

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.

Snow Storm Xavier Paralyzes Belarus

Large parts of Belarus and the Belarusian capital Minsk have spent this weekend under exceptional circumstances. The cyclone Javier has paralysed large parts of the country for almost two days.

While similar weather conditions in the USA would make it to the top news in Europe, there has been no mentioning of the storm in Belarus in Western media.

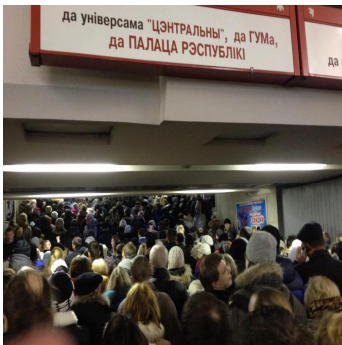
It started as simple snow fall on Friday morning, but approximately 20 cm of snow fell in the following 24 hours. The wind was 22 metres per second according to the Belarusian hydro-meteorological centre. Sight was limited to 100 metres in the Minsk region on Friday afternoon because of the heavy snow falls. Although the country is used to severe winters and well equipped to deal with large amount of snow, public life has come to a halt at this weekend.

Traffic standstill during Friday rush hour

By the time most Belarusians were trying to go home, the situation was at it worst. This led to a chaos that is extraordinary for Belarus. "The last time I have seen something similar was in the 1980s" says Sasha, who has reached home by walking from the metro station to his homes. Buses stopped running during the afternoon and have not re-started until Saturday evening.

Getting home during rush hour was very difficult for all people and impossible for many. "My colleague left the office

at lunch time and got home at 4a.m.”, says Vasili. Indeed, circulation on the Minsk beltway came to a standstill during rush hour.



Thousands of cars were stuck in traffic jams. More than 650 traffic jams were registered in Belarus on Friday evening according to Nasha Niva. This is twice more than on a usual day, according to the road police. 3 people died in accidents. In several cases, more than 20 cars were involved in mass accidents.

For some time, the roads out of Minsk were completely closed. It was impossible to get from towns to the periphery of the capital such Dziarzhinsk and Fanipol' to Minsk or back. Circulation on the main street in Minsk, the prospect, came to a complete still-stand during the rush hour.

Many people had to sleep at work or were forced to stay overnight with friends in the centre. As there were no buses running, the metro had to be temporarily closed because it was so overcrowded. Those who could, left their cars at works and tried to get home by public transport. This turned out to be difficult, however, when only metro and regional trains could operate.

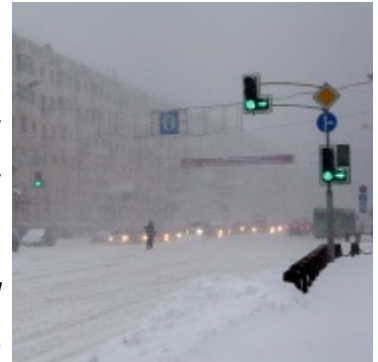
Thousands forced to spend the night in their cars

The roof of a car park near Hotel Minsk in the very centre of the capital fell down on account of the masses of snow covering it. The plastic roof buried around 30 cars but fortunately did not hurt a single person.

While in Minsk, inconveniences consisted mainly in perturbed traffic and the impossibility to reach home, by Friday evening more than 530 villages and towns in Belarus were left without electricity. Up to Saturday evening, 26 villages are still without electricity in Brest region. This region suffered especially from heavy snow falls and wind: 82 cars were freed

from snow drifts. 320 persons, among them 37 children were in the cars. None of them was injured.

On Saturday, although the snow fall had stopped, Minsk was quieter than ever before. Around 20 000 employees and parts of the army that were called to support the city administration to clean the roads. The news agency BelTA informs that more than 900 snow clearing vehicles were employed to clear the capital.



Most people had to stay at home in the "sleeping districts" during the day. While even the courtyards and central parks had been cleaned from snow during the day, there were still no buses running or streets cleared in the suburbs.

Some shops stayed closed, as for example the Central Fashion Market. However, fresh bread and meat was delivered to the shops in the centre of Minsk.

Public life had to be postponed as well. All Maslenica events (Maslenica is the holiday of winter farewell) as well as football, hockey and basketball matches are to take place on Sunday instead of Saturday. The soccer team of the "Football Club Homel" had to spend 28 hours on the way to the quarter finals of the cup of Belarus that was supposed to take place in Minsk on Saturday. The players spent the night in their coach and finished their journey by regional train on Saturday morning.

International airport closed on Friday

While international airport Minsk II was closed for several hours on Friday, all passengers that were supposed to land in Minsk on Friday arrived there on Saturday morning. As planes could not touch down in Minsk, they had to be directed to Homel or Kyiv.

700 passengers had to spend the night at the airport in Minsk. During the day, around 2,000 people were waiting to fly to their destinations. Unfortunately, the Belarusian national carrier Belavia did not accept that flying would not be possible on Friday and refused to inform passengers about what was going to happen according to a news report on tut.by.



According to the Minsk city executive committee, the roads leading out of Minsk were opened only for a limited circulation in order to allow the vehicles to clear away the snow. This is also true for the majority of roads in the Minsk region. On the M4 from Minsk to Mogilev, there were still more than 30 km of traffic jam on Saturday evening.

For the upcoming days, the weather forecast promises less snow fall but still icy temperatures. The Minsk city administration did a remarkable job in clearing the centre from snow. But next time they should clean the roads on the outskirts of Minsk before clearing the parks and courtyards of privileged houses in the centre.

Nadine Lashuk