

Customs Union of Former Soviet Nations Fails Due to Total Absence of Mutual Trust

The post-Soviet integration and cooperation initiatives have an extremely unsuccessful track record. It seems that the problems persist. Recently, the very idea of Customs Union between Belarus, Russian Federation and Kazakhstan had been questioned, after the government of Belarus made clear its intent to insist on more tariffs exemptions, especially concerning Russian raw oil exported to Belarus.

These exemptions are vital for the Belarusian economy which in 1990s and 2000s immensely profited on refining imported oil selling the end products to Western Europe. By importing cheap Russian oil Belarus kept its refineries in Navapolack and Mazyr busy and very profitable. It also worked well for Russia which lacks refineries and other processing facilities.

But recently Moscow decided to stop this enrichment of Belarus and while insisting on 'customs union', excluded oil and oil products from its coverage. Belarus is expected to pay full tariffs. Yet cheap oil was that only benefit which made the idea of customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan, known as the world's major oil- and gas exporters, interesting for industrially developed Belarus.

As Minsk-based economist Siarhiej Chaly put it,

'Customs Union' in its present shape, including two identically raw materials-based economies oriented at selling energy resources and buying consumer goods, does make sense. But only for these two economies, however. In essence it is merely a protectionist agreement.

Siarhiej Chaly is sure, Belarus has no interest in entering such association. The Belarusian officials, including deputy prime minister Siamashka now express the same opinion ever more explicitly.

Is Moscow facing one more failure in its attempts to collect its 'lost lands'? If Minsk will not comply with Russian wishes on the Customs Union it means a setback for ambitions harbored by a significant part of Russian elites, including Russian prime-minister Putin. Of course, the Kremlin can continue the whole enterprise with sole Kazakhstan. Yet, in this case Moscow shall wait until 2012 as agreed with Kazakhstan president Nazarbayev. More cooperative Lukashenka could be a symbolic geopolitical victory for the Russian leadership which is important to Russian public opinion eager to see restoration of 'national greatness'. Some observers speculate that such integration project could quite intentionally serve to show the wider audience in Russia an illusion of Soviet Union revival for the next presidential campaign of Vladimir Putin.

Meanwhile, there are two other conclusions to be drawn from the Customs Union. First, the integration of Belarus and Russia and their so-called 'Union State' has been endlessly discussed and propagated in public and media, but it remains only a spin matter, since the countries did not even reach the level of customs union. Moreover, conditions of oil shipments to Belarus proposed by Russia this time are worse than those for China.

Second, the whole set of post-Soviet integration initiatives so far have pitifully failed, and it is true both for projects with Russian involvement and without it. The reason seems to be common and basic lack of trust in relations between post-Soviet nations. Without confidence in their partners, former Soviet republics see all integration enterprises as either formalist nonsense or a way to promote other ends which run contrary to integration.

The only examples of successful integration embracing post-Soviet countries are the EU and NATO. Even Baltic countries did not manage to get along well enough to abolish borders or create common currency between themselves until they joined European Union.

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Internet Censorship in Authoritarian Belarus

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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Viachaslau Bortnik

Something that every internet user in Belarus feared has finally happened. On February 1, 2010, Alexander Lukashenka signed a decree imposing censorship on the internet, approximately one year before the next presidential election. Lukashenka had previously been criticizing “anarchy on the internet”. After placing most of the traditional media under its control, the regime is pursuing an offensive against new media. The presidential election is scheduled to take place in early 2011 and Lukashenka plans to “win” again, (the last two presidential elections wherein Lukashenka retained power were widely viewed as fraudulent). Thus far, the internet has been one of the last places to express independent opinion in Belarus. The political opposition is fearful of being without any media access during the upcoming elections.

Under the new decree, internet providers, websites and internet users will be strictly controlled by the government and a special unit of the Presidential Administration – the Operating and Analytical Center. According to the decree “On Measures for Revising Use of the National Segment of the World Wide Web”, through an agreement with the President, the Center will define the list of “telecommunication operators, which have the right of direct access (interconnection) to international telecommunication systems, and authorized Internet service providers”. Any activity of a provider can be stopped by a decision of the Council of Ministers. The Center will be able to forbid access to information considered to be illegal according to Belarusian legislation and will control the registration of “.by” domain names. An internet service provider will be able to stop rendering internet service to anyone in cases that they find to constitute a “gross violation of law, further violation of the decree, and other acts of legislation”.

Although it is not yet clear how the decree’s provisions will be utilized in the new legislation, which takes effect on July 1, 2010, there is no doubt that behind the extensive control over internet access and online content, President Lukashenka has the obvious intention of reducing free expression in Belarus. Comments of Belarusian officials suggest that there is nothing positive on the horizon. The Belarusian Minister of Communication, Mikalai Pantsyalei, pointed out that visitors of internet cafes will have to show their passports for identification. Natallia Pyatkevich, the deputy head of Lukashenka’s Administration, said that the ideologists should serve as the original source of information, not oppositional websites. Behind the extensive control over internet access and online content President Lukashenka has the obvious intention to reduce free expression in Belarus.

Introduction of the scandalous decree resulted in criticism by the international community including the EU, OSCE, human

rights organizations and the Belarusian Diaspora worldwide. The EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, said that the decree "is going to further restrict freedom of speech and freedom of media in Belarus after it takes force". The EU regards this issue as an important step in the wrong direction and hopes the Belarusian authorities will review it. The OSCE has prepared an expert assessment of the decree, and provided the Belarusian government with a set of recommendations that include the following:

- Abolish mandatory identification of internet service users and their technical means used to connect to the internet.
- Clarify the meaning and procedure of introducing limitations and bans on spreading illegal information.
- Clarify the scope of responsibility of internet service providers in the event of failure to comply with an order by a relevant body to eliminate violations or to suspend internet services.
- Envision requiring state bodies and other public organizations to publish information not only on their activities, but also information which results from these activities.
- Abolish the requirement to include hyperlinks to the original information source in media outlet materials disseminated via the internet.

At the same time, activists of the Belarusian-American Association staged numerous protests against internet censorship in Washington and New York. The recent protest in front of the Newseum in the U.S. capital was supported by the international press watchdog group, Reporters Without Borders and covered by Voice of America. "Last year, the Belarusian government claimed that China was a model in terms of internet control. This year, President Lukashenka signed a decree subjecting online access to an identity check or to prior online authorization dependent on the content and the applicant. Now, in Minsk, people will censor themselves, which is the worst violation you can impose on freedom of speech",

said Clothilde Le Coz, Washington Director of the Reporters Without Borders, in her address to the protesters. In its monitoring of online freedom, Reporters Without Borders has, until now, classified Belarus as a country "under surveillance" because it has only one internet service provider, (Beltelekam), because access to opposition websites is blocked during major political events, and because internet café owners are required under a February 2007 decree to alert the police about customers who visit "sensitive" sites and keep a record of all the sites visited during the previous 12 months on each computer, making the information available to the police if requested. If more far-reaching internet censorship is imposed in Belarus, as contemplated by the new Decree, the country would be added to the list of countries such as North Korea, China and Iran, which are notorious for blocking internet freedom.

The Decree "On Measures for Revising Use of the National Segment of the World Wide Web" is to take effect on July 1, which does not leave much time to work out a comprehensive strategy. For years, the internet has been viewed by international experts as a key vehicle for promoting democracy in Belarus. In a worst case scenario, the internet will not be an area of free speech anymore. This would force the international community to find answers to tough questions. The U.S. and the EU should work together to facilitate international pressure on the Belarus government to compel a review of the onerous decree. The international community should promote public discussion on internet censorship in Belarus by organizing information campaigns, protests, conferences, mobilizing media and other grassroots activities. In this difficult situation, sufficient support should be provided to satellite TV and FM radio broadcasting.

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Travel Safe, Belarusian Student



Despite having one of the highest student ratios in Europe, a virtually free higher education, and laws making study abroad difficult, the best and brightest young Belarusians continue flocking to or at least dreaming of expensive Western universities. The situation is exacerbated by Minsk's practice of closing down independent-minded educational institutions and expelling Belarusian students and Western lecturers for refusing to toe the official line.

On February 18, representatives of the Nordic Council of Ministers visited the European Humanities University (EHU) in exile. EHU was founded in Minsk in 1992 "in order to open our minds to those values constituting the basic principles of democracy," according to Professor Anatoli Mikhailov, EHU's rector and one of its founders.

EHU was closed for political reasons in Belarus in 2004. It was then reorganized in Vilnius at the invitation of the Lithuanian government. Since 2006, EHU has enjoyed the status of a private Lithuanian university. Currently, EHU is the only Belarusian university offering western-standard education. EHU is also the only Belarusian university that still retains a degree of autonomy from the authorities.

In 2008, the European Commission established the EHU Trust

Fund, inviting support from the EU member states and international donors, and Lithuania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has supported the maintenance of the EHU premises since 2007.

Students who study in their native Belarus are discriminated against all the same. Some are expelled for active participation in activities disapproved of by the Belarusian authorities. In 2005, the Belarus State Economic University expelled Tatsiana Khoma, a fourth year student, for attending the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) meeting without the university's permission.

In November 2009, Tatsiana Shaputska, press-secretary of the Young Front, was expelled from the Belarusian State University's law department for participating in the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership in Brussels without asking the dean for a required permission to leave the country.

Shaputska's case caused quite a stir. Even Swedish Foreign Affairs Minister Carl Bildt came to the rescue, saying it would be "absolutely unacceptable" if the expulsion was related to the student's participation in the Forum. Foreign Minister of Belarus Siarhej Martynau said that the main reason for expulsion is "the absence rate." He stressed that "not the government, but the university expels students."

When offered to attend EHU, Shaputska decided not to leave Belarus but continue education as a distance-learning student in the department of political science. At the same time, she is preparing a complaint to the court with the help of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee.

The EHU provides education to over one and a half thousand Belarusians and collaborates with some European and US universities. This collaboration is very important for young Belarusians. However, it is quite a challenge for the

university's graduates to find a job in Belarus, especially given the fact that the EHU education certificates are not officially recognized in Belarus. So most continue their careers abroad. Thus, in effect EHU is preparing "Belarusians for export," and the financial support it receives to a large extent supports emigration from Belarus.

Perhaps the University's European supporters could come up with scholarships and grants encouraging students to work in Belarus for at least a short period of time. For instance, Belarusian citizens are not eligible for the Junior Faculty Development Program that program provides university instructors with a semester-long opportunity to study and work with faculty at the US universities and is open to citizens of Moldova, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and many other states. A similar program could be established to encourage EHU graduates to conduct research and publish in Belarus.

You can read more about the EHU at its [web site](#)

Internet Censorship in the Authoritarian Belarus



To be precise, the Belarusian officials have not yet approved the introduction of additional measures to regulate Internet in Belarus. However, Belarusian independent media have published [a realistic draft of the document](#) and the document has been discussed by the government.

Introduction of this new regulation would give the regime in Minsk additional instruments to regulate the last area of free

speech in the country, which the Internet indeed is. The number of internet users in Belarus is relatively high (the official number is [over three millions](#)). In fact, an average Belarusian internet user is generally not too interested in politics and opposition websites, but nevertheless the potential auditorium for on-line oppositional media is quite significant.

Another question is whether the officials would actually use the instruments for real repressions, which may seem less likely considering the closer ties with EU. Still, self-censorship has become a common practice in the Belarusian information sphere. Knowing that one is being identified and traced by officials, both readers and writers will be much more cautious and less willing to risk being sanctioned for viewing websites criticizing the regime. This is the sad reality of a European country, just 2 hours flight away from Berlin, in the early 21st century.

The authoritarian Belarus is introducing censorship on the Internet in the coming days, about a year before the presidential election. In the future, websites and Internet users would be strictly controlled by the government and a special unit of the Presidential Administration.

The Moscow newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported it on Monday. Labeled by human rights activists as Europe's last dictator, President Aliaksandr Lukašenka has previously been criticizing "anarchy on the Internet". In early 2011 presidential elections are scheduled to take place in the former Soviet republic, where Lukašenka wants to win again.

The Internet has so far been the last place to express independent opinion in Belarus. The opposition is afraid to stay without media access during the upcoming elections. The government in Minsk's had further tightened the already strict media laws this year. In Belarus, Lukašenka's chief ideologist Aleh Praliaskoŭski has recently been appointed as

media minister.

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Belarus Looking for Oil in Latin America



The Venezuelan oil and energy minister announced a new Belarus-Venezuela oil project the Orinoco River Basin.

Belarus and Venezuela have agreed to invest \$8 billion in joint development and production in that area. Belarus depends heavily on Russia, which provides most of supplies as well as crude oil for large refineries in Navapolatsk and Mazyr. The desire of Belarus authorities to diversify its energy supplies is understandable and plausible. However, the economic sense of getting oil supplies to North-Eastern Europe from South America, 10 000 kilometers away is doubtful.

Apparently, the political component of such projects dominates over economic reason. Given the U.S. sanctions against Belneftekhim, the largest state-run group of oil companies in Belarus and Russia's increasing unwillingness to subsidize the Belarusian economy Minsk is forced to look for friends on the other side of the globe.

Read more about the new Belarus-Venezuela joint venture at

Rian.ru. A more detailed article about the joint venture appeared in Novaya Gazeta in Russian.

Russian-Belarusian exercises made Poland ask for help from US



Poland's foreign minister called upon the US to deploy its troops on the territory of the country to defend it from military aggression.

During a conference in Washington Radoslaw Sikorski reminded that recently Russia and Belarus held joint military exercises not far from the Polish territory, where hundreds of tanks took part. As said by him, now there are only 6 US soldiers in Poland, BBC informs.

“There are 900 tanks on one side and only six soldiers on other. Could you be calm in this situation?” Reuters quotes Sikorski.

The minister noted that when Poland joined the NATO, Russia received assurances that the alliance won't send considerable NATO forces to the region. “But nobody imagined at this time that no forces would be put in whatsoever. And so this is I think the job that is going to need to be done,” the minister said.

Experts note that many people in Poland were disappointed by

the decision of the US not to deploy anti-missile system elements in Poland.

Washington's plans to place anti-missile system elements in Poland and the Czech Republic caused extreme discontent of Russia which found them aimed against its strategic interests. However, Washington underlined that the new system was to defend Europe and the US from possible missile blow from such countries as Iran.

Barack Obama, a new US president, reconsidered the decisions of the previous US administration and stated that he would create more effective missile shield without radars and anti-missile systems in Eastern Europe. However both in Russia and in the West this step was viewed as a concession to Russia made as a result of "rebooting" in the relations between Moscow and Washington.

Sikorski noted that US vice president John Biden who recently visited Poland, assured Warsaw that Washington is still its strategic partner. However as said by the head of the Polish Foreign Ministry, acts speak louder than words.

"If you can still afford it, we need some strategic reassurance," Sikorski said.

Source: <http://charter97.org/en/news/2009/11/5/23413>

Image source: <http://www.crossed-flag-pins.com>

**Belarusian Nuclear Power
Project: Dangerous and**

Expensive



On September 2nd, Belarus moved one step closer to building its first nuclear reactor by signing an agreement with Russia's AtomStroyExport for constructing a nuclear power plant in Astravets, Hrodna region. The launch of the first nuclear plant unit is scheduled for 2016 and the second – for 2018.

For Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka – who announced building the power plant during his annual visit to the contaminated Chernobyl zone – a domestic nuclear energy source is a “national security” guarantee. Today Belarus uses minimal domestic electric production capacity and is able to provide for only 10 percent of its energy needs.

Approximately 75 percent of its electricity is imported from Russia, a supplier not shy about exploiting the energy dependence of its neighbors turning energy “from a purely economic issue into a political one,” as Lukashenka himself acknowledged.

Diversifying energy supplies to Belarus is indeed an exigent matter. But a nuclear plant built by Russia on a Russian loan, serviced by Russian technicians and fed with Russian fuel might be a very good deal for Russia, but will hardly make Belarus more independent. Moreover, the new nuclear plant would supply only 25 percent of Belarus energy needs and would begin operation in 2016 or later, even according to the most optimistic prognoses. What will happen to the high-level

radioactive waste from the power plant is still unclear, but in solving this problem, Belarus would most likely also have to rely on Russia (although currently neither Russia nor Ukraine permit the import of radioactive waste).

Belarusian Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection has reassured the population that the nuclear power plant would meet international standards on nuclear and radiation safety. However, the track record of Russian power stations is far from comforting. No further proof is needed when one remembers the Chernobyl catastrophe on 1986 – the worst nuclear power plant disaster in history and the only level 7 instance on the International Nuclear Event Scale. An estimated 260 million curies of radiation were released – about 200 times more radiation than was released by the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Belarus faced 70 percent of the fallout, and twenty-three years later, one fifth of its territory is still radioactively contaminated. Already in 1992, Belarus was spending 20 percent of its budget on Chernobyl-related problems.

Another disturbing example is Mayak, a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant in Chelyabinsk oblast in Russia. Working conditions at Mayak resulted in severe health hazards; by the beginning of the twenty-first century about half a million people in the region have been irradiated in one or more of the incidents.

One need not look far back, however. Just this August, about seventy people were killed in an accident at the Sayano-Shushenskaya hydroelectric station. The consequences would have been much more serious, had the station been a nuclear power plant. Despite significant technological advances, nuclear power remains a dangerous energy source.

In the midst of financial crisis and borrowing left and right, Belarusian government seems oblivious to the costs of the nuclear power plant – up to \$12 billion not counting the

expenses on a spent fuel storage facility. For comparison, Belarus' annual budget in 2008 was about \$25 billion. The loan to finance the project will probably come from Russia since Belarusian financial system is just as poorly diversified as its energy. Being slow to send the last \$500 million installment of its \$2 billion loan to Belarus this summer, Moscow is hardly a reliable creditor, and it has never been never squeamish to use the dependency of its smaller neighbors to its own advantage.

Despite all this, in the eighteen years of its independent history marred by the Chernobyl disaster, Belarus has been edging closer to acquiring a nuclear power plant. Belarus announced started a program to examine 15 possible sites for constructing a nuclear power plant. In 1996, Belarusian Energy Minister, Valentin Gerasimovm announced that Belarus was seeking \$3.5 to \$4 billion in aid to build a nuclear power plant. In 1997, the Dubrowna region in northeast Belarus volunteered to host a nuclear power plant. In 2002, Lukashenka named Russia as main partner in the area of energy and nuclear research.

The nuclear power station will be built in Astravets, the most beautiful part of the country full of Belarus historical landmarks. The proposed site is just 20 kilometers from the Lithuanian border and 50 kilometers from Vilnius. International law does not allow building nuclear power plants so close to the border without informing and receiving approvals from neighboring countries. However, Lithuania has not been officially notified about the project yet and is concerned about the plans of the Belarusian government no less than the Belarusian citizens.

Opponents of the project point out that Astravets is far from being an ideal location for a nuclear power plant due to its wind rose and seismic instabilities in the area. In 1909, the region experienced an earthquake measuring 7 on the Richter scale. The most recent earthquake occurred in 1999.

Before deciding to spend an exorbitant amount on the nuclear project, the Belarusian government should read the numerous studies that explain why nuclear power is neither environment-friendly nor cost-effective when compared to other carbon-free or low-carbon options, which include wind power, combined-cycle gas power plants, and energy efficiency measures.

In the end, building a nuclear plant will only deepen Belarus' economic dependence on Russia and will not contribute to the country's wasteful level of energy consumption. Most importantly, in the absence of independent environmental expertise and very limited access of media and public to the project, the Russian-built station might be very dangerous to Belarus and its EU neighbors.

The Wall Street Journal: Europe's Last Dictatorship

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. The Wall Street Journal published an article of Jeffrey Gedmin, president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, who recently visited Belarus. He urges the U.S. to consider lifting sanctions only on the basis of strict conditionality. He also suggests that the EU insists that any economic assistance be closely tied to political reforms and respect for human rights. Here is the text:

Minsk, Belarus – One of the questions I was repeatedly asked during a recent trip to the capital of Belarus was whether the Obama administration would opt for greater pragmatism at the expense of idealism in foreign policy. Both the government and opposition in this country have a vested

interest in the answer. As early as next week, the U.S. will decide whether or not to continue sanctions against the country known as "Europe's last dictatorship." The European Union faces fresh choices as well.

NATO sees Belarus as a potential threat to neighboring Lithuania. Russian tanks stationed in Belarus can be in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, in about 90 minutes. This small nation of 10 million can threaten in other ways: 20% of EU gas imports from Russia pass through the former Soviet state.

Belarus also remains a notorious human-rights abuser. In its press-freedom index, Freedom House ranks Belarus 188th out of 195 countries. Transparency International rates Minsk as more corrupt than Moscow. Minsk can feel like a time warp: Main avenues in the capital are still named after Lenin, Marx and Engels.

On my trip, I attended a dinner with leading oppositionists in a private room at a local restaurant. It was private except for the two minders who were stationed about five feet away from us. At a meeting of former political prisoners at the U.S. embassy to celebrate the 55th anniversary of Radio Liberty broadcasts to Belarus, I met a former trade minister who had served two years for breaking with the regime. Another young, charismatic businessman had spent six years behind bars for his pro-opposition views.

The man who rules Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, is severe. In 1995 he had his air force shoot down a hot air balloon that had strayed into his air space, killing two Americans.

The U.S. and the EU need to consider two issues in their relations with Belarus. It's only through a coordinated approach that we'll make progress towards reform.

The first issue has to do with democratic development. The heady days of the 1990s, when it appeared that freedom was on the march around the world, have given way to a decade of

democracy recession. The most troubling developments have taken place in Russia and its periphery.

Democratization in countries such as Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine will almost certainly help to curb Russia's imperial appetite. Faced with neighboring democracies, Russia would be forced to take greater stock of its affairs at home. Garry Kasparov, the chess champion turned Putin opponent, thinks of an inside and an outside game if you want to support Russian democracy today. Mr. Kasparov argues that the outside game – what happens in Russia's neighborhood – may be as important as what's happening inside Russia.

Let's encircle Russia with states that provide a powerful model for democratization. It has been 20 years since George H.W. Bush gave his "Europe, Whole and Free" speech in Mainz, Germany, and the project is only half complete.

Second, the prospects for political change in Belarus may not be as bleak as some believe. True, the opposition is weak. For his part, Mr. Lukashenko never fails to disappoint. Despite all evidence to the contrary, the regime calls into question the fact that the mass graves on the outskirts of Minsk are the work of Stalin's henchmen. And Mr. Lukashenko is the only ex-Soviet leader to have proudly retained the name "KGB" for his security services.

Yet every dictator has his Achilles' heel. For the authorities in Belarus, theirs may be the economy. The Russians, with whom Mr. Lukashenko has a "close but dysfunctional relationship," as one EU diplomat puts it, have reduced their economic support for Belarus in the last couple of years. Moreover, Belarus has not managed to remain immune from the global financial crisis. According to that same diplomat, some 25% of state-enterprise employees are now working on reduced hours. Mr. Lukashenko is in trouble if his social pact begins to seriously fray.

What to do? The civil-society leaders I met were in agreement that the recent release of political prisoners was the result of U.S. and EU pressure. That pressure must be sustained. The U.S. should consider lifting sanctions only on the basis of strict conditionality. Washington should not give in to the temptation to accept the return of the American ambassador, who was expelled last March over U.S. sanctions, as sufficient. Belarus must be pressured to have more independent media, to investigate the cases of missing dissidents, and to end the practice of jailing oppositionists. For its part, the EU should insist that any economic assistance be closely tied to political reforms and respect for human rights.

This will be slow, tough going to be sure. But now is exactly the wrong time for a short-sighted realpolitik approach.

Source: The Wall Street Journal of 29 May 2009, page A13.

International Herald Tribune: An Artful Balancing Act

International Herald Tribune published an article on how Belarusian authorities try to balance between Russia and the European Union. The article agrees that the messages Minsk has been sending over the last few months are mixed. On the one hand, there are some signs of liberalization such as registering one opposition movement or a few economic reforms. On the other hand, there are new political prisoners and police continues to use force to break up small opposition demonstrations. The article also notes a difference between European and American approaches towards Belarus:

The United States, like the EU, supports the principle of engagement. However, its relations with Minsk are frostier: Most of its diplomats were expelled last year and it voted against the IMF loan. And it thinks the EU is sometimes too soft. European diplomats believe that a group of "modernizers" around Makay is serious about bringing Belarus in from the cold. Some admit that the focus on engagement could lead the EU to be indulgent on human rights. But they are adamant that Belarus cannot join the Eastern Partnership if it has political prisoners.

Read the full text of the article at IHT.com. Another piece published in IHT today was an interview with Sergey Martynov, Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs. He argues that there are three misconceptions about Belarus:

– That in liberalizing our economic and political systems, Belarussians are responding to Western pressure. – That Belarus faces a choice of friendship between Russia and the West. – That Belarus exists in some kind of time warp, as a miniature Soviet Union perpetuating Soviet ideals and objectives.

For those unfamiliar with the real state of things in Belarus, the Minister's arguments may sound persuasive. For those, familiar with what is going on in Belarus, the conclusions may seem right, but not the arguments. First, the recent efforts of Belarus to liberalize are attributable to a larger extent to severe economic crises in Belarus rather than to the Western pressure. Second, no one in the West has ever seriously claimed that befriending the EU requires being hostile to Russia. And, finally, it is true the ideals and objectives of today's Belarus are not Soviet. Although there are mandatory ideology classes taught in schools, there are no ideals. The only real objective and ideal of the current political leadership in Belarus is remaining in power for as

long as possible. And they know that either the West or Russia will be happy to buy their promises. Even when those promises are empty. Read the full text of Martynov's interview at IHT.com.