

Closer EU Ties, Austerity Reforms, and A Cop Calendar – Western Press Digest

Belarus tries to improve its economy and sends signals to the West that it is ready to carry out reforms to attract investment and secure loans. Besides reforms, Minsk has been pushing state-owned potash producer Belaruskali to win more of the marketshare, even if it means losing money.

The EU views relations with Belarus pragmatically, making no guarantees. Despite the air of mistrust, Lukashenka has won the confidence of some policymakers in the EU that he is ready for reforms if the West is willing to support Belarus restore its image internationally with strategic issues.

A local police force in western Belarus has decided to put out a controversial calendar for the public. The calendar in question features pictures of real female members of the police force, a move that has led to a mixed public response. All of this and more in this edition of the Western Press Digest.

International Relations

[EU-Belarus Rapprochement Gaining Ground](#) – Following Minsk's constructive role as a host and mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the EU is seriously weighing how to improve ties with Lukashenka. The Wall Street Journal reports that these warming relations are still only in their initial stages, but there are serious discussions going on in Brussels about how to improve ties while not ignoring Minsk's past record.

Two issues under consideration, according to Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs, are easing visa restrictions for

Belarusian citizens and supporting Belarus as it makes its bid to gain entrance to the WTO. Rinkēvičs also said that improving ties between the EU and Belarus should not be seen as trying to pull Minsk into the EU's orbit of influence.

[Diplomatic Barbs Exchanged with Kyrgyzstan](#) – Following the murder of a prominent Kyrgyz mob boss in Minsk, ties between the two former Soviet republics are under strain. In their coverage of the diplomatic sparring match, RFE/RL reports that the conflict came about after a witness to the killing of Almambet Anapiyaev in Minsk said that members of ex-president of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiev's were involved. Belarusian authorities stated that an official investigation needed to be carried out and that the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' made it impossible for it to hand over anyone to the Kyrgyzstani authorities until guilt was established.

Kurmanbek Bakiev and his brother Janysh (then head of the state's bodyguard service) fled Kyrgyzstan in 2010 following the massacre of dozens of civilians who protested the then president's administration for its corruption. Bakiev contacted Lukashenka to ask that his family be given refuge in Belarus, after which the Belarusian head of state provided sanctuary for Bakiev and his entire family. Kyrgyzstan has demanded that Belarus return Bakiev, who was sentenced to life in prison in absentia for his alleged crimes.

Economy

[Winning Over Confidence With Reforms](#) – A recent article by Euromoney says that the authorities in Minsk are doing their best to convince western policymakers and investors alike that they are embarking a series of reforms to improve the domestic economy's standing. Some of these reforms including freezing public sector wages at their current levels, slashing government support for state-owned enterprises and halting state sponsored projects that are not 80% or more complete. Like other countries in the region, Belarus' economy is

struggling in the face of the economic downturn due to the conflict in Ukraine.

According to Euromoney, the mantra in Minsk is that Belarus will make good on all of its debts this year, even if that means making cuts elsewhere. Still, most experts following the developments in Belarus are wary that any substantial change is underway – especially with the upcoming presidential election this fall. Major reforms, like the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, are still not on the table. Despite the sense that Minsk may not be serious about carrying out serious reforms, there is much optimism that rapprochement between Belarus and the EU is gaining traction and may open the door to stronger ties between the two parties.

[Belarus Pushing Potash Exports](#) – Bloomberg reports that Belarusian potash producer Belaruskali is working overtime to get a larger share of the lucrative global market. Following the messy split with its Russian partner Uralkali, the Belarusian potash exporter has struggled to gain better control over the market and maintain its relevance. It has done this by selling to countries like Brazil and China for a discounted rate and is suspected of flooding the latter's market to the point that it is not interested in buying more due to its large surplus. As currencies decline in value across the globe, potash producers are seeing export costs drop as well – a development that is driving more competition.

Civil Society

[Man Detained for Writing on Fence](#) – Based on an RFE/RL report, the BBC reports that a resident of Brest in eastern Belarus has been detained for keeping a public 'fence blog'. Mikhail Lukashevich has been writing on a city fence since the 1990s, but began regularly posting only around 10 years ago. His comments are typically confined to discussing current political issues and are critical of the authorities, according to the report. Lukashevich is under investigation by

the authorities for 'defaming Lukashenka' and says that he may have to undergo psychiatric evaluation. The article notes that during the Soviet era he spent time in a psychiatric hospital in the past.

Miscellaneous

[Not Your Average Calendar](#) – Female traffic police have made quite a stir in Belarus lately, but it is not their professional accolades that are drawing the public's attention writes the Daily Mail. The Mail's photo exposé, based on a report from Vocativ.com, has created some controversy, with some citizens calling it a 'desperate' move by the government, while others appear to be [rather fond of the idea](#). While not entirely uncommon in the West, this is the first documented calendar of its kind in Belarus.

[Unique Underground Medical Treatment](#) – An unconventional treatment for patients with lung ailments has taken foot in Belarus, reports the Daily Mail. According to the UK publication, children and adults alike are treated for issues like bronchial asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease by breathing in the unique mineral-rich air found in an abandoned salt mine found some 1,400 ft below the surface. Treatment lasts for 19 days and is often repeated over a period of 2.5 years. Less one fret, patients sent to the underground facility treat it more as a period of leisure than treatment, as the treatment centre is full of things for them to do, including sport and games.

Devin Ackles

Belarus Welcomes Top EU Leaders: A Rare Show

The leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine agreed to hold peace talks in Minsk on Wednesday, 11 February, in an effort to avert a full-scale war in Ukraine.

The last German and French leaders to visit Minsk were Adolph Hitler in 1941 and Georges Pompidou in 1973. In the twenty years of Alexander Lukashenka's reign in Belarus, only two European leaders (Silvio Berlusconi and Dalia Grybauskaitė) set their foot in Minsk.

As the international community eagerly awaits positive results of the peace talks in Minsk, the Belarusian public is also impatient to see whether Lukashenka will be able to charm his European guests in the year of the presidential election in Belarus.

Unexpected News?

During their phone conference on Sunday, 8 February, Angela Merkel, François Hollande, Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko chose Minsk as a venue of their 'Normandy format' meeting.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko was the first to call his Belarusian counterpart in order to confirm Minsk's willingness to host the talks. A few minutes later, Alexander Lukashenka, on a short skiing holiday in Sochi, discussed the subject at a personal meeting with Vladimir Putin:

Do not worry and come. We will organise everything... We will do everything we can here in Belarus to find a way out of the situation [people in Ukraine] have faced.

The meeting in Minsk on 11 February can be canceled at the

last moment if the parties' experts fail to agree on a basic framework of the peace deal. Three presidents and a chancellor will not come to the Belarusian capital to inaugurate another failure. In fact, the 'Normandy Four' already abandoned their much-publicised decision to hold a similar meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan on 15 January.

Why Minsk?

Ironically, less than two weeks ago Alexander Lukashenka spoke strongly against the Normandy format. During his ['open dialogue' with the press](#), he blurted out:

I can't imagine yet any format for negotiations other than Minsk [format]... Most importantly, the proposed [Normandy] format... is to happen at the highest level... They will make general political statements; we heard enough of them.

At that time, Lukashenka was extremely jealous of the negotiating parties' decision to accept President Nazarbayev's invitation and meet in Astana. Evidently, he cannot care less about the format as long as Minsk remains the site and symbol of the peace talks on Ukraine.

Minsk's symbolic significance may have played a role in the decision of the 'Normandy Four'. The agreements based on the [Minsk Protocol](#) led to a real and relatively lasting reduction in violence in Eastern Ukraine. These agreements remain a reference point for further talks between the conflicting parties even if Kyiv, Donetsk and Moscow tend to disagree on their interpretation.

Merkel and Hollande understand that Lukashenka will reap the fruit of their visit to Minsk

The logistical and political convenience of Minsk may have mattered more. Minsk is much closer in flight time to Berlin, Kyiv, Moscow and Paris than Astana. [Lukashenka's neutrality in](#)

[the Ukrainian crisis](#) and his genuine willingness to help achieve its speedy resolution also comfort Ukraine and Russia.

Merkel and Hollande may be less happy with Minsk's choice as a venue for talks. They understand that the regime in Belarus will reap the fruit of their visit to the country. However, it looks like that the West is willing to pay this price to reach a peace deal in Ukraine.

Is Lukashenka Happy to Have Guests?

The decision to hold the 'Normandy Four' summit in Minsk suits Lukashenka to perfection, both in his international and domestic agenda.

Domestically, it plays well into his hand on the eve of the presidential election. He is no longer a European pariah. World leaders come to Belarus in recognition of his peace-making efforts and the country's stability and security. Europe needs Minsk to settle conflicts on the continent.

☒ Internationally, the visit of Merkel and Hollande extends the window of opportunity opened initially by [the meeting between the Eurasian "troika", Petro Poroshenko and three EU commissioners](#) held in Minsk on 26 August 2014. This time, the Belarusian president gets direct access to the true European decision-makers.

Alexander Lukashenka has always believed in his personal charisma and ability to make a good impression by his seemingly frank and outspoken nature during personal encounters. However, he rarely got an opportunity to test his "charms" on European leaders.

Any Experience with Visitors from Europe?

Indeed, the regime's disregard for human rights, rule of law and electoral standards has long prevented most European leaders from receiving the Belarusian president in their

capitals or travelling to see him in Minsk.

Since 1994, only two EU leaders visited Belarus

Alexander Lukashenka, together with many other officials, are under US and [EU travel bans](#) imposed in response to brutal crackdown on the opposition. The only realistic opportunity for him to approach Western leaders has so far been restricted to chance encounters in meeting halls and corridors of the UN, OSCE or other international fora. However, he is a rare guest there as well.

Belarusian diplomats made it their priority to break this self-imposed wall of isolation, so far with very limited success. In twenty years of Lukashenka's reign in Belarus, only two leaders of EU countries made their way to Minsk.

What Brought Berlusconi and Grybauskaitė to Minsk?

✘ On 30 November 2009, Silvio Berlusconi, the then Italian prime minister, came to Minsk on [a six-hour visit](#). The Italian leader and his Belarusian host signed a number of bilateral agreements and discussed trade relations and humanitarian cooperation. Alexander Lukashenka was not slack at publicly interpreting Berlusconi's visit as an "eloquent gesture of support to Belarus in the international arena".

Both Italian and Belarusian opposition groups criticised Silvio Berlusconi for his overtures towards the authoritarian regime. One cannot be sure of the criticism's effect on the eccentric Italian politician. Anyway, his promise to lead in person a group of Italian executives to Minsk remained unfulfilled.

✘ A year later, on 20 October 2010, President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė made a [one-day working trip to Minsk](#), shortly before the presidential election in Belarus. Her staff explained the visit by the desire to remind her Belarusian

counterpart about the importance of free and democratic elections for future relations between Belarus and the EU.

Independent experts believed that two other motives were behind Grybauskaitė's travel to Minsk: promotion of Lithuania's trade and transit interests and an attempt to bring Belarus further away from Russia, as the visit happened in the midst of an information war between Moscow and Minsk.

Outsider in His Own Residence?

For Lukashenka, the meeting of the 'Normandy Four' in Minsk is an excellent opportunity to join in top-level international diplomacy. He can certainly expect having brief bilateral meetings with Merkel and Hollande. Lukashenka may want to use these meetings to strengthen the trend on his "acceptability" in Europe.

However, unlike during the August meeting between the European and Eurasian "troikas", the Belarusian ruler can hardly count on a seat at the negotiation table in his own residence when the 'Normandy Four' will meet. Diplomacy is not where Lukashenka scores. He will have to wait for the meeting's results behind the closed doors, like everybody else.

**Lukashenka in Ukraine,
Blocking the Internet and
Gandalf for President –**

Western Press Digest

Belarus-Russia tensions continue to grow as the economies of both countries come under more and more stress. Seeking to distance himself from the image of being the Kremlin's vassal, Lukashenka went to Kiev to reaffirm his commitment to help with the peace process in eastern Ukraine.

The 2015 presidential election may be a way off, but civil society is already getting more active. One civil society organisation is proposing a famous mythical character to run for president. Another has drawn the ire of the authorities for distributing ribbons with traditional Belarusian embroidery.

As the Belarusian economy continues to struggle, a recent trip by a western IT journalist encourages people to not judge a book by its cover. All of this and more in this edition of the Western Press Digest.

Politics

[Lukashenka Visits Kiev](#) – The Boston Herald covered the Belarusian head of state's recent visit to Ukraine where he promised to support the peace process in order to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The report blames Ukraine's ex-president Yanukovich's ouster by popular nationwide protest as the reason behind Russia's annexation of Crimea. Lukashenka's visit to Kiev came just before a meeting between Kazakhstani President Nazarbayev's visit. Both presidents attended a meeting of the Belarus-Kazakhstan-Russia Customs Union trade bloc with Putin in Moscow shortly thereafter.

[Lukashenka Reshuffles Government](#) – As Russia's economic problems begin to have an impact on Belarus, one of its closest trading partners, change are underway on the home front for the Belarusian head of state. The New York Times

reports that as a result of the generally worsening economic situation in the region, Lukashenka has been forced to start to make some changes in hopes of shoring up his political capital during an election year. While noting increased tensions with Moscow over the past year, the article quoted new Prime Minister [Andrej Šas Kabiakoŭ](#) saying that the government will focus on maintaining Belarusians' standard of living, though did not mention any reforms.

Economy

[Following Currency Panic, Government Turns Off Internet](#) – The Guardian reports that the Belarusian government moved to shut off its citizens' access to Internet stores and certain news web sites on 19 December in order to stem a growing currency crisis at home. The move is seen as a way to limit Belarusians' ability to make purchases online and deplete their bank accounts while trying to take advantage of disparities in the declining value of the Belarusian rouble and the yet-to-be adjusted prices for goods online and in stores.

A new 30% tax on all goods purchased with a foreign currency was introduced not long before in order to incentivize Belarusians not to purchase new goods and hold onto their savings. The latest move by the government also demands that half of all profits that companies make would have to be converted into Belarusian roubles, an attempt to avoid a hoarding of foreign currency. In reality, however, the new tax is being applied to the next round of imports destined to hit Belarusian store shelves, leading many individuals to buy up as much as possible now while they can stretch the value of the rouble much further. The 30% rate was later [reduced to 20% by officials](#).

[Economic Integration Pains](#) – Many former Soviet Union republics are taking stock of the Russian rouble's decline and how Kazakhstan and Belarus, the two other members of the

Russian-led Customs Union, are faring as a result. The Wall Street Journal opinion piece warns the West to be weary of Lukashenka, as he is likely hedging his bets on Moscow's recovery. Still it could take advantage of the Belarusian head of state's recent overtures in which he is positioning himself as a peacemaker between Russia and the West. It should not, however, sacrifice its principled approach towards Lukashenka, but instead reassert that he loosens his grip on Belarusian civil society.

Newsweek also covered the [growing economic tensions](#) between Belarus and Russia. Lukashenka recently demanded that all trade between the two countries be conducted in a stable foreign currency (dollars or euros) instead of Russian roubles.

Civil Society

[Gandalf for President 2015!](#) – An online group with over 50,000 followers, taking cues from the Ukrainian Darth Vader for President campaign, have gotten some attention for their Lord of the Rings wizard-hero Gandalf-inspired 2015 campaign. Unlike their Ukrainian counterparts, they have no official candidate lined up yet, but are rather seeking a local individual with Gandalf-like qualities to run the show from Minsk.

[Belarusians Show Their True Colours](#) – A recent campaign by Belarusian activists has people dotting ribbons stylised with a traditional Belarusian folk design. RFE/RL reports that the campaign, organised by a civil society group, is tremendously popular online. The colours of the ribbons, red and white, are particularly sensitive in Belarus since they were banned by Lukashenka in the 1990s. Lukashenka also led a movement to change the colours of the nation's flag to its current design, one that harkens back to its soviet-era predecessor. The colours are traditionally seen as symbols of the Belarusian opposition.

The group officially was handing out the ribbons in sport of the Belarusian Day of Embroidery. According to RFE/RL four individuals were arrested for handing out the ribbons by the Minsk police, but were released several hours later after their detention.

Other

[Belarusian IT Sector is Impressive](#) – In a blog on the Huffington Post, author Mark Hillary describes his rather surprising first visit to Belarus. Many of Hillary's previously held associations with the eastern european country, based on pre-conceptions of life behind the Iron Curtain, were dismissed as he entered Minsk on a well-paved highway from the airport. Instead of finding something resembling Moscow, the author found something resembling east Berlin – a very European city, by his own estimates.

The point of the author's trip to Minsk was to take a look at its thriving IT sector, one much overlooked by the West. Commenting on Belarus's distinct advantages in the IT sector, Hillary takes note of the generations of tech specialists that work together on a single project. In particular, each individual does not feel pressure to extend their working knowledge into several fields, but can feel comfortable being an expert in one particular area and remain dedicated to it. He goes on to recommend anyone in need of needing IT solutions consider Belarus in the future, as it has much to offer.