get that down to 2 hours.

This year Latvia also expects more tourists from Belarus, due to several factors – the Crimean crisis, Latvia's similar climate and its close proximity. The Latvian State Agency of Tourism noted in its development reports that in 2013 the inflow of Belarusian tourists to Latvia increased by 37% compared to 2012.

However, the Baltic Sea and its climate cannot compare with the much warmer Black Sea, so many Belarusians will look for sunny beaches in Bulgaria and Turkey. But these resorts are more expensive and will hardly satisfy almost half a million Belarusians who are used to spending their summer holidays in Crimea.

Tourist companies accept that cheap Crimean offers can hardly be replaced by other destinations. Even Belarusian health resorts are more costly. For a family of three, for example, 10 days in Crimea this August would have cost around \$1,000, while in Bulgaria and Lithuania Belarusians will have to pay \$2,000 and even more in Turkey.

It is beginning to look like many Belarusians will remain on their dachas and parent's villages in Belarus this summer.

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# **Belarus Refuses To Support Russia's Invasion of Ukraine**

At a meeting of presidents of the Customs Union on 5 March, Putin desperately tried to gain support on for Russia's invasion of Ukraine from his closest allies, Belarus and Kazakstan.

All his efforts, it would seem, appear to be in vain, as neither Lukashenka nor Nazarbaev publicly voiced support for Russia's aggression in Crimea. For both individuals, it became a dangerous precedent which showed the true nature of Russian politics in the post-Soviet space.

Now, the Belarusian authorities are attempting to re-launch their cooperation with the EU and preparing to host the Ice Hockey World Championship, they know full well that any involvement in the crisis in Ukraine could destroy their painfully reconstructed relations with the West.□

## **Lukashenka's Thoughts on the Crisis in Ukraine**

Aliaksandar Lukashenka first mentioned the Euromaidan protests on 21 January at a meeting with Belarusian media. "It is a nightmare, a catastrophe. As soon as the president's children engage in business and his mistresses start to wear crowns – expect trouble," he said, describing the corruption in Ukraine prior to the revolution.

A month later, Lukashenka spoke about Ukraine during an address to the security forces on Belarus' Armed Forces Day, 23 February. Here, he explained Belarus' position on the future of Ukrainian lands. "They have their own problems. Maidan is not new to us. This is not the first time it

happened and you know, I still have good relationship with the original leaders of Maidan, Yushchenko and others...We have a singular view of Ukraine. It should be integral, nobody should divide this great country.”

Lukashenka also compared the Ukrainian Maidan with the [19 December 2010 protests](#) in Minsk and assured Belarusians that Maidan was impossible here. “We did not steal anything, nor have we acquired any luxuries at the expense of others. In Ukraine, they drove people to a terrible state, and people decided: it could not get any worse than this anyways.” He stressed that in Belarus, the very capable armed forces and police will ensure order is upheld and prevent anarchy and a crisis like in Ukraine.

In a telephone conversation on 4 March Lukashenka assured Ukrainian ex-President Leonid Kuchma of his support of Ukraine’s territorial integrity.

### **Foreign Minister Makej Tours the EU**

Belarusian Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makej](#) became the other official who made public comments on the situation in Ukraine. At the end of February he visited Latvia and Lithuania, preparing for a new rapprochement with the EU and began discussing the prospects for renewed cooperation.

At the meeting with Latvian Foreign Minister in Riga on 27 February, Makej said that Belarus had already formulated several issues for the agenda of Riga Summit of Eastern Partnership in 2015.

Speaking about Ukraine, Makej mentioned the close economic and cultural ties Belarus had with Ukraine, called the events a tragedy and stated that Belarus supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

On 1 March, Makej gave an interview to the Baltic News Service, where he again explained Belarus' official stance.

According to him, the victory of Euromaidan is not the end of the struggle, and Belarus will keep on observing how things develop. And despite the mess, Belarus will remain in contact with the new Ukrainian government.

### **Ukraine on Belarusian TV**

Despite the very reserved and even pro-Ukrainian comments made by Belarusian senior officials about the crisis, some of Belarusian TV channels featured Russia-style propaganda tales.

ONT channel focused on the economic crisis in Kiev, where people are snatching up all the products in stores and huge queues are appearing near cash machines, as everyone frantically lines up in an attempt to withdraw their money. It also criticised an attempt to reduce the status of Russian language.

The channel STV showed the events in Eastern Ukraine in a style typical of Russian propaganda. It accused Maidan radicals of violating the rights of Russophones and threatening their security. It also repeated information on the alleged 700,000 refugees from Ukraine that had left the country in the previous months.

Meanwhile, Belarus 1 channel simply mentioned that the events did indeed occur in Ukraine, though did not bother to provide any detailed coverage. This, in effect, means that no order was given to support or ignore Russian intervention. What Belarusian TV did have to make clear in their broadcasts was that anti-government protests lead to anarchy, regardless of the country, and they always have and always will.

### **Customs Union Discusses Ukraine**

On 5 March, the three presidents of Customs Union attended the meeting of the High Eurasian Economic Council. Vladimir Putin put the economic issues of Ukraine crisis on the agenda, saying Customs Union needs to protect its economy from

Ukrainian unrest and develop new approaches to cooperation with Ukraine.

However, Lukashenka appeared more concerned with remaining duty exemptions, which impede the building of a real economic union. For Lukashenka, the issue of equal prices for hydrocarbons remains essential in the union, and that is what Russia does not want to concede.

Nazarbaev in his speech focused on technical issues of the union building and did not publicly express any political concerns. So, neither Lukashenka nor Nazarbaev voiced support of Putin's invasion. And it is quite clear why.

### **Abandoned Putin**

Russia's invasion of Crimea concerns Kazakhstan, which also has regions with large ethnic Russian populations. Therefore the reaction of Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan was neutral and urged all parties to maintain a balanced, objective and responsible approach towards the situation.

For Belarus, situation seems even more complicated. Russia, as Belarus' main political and military ally as well as its main financial supporter, considers Belarus within its sphere of interest, perhaps even more so than it does with Ukraine. And deployment of Russian troops in case Mr. Putin does not like Lukashenka's behaviour indeed frightens Belarusian leader.

At the same time, the current foreign policy priorities make any anti-western moves highly undesirable for Belarus. As the country recently started a new period of rapprochement with the West, any support of Russian aggression can destroy any potential for a relaunch of a constructive Belarusian-Western dialogue.

Another threat for the regime, coming from support of Russian intervention, is the fate of [Ice Hockey World Championship](#) that will take place this May in Belarus. A pro-

Russian position from Belarus in the current conflict could lead to a boycott of the championship games, which Belarusian authorities consider as a major international breakthrough in recent years.□

At the moment, Lukashenka looks quite a brave politician. Despite pressure from Russia, for years he has been stubbornly refusing to recognise independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – two breakaway Georgian provinces. These days he again shows that Belarus has its own voice in international affairs.

In such a situation, Vladimir Putin looks indeed isolated. Even his closest allies cannot stand such an open and groundless aggression.

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## **Conflict between EHU Senate and Administration: How to Find a Peaceful Solution**

Belarusian lecturers from the European Humanities University are getting ready to strike soon.

This was the message coming out of the University's labour union shortly after the EHU administration dismissed professor Pavel Tereshkovich, the head of the EHU Senate, who was elected last November.

Prior to these elections a group of lecturers launched an electoral platform criticising the conditions of their employment contracts and the upcoming hiring campaign.

They proposed to include Belarusian academics into the governance of the University and to strengthen the role of the EHU Senate, a self-governing body that ensures the quality of education and research.

Despite resistance from the Senate the University administration thinks that it is important to proceed with a competition for a set of soon-to-be-established permanent faculty positions.

Both EHU academics and its administration recognise the need to reform. As the conflict inside the university escalates, both sides need to sit together at the negotiating table sooner rather than later, perhaps with a respected mediator who could guide the reconciliatory talks.

### **History of Disagreements**

In November 2013, the Belarusian media widely covered the vibrant electoral [campaign of Belarusian academics](#) entering into the EHU Senate. The Senate itself is a self-governing body, which consists of 21 members, representing both academics and students.

Back in those days, a group of Belarusian academics, including Pavel Tereshkovich and Volha Shparaha, launched an electoral platform under the slogan "For a New EHU".

They criticised the university's administration for its authoritarian and non-transparent decision-making practises and the absence of any meaningful involvement of EHU academics in decision-making. Lecturers proposed a stronger role for the Senate and a rotation in the EHU management, including the post of rector.

They also advocated making Belarus-related research and teaching a priority for the University. As a result of their campaign candidates from "For a New EHU" won a majority of the seats in the Senate. Pavel Tereshkovich became chairman of

this democratically elected body.

### **Tereshkovich Dismissal**

When EHU dismissed Tereshkovich a few months later, it provoked outrage from both the Senate and the EHU trade union, which announced its plan to strike in protest.

Colleagues of Tereshkovich launched a campaign in support of him. Some of the EHU Senate members, including Ala Sokolova, Volha Shparaha and Maksim Zhbankou, initiated a petition on the web site [change.org](http://change.org). The petition has already collected over 1,000 signatures.

Maksim Zhbankou, another EHU lecturer, told Radio Svaboda that the administration would also dismiss other Belarusian academics. In his opinion, the University presented those who remained critical of the administration as a small group of people, but in reality the majority of the teaching staff disagreed with the current policies of the administration.

Tereshkovich thinks that his dismissal was unlawful and an affront to the EHU Senate which elected him

Tereshkovich thinks that his dismissal was unlawful and an affront to the EHU Senate which elected him. According to Tereshkovich he did not receive any official explanation for his dismissal. He tells Belarus Digest that the EHU trade union is planning to sue the EHU administration on his behalf.

He argues that his recent criticism of the changes in the system of governance, the newly created position of provost and other new governing structures cannot to be found anywhere in the Statute of EHU. He also believes that the university wants to put pressure on those who question the transparency and fairness of the recently announced international

competition for EHU positions.

### **EHU's Response: We Are Ready to Talk**

Darius Udryš, a vice-rector for Development and Communications, refrained from discussing the reasons behind Tereshkovich dismissal. However, in response to Belarus Digest's questions he did state that, "examples of faculty who are critical of the administration and continue to work at EHU are plentiful."

According to him, the administration is ready to meet and discuss any concerns of the teaching staff. He also commented that to resolve the conflict, the administration has made an effort to "restore dialogue with those who are critical to our plans."

Udryš is confident of the donors and stakeholders, "continued commitment to the university as well as support for our efforts to introduce standard academic practises like open competitions for full-time faculty positions."

### **All Agree – EHU Needs to Reform**

In January an independent evaluation service of the European University Association, published a [report](#) which indicated areas for improvement of the strategic management of the University. With regards to the provost and executive council, the report recommended to define these positions in the EHU's Statute, which should be amended accordingly.

The report suggests that the management should ensure that all internal constituencies will be able to participate in the decision-making process: "The distribution of competencies in the decision-making processes is unclear and uncertain."

As concerns the mission of EHU, the European University Association report states that "given the composition of the staff and student bodies, the team found broad agreement

amongst them that the Belarusian mission should not be abandoned." The report's authors recommend "to reaffirm the institutional mission and develop an appropriate strategy."

the university administration and its academics agree that the University needs to undergo serious structural changes

Both the University administration and its academics agree that the institution needs to undergo serious structural changes, while remaining faithful to its original mission as a Belarusian university in exile.

For its part, the EHU wants to be competitive with other universities. Today when education institutions are becoming increasingly internationalised, the EHU is afraid of falling behind.

The introduction of open competitions for full-time positions, widely practised elsewhere, represents an effort to bring one of the basic international standards in higher education to the EHU. The administration also understands the need for increasing the quality of the university's teaching and research.

Still, the EHU has [a complex identity issue](#). For one, it has an explicitly [Belarus-related mission](#). EHU is supposed to be a safe haven for embattled Belarusian intellectuals – not a business arrangement. Yet it is based in Lithuania and wants to be internationally competitive and financially sustainable. Combining both of these issues into a cohesive plan has proven to be a difficult task.

### **Need for a Peaceful Solution**

The EHU badly needs good press coverage to maintain its positive reputation both abroad and in Belarus. In Belarus, it is important to attract prospective students and academics. Abroad it needs to main its image for donors who support the

institution. For this reason, these disputes should be resolved peacefully without resorting to extreme measures.

Most observers agree that EHU is no longer just a private university run by a single person but has an important mission to serve Belarusian society. EHU existence depends upon the financial support from the international donor community. But shifting the burden of conflict-resolution and micro-management to EHU alone is hardly realistic.

It may be advisable to engage a mediator come in who could facilitate a resolution to the dispute

However, as tensions at the University are rising and both sides are unable to work out a solution, it may be advisable to engage a mediator to facilitate a resolution to the dispute.

Ideally, such a person could be respected internationally, but at the same time, intimately familiar with Belarusian society and situation inside the country. The mediator would be able to speak the same language both with the university administration and Belarusian academics.

Such an effort might help restore trust between both sides of this conflict and help strengthen EHU by finding a long-term workable solution. Someone like Stefan Eriksson, a former Swedish ambassador to Belarus, who speaks perfect Belarusian and lived in Belarus for years might be a good candidate.

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## **Belarusian-Chinese ‘Geely’**

# Car, Spiritual Revival and Local Elections – Belarus State TV Digest

Channel 1 covered an official award giving ceremony honouring prominent Belarusians.

Alexander Lukashenka introduced his fellow citizens to the new Patriarch of Belarus Orthodox Church Pavel with warm words.

Will the Belarusian-Chinese cars 'Geely' become an international hit? The head of state discussed this project with the Prime Minister Michail Miasnikovich and the Minsk Regional Governor Siarhei Shapiro.

The elections of deputies to local councils in March will take place according to a series of new rules. They include compulsory disclosure of the information on any criminal record and any sources of income. State TV concluded that the new legislation would allow Belarusian voters to get to know their candidates better.

## Domestic Politics

[State awards to the prominent Belarusians](#). State TV afforded a great deal of coverage to the annual state award ceremony “Spiritual Revival” for important public figures who contribute to the spiritual life of Belarusian society, the journalist explained.

This year [Lukashenka](#) entered the stage together with Pavel, the new Patriarch of the Belarus Orthodox Church. “There is a special meaning in this unity,” the state TV journalist noted. In his speech, the head of state underscored the important role of the Orthodox Church plays in society. He also focused on the fact that the church remained the only confession that

the state had signed an agreement of co-operation with.

The reporter noted that the head of state spoke about the values that unite Belarusian society, such as their national ideas. Lukashenka emphasised that although throughout its existence Belarusian culture was under the influence of other cultures, including Rus, Western European and Asian, the country has still managed to protect its identity.

While Patriarch Pavel accompanied the head of state on the stage, camera also spotted in the audience Tadeusz Kandrusievich who leads Belarusian Catholic Church.

Among others, Lukashenka awarded the news agency of state TV for its production of a series of historical movies as well as Mikola Mytlicki who translated Chinese poetry into Belarusian.

[Belarusians are getting ready for elections](#). Elections to local councils will become one of the most important events of the year, state TV reports. However, this year new legislation will regulate the electoral campaigns. According to these new amendments to the previous laws, candidates have to disclose the sources of their income and report any criminal record. According to the reporter, it will also make candidates better known to voters.

State television even took the time to present a candidate running in the local elections, Natalia Slelian. She comes from one of the most authoritative civil society organisations in the country, Belaya Rus, the reporter emphasised.

[How to be elected to the local councils?](#) During its news segment, state TV went on to explain the three ways how one can become a candidate in the upcoming elections. It can happen either through a political party or labour collectives. Alternately, one can become a candidate through the collection of signatures by a group of independent initiators, composed

from 3 to 10 people.

[The head of state gets a report on the work of the Belarusian police.](#) Lukashenka met with [Ihar Shunievich](#), the head of Ministry of Internal Affairs. State TV noted that he was happy with the report and praised a work of the Belarusian police.

The reporter mentioned the achievements of the ministry, such as a decrease in the crime rate, with nearly 1,200 fewer offences occurring in 2013 than in 2012. The militia have also registered fewer cases of speeding.

## **Economy**

[Will the Belarus-Chinese 'Geely' car become a hit?](#) Strategic partnership between Minsk and Beijing continues according to plan, state TV reports. The head of state met with Prime Minister [Michail Miasnikovich](#) and [Semen Shapiro](#), Governor of the Minsk Region, to discuss one of the joint Belarus-Chinese projects the 'Geely' automobile. In the opinion of the journalist, production of cars remains one of the most promising projects and should bring tangible benefits to Belarus.

The head of state wants to make the joint Belarusian-Chinese project an internationally recognised brand. Within 5 years production of the automobile should raise to around 120 thousand annually. In the words of Lukashenka, building automobiles is among the most prized dreams of many Belarusians.

[Improvements in housing?](#) Recently improvements in housing construction in Belarus has been high priority for officials. The head of the head of the state's administration, [Andrej Kabjakou](#), went on a trip to learn precisely how housing was being built in Barisau. The state TV report showed a house which had been under construction since 2011, with no concrete date for its completion set at this time. Kabjakou was informed about sources of financing for the housing's

construction and the degree to which the housing had been completed.

### 2013 was a critical year in the housing industry in Belarus.

On another occasion, state television continued covering issues facing housing. “The head of state gave his word to ordinary Belarusians that things will all be set straight”, journalist proudly stressed in their coverage of the issue. “These are actions coupled with words”, she commented.

Thank to a series of improvements in the legislation and construction management, initiated by the head of state, the industry should now function more efficiently. Another serious achievement in regard to solving the housing problem was a decree signed by Lukashenka.

### **International Affairs**

No stability in the aftermath the Arab Spring. In a less than a minute of coverage, Channel 1 reported on the unstable situation in the Arabic world. They briefly mentioned that the third anniversary of the revolution Tunisia was commemorated with a demonstration against the authorities.

“Its participants state that they do not feel any improvement since the revolution in 2011”, the journalist alarmingly noted. She explained that a wave of upheavals led to serious changes in power in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Morocco. “All of these countries have not only lost their stability, but also their brand as a place that is attractive to tourists”, she continues. These events have significantly weakened their respective economies.

Syria is also affected the ongoing internal armed conflict between the authorities and rebels. Bashar Assad, together with the international community, are trying to preserve hope that they will be able to re-establish the previous level of stability enjoyed in the country.

[Vilnius has approved its transition to the Eurozone](#), In the spring time a bill on joining the other countries who use the euro as their currency will be headed to the Lithuanian parliament. If approved by parliament, the country could introduce a new currency as soon as January 2015. State TV noted that recently Latvia joined the eurozone. Its citizens, however, are unhappy primarily due to an increase in prices the state TV channel argued.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State Television 1 (BT1). Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.*

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## **Protectionism or Cross Border Business: a Belarusian Dilemma**

At the end of the year the Office of Statistics of Poland published information on the money spent in Poland by nationals from neighbouring countries.

According to their report, from the period of July to September 2013 Belarusians spent \$250m in Poland. Surprisingly, this figure per capita appeared larger than that of either Ukrainians or Russians.

Due to the lower prices and better quality of goods, Belarusians from border regions, and even some from remote

parts of Belarus, prefer to shop in Poland.

This trend has damaged Belarus' own manufacturers and pumps foreign currency out of the country. This could be the main reason why the Belarusian government is delaying the signing of any agreements that would ease local border traffic control with Poland and Lithuania. Allowing a million and a half Belarusians to enter a 50 km area of the EU without a visa could deal a hard blow to the country.

The government, however, does not turn down EU funding [for cross border cooperation programmes](#) that are implemented by the EU. In recent years these programmes have made considerable progress in helping Belarus' border regions to break out of their isolation.

### **Protectionism vs Cross Border Business**

The local border traffic regime, which the EU has suggested to Belarus, will give citizens who live in a 50-kilometre radius on both sides of the border to have the possibility to move in this area without a visa.

Belarus has already implemented such an agreement with Latvia, which has a comparatively small border with Belarus, though still refuses to do so with Poland and Lithuania. Lithuania has already gone through all the necessary procedures for the implementation of easing local border traffic controls with Belarus a few years ago, as did Poland.

The growth of cross border traffic will increase the inflow of cheaper and higher quality EU goods into Belarus, which will hurt local manufacturers

The authorities do not publicly explain their reasons for delaying the signing of these agreements, but they seem to be mostly tied to economics: the growth of cross border traffic will increase the inflow of cheaper and higher quality EU goods into Belarus, which will hurt local manufacturers.

It will also lead to even more foreign currency being drained from Belarusian currency reserves, a serious problem for Belarus that it has been facing over the past couple of years.

While such fears are warranted, Belarus also loses a great deal from its closed borders and inability to use the EU neighbourhood in order to benefit its own development. The tourism industry, the largest beneficiary of near-border destinations, is very weak and the number of tourists from neighbouring countries [remains very low in Belarus](#).

### **Belarus-Lithuania-Latvia: Promoting Cross Border Tourism**

Despite the obstacles that arise due to very tight Belarusian border control, the EU continues to try to establish contact with their neighbouring Belarusian regions to promote their social-economic development and people-to-people contact.

In 2007-2013, Belarus participated in the Poland-Ukraine-Belarus and Belarus-Lithuania-Latvia border crossing programmes, which embraced the whole western territory and even some parts of eastern Belarus. Around 90 trilateral and bilateral projects were implemented in total, with a budget of more than €220m.



In the Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus programme, the Bella Dzvina project was recognised as being the most successful. Its name comes from words Belarus, Latvia and Dzvina, the river that runs through both Belarus and Latvia.

The project included the Vitebsk region of Belarus and Latgale region of Latvia, and since 2012, the Utena region of Lithuania. It aimed to develop the cross border tourist infrastructure and spread information about the tourist potential of the regions.

Deputy director of the EU-financed "Interaction" fund Maryna Barysava said in an interview to Eurobulletin that at the start of the project in 2007 it was very difficult to cooperate with the local Belarusian authorities. Project managers had to explain to them the importance of cross border cooperation as well as the peculiarities of EU funding and project management. Soon, however, they realised that such projects could really benefit the region's development.

For instance, the Bella Dzvina project financed the creation of a solid tourist infrastructure in Polack, more specifically a tourist information centre, road signs and the names of important objects in English, which remains a big problem for tourists in Belarus.

Considering the success of the project, both sides have decided to continue it and since 2012, Bella Dzvina-2 has been carrying out further work in supporting the further development of the project's next phase. To that end, in July 2013 the project held tourist festivals in all three regions, showing the project's viability and importance.

In Belarus, it was Braslaŭ that hosted the sports and music festival "Viva Braslaŭ!" in the summer of 2013. The festival included a yacht regatta on Dryviaty lake, beach volleyball, football and kayaking competitions. The musical part of the festival consisted of a competition of young singers, a rock concert and a open dance floor.

The local authorities did not expect so many people to participate and finally had to let them in without tickets. While local governmental officials were ready for critics to

speak out against the event, they were pleasantly surprised to have received only positive feedback about the festivities.

### **Poland-Belarus-Ukraine: The Largest EU Programme**

The programme for Poland-Belarus-Ukraine is the largest among the EU cross-border cooperation programmes with a budget of €186m for 2007-2013. The programme has three priority areas of cooperation: increasing the competitiveness of the border region (entrepreneurship, tourism and better access to the region), improving the quality of life (environmental protection and secure borders), networking and people-to-people cooperation. The programme embraces four out of six regions of Belarus, which border Poland and Ukraine.



Apart from developing tourism, which remains a very popular project theme in the programme, it has implemented projects in other spheres. In 2012-2013, the Hrodna Clinical Hospital had some of its facilities renovated and received new equipment, the Brest region psycho-neurological hospital received funds for creating new departments for the treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction.

Water management and purification facilities were built in the towns of Kamianiec and Vysokaje in the Brest region. The most costly projects were aimed at the reconstruction of border crossing points, such as at Piaščatka in the Kamianiec district.

These programmes clearly benefit the local communities of Belarus, but on a national level some obstacles to cross border cooperation remain in addition to a strict visa regime.

“Belarus looks like a blank spot on the map of cooperation, mainly because of the bureaucratised procedure for the approval of projects by the central government,” says a representative of the Belarusian Sports and Tourism Association Siarhei Kaliada.

Foreign aid represents an issue which is subject to intense focus on the part of the authorities, which have not yet put aside Soviet schemes of working with their western partners.

On the other hand, many people in the government realise that cooperation should continue despite the two side's political differences for the benefit of local communities. As Dzmitry Jermaliuk, Head of Department of the EU at Foreign Ministry of Belarus, said in an interview to Radio Racja, “The cross border cooperation programme is not a site where we discuss the politics of Minsk and Brussels. Here, we cooperate on concrete issues.”

Although it remains unclear when the local border traffic with Lithuania and Poland will start, the EU cross border cooperation projects already benefit Belarusians. Quietly, authorities learn that Europe can be a helpful partner in resolving local problems of Belarus.

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**European**

**Humanities**

# University Elects Its Senate and Debates its Future

On 19 November the European Humanities University (EHU), also known as Belarusian university in exile, held elections for its Senate. Although the Senate is just one of several bodies which govern EHU, the result may affect the direction of EHU's reforms.

Unlike previous elections, which often went unnoticed by the Belarusian press, this time a group of EHU academics united under a platform called 'For a New EHU' which conducted a vibrant electoral campaign. The vast majority of the newly elected Senate members supported the platform. The election campaign provoked discussions in Belarusian media about the direction EHU is taking under its current administration.

The main topics raised during the Senate election campaign included the role of academics in the governance of the university in exile and whether the Belarusian university in exile could do more for Belarusian society.

The Rector of the University responded to criticism by explaining that the university needs changes to improve the quality of its scholarship and teaching and also to remain competitive.

## **Academics Want More Involvement**

A public debate started after a group of lecturers adopted a manifesto criticising the management style of the EHU administration as being not democratic enough.

The group 'For a new EHU' consisted of the Chairman of the EHU Senate Pavel Cierashkovich and a number of lecturers including Volha Shparaha, Andrej Laurukhin and Maxim Zhbankou.

According to the manifesto, the university often made important decisions without meaningful consultations with EHU academics. The academics argued that the management excluded representatives of the Senate and labour unions from the decision making process related to the future of the university.

The lecturers also claimed that most Belarusian academics have to work for the university without employment contracts. They called for strengthening the role of the Senate and EHU academics and the introduction of regular rotations for key administrators, including the rector.

In their view, the university is losing its humanities identity, as well as its ties to Belarusian society. Therefore, the EHU should also develop Belarus-oriented programmes for students and encourage teaching in the Belarusian language and learning the language.

According to the manifesto, co-operation not only with Belarusian NGOs and think tanks, but also prominent Belarusian political and cultural figures, might help to bring the university closer to civil society in Belarus. It also states that the teaching programmes should keep Belarus as a point of focus and involve successful Belarusian academics from around the world.

### **The EHU administration promises reforms**

On 14 November Professor Anatoli Mikhailov, who has been leading the university since its establishment in 1992 responded and shared his vision of the future of the university.

Professor Mikhailov explained that the university planned to hire a core faculty consisting of permanent lecturers after holding an open competition. The budget for salaries will be doubled. The permanent staff is supposed to reside in Vilnius and could claim all social benefits and will have proper

employment contracts, in compliance with Lithuanian law.

This change would signify a shift from the previous practise of EHU lecturers regularly commuting from Belarus to teach.

Commenting on whether Belarusian academics will be replaced by other nationals, Mikhailov emphasised that Belarus was and would continue to be at the centre of EHU's focus. He emphasised that the university has always been on the look out for qualified candidates from Belarus.□

The rector also explained that to strengthen its focus on Belarus, the EHU is developing a programme of transformation studies. The EHU also wants to revive its Belarusian studies programme which was closed not that long ago. According to Professor Mikhailov, thanks to generous and consistent donor support, the EHU's financial situation has never been better.

The rector commented also on the accusations that the administration had excluded the Senate and representatives of the University's faculty from the decision making process. In his view, the governing structure of the EHU is a hybrid one and consists of international educational experts, foreign donors, the Senate, which is understood to consist of representatives of the EHU administration, staff and students.

He described this model as being one of “stakeholder involvement, separation of powers, and accountable democratic leadership”. In his view, it allows for the efficient, but also democratic management of the university.

### **Competing or complementary visions of the EHU?**

Will the newly selected Senate with majority of supporters of reforms, find a compromise with the university management? In fact, much will depend on the position of the administration of the university. Although the Senate is an important body, its powers, when it comes to real strategic decisions and

appointments, is rather limited.

Both the majority of the EHU Senate and the university management think that EHU needs change. On most issues, the positions of the Platform 'For a New EHU' and Rector Mikhailov are not mutually exclusive.

All agree that the University needs to maintain its focus on Belarus, hire Belarusian academics and act as an important platform for debate, research and teaching relevant to Belarus. They also agree that the voice of academics at the EHU should be heard and respected.

Rector Mikhailov already announced that he would discuss with the Senate and try to get its approval of his reforms. One hopes that EHU's management and the Senate will be able to agree on a viable reform plan.

The debate on the future reform of the university, widely covered in Belarusian press, shows diverse opinions among those who work for EHU. The university could benefit from the healthy debates if it makes sure that they lead not to divisions but to improvements and progress.

This will help EHU to balance its Belarusian identity with the challenges of making the university more internationally competitive and strengthening its relevance to Belarus at the same time.

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## **Lithuania's EU Presidential Policy – A New Approach**

# towards Belarus?

The Lithuania's six month European Union presidency which started in July has led to talk of a new Eastern policy. Lithuania wants to keep EU enlargement on the European agenda, showing Eastern neighbours that the European Union wants enlargement. It acts as an answer to Russia and that the Russian inspired Customs Union is not the only answer for the former-Soviet Union region.

Lithuania wants to improve economic relations with Belarus and develop them by opening up borders and liberalising the Schengen visa regime. By liberalising visas for Belarusians, the Lithuanian government hopes it will force Minsk to liberalise, once Belarusians experience the liberalism and economic well-being of the European Union.

## **Lithuania's Policy Concept**

Trade between Lithuania and Belarus (2012) was €1.7 billion (\$2.3 billion). This increased from 6.4% of Lithuanian GDP in 2011, to 14.4% in 2012. The Lithuanian vice minister for Foreign Affairs (Andrius Krivas) in August demanded more cooperation and modernising of the Belarusian economy.

The Lithuanian ARVI and VMG groups, with Belarusian partners have established a joint industrial venture in Mogilev. Further investments (€90 million) have been made by the two Lithuanian groups, in improving the Belarusian banking system industry, energy, tourism, furniture and manufacturing.

Whilst Belarus has an its own embassy at the European Union, Lithuania according to the chairman of Lithuania's parliament's European Affairs Committee Gediminas Kirkilas is Belarus's representative in the European Parliament. Kirkilas hopes Lithuania will help integrate Belarus into the European

Union in the future. Lithuania's government contends that sanctions imposed on the regime should not harm Belarusian people.

The government continues holding a dialogue to bring Minsk closer to it. Minsk views Lithuania as a bridge to the European Union and Belarus's Interior Minister Anatoly Savinykh stated in June that Lithuania's change in EU policy had created "a constructive decision in the right direction".

The Lithuanian government wants to become a reconciler in world diplomacy. Belarus is seen as an opportunity to improve their mediation skills.

Justas Vincas Paleckis, (MEP), in August contended that Lithuania will continue its policy, as it was improving human rights in Belarus. Enhanced trade and visa regime would develop this further.

The policy consists of three concepts. Firstly, trade and dialogue serve as basis for negotiation. Negotiation will lead to additional trade and dialogue. By incorporating Belarus, it would offer Belarus alternatives to its reliance on Russia, giving the European Union leverage. Belarus would not willingly lose access to European markets. Increased trade would modernise the Belarusian economy, establishing a middle-class independent of the regime.

Secondly, Lithuania, (after Poland with 291,822), provides the most visas to Belarusian's (193,129), rejecting only 0.17% applications, as opposed to Poland's 0.35%. Lithuania, like Poland does not charge visa fees for Lithuanian visas for Belarusians. It advocates lowering costs of a Schengen visa for Belarusians. Increased travel would allow Belarusians to witness the European Union's wealth and liberalism – which would be detrimental to Minsk.

The third aspect revolves around building a democratic minded external Belarusian civil-society, creating Western minded

elites through education, training and more engagement with civil society actors from Belarus.

Lithuania spends 0.13% of its Gross National Income (Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) on development aid to Belarus. Belarus and the EU have a number of common issues to discuss, such as migration, the environment and natural resources. Lithuania hopes discussion would lead to future negotiation.

### **EU Policy to Belarus: political conditionality does not work?**

The German government of Angela Merkel argues Lukashenka is not concerned with human rights or democracy. Therefore, EU sanctions on the regime will remain in hopes that they will make the regime respect human rights and elections. Poland also advocates sanctions and travel bans for Belarusian elites.

With the end of the Christian Democratic Union and the Free Democratic Party coalition, Guido Westerwelle will not be foreign minister. His relationship with the Belarusian regime was frosty and a new German foreign minister will have a different approach to Belarus.

This has occurred already. The German ambassador to Belarus Wolfram Maas in September stated that Germany would improve economic cooperation with Belarus, although sanctions would remain.

Understandably, the European Union uses sanctions. Lukashenka has cynically called the EU's bluff promising improvements with respect of human rights and reforms but failing to implement them. This has not been helped by the regime's attacks on the media, Internet, civil rights and the jailing of opposition. EU sanctions have entrenched the regime in the belief that the West offers little.

Although Belarus and Russia are close, Lukashenka wants other

outlets. Ukraine's prime minister Mykola Azarov in September discussed with Belarusian elites possible economic cooperation. Belarus looks to European Union states too, for new trade avenues.

Belarus does not want the political conditionality of the European Union, but access to its markets.

Belarus does not want the political conditionality of the European Union, but access to its markets. This may cause problems in the future, as further trade with the European Union is dependent on the Belarusian regime making political and economic reforms

Cathy Ashton in September contended that the European Union needs a new relationship with Belarus and that the Lithuanian presidency offers a "unique opportunity to improve relations" leading to "resumption of negotiations".

The European Parliament spoke of lowering Schengen visa costs for Belarusians from €60 to €35 "opening all gates, doors and...windows" for people-to-people contact. The Belarusian foreign ministry has been conciliatory, wanting a new dialogue on a road map. Currently both sides want dialogue.

### **Any prospect of serious changes?**

Lithuania's policy of openness towards Belarus could increase dialogue and if it works, it could bring both sides closer.

At some point the policy will come up against its internal weaknesses. To continue the relationship, the European Union will want political changes. With no end to the Lukashenka regime in sight, it is unlikely he will allow any opening of the political system.

Lithuania's presidency only lasts 6 months, as this is the length of its EU presidency. It remains unlikely a policy reliant on longevity for fruition, will be maintained once the

term ends.

Lithuania will not change the sanctions policy. Its tenure is too limited in duration and it requires changing the views of intransigent member states like Germany and Poland on the sanctions issue. Even the limited lifting of sanctions for Belarusian ministers to attend meetings with EU delegates have not led to the Belarusian authorities making any significant response to even these timid overtures by the European Union.

Member States that want to keep sanctions question the need to make make further concessions, when the Belarusian regime does not reciprocate. Lithuania's policy given time could work, however the Belarusian regime seems determined only to speak on dialogue, but its actions, or rather lack thereof, belie this discourse.

*Stephen Hall*

*Stephen is a contributing author based in the United Kingdom*

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## **Third International Congress of Belarusian Studies Kicks Off in Lithuania (Online Broadcast)**

On 11 October, the Third International Congress of Belarusian Studies starts in Kaunas, a city in the west of Lithuania. The congress remains a unique event which brings together many scholars of Belarus.

Some call the event an academic supermarket, as it combines a

great variety of topics and experts. In addition to panel and sanction discussions, the organisers will arrange presentations on various books and scholarly projects. This year, an international panel will also select the best scholarly works of the past year and reward their authors.

Though most of the participants are Belarusians, foreign researchers have become a significant part of the convention, and in some sections they may even constitute a majority. This conference displays researchers who focus on Belarus at an international level and breaks down the isolation of Belarusian academia.

### **Online Broadcast of the Congress**

Belarus Digest will live broadcast selected sessions from the [congress programme](#) at the following times (UTC+02:00, Lithuanian time zone).

Friday, 11 October 10.00-11.20, 11.50-13.20

Saturday, 12 October 17.00-21.00

Sunday, 13 October 12.30-14.00

### **History of the Congress**

The International Congress of Belarusian Studies will start its work for the third time. Since 2011 the congress takes place annually, bringing together a large range of researchers, journalists, civil society leaders and students. It remains the [largest event of scholars](#) and experts working on Belarus. This year, about 400 researchers will come to Kaunas from 16 countries.

Deutsche Welle compared the event with an academic supermarket. This year, experts will cover a range of topics from the problems of transformation of the economy and the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and neighboring states, to politics and international relations, culture and

historical heritage, gender rules and psychology. Multiple parallel sessions will take place simultaneously.

Among other events, Makoto Hayasaka, a professor from the Tokyo Institute of Technology, will present his book "History of a Borderland: Speculations on the Past of Belarus". The Centre for Transition Studies will present [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), the only English language peer-reviewed periodical of Belarusian studies.

This year, for the first time, the congress will recognize the best publications in the field of social sciences and the humanities with a special award. 28 nominees have a place on the short list, among them a contributing author to Belarus Digest, Vadzim Smok.

The Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere" remains the main organiser of the Congress. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, the German Marshall Fund, the International Consortium "EuroBelarus"/Forum Syd, Nordic Council of Ministers are funding the event. Vytautas Magnus University and Institute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as well as the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies and an online magazine "New Europe" feature among the other organisers of the event. It is noteworthy that all these organisations are registered abroad.

### **Breaking Through The Isolation of Researchers**

The Director of the Institute of Political Studies Andrej Kazakevich explained to Belarus Digest that "two-thirds of the participants will be Belarusians. In addition to Belarusians, neighbours of Belarus like Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania will also be well represented. Only a few people represent Western Europe, USA or Asia." Although most participants are Belarusians, the presence of other researchers remains prominent. Last year, in the literary section there were more foreign researchers than Belarusians.

Though the event remains purely academic, the authorities of Belarus have not yet developed their own official line towards it. Last year, Siarhiej Tokc, a historian from Hrodna, could not visit the conference. The administration of the university where he teaches said that his speech was undesirable and prevented him from going. However, organiser Andrej Kazakevich said that such cases happen very rarely. On the other hand, last year, even the staff from the Information and Analytical Centre of the Presidential Administration and representatives from Belarus State University took part in the event.

In today's Belarus universities often face restrictions regarding certain participants or topics. The event in Lithuania is free from such constraints and provides a unique platform for debates and exchange of ideas. It also increases the quality of Belarusian studies and helps integrate Belarusians into the global research community.

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## **Global Belarusian Leaders Plan to Unite Successful Emigrants**

Global Belarusian Leaders organisation (GBL) came into existence at the end of August in Vilnius, Lithuania. The founders propose an alternative to the conventional Belarusian emigre networks and seek to unite immigrants who will be able to give their country a hand during the period of its political and economic transformation.

The organisation is going to recruit new members among young and perspective Belarusian professionals all over the world. Several young Belarusians living abroad are the founders of

the organisation. Emigrating in the 2000s, and not being able to fulfil their potential in Belarus, they intend to influence the country of their origin by creating a network of professionals with Belarusian roots and those affiliated with Belarus.

### **A Belarusian project born in Lithuania**

On August 31, the founding meeting of the non-commercial, non-partisan organisation Global Belarusian Leaders (GBL) took place at Vilnius City Hall. GBL aims to build a global network of accomplished professionals from Belarus and those affiliated with Belarus. The founders of the organisation claim that it seeks to connect and involve the Belarusian population living outside of Belarus in contributing to the economic, political, social and cultural development of Belarus.

When speaking about the future of GBL, Tatsiana Kulakevich, one of the founders and a local representative of the organisation in the USA, sees it as an association of professionals who will be able to give their country a hand during the period of its political and economic transformation.

According to one of the GBL founders Mikalai Tsimashenka "the idea of GBL was met with support and enthusiasm from different institutions particularly European Humanities University (EHU), German Marshall Fund of the US and Eastern Europe Studies Center (EESC). In addition to financial support EHU also offered venue for the founding meeting in Vilnius. All these organisations clearly see great potential of building a global professional network of Belarusians."

The idea of GBL came from Lithuania. The organisers followed the example of the Global Lithuanian Leaders organisation (GLL) established in 2009. GLL connects Lithuanian professionals in different fields from all over the

world by organising such activities as World Lithuanian Economic Forum and Global Lithuanian Awards. GLL also offers mentoring for Lithuania's growing businesses and Lithuanian students abroad.

The founders of GBL met at one of the annual meetings of Belarusian students studying abroad called the United Students of Belarus Rally (USB Rally). The Rally has taken place annually in Lithuania since 2007 under the auspices of the Vilnius-based Eastern European Studies Centre (EESC) which works on the promotion of civil society and democracy in Eastern Europe. Every year the USB Rally gathers dozens of students originally from Belarus who are studying abroad, mostly in Poland and Lithuania, but also in Czech Republic, Russia, Italy, USA and other countries.

USB rally is a unique meeting for Belarus. Within six years, USB Rally created a network of students involved in Belarusian activities in the countries where they study. GBL is a first joint project of the USB Rally participants, most of whom graduated from Western universities and are living abroad. They were able to attract successful young entrepreneurs from Belarus and abroad, well-known athletes and artists like the poet Valeryja Kustava and musician Zmicier Vaiciushkevich to GBL's founding meeting.

If the GBL founders would make an attempt to register the organisation in Belarus, surely, they would have problems. Officially, there is only one "Global Belarusian Leader" in the country and even the name of the organisation can raise the suspicions of the registration authorities. For that reason, same as many Belarusian NGOs, GBL would have to be registered in Lithuania. It makes the functioning of the organisation much easier. The representatives of the organisation would have an opportunity to receive financial aid from international partners circumventing restrictive Belarusian legislation on foreign aid.

## **Influencing Belarus from abroad**

Most of the founders and local representatives of GBL live abroad. Growing up in Belarus, they left Belarus to study in the European Union and USA. It became a common phenomenon after the presidential election of 2006 when hundreds of students were subject to repression at their universities and many western schools offered scholarships for them. As a result, thousands of students left Belarus. Mostly to Poland and Lithuania, where the European Humanities University, a Belarusian university in exile, renewed its activity in 2006.

A majority of the students after graduation do not come back to Belarus and try to find work in countries where they studied. A permanent financial crisis and the political situation in the country are not at all attractive to young people educated in the West.

Belarusians are going abroad not only to studying, but also to work. According to various estimates, from 200 thousand to 1 million Belarusian citizens are permanently living and working outside of Belarus. Moreover, according to a survey by the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies, 35.6% of Belarusians want to leave the country for different reasons. In these circumstances, GBL has all the opportunities to become a huge network of Belarusians abroad.

Belarusians, residing abroad and making careers in business, science or IT-industry very rarely take part in activities of conventional émigré associations that were established after the Second World War with the main idea to retain national traditions and to make a network of Belarusians throughout a particular city or a country.

GBL proposes another theory for its network. As the name implies, GBL intends to unite Belarusians all over the world with the main goal is to expand international ties and

relationships, as well as establishing business contacts between Belarusians living abroad. In other words, instead of building churches and organising folk festivals, the new wave of Belarusian émigrés aims to help each other to make money and, thereby, increase their ability to promote their interests inside Belarus.

Evidence of this trend can be seen in the events the organisation plans to hold in 2013-2014. The GBL will cooperate with BelBiz in a workshop “GBL as a platform for professional connections” during the Global Entrepreneurship week in Minsk in November 2013. Lithuanian representatives plan to run the conference “Belarusian Business in Lithuania: Perspectives.” Moreover, GBL will have their representatives at the Eastern Partnership Summit and the 24th Economic Forum in Krynica-Zdroj (Poland).

It is too early to predict whether GBL will succeed. The obvious fact, however, is that latest members of the Belarusian diaspora have a huge potential to become a power that can influence Belarus now and even more so in the future. Such initiatives as GBL propose alternative ways to unite Belarusian immigrants globally.

Moreover, both immigrants and the country they left can benefit from GBL. Being united on a global level can help immigrants prosper, which, in turn will make a positive image of the country and, potentially, create an opportunity to improve the economic, political, social and cultural development of the country of their origin. Maryia Anishchankava, one of the founders and a local representative in Italy is hopeful that “within 5 years GBL will become a hub for Belarusians spread around the globe who want to grow personally and professionally..”

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# Why Do Belarusians Commit Suicide?

On 10 September, the world marked suicide prevention day. Belarus ranks sixth in the world with regard to the number of total suicides that occur annually.

Last year, about two thousand Belarusians committed suicide – higher than the number of road accident victims. Belarusian men, like elsewhere in the world, tend to commit suicide more than women, though the large number of suicides in rural areas sets Belarus apart from other countries. Studies indicate that increases in alcohol consumption in Belarus correlates with an increase in the number of suicides.

The overall social withdrawal and tendency towards depression that Belarusians face, rather than poverty, constitute the main reasons for the current situation. Although the Ministry of Health Care has taken certain steps to prevent suicides, Belarusians should first and foremost decrease their own alcohol consumption in order to reach this goal. [Washtingtonian](#) has a very helpful information about how the CBD can help you treating the depression.

## The Grand Duchy of Suicide

Every year, about a million people all over the world commit suicide. Scientists and scholars consider those countries that have a rate of 20 suicides per 100 thousand people to be states with a high level of social behaviour. Since it gained its independence, Belarus has never dropped down to this level.

World statistics on suicides are not regularly updated, which

sometimes makes it impossible to properly assess and highlight Belarus' place with regard to the number of suicides that take place in the country annually.

In 2012, 1,949 Belarusians committed suicide. In the 1990s, the number was even larger – about 3,500 Belarusians killed themselves every year. Before the economic crisis and default happened in Russia in 1998, the number of suicides decreased while after the default it once again began to grow.

Belarus often parallels Lithuania in such ratings – a country with which it shares a long common history.

Although the countries picked different paths of development, they remained similar to one another in the number of suicides committed in each. This is perhaps due to the fact that both countries are agriculture-based as a considerable number of people could not adapt to the capitalist reforms and fell into despair.

Lithuanians often tie the large number of suicides to the overall depression of the nation, which could also be said about Belarusians as well. The problem lies also in the fact that many people in both Lithuania and Belarus lost any possibility of earning a living in the countryside and at the same time were not able to adapt to working in the private sector with industry or services.

The number of suicides in Belarus coincides with the same tendencies in many other post-Soviet countries that built their independence on the foundations of their great Soviet heritage – one that left them with an empty state budget and destroyed connections and trust between people.

### **Suicide in Belarus**

In order to realise the seriousness of the number of 1,949

suicides, it may be instructive to compare it with the number of road accidents victims – 1,312 people last year, or the victims of alcohol poisoning – which was 1,918.

A high level of [alcohol consumption](#) often leads to higher levels of suicide. Most of the people who killed themselves and who attempted suicide abused alcohol for at least a year before they decided to take their lives.

Yury Razvodovsky, a Belarusian scholar from Hrodna State Medical University conducted [research](#) and produced a report that shows a significant association between alcohol consumption and suicide rates. The study suggests that an increase in alcohol consumption per capita by 1 litre would result in an 8.8% increase of the suicides rate.

The scholar observed that Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign reduced the consumption of alcohol from 13.3 to 6.7 litres between 1984 and 1986 which in turn led to a decrease in the suicide rate 15.4 to 7.0 per 100,000 people. Therefore the author of the report concluded that restrictive alcohol policy would be an effective measure to prevent suicides.

Rural residents tend to drink more. Although only a quarter of Belarusians live in the [countryside](#), the number of suicides there remains 2.5 higher bigger than in the cities. [Alcohol remains remarkably cheap](#) and affordable in Belarus, which makes the problem even worse.

The average suicide victim from Belarus is a man of active working age between 45-54 from the countryside. He has a lower than the nationwide average level of education, meaning that more often than not he did not have even complete secondary education. As for women, many of the victims were retirees on pension. Still, it is working age people that have committed a majority of the suicides. Hanging or jumping remain the most frequent ways to commit suicide for Belarusians, accounting for nearly 80% of all suicides. If you know someone who is

acting strange lately because of depleting mental health, you can help him/her by offering products from sites such as [CBD Oil UK](#).

The low level of religiousness in Belarus also affects the numbers. According to the research of Gallup, Belarus remains one of the most [atheistic countries worldwide](#). Only 27 percent of respondents said that religion played an important part in their everyday life. It should also be noted that none of the other world leaders in suicide are particularly religious countries.

### **What Does the State Do?**

Although the Ministry of Health Care elaborated a complex plan on suicide prevention, the root of the problem lies in the closed mentality of Belarusians. According to TUT.by, 90% of people who killed themselves never tried to get psychiatric help from specialists. Some people are afraid of asking for counseling or support as they remain afraid of being put on a record as having received psychiatric treatment.

Although the number of suicides is decreasing, Albina Samusenka of the Mahileu Centre for Hygiene, Epidemiology and Public Health says that “the situation has not improved as the number of para-suicides is growing. The people who are attempting suicide are still there.”

Suicides are not the kind of problem that a presidential decree can solve. To cut down the number of suicides committed annually, Belarusians should lessen their alcohol consumption and conduct real economic reforms, especially privatisation of land in the rural areas.

Changing the Belarusians mentality to make their minds more open remains the key task. By restricting the freedom of association and other rights of its citizens, the Belarusian authorities have done much in the way of depriving Belarusians of the opportunity to articulate their interests.

A robust policy to reduce alcohol consumption coupled with giving more freedom to religious organisations and NGOs would help decrease the suicide rate in Belarus. Unfortunately, many authoritarian regimes view strengthening civil society as a threat to their existence. Belarus is not an exception here.

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## **Getting to Know Belarus: An American's Year in Minsk**

A country where parachuting teddy bears and clapping in public are illegal? Where one in eight people is employed by the military or the police? Where nobody speaks English at all? Why would anyone want to go there? These were the questions that friends and family asked when I told them I was going to teach English in Belarus as a Fulbright scholar for the 2012-2013 school year.

I had maintained a positive outlook on going to Belarus from the beginning, when I first submitted my application to the Fulbright Commission. My Lithuanian roots combined with my study of Russian language made Belarus a perfect place to experience the crossroads of the Baltic and Slavic nations. Interest in the political situation sharpened my intrigue, as did the opportunity to impart my native knowledge of English as a teacher.

Boarding the plane in August 2012 was easy, but by the time my flight was landing, I had gotten apprehensive. As the plane descended into Minsk-2 International Airport, I wondered if all the rumours were true, if the country was as strange as colleagues and Internet articles had claimed. The answers were revealed over the course of my year in Minsk.

## **First Impressions**

My first impression of Minsk was almost exactly as I imagined it. Partizanskii Prospekt was a wide avenue along which crawled giant, light green, caterpillar-like trolleybuses. A mix of high-rise concrete blocks and faded three-to-six story Stalin-era apartment rows stood on a grey-skied background. On my first day, I visited my university, paid for my accommodation in the sparse dormitory and bought simple groceries at the windowless Belarus department store. I heard English spoken only by Yuliya, a fourth-year university student who had been assigned to guide me around the city.



As I became acquainted with Minsk, I was fascinated by how things operated. The Metro was consistently on time; the streets, impeccably clean; the people, friendly enough and happy to become acquainted with an outsider.

I systematically walked around the city, visiting different parks, monuments and places of interest, trying to figure out what it was about the city that made it so much different from Vilnius, my second home, only three hours away. It could have been anything from the lack of history, to the linguistic identity crisis, to the charming, peeling pink paint on the Pobeda Cinema.

I struggled to answer when new acquaintances asked me, as they always did, “What do you think?”

## **True Rumors**

To some degree, one of the things that initially attracted me

to and intrigued me about Belarus was the rumor that the Soviet Union's influence still echoed across much of the country. When I found my first hammer and sickle on the façade of GUM, the state-run universal department store, I felt conflicted. On one hand, I was witnessing an idiosyncratic lifestyle that had elsewhere faded over the course of the past 22 years. On the other, it was creepy to see the remnants of a bygone era.

The amount of bureaucratic red tape that I had to cut through turned out to be the most actual example of Soviet life. It had been hinted at before my arrival, when I was preparing my travel documents. A brief phone call to the Belarusian Consulate in New York to ask if my documents were received was answered by an irritable woman who could confirm nothing without a mysterious tracking number.

Upon arrival, I visited my district police station approximately five times in the registration and visa-extension process, bringing with me various translated, notarised, and stamped papers from the bank, my university, and the housing authority office, proving my residency and occupation.

Everyday examples of Soviet life were charming at first, but became tiresome. The most evident was the simple experience of grocery shopping. Every few days I went to Centralny supermarket to buy food, and found that the selection and supply varied on an hourly basis. Sometimes I would be able to find my favourite products; other times, not at all. Once, right around Christmas time, a row of jars of peanut butter, my favourite indulgence, lined one shelf of the store. Within twelve hours it was gone, only to reappear three months later.

## **False Rumours**

Linguistically, I was in a unique place. Having studied Russian for three years prior to my arrival, I understood much

of what was happening and was able to communicate my needs fairly clearly. Nevertheless, I was surprised to find that many people, when they discovered that I was an American, were eager to practice their English with me, from my students to the door lady at the university dormitory!

living in Belarus was quite comfortable, if I directed my attention away from the dubious political situation and the national identity crisis

It turned out that English was much more widely spoken than I expected. Despite their enthusiasm to speak, many of these people seemed nervous to become too close to me. Forming a solid social group was a challenge that lasted the whole year. Although the culture was fairly closed, I found that I fit in very well with the local population, which could have had something to do with my distinctly Baltic features.

I had been warned that the police officers who regularly patrolled our block would be inclined to check my documents if they suspected that I was a foreigner. Luckily, I never had any trouble with the many police officers I saw over the course of the year, and I found them mostly cordial in the few times when I did encounter them.

## **Living the Life**

As time went on the city gained depth, and the country began to fulfil its promises to me. Working at the university and developing relationships with other organisations around Minsk, I found that living in Belarus was quite comfortable, if I directed my attention away from the dubious political situation and the national identity crisis that manifested itself in each individual.

The charm of the Soviet architecture and Lenin's statue in the city centre never disappointed, and I developed a sort of affection for the ever-present Belarus tractors and the city's pride in the newly historic Trinity Suburb and the jewel-like

National Library.

I left Belarus at the eleventh hour, boarding a train to Vilnius in the evening on the day my visa expired on 15 June 2013. After nearly ten months of living in the country I felt that I had adapted to the unique lifestyle that such an isolated country offered to an American like myself. At first reflection, I have come to the conclusion that, like a good comrade, as long as you expect nothing from Belarus, Belarus will expect nothing from you in return.

Soon to come is a series of articles on Belarus Digest, in which I will further describe some of these experiences and topics and explore the life of an American in Belarus.

*Monika Bernotas*

*Monika was a Fulbright scholar teaching in Belarus in 2012-2013.*

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## **Belarus Kills Thousands of Pigs to Stop a Pandemic**

On 21 June the Ministry of Agriculture of Belarus had to acknowledge that they detected African swine fever in a village of the Hrodna region. By August, it had spread to other regions of Belarus. This highly contagious disease causes up to a 100% mortality of livestock. Moreover, medics so far failed to develop an effective cure.

The Belarusian government had to take unprecedented measures to fight the outbreak such as killing livestock on large pig farms as well as in private households, causing popular

discontent. For many rural families, breeding pigs has been an indispensable part of their households. People cannot understand why they have to kill all their pigs at once.

Neighbouring countries have banned meat imports from Belarus and introduced disinfection procedures on the border. But whether or not it will prevent the virus from spread to the EU remains unclear.

### **A Dangerous Virus**

African swine fever is a highly contagious disease caused by a virus. It comes from Africa where it has existed in populations of wild pigs who have an immunity against it. However, when the infection reaches domesticated pigs, it is typical that all of them die from the virus. The fever emerged in Southern Europe and Latin America in 1960-1970s, causing vast losses of livestock.

Mortality from the disease varies from between 50 to 100%, but the virus does no harm to humans. So far no effective preventive measures and cure against the fever have been created. The only way to fight the disease remains the total elimination of the entire livestock population in question. Virtually all of Europe and part of Russia is infected with African swine fever now and a whole branch of pig breeding is threatened throughout the region. The pandemic has inflicted great damage to farmers.

### **Fighting the Pandemic**

In January 2012 the Ministry of Agriculture of Belarus issued a recommendation for local governments in Belarus to take additional measures to prevent the penetration of African swine fever from Russia. By that time, 22 Russian regions had detected the disease taking root. The Belarusian government banned the import of animal products from the infected regions, but despite this ban and other sanitary steps the pandemic broke out in June 2013 in the Hrodna region.



As it often happens in Belarus, the information on the outbreak came not from Belarusian official sources. On 21 June the Russian Service of Veterinary Surveillance announced this information, which it secretly received from Belarusian authorities. After that, Belarusian officials had no choice but to accept that the case of infection took root in one of the villages and the authorities did their best to prevent the spread of the disease.

According to the Belarusian Veterinary Service, African swine fever came to Belarus from abroad through animal fodder. On 4 July, authorities announced another outbreak of the disease in the Vitsebsk region on the border with Russia and soon it appeared in the Minsk region too.

Authorities decided to strengthen control over pig farms and eliminate the whole population of pigs in the outbreak zones. The state guaranteed a reimbursement for losses incurred at a rate of \$2 for a kilogram of the live weight of an animal (while the market price of pork is about \$6). According to a governmental order, people in the infected areas cannot breed pigs for half a year.

A special regime was established on large infected farms to minimise the risk of spread of the pandemic. Near some farms, police posts appeared to make sure that no one could access the farms without permission.

Additionally, in some areas of Belarus, authorities ordered the complete elimination of wild boars who also serve as major disease carriers. For that purposes, authorities engage local hunters and allow them to shoot boars without hunting permission. All bodies are disinfected and buried in special pits.

### **Panic on Border**

Meanwhile, neighbouring states attempt to build a line of defence from the Belarusian pandemic. Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia banned the import of animal products from Belarus.

Citizens who do not deal with pig breeding but who travel abroad and have experienced fever symptoms have to drive through a special carpet covered with a liquid antivirus. And special units on the border spray the liquid on the bottoms of vehicles. Moreover, all passengers exit their vehicles and clean their shoes on the carpet.



On 2 July the head of Lithuanian Veterinary Service called the situation with the African swine fever in Belarus “threatening and practically uncontrollable”. Poland and Lithuania have the longest borders with Belarus and appear particularly vulnerable to the penetration of the disease. They requested additional measures from the EU to defend the border: to set a fence on the border of Belarus to prevent the movement of wild boars, and build special facilities for chemical treatment of vehicles.

In response to that, the Belarusian Minister of Agriculture Michail Zajac claimed that, “there is no need to dramatise the situation, it is under control. We have some specific regions where the disease is, but all the necessary measures have been taken. Veterinary services’ work is well organised.”

In support of this claim, the Head of the Eastern European office of International Epizootic Bureau Kazimiras Lukauskas said that, “Belarus presents an example of how the government should act in such situation. We see great efforts being made by the Belarusian government and they want to study Belarusian experience of dealing with the fever and offer it to other countries”.

### **The Personal Tragedy of Villagers**

In Belarusian villages, most households have at least one pig to support themselves financially. For them, the mass killing of pigs and the ban on their breeding in the near future has become a real tragedy. More often than not, the situation has deteriorated because of the awkward actions of the local authorities.

This is how it happened in Stajki village, Minsk region:

*Authorities gave us one day to kill our pigs. In order to do this, people had to drop their work. There remained no space for meat in the fridge, so people went to town to buy new fridges, and when the local stores ran out of fridges people went to another town to buy them. Some have tried to pass meat to relatives in other villages, but special services check cars and buses very closely. Authorities warned us not to hide pigs because they would find them anyway.*

In village of Lazavičy, the local people resisted plans to kill their pigs and when special units came, they demanded documents that the disease was detected in the village. The unit had no such proof and people simply did not let them into

the village.

The true scale of African swine fever outbreak can only be calculated later, but clearly it has caused huge economic to and damaged the morale of state farms and private households. The risk of penetration into the European Union remains high and EU agriculture can suffer greatly if the disease spreads there.

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## **Belarus-EU: From Sanctions to an Unwanted Dialogue**

On 29 May 2013, the Council of the EU withdrew all sanctions from former deputy editor of the newspaper “SB Belarus Today” Hanna Shadryna and two Belarusian companies – “Akvadiv” and “Sport-Pari”. The next day, the MEPs discussed Justas Paleckis’ report, in which he claims “an improvement of the situation of human rights in 2012”.

The European Union was disappointed with the petty sanctions policy once again. Backstage negotiations about the future dialogue have been in progress for several months but with little evidence of success. The EU has taken more than enough positive steps towards cooperation with the Belarusian authorities. At the same time, Lukashenka’s regime did not take a single step in return. It looks like the EU wants this dialogue more than the Belarusian authorities.

In order for Belarus-EU relations make sense, the parties should in the first place develop mutual trust. If the European leaders lost their trust in Lukashenka after 19 December 2010, the regime also has a list of claims against

the EU. Not surprisingly, the Belarusian regime will not trust those who want to destroy it.

## **Lingering Start of a Dialogue**

The negotiations between the Belarusian authorities and the EU has been going on for several months. The EU managed to make several important gestures.

Last month, Belarusian PM [Mikhail Myasnikovich](#) participated in an economic forum in the Lithuanian city of Klaipeda together with his Lithuanian colleagues. The EU also invited Belarusian Minister for Foreign Affairs and previous dialogue's architect, [Uladzimir Makey](#), to the meeting of the Eastern Partnership countries' foreign ministers in Poland. Makey ignored the invitation.

the Belarusian authorities so far failed to do anything significant in response to EU's gestures

Still, withdrawal of sanctions and Justas Paleckis' [controversial report](#) remain the most significant steps of the EU. A former activist of the Lithuanian Communist Party Justas Paleckis paid a visit to Minsk in March. The draft report resulted in an outpouring of outrage amongst Belarusian civil society. Among other things, the report states that there was "an improvement of the situation of human rights in 2012" and offers "to consider the suspension of key officials from the EU visa ban list". Paleckis acknowledged later that his word usage was in some places inaccurate.

On the other side, the Belarusian authorities so far failed to do anything significant in response to EU's gestures. About a month ago a rumour circulated between Minsk and Brussels that the Belarusian authorities would release political prisoners on 5 May, when the Belarusian Orthodox Christians celebrated Easter. However, the Belarusian authorities did no such thing. The Swedish ambassador who was expelled from Belarus has not

returned to Belarus either. The Belarusian authorities failed to renew the Swedish Ambassador's accreditation after the [teddy bears stunt](#).

The relations between Belarus and the EU remain a one-way road. The more concessions the EU makes the more empowered the Belarusian authorities feel. Therefore, the EU should stick to the request to the release of political prisoners' and get back to supporting its own principle – “more for more” as it did in the past.

### **Belarus-EU Relations – the Brakes**

Mutual mistrust remains a key problem in bilateral relations. The EU was burnt too badly during the previous dialogue in order to be able to trust Lukashenka any more. The European politicians who invested their reputation and influence into the previous dialogue lost a lot after the brutal dispersion of the demonstration on [19 December 2010](#). Still, the Belarusian authorities also have reasons to distrust the EU.

If the EU's decision-makers want to see Lukashenka in a cell in the Hague, why should he trust them

Most European leaders make it clear that the long-term aim of their policy with regard to Minsk remains the change of Lukashenka's regime. If the EU's decision-makers want to see Lukashenka in a cell in the Hague, why should he trust them, or demonstrate any sincerity?

Also, the incident with Bulgarian Minister Mladenov influenced the attitude of the Belarusian authorities to the EU negatively. In 2011, Mladenov arrived in Minsk for a secret meeting with Alexander Lukashenka, and then in [the letter of the Bulgarian Minister](#) to Catherine Ashton all the details of the meeting were leaked on the internet. Thus, the Belarusian authorities worry that each word they say end up in the Western press and Lukashenka will lose face.

Using the admittedly crude terminology of the Belarusian leader, Lukashenka does not want “to be bent over”. In the opinion of the Belarusian authorities, the political prisoners’ release must look like a sign of mercy from Lukashenka, not a concession to the EU. Getting back to the dialogue is not an attempt to save themselves from Russian dependence, but the result of the acknowledgement of the “uniqueness of the Belarusian model” by the EU.

Also, the Belarusian authorities want to have exclusive relations with the European Union only, leaving Belarusian civil society aside. This is why the [“European Dialogue on Modernisation”](#) failed. The authorities refuse to recognise the opposition as equal. In order to save the program the EU will be forced to change it, refining it to focus on government-to-government relations.

### **Breaking the Circle**

Creating a “road map” for mutual relations remains the only way out. However, traditional EU issues once more arise here, like the absence of unity between the 27 member states. If such countries as [Lithuania](#) stand for a milder approach, [Poland](#) continues to pursue a stricter policy. Some Western European countries, like France, consider Belarus through the prism of its own relations with Russia.

This “road map” is somewhat of a mantra by the analytical community today. However, transforming something from paper to real life never comes easy in politics. Still, without a clear aim this dialogue will end much like the 2010 dialogue.

In addition to putting together and sticking to this “road map” the EU should decide together with the Belarusian regime who will implement this road map. Lithuania claims its willingness to act as an intermediate between the EU and the Belarusian regime. However, its pragmatic approach is alarming to some

member states.

It looks likely that Lithuania will get a cart-blanc to play a leading role during its presidency in the EU. The question is, how wisely it will use this opportunity.

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# **Forget Lukashenka – Remember Belarus – Digest of Belarusian Analytics**

Over the last two weeks, Belarusian analysts devote much attention to Belarus-EU relations. A major Amnesty International report on Belarus came out. Analysts discuss privatisation and female politicians in the country.

[Forget Lukashenka – Remember Belarus](#) – politician Andrei Dmitriev names Lukashenka a politician of the past and offers to stop using the legacy code "Lukashenka" – and start to create and use the new code: "We and Our country". Dmitriev calls to join the discourse of the new majority – the work on the national agenda of change which provides a social agreement about the changes, where the main principle is "not Who instead, but How after."

[What is not Permitted is Prohibited: Silencing Civil Society in Belarus](#) – Amnesty International's report analyses the legislation governing freedom of peaceful assembly and association and documents violations of these rights faced by human rights defenders, trade unions, environmental campaigners and sexual minorities individuals. The report shows how the authorities in Belarus regularly deny the rights

to freedom of peaceful assembly, association and expression, preventing people from speaking out in public, holding demonstrations or setting up civil organisations.

[\*\*BISS Political Media Barometer #3\*\*](#) – BISS presents its report for October – December 2012 and offers the analysis of political media following the 2012 parliamentary campaign period in Belarus. The report notes growing differences between the forces inside and outside of Belarus. The main topic of communication of those actors/forces outside of Belarus are repressions while those in Belarus focused on social sphere and internal questions of political parties. Meanwhile, media pay much more attention to stories of repression and political conflict.

[\*\*What Do Belarusians think?\*\*](#) – A video capturing the most interesting moments of the discussion *What Do Belarusians Think?* is available online. The discussion took place on April 12, in Vilnius, and focused at the newest results of national public opinion polls carried out by Belarus' leading pollsters and analysts. The event was organized by the Eastern European Studies Center (EESC, Lithuania) and the Belarus Research Council (BRC).

[\*\*PRIMUS: Yaraslaa Ramanchuk\*\*](#) (audio) – Yaraslau Ramanchuk, head of Mises Research and Analysis Centre, sums up the development of the Belarusian economy for the first three months, analyses the two long-running privatisation deals – MTS and MAZ and argues that now the Belarusian government is carried away by the stimulation of the economy and just forgot the future.

[\*\*Female Politician: Reality or Nonsense?\*\*](#) – Tatiana Schurko notes that in the modern world, despite the declarative statements on gender equality, women are still faced with the barriers that hinder their promotion into the political sphere. Government leaders and all active women in politics are still not so much that connected with gender stereotypes and prejudices. The expert presents the

history of women's political rights, gives the actual statistics of women in governance, and describes the stereotypes that exist in Belarus in this field.

## **Belarus-EU Relations**

[The Holly War for a Water-Pump Station: Notes to the Latest Events](#) – Andrei Yahorau, Centre for European Transformation, appeals to the recent conflict among the political members of the opposition when Alexander Milinkevich and Andrei Sannikau expressed different points of view if the EU should have a dialogue with the official Minsk. The expert considers the conflict "the highest point of absurdity" because the opposition was left aside the dialogue between the EU and Minsk long ago. Until the political opposition is in state of disorganisation and only gives useful pieces of advice, nobody will take it seriously, Yahorau summarises.

[Three Levels of Misunderstanding](#) – Uladzimir Matskevich, the head of International Consortium *EuroBelarus*, suggests his vision of the situation why the discussion of Belarus-Europe dialogue permanently provoke sharp conflicts within Belarusian political opposition. The analyst singles out three types of incomprehension: the level of ordinary people who are not initiated into the subtlety of international politics; the political level, when professionals don't understand the essence of dialogue; and finally, the level of intraoppositional competition and struggle when every leader tries to get in the mainstream of European politics.

[Prospects for EU Policy Towards Belarus During the Presidency of Lithuania](#) – Kinga Dudzińska and Anna Maria Dyner, the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), note an intensification of political and economic relations between Lithuania and Belarus and expect that Lithuania will use its presidency of the EU Council to resume a dialogue with the Belarusian authorities. The experts consider that this

would be a great success for Lithuanian diplomacy.

**Analysis of EU Instruments for the Development of Civil Society in Belarus** – experts of Centre for European Transformation (CET) prepared working papers that analyze two thematic EU instruments – [European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights](#) (EIDHR) and [Non-State Actors and Local Authorities](#) (NSA-LA). The papers consider the priorities of EU instruments and draw some conclusions on their capacity in the Belarusian context. The papers are a part of the CET study aimed to analyse effectiveness of EU programs for the development of civil society and democracy in Belarus.

**Traps and Opportunities of the European Policy towards Belarus** – Whether there is a shift in the EU dialogue with the official Minsk? What are the reasons of this shift, what are traps and possibilities there; what is the role in the process of civil society? Radio Svaboda discusses the mentioned issues with Pavol Demes, German Marshall Fund, Kamil Klysinsky, Polish Center for Eastern Studies, and Kirill Koktysh, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations.

*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.*

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**Opinion: European Union**

# Divided over Belarus

The Lukashenka administration has lately reached out to European leaders in a purported attempt to reach common ground. Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei initiated numerous consultations with European policymakers during the last three months.

Makei will also be meeting with his Latvian counterpart, Edgars Rinkēvičs, on 10 April while Deputy Foreign Minister Yelena Kupchina is currently visiting Brussels to explore avenues for a renewed cooperation between the two parties. If Europe is genuine about its desire to see democracy prevail within its direct neighbourhood, however, it should ignore such calculated moves.

Cooperation between Brussels and Minsk, which gained momentum after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, was put on ice after the rigged Presidential elections of 2010 and the subsequent crackdown on opposition protests. Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius recently revealed his discontent when asked about Europe's quarrel with Belarus.

Linkevičius claimed that a renewed dialogue between the two parties would bolster the EU's influence over Minsk and increase its foothold within Belarusian society. Given the previous ill-fated attempts at reconciliation, however, this argument does not have much credibility. The chief aim of Lukashenka revolves around regime survival. Democratic reforms would critically undermine his position of power, making it equivalent to political suicide.

## **Murky Power Game in Minsk**

Makei recently stated that the 'law of the jungle' applies to Belarusian-Russian relations

Lukashenka's recent Western activism demonstrates his wariness to solely rely on Russia. In the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin's economic aggression, Makei recently stated that the 'law of the jungle' applies to Belarusian-Russian relations. The ruling establishment in Minsk realises that a heavy reliance on Moscow will leave them tremendously vulnerable.

At the same time, Belarus also presented a report in February which accused EU nations for human rights violations, adding to its ideological tug-of-war with Brussels. This paradoxical contradiction neatly testifies to Lukashenka's opportunism in the international arena.

Lukashenka's policies closely resemble those of other post-Soviet states and are aimed at strengthening his position of power. He has succeeded in this endeavour by allowing outsiders to pay for his foreign policy decisions. Throughout his 18 years in office, Lukashenka has pragmatically exploited the geopolitical competition between the EU and Russia through utilising the threat of geopolitical reorientation or the promise of political loyalty to extract lucrative rents and ensuring market access.

Cycles of conflict and engagement thus constitute the centre of Belarusian foreign policymaking

Consequently, the Belarusian political elite for a long time succeeded in preserving economic stability and legitimising its leadership. Cycles of conflict and engagement thus constitute the centre of Belarusian foreign policymaking, rendering democratisation in the context of regime continuity highly unlikely. Another engagement between Brussels and Minsk would merely permit Lukashenka to repeat this political trick.

### **European Leaders Divided over Belarus**

Robert Schuman, a founding father of the EU, envisioned the

Union to become a diffuser of democratic liberties to areas such as Eastern Europe, where people lived under the yoke of Soviet communism. Within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Brussels seeks to promote such common values within its direct neighbourhood. From the outset, the EU has assumed a leading role in supporting transition to democracy on the continent and beyond. Geopolitical considerations, however, seem to have clouded this idea within the Union's backyard, where its relationship with Belarus remains in a state of flux.

While couched in notions of democracy, the Lithuanian position seems to be primarily driven by geopolitical concerns. Various states within the Union's eastern areas still hold a deeply embedded suspicion toward Russia's regional ambitions. This has led some analysts to assume that Belarus could act as a strategic buffer against Russian political interventionism. This argument, however, is difficult to believe. Lukashenka only serves his own interests and can therefore never be expected to boldly stand up against his biggest sponsor. His opportunism does not allow him to consistently choose one side.

The EU seems caught between two ideas. On the one hand, some European leaders are making their bets on a potential downfall of Lukashenka through advocating regime isolation and stirring up internal resistance. On the other, there are those who keep a watchful eye on Russia and call for a reengagement with Minsk. Indeed, opposition candidates lack the basic skills of politics and public policymaking. However, the president and his bureaucracy do not act as separate entities, making cooperation with Belarusian officials a delicate venture.

Still, some commentators argue that European politicians have not offered Minsk a convincing deal that could seriously change the situation. After all, Belarus needs to offset the potential loss of substantive Russian subsidies in the aftermath of a termination of the existing mode of relations

with the Kremlin.

They contend that Brussels fails to appreciate the basics of the Belarusian political economy, refusing to seriously invest in modernising public administration and economic institutions. Yet, such a policy could counterproductively enhance Lukashenka's internal power through boosting his government's capacity and allowing his geopolitical entrepreneurship to continue.

### **Where to?**

Brussels should focus on how it could seriously support democratic movements and civil society from within the country

First and foremost, Brussels should drop the geopolitics and instead focus on how it could seriously support democratic movements and civil society from within the country. The EU could, for example, waive visa fees for Belarusian visitors. This would foster interaction at all levels. The immediate post-2010 support provided to Belarusian human rights organisations and independent media yielded positive results.

However, these efforts have not been accompanied by a long-term commitment. Brussels should therefore establish durable assistance programmes with civil society actors and broaden its scope to include other sectors as well.

There is no point in reengaging with the Belarusian regime. Lukashenka has never approached negotiations sincerely and does not even think in the same sort of terms as Brussels does. The EU will never be able to persuade Lukashenka to dump his old-time Russian ally and give up his long-term political strategy. It would be utterly naïve to think that Lukashenka will mend his ways, or share power, or somehow transform into a democrat.

In all fairness, however, urgent matters such as the intra-

Union state of emergency and the implications of the Arab Awakening seem to trump the issue of Belarusian authoritarianism. With the financial debt crisis currently rocking the EU's foundations, Syria at the verge of implosion, and the continuing political volatility within the Middle East and North Africa, European leaders have more than enough to deal with at the moment. Apart from its convenient transit location between Russia and the West, Belarus remains a small post-Soviet state which lacks any major asset like oil or gas, and which does not constitute an immediate threat to other countries in the area.

That said, if Europe is still sincere about its intention to spread democracy as projected by Schuman, it should reject internal proposals for a mending of fences for the time being. Another rapprochement would merely enhance Lukashenka's grip on power and dampen the prospects for a democratic transition.

*Jort van Oosterhout*

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