

Cooperation with Podlasie, Union of Poles, IT Startups, Chernobyl Myths – State Press Digest

On the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster government officials are trying to dispel some common Chernobyl myths circulating in Belarusian society.

The authorities are preparing for the All-Belarusian Assembly in June – an event that aims to add legitimacy to various political initiatives.

Belarus is working on the abolition of energy subsidies and is calculating the possibility of popular discontent resulting from rising tariffs. Belarusian IT geni are winning global startup contests but do not want to set up companies at home. All of this and more in the latest edition of the State Press Digest.

Politics

[All-Belarusian People's Congress will unite power and people.](#)

Zviazda newspaper talked to Marat Žylinski, rector of the Public Administration Academy and MP, about the significance of the All-Belarusian People's Congress scheduled for June. The assembly is a forum in which the government talks to the representatives of people, tells them frankly what has been achieved, what has failed, and why.

The delegates should understand clearly where the country is heading, and then transmit this vision to their constituencies. According to Žylinski, although Belarus has

low wages and a deficient public administration, the preservation of peace and unity should come before everything. The All-Belarusian congress has become one form of legitimisation of President Alexander Lukashenka's rule. It allows the authorities to appoint delegates who “represent” the grassroots and who will approve government strategy for another five years.

[Hrodna region intensifies cooperation with Podlasie Voivodeship \(region\) of Poland.](#) *Hrodzienskaja Praŭda*

highlighted a visit of the delegation of Hrodna region leaders to Podlasie Voivodeship of Poland at the beginning of May. The Poles called the visit “a historic event”, since the last visit of Hrodna officials to their Polish neighbours took place 10 years ago. The visit included a joint cycle, a tour of Bielavieža forest, the Augustow channel and some other spots, as well as informal negotiations.

According to the head of Podlasie region Erzy Leszczynski, the sides have a particular opportunity to cooperate in walking and cycling tourism, the more active joint use of the Augustow channel, opening of new border crossing points, expanding the areas of visa-free visits, and cultural exchange. Hrodna region head Uladzimir Kraŭcoŭ announced that the Hrodna authorities plan to apply for EU funding for around 50 projects in the area of cross-border cooperation.

[Tax inspectorate fines the leader of the unofficial Union of Poles.](#)

The tax inspectorate of Hrodna city ordered that Anžalika Borys, head of the unofficial Union of Poles in Belarus, pay a fine of \$6,000, wrote *Belarus Segodnya*. Borys owned a private company called Polonica that specialised in cultural and educational events financed by the Polish government. The newspaper claims that the company often organised fake events and engaged in other forms of deception to secure funding from Poland.

The Belarusian authorities qualified it as a misuse of funds

and issued a fine. The company subsequently went bankrupt and now its head has to pay the fine herself. Borys heads the unrecognised group of Poles' Union, which emerged after the breakup of the organisation in 2005 as a result of conflict with the authorities. Since that time the unofficial organisation has been facing pressure in a number of ways.

Economy

[Belarusians win global startup contests, but do not set up companies at home.](#) *Narodnaja Hazieta* described a number of successful IT startups created by Belarusians in 2015. Arciom Stavienka and Kiryl Čykiejuk found success at the Pitch to Rich contest with their screen that makes holographic 3D projections. Their company Kino-mo won a £150,000 prize for advertising and marketing, and received partnership requests from 40 countries. Their device also featured on all top lists of the famous CES exhibition in Las Vegas, along with LG, Samsung, and Toshiba gadgets.

Jury Birčanka won \$220,000 at prestigious British competition The BIG Awards. He presented a wireless networking platform that enables low-cost and low-power communication between devices and clouds. Siarhiej Churs and Dzmitry Marozaŭ won a Grand Prix and a prize of \$100,000 at the innovative startups contest, the Wolves Summit in Warsaw. They presented a portable scanner to detect dental problems at early stages. However, the newspaper noted that all these IT-breakthroughs are registered in the EU and the US, and tried to explain why startups cannot effectively develop in Belarus.

[Removal of energy subsidies will cause 2.5 fold price rise for households.](#) *Respublika* called attention to an overview of the Belarusian energy sector prepared by the OECD with the support of the EU and the UN. The report states that energy subsidies for the population and industry grew from \$1bn in 2010 to \$1.7bn, or about 2.2 per cent of GDP, in 2014. However, due to

the fact that gas, heat and electricity tariffs are exempt from VAT, in 2014 the national budget lost \$199m from subsidy policies.

A full cessation of subsidies in the energy sector would imply that Belarusians have to pay 2.5 times more than the current price. In terms of money this will mean an increase from about \$60 to \$150 per person annually. The average monthly fee for a family will reach \$38 and increase to \$58 during the cold season.

Society

✘ [Belarus will gradually be freed from radiation.](#) *Belarus Segodnia* interviewed Head of Contaminated Areas Department of Emergency Ministry Dzmitry Paŭlaŭ, who dispelled a number of myths about Chernobyl that are still widespread among the Belarusian population.

The radiation in Belarusian lands will not last forever, as the 30-year half-life of cesium and strontium has now passed. In 2046, affected areas in Minsk and Hrodna regions will become clean.

However, the area in the immediate vicinity of Chernobyl, which was also contaminated with plutonium, will remain dangerous for hundreds to thousands of years. The government is not in a hurry to return contaminated areas to cultivation, despite what many think. Out of 250,000 hectares of contaminated land only 17,500 have been returned to agricultural use in the past three decades.

[Homiel region continues to suffer from a high rate of alcohol-related deaths.](#) *Homielskaja Praŭda* presented data from the State Committee of Court Expertise on deaths caused by drinking alcohol. Within the first three months of 2016 in Homiel region 75 people fatally poisoned themselves with

alcohol. In 2015 the death toll from alcohol poisoning reached 254 people, 15 fewer than in 2014. The victims usually consume excessively large quantities of legal alcohol, and many drink highly toxic technical spirits which easily cause death or serious health damage.

The State Press Digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. 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.

Upgrading Relations with Europe, Winning in an Embassy Row – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

In recent weeks, Belarus managed to noticeably upgrade the level of its relations with EU countries. However, the ministerial-level meetings have been limited to Belarus' long-time sympathisers in Europe (Hungary and Slovenia) as well as its closest neighbours (Poland).

The relations with the United States have maintained their positive dynamics but remained at the expert level. The embassy row with Israel has ended with a victory of Belarusian diplomats.

Visiting “friend Szijjártó”

On 16–17 March, Belarus' foreign minister [Vladimir Makei](#) paid an official visit to Hungary. The Belarusian foreign ministry made no prior announcement of the visit. It released its first communiqué when Makei almost exhausted his agenda in Budapest.

Makei had talks with his Hungarian counterpart, Péter Szijjártó, and met high government and parliamentary officials as well as potential investors.

Belarus and Hungary focused on the ways to develop economic cooperation, with priority attention given to agriculture and food processing, mechanical engineering, pharmaceuticals, construction, telecommunications and tourism.

Belarus seeks to play the card of Hungary's independent position towards Brussels on several policy issues, including the EU's relations with Belarus and Russia.

Makei: "Any state's task... is to find legal ways of circumventing sanctions"

Makei and Hungarian politicians [favour pragmatism](#) and prioritise economic interests over human rights and democracy considerations. In his interview to a conservative Hungarian daily, the Belarusian minister advocated search for “legal ways of circumventing sanctions”, referring to the EU and Russia's reciprocal embargoes.

Today's atmosphere of bilateral relations is prone to higher-level contacts between Belarus and Hungary. One should not exclude a possibility of a meeting between Alexander Lukashenka and Viktor Orbán in 2016.

Exploring new investment projects with Slovenia

On 25 March, Slovenia's foreign minister Karl Erjavec visited Belarus accompanied by representatives of eleven Slovenian companies in a bid to strengthen bilateral relations and look for new economic opportunities.

✘ The Slovenian politician met his Belarusian counterpart and was received by President [Alexander Lukashenka](#). The identified priorities in economic cooperation match those in relations between Belarus and Hungary, with addition of power industry.

Erjavec attended the opening of the transformer station in Minsk build by Slovenia's civil engineering giant, Riko Group. In presence of the two countries' foreign ministers, Riko Group signed new cooperation agreements with local energy agencies.

In February 2012, Slovenia [vetoed](#) the introduction of the EU's sanctions against [Yury Chyzh](#), a Belarusian oligarch who was then closely linked with Alexander Lukashenka (but recently [detained](#)). At that time, Riko Group was implementing a large construction project in Belarus with one of Chyzh's companies.

Alexander Lukashenka did not fail to thank the Slovenian diplomat for the "position, which Slovenia [had] taken in recent years on Belarus, in particular, when discussing problems with the EU".

Discussing "most sensitive

issues" with Poland

In between his encounters with the regime's probably strongest allies in the EU, on 22-23 March, Vladimir Makei [welcomed in Minsk](#) Poland's foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski. President Alexander Lukashenka also received the Polish official.

While [trade and investment relations](#) have kept their traditionally important place in the bilateral dialogue, the parties discussed other issues extensively.

Belarus and Poland seek to further reinforce their shared border and agreed to seek financing from the EU funds while the security of the EU's external borders remained a hot topic in European capitals.

Lukashenka thanked Poland for seeing Belarus as a sovereign and independent country

Poland would like to see progress in the treatment of [Polish minority](#) in Belarus. The Polish government also worries about the situation of the Catholic Church in Belarus, especially regarding the status of Polish clergy in the country.

Alexander Lukashenka reassured Waszczykowski about his intention to guarantee equal rights of all ethnic groups and creeds in the country. Vladimir Makei also mentioned the two countries' "willingness to seek mutually beneficial solutions to absolutely all issues, including the most sensitive ones".

However, one should not expect a quick progress on the matters involving human rights and democratic freedoms in Belarus. The Belarusian authorities manage very well to use these issues as a bargaining tool in a prolonged diplomatic game.

Honouring a US expert

On 28-30 March, Michael Carpenter, US deputy assistant secretary of defence, visited Minsk to meet Alexander Lukashenka, Vladimir Makei and Belarus' defence minister [Andrei Ravkov](#).

Carpenter is a top expert of the US department of defence for the ex-USSR. However, his strictly mid-level position in a bureaucratic hierarchy would preclude his direct talks with top government officials in most other countries. However, lately Lukashenka chooses to [disregard such subtleties](#).

✘ The US expert focused on [bilateral relations](#) with Belarus in the security and defence areas as well as on the situation in neighbouring Ukraine. Lukashenka used this opportunity to reiterate his earlier calls for a greater US involvement in the resolution of the crisis around Ukraine.

In dissonance with Russian politicians, the Belarusian president admitted that he was not inclined to demonise NATO's expansion eastward and to think that NATO was going to wage a war against Russia or Belarus.

The Belarusian leader also chose to talk with the security expert about expanding economic ties between Belarus and the United States.

Ending embassy row with Israel

Belarus and Israel are close to a full resolution of the recent [embassy row](#). The situation in bilateral relations quickly deteriorated in early January when Israel announced the imminent closure of its embassy in Minsk. Belarus immediately retaliated by announcing the symmetrical

withdrawal of its mission in Tel Aviv.

Within a few weeks, influential Israeli politicians began sending repeated signals that their government's decision would most likely be revoked. However, the Belarusian foreign ministry refused to suspend measures directed at phasing out its diplomatic presence in Israel. Several diplomats returned to Minsk. The embassy suspended some consular services.

Even the publication of the decision to maintain the embassy on the Israeli government's web site failed to satisfy Belarusian diplomats.

Only after having received a formal notification from Israel's foreign ministry in late March, the Belarusian foreign ministry admitted that it got formal grounds for reconsidering the issue of Belarus' diplomatic presence in Tel Aviv.

Belarusian diplomacy has scored another victory in already the second embassy row with Israel. This time, a more resolute retaliation led to a much quicker restoration of status quo.

Poland Lures “the Best Migrants in the World” from Belarus

On 28 January the Polish Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers proposed granting residence permits to a million migrants currently in Poland. The majority of them are Ukrainians, followed by Belarusians and Vietnamese.

In recent years Poland has been aiming its immigration policy at absorbing a young labour force from the regions of former

Polish rule, and has created unique preferences for foreign citizens in the form of the Card of the Pole. The card gives its holder the right to work and study in Poland, and later to obtain Polish citizenship.

Many Belarusians see it as an opportunity to work and study in Poland with the prospect of getting EU citizenship in the conditions of the ongoing economic crisis. The authorities of Belarus definitely dislike the initiative, but have proved unable to counter it so far.

Poland attracts migrants

On 28 January the Polish Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers in a publication estimated that due to the demographic crisis, by 2050 Poland will need to accept between 2m and 5m migrants to retain current economic growth rates. Currently, around one million people, mainly from Ukraine and Belarus, are employed in the Polish economy. Thanks to them the Polish budget receives an extra €1.5-2bn annually.

In an interview with Gazeta Prawna, union head Cezary Kaźmierczak said that migrants from these countries are “the best in the world”. They do not take away jobs from Poles and cost nothing for taxpayers. He contrasted them to migrants from the Near East and Africa, who in most cases do not work and live on social benefits. As discontent with current EU migration policy grows in Poland, Belarusians and Ukrainians are increasing their chances of becoming resident in Poland.

The Card of the Pole

In 2008 Poland introduced a Law on the Card of the Pole, which targeted the population of lands formerly ruled by Poland in Belarus, Ukraine and the Baltics. The card gives its owner the

right to get a long-term free Polish visa, legally work, do business and study in Poland on an equal footing with Polish citizens, as well as offering some other benefits.

✘ To get a card, one needs to demonstrate documented proof of ancestors living in Poland in 1921-1939. Poland at that time included the current western Belarusian territories. Alternatively, one must make a considerable contribution to Polish culture to receive the card. These criteria makes a few hundred thousand Belarusians potentially eligible for the card.

In 2013 the Polish authorities announced that they had granted the Card of the Pole to 42,000 Belarusians. The current number of card owners in Belarus remains unknown, as Polish officials are reluctant to reveal the latest figures. According to Eurostat, around 70,000 Belarusians have received national long-term visas, which gives an approximate indication of the number of Pole card holders in Belarus.

In November 2015 a special commission of the Polish parliament recommended an amendment to the Law on the Card of the Pole, which would allow its owner to get Polish (and EU) citizenship after living in Poland for only one year. Moreover, the card owners would receive a grant of around €5,400 per family member to cover their adaptation costs, as well as professional and language training.

Initially Poland declared the Card of the Pole a symbolic step to support its nationals abroad, but it has obviously become a purely pragmatic policy – an instrument to absorb the young workforce from neighbouring countries, which cannot go unnoticed by the Belarusian government

Authorities see Card of the Pole as a threat

In 2012 the Constitutional Court of Belarus announced that the Law on the Card of the Pole contradicts international law and violates a number of bilateral agreements. The government also made amendments to the law on the civil service which forbids officials from having a Pole card and similar documents from other states.

[Andrei Jelisiejeŭ](#), migration expert from Belarus, told Belarus Digest that few countries would tolerate the fact that a considerable number of their citizens, including officials, declare themselves loyal to another state. He recalled the reaction of Lithuanian officials to the Card of the Pole law in 2009, when Lithuanian MPs tried to restrict card holders' right to run in parliamentary elections.

The negative reaction of the Belarusian authorities is justified. The Card of the Pole will cause a drain on the Belarusian labour force and strengthen the influence of Poland, a NATO member and ardent critic of Lukashenka, on the Belarusian population.

However, the authorities unwisely stimulate the rush for a Card of the Pole by protracting visa liberalisation with the EU and blocking small [local border traffic](#) with Poland. Many Belarusians would be satisfied just with free Schengen visas [to shop](#) in nearby Poland and Lithuania. With the Card of the Pole they receive a more alluring opportunity to get EU citizenship.

Belarusians are heading west

The economic situation in Belarus [has been worsening](#) for the last two years, and the coming years do not look bright either. Russia, which traditionally served as a [migration hub](#) for many Belarusians, is also declining and in addition getting increasingly aggressive and xenophobic. These developments push Belarusians to look west, to countries with more stable economies and effective rule of law.



Most Belarusians wish to get a Card of the Pole not because of sentimental attachment to Polish culture or pride in their ancestors. They want concrete material benefits – getting free visas with the prospect of receiving a residence permit and later citizenship of the EU, and the ability to work and study on equal terms with Polish citizens in a country with a three times higher average salary. Those who are not ready to move abroad wish at least to get the possibility of shopping and travelling.

Ihar from Minsk, 30, has recently become a happy owner of a Card of the Pole. He told Belarus Digest that among his friends around 10 people already have cards, and it has become increasingly popular among young people. For example, a section of the largest Belarusian Internet forum Onliner dedicated to discussion of ways of getting a Card of the Pole has 3,000 pages – one of the most popular topics on the forum.

Andrej Jelisiejeŭ thinks that the current economic crisis will definitely cause an outflow of Belarusians towards the west. Those not eligible for a Card of the Pole will use other opportunities, like seasonal works in Poland.

If the Belarusian authorities want to stop the brain drain, they should in the first place enforce local border traffic

and make efforts to liberalise or completely remove the visa regime with the EU. In a longer term perspective, the government should think of introducing a similar policy to attract ethnic Belarusians from abroad and provide them with special preferences.

Journal of Belarusian Studies 2015: History of the Belarus- Poland-Lithuania Borderland

The 2015 issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies [released](#) today is almost entirely about history. It focuses on the Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian borderland and the period stretching from the uprising of 1863 to the inter-war period of the 20th century when the territory of today's Belarus was split between the Soviet Union and Poland.

Two longer articles are followed by several essays which resulted from a conference held by the Anglo-Belarusian Society and other London-based organisations at University College London in March 2014.

The issue opens with an analysis of humour as a weapon of the political forces in Eastern Poland, what is now West Belarus, in the interwar period. [The article](#), by Anastasija Astapava from the University of Tartu in Estonia, explains the historical context of the 1920s and how various political groups were struggling for the minds of Belarusians by ridiculing political realities of that time. Rare pictures from interwar periodicals richly illustrate the article.

✘ Felix Ackermann, a DAAD Associate Professor at the European Humanities University in Vilnius, devotes [his article](#) to the Lukiskės prison in Vilnius. The prison was a hotbed of political struggle in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It was a place of detention for scores of Belarusians, Lithuanians, Poles and other activists fighting for their causes in multi-ethnic Vilnius at that time. It was the only prison in the Russian Empire to incorporate Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Jewish places of worship at the heart of its infrastructure.

Kastus´Kalinouški Conference Proceedings

The subsequent four shorter articles resulted from the Kastus´Kalinouški and the Nation-Building Process in Belarus conference, which brought together over a dozen of scholars from Belarus, the United Kingdom, Lithuania and Poland. Kastus´Kalinouški is a national hero of Belarus who led the 1863–1864 uprising against tsarist Russia.

Aliaksandr Smaliančuk, a Belarusian historian from Hrodna who is currently affiliated with the Polish Academy of Sciences, [analyses the research problems](#) which historians face when they tackle the historical role of Kastus´Kalinouški in Belarusian nation building. He argues that Kalinouški should not be seen as a creator or even a bearer of the Belarusian national idea but instead as a link in the gradual evolution of the Lithuanian idea in the ‘Belarusian direction’.

Dorota Michaluk from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Poland [analyses the Polish-language clandestine press](#) published under the patronage of Kastus´Kalinouški around the time of the uprising against the tsarist authorities in 1863–1864. One

of her findings is that the periodicals did not promote the idea of separatism of in Lithuania and Belarus but instead called for national unity and the restoration of the whole of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Uladzislau Ivanou from the European Humanities University in Lithuania [looks at the role of Belarusian old Believers](#) in the Kalinouški uprising. Old believers were a Christian Orthodox sect who refused to accept church reforms in Russia in the 17th century and who after being persecuted settled in the territory of Belarus. The author shows how the old believers tried to reconcile their 'Russianness' with their 'Belarusianness'.

Andrus Unučak, Head of the Department of Belarusian Statehood at the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, [focuses on the image of Kalinouški](#) in the official discourse of Soviet Belarus. According to the official line of the Belarusian Communist Party, Kalinouški supported a federation with Russia while the Belarusian intelligentsia tried to use the image of Kalinouški to strengthen Belarusian national consciousness.

Reviews

This issue also includes the transcript of the [first Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies](#), which was hosted by the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies of University College London in March 2015. Per Anders Rudling from the University of Lund in Sweden tracks the development of the Belarusian national idea from the 18th century to modern day Belarus.

The issue also includes two book reviews – [one by Stephen Hall](#) examining the meaning of Europe for the Belarusian and Ukrainian authorities, and [the other by Siarhej Bohdan](#) looking at relations between various ethnic groups in Eastern Poland

in the inter-war period, which is now Western Belarus. Brian Bennett, Chairman of the Anglo-Belarusian Society and a former British Ambassador to Belarus [prepared an overview](#) of activities of the Anglo-Belarusian Society in 2014.



Fr Alexander Nadson

On 15 April 2015 Fr Alexander Nadson, a spiritual leader of the Belarusian diaspora in the West, a member of the Advisory Board of the Journal of Belarusian Studies and a former chairman of the Anglo-Belarusian Society passed away in London. Fr Alexander left a legacy of not only religious texts and translations but also books and articles on various aspects of Belarusian studies.

Fr Alexander authored the first article in the first issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies on the writings of St. Cyril of Turaŭ in 1965 and since 1973 served on its editorial board. His last article in the Journal was published in 2013. Jim Dingley's [obituary and a bibliography](#) of his works in English concludes this issue of the Journal of Belarusian Studies.

Belarus and Russian Food Embargo: a Success Story?

Belarus became the primary beneficiary of the food embargo, which Russia imposed against Western nations in August 2014. In January – May 2015, Belarus supplied 916.4 thousand tons of embargoed products to Russia, a 53.5% increase over the same

period in 2014.

Two weeks after Russia introduced its food embargo, Howard Solomon, the minister counsellor at the US Embassy in Moscow, tweeted: "Last night, I tasted the Belarusian salmon. It reminds me of the one from Norway, but more expensive. I'll taste the Belarusian parmesan next."

What really stands behind this Belarusian commercial success: the hard work of domestic producers or the inventiveness of local smugglers?

Exploring the Klondike

Belarusian farmers, entrepreneurs and officials [moved fast](#) to take advantage of this windfall. The next day after the introduction of the embargo, Leanid Marynich, the Belarusian first deputy minister of agriculture, assured Russia of Belarus' willingness to "substitute Western countries for many food positions" calling this lucrative opportunity a "Klondike".

We must stir and seize the moment to make money

Immediately, several European companies wanted to invest in transforming agricultural products in Belarus. Officials from Latvia, Lithuania and [Poland](#) – Belarus' EU neighbours who are affected by the embargo – came to Minsk to discuss the opportunities for joint processing and exporting of dairy products.

In August 2015, President Lukashenka gave his blessing to this cooperation in his very direct style: "We must stir and seize the moment to make money... We have not made any commitments [towards the Russians] about our domestic market. We can import products from around the world. We must load, process and sell [them]. "

However, these ambitious projects turned out to be difficult to implement, at least in a legitimate and transparent manner that the officials promised. The production capacity of meat processing and dairy plants quickly became saturated. In addition, any radical increase in the export of food products might cause a deficit in the domestic market.

Lukashenka had to recognise the complexity of the situation at a government meeting at the end of 2014: "Even if we wanted to, we cannot import more meat and milk today for the transformation that we brought from the West [before], because we do not have any spare capacity."

Smuggling Beats Transformation

However, these difficulties never stopped Belarusian entrepreneurs. Many of them engaged in [outright smuggling](#) trying to bypass sanctions on a scale, which can hardly exist without the tacit consent of top-ranking officials. The open border between Belarus and Russia has definitely facilitated these projects.

A week after the introduction of the embargo, the Russian Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance (Rosselkhozadzor) reported the first attempt to bypass the embargo from the territory of Belarus. Russian inspectors stopped a lorry with 19 tons of Ecuadoran peaches and nectarines accompanied by forged phytosanitary certificates issued in Belarus.

by the end of September 2014 the patience of the Russians ran out

Initially, Rosselkhozadzor tried to solve the problems of smuggling "in family", without much publicity. However, the negotiations failed and by the end of September 2014 the patience of the Russians ran out. Rosselkhozadzor began

reporting on the attempts of Belarusian businesses to circumvent the embargo on an almost daily basis.

The web site of Rosselkhoz nadzor has been running what resembles a battle-field situation reporting about attempts to import products "of unknown origin" without certificates or food coming from embargoed countries and accompanied by Belarusian certificates. Thirty tonnes of potatoes, twenty tonnes of tomatoes, forty tonnes of pork, eighteen tonnes of grapefruits, two tonnes of beef ... However, the true scale of contraband certainly exceed these figures, given the extent of corruption in Russia.

this brief trade war ended in December 2014

In November 2014, Rosselkhoz nadzor started a trade war with Belarus by banning imports of meat and dairy products from twenty-three Belarusian producers. Moscow also prohibited the transit of Western food products to Kazakhstan through the Belarusian and Russian border. Belarus and Russia de facto [reinstalled customs controls](#) on their common border. In retaliation, Minsk forced Russian trucks to spend long hours waiting at border crossing points.

This brief trade war ended in December 2014 when Russia gradually recalled its import ban. Nevertheless, resourceful Belarusian entrepreneurs have not abandoned their efforts to supply the neighbouring country with European products re-labelled "Made in Belarus". In January – March 2015, Rosselkhoz nadzor identified nearly 200 falsified phytosanitary certificates, which accompanied imports from Belarus.

Contradictory Statistics

Belarusian attempts to substitute the Western food imports to Russia have brought uneven results. While for some positions there has been a spectacular increase in supplies, the most

ambitious plans have failed to come true.

In September 2014, an official of the Belarusian Ministry of Economy announced the country's intention to increase its food exports to Russia by \$300m in 2014. In fact, the Belarusian supplies of food products to Russia increased only by 0.9%, which represented a growth of about \$42m.

In January – April 2015, according to Russian statistics, Belarus increased its share in Russia's imports of fresh and chilled beef from 76% to 90% compared to the same period of the previous year and cheese from 26% to 76%. However, in tonnes and dollars these exports grew very modestly. Belarus was more successful in its exports of apples, milk, cream, dried and salted fish to Russia.

In 2014, Belarus increased its imports of fresh fish by 7.1 tonnes, mostly from Norway; its export of dried, salted and smoked fish grew by 6.2 tonnes

Last year, Belarus bought an additional 208 tonnes of apples from the EU and Moldova. Again, most of the fruit the country most likely re-exported to Russia, as its export to this country grew by 198 tonnes representing a 142% increase.

Alongside with the direct re-packing and re-labelling, other transformations also took place. In 2014, Belarus increased its imports of fresh fish by 7.1 tonnes, mostly from Norway. The bulk of this surplus underwent transformation in Belarusian plants and went to Russia, as Belarusian exports of dried, salted and smoked fish grew by 6.2 tonnes.

On 5 August, the Belarusian minister in charge agriculture and food [Leaniid Zajac](#) claimed that the Russian decision to destroy confiscated Western products never affected Belarus and refuted all accusations of possible contraband. "We will ensure that our products continue to enter the Russian market without any interruption and that there would be not one iota

of doubt in our products' country of origin and quality", he said.

The Belarusian success story in becoming the primary beneficiary of the Russian food embargo has been a complex mixture of hard work, honest entrepreneurship and [cunning scheming](#). But even with this combination Belarus gained less from the Russian embargo than it had initially hoped.

Belarus Wants Foreign Catholic Priests Out

At the end of January, senior Belarusian officials made statements that threatened to undermine Belarus' good relations with the Vatican, severing ties that the country had worked for years to establish.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka and the Commissioner for Religions spoke out against the presence of foreign Catholic priests, most of whom are Polish citizens, in Belarusian parishes, – a tradition that has existed since the USSR's collapse.

Belarus has failed to create its own national church in the course of its history, and the authorities view the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches as foreign elements – one from the East and another from the West, – rather as a part of local religious traditions.

With the war in Ukraine raging near its border and a presidential election coming up in autumn, the Belarusian authorities are seeking to establish tight control over domestic affairs, including religion.

Catholics have a weaker position within Belarusian politics, while the Orthodox Church remains [under Russia's protection](#), and Lukashenka [fears to confront](#) it at a time when relations with Russia are strained.

Foreign Minister Explains Away Lukashenka's Words

At a meeting with the Belarusian Foreign Minister on 30 January, the Apostolic Nuncio Gugerotti expressed his concerns about the "possible interpretation of recent comments about the Roman Catholic Church made by senior officials". First, the Commissioner for Religions and Nationalities Leanid Huliaka on 22 January, and then Lukashenka on 29 January, spoke out against the service of foreign Catholic priests in Belarus. The shortage of local clergy has been the result of decades of the USSR's state atheism policy in Belarus.

Belarusian officials called for the meeting, a fact that indicates that the Foreign Ministry is trying to smooth over Lukashenka's most recent comments. Minsk has been expending a lot of effort into fostering good ties with the Vatican for years, as it still holds authority in the West and does not demand political reforms in exchange for working relations. For Belarusian diplomacy, losing these ties would signal a major defeat, something Minister Makej is acutely aware of.

Foreign Priests Should Head Home

On 22 January the Commissioner for Religions and Nationalities Leanid Huliaka, a senior government official responsible for religious issues, criticised Roman Catholic priests at a government meeting on religious affairs. "Some priests from Poland are trying to get involved in politics here. They do not like our country, our laws, or our government. In these kinds of situations we should not allow them to continue serving in Belarus", the official said.

The next attack on foreign clergy came shortly thereafter from none other than Lukashenka himself. The Belarusian leader,

during his record-breaking press conference on 29 January, said he is “not quite satisfied with the Polish priests working in Belarus”. Lukashenka did not want to specify the reasons for his dissatisfaction, only saying “they are doing the wrong things”. He also noted that more local priests should be trained in Belarus.

Currently, Belarus has 430 Roman Catholic Parishes, where a total of 430 priests serve. 113 of them have foreign citizenship, usually Polish, but their number is declining. In 2005, for example, Belarus hosted 202 foreign Catholic priests. This is a large share when compared to the Moscow-controlled Orthodox Church, where only 15 foreign citizens served in 2013 out of a total of 1,605.

Share of foreign priests in Belarus | Create infographics

Nevertheless, according to Huliaka, the Roman Catholic Church fails to supply the necessary number of local priests to Belarusian parishes. The Hrodna seminary has 27 students and the Pinsk seminary even fewer – only 19. In 2014, these religious schools enrolled 2 and 3 students respectively. “It seems that the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church has no interest in training local priests”, Huliaka said.

Belarusian priest Piotr Rudkoŭski, speaking to Belarus Digest, said that serving God is a calling, not a mere profession, so training new staff in the Church differs from training people for, say, state institutions. “Belarusian bishops, actually would like to have as many local priests as possible. The Church organises a lot of educational events to attract possible candidates, and parishes even have a weekly prayer for new people to become priests. Yet government officials look at the whole issue from a bureaucratic point of view, not a spiritual one”, Rudkoŭski says.

Roman Catholics – An Imaginary Threat?

Belarus over its history has failed to establish a single national church. The Belarusian Orthodox Church is fully subordinate to Moscow, while Roman Catholics maintain close ties with Poland and the West in general. Powerful foreign organisations with influence on the minds of their congregations are an issue of considerable concern for the Belarusian authorities. This is especially true as of late. With the ongoing Ukraine conflict and upcoming presidential elections in November, the authorities need more control over society, and churches in particular.



Although the Catholic Church has been pursuing a policy of Belarusianisation, and today most masses occur in Belarusian, Polish language still retains some influence and most priests from Belarus are educated in Poland.

As Piotr Rudkoŭski shared with Belarus Digest, relations between the Catholic Church and the state maintain a shaky equilibrium. The state allows some autonomy in exchange for political loyalty, for which the church receives criticism from opposition-minded priests.

Lukashenka of course remembers [the patterns of voting](#) of Catholics in Western Belarus, which showed the highest levels of support for the democratic opposition during previous presidential elections. However, the Catholic Church has not displayed any open hostility towards the government.

The only known case [occurred in July 2014,](#) when the priest Uladzimir Lazar was taken to prison on charges of treason against the state. However, after spending half a year under investigation, he was released due to a lack of evidence. No other similar cases or open criticism of the authorities from Catholic priests are known.

Belarus Changes its Strategy towards Vatican?

According to Rudkoŭski, the Kremlin is interested in raising tensions between the Belarusian state and the Catholic Church. It seeks to hamper the trend of Belarusianisation within the Catholic Church and its impact on Belarusian society. Still, it remains unclear what leverage Russia has on this relationship.

Relations with Russia are already too strained at the moment in both the political and economic realms. Another confrontation on a different topic will make the Belarusian side even more vulnerable. Meanwhile, less radical steps towards state control over religion seem quite acceptable, and especially with the Catholic Church, whose political leverage in Belarus is much weaker than that of Russia's Orthodox Church.

The Belarusian authorities have [tried to use](#) the Roman Catholic Church as an intermediary to normalise Belarus-EU relations, and Lukashenka [has been expressing hopes](#) to meet the Pope in Belarus a number of times. The pressure on foreign priests can bury these hopes for good, something that the authorities are well aware of. Lukashenka, in a fit of populist passion, seems to forget to be careful, leaving diplomats to sort things out.

Talking to Europe, Mending Ties with the Vatican, Family Values – Belarus Foreign

Policy Digest

During his "open dialogue" with the press on 29 January, President Alexander Lukashenka continued walking the fine line between alarming Russia and progressing Belarus' relations with the West.

The Belarusian ruler made it clear that he appreciated the noticeable shift in European and US policy towards Belarus, all the while reaffirming his mistrust of the West at the same time. He swore allegiance to the nation's "sacred ties" with Russia, though he also insisted that he would never "go to war with the West to oblige someone".

Quite unexpectedly, Lukashenka gets the chance to have a direct top-level dialogue with the EU on 11 February when he will host a meeting on Ukraine with the participation of Angela Merkel and François Hollande. Given the format of the event, it is unclear whether he will get anything substantial out of it, apart from the obvious PR benefits.

Lukashenka and his religious figurehead, Lieanid Huliaka, also managed to mar Belarus' relations with the Catholic Church by making a few ill-conceived statements in public. The foreign ministry was forced to intervene immediately in order to salvage their hard-won relations with the Holy See.

Lukashenka and Europe

Latvia is considering inviting [Alexander Lukashenka](#) to represent Belarus at the next summit of the Eastern Partnership, which will take place in Riga on 21 – 22 May. Andrejs Pildegovičs, Latvia' State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, announced their intentions on 23 January, speaking to the press in Minsk after several meetings with his Belarusian counterparts.

The Latvian diplomat stressed that the final decision would rest with the Belarusian authorities. He also made it clear that Europe expected reciprocal steps from Belarus: "In today's Europe there's no such thing as political prisoners".

Lukashenka: "I don't really trust our Western partners".

In its relations with Belarus, the European Union is willing to go beyond the current stage of intensive working-level interaction. Reaching this stage was quite an achievement in 2014. A few years back, meetings at the level of foreign ministers and their deputies were a rarity. Now, the foreign ministry's European department works overtime to cope with the overwhelming workload of visits and consultations.

However, further normalisation in their relations seems unlikely without Lukashenka's direct engagement in the process. On 29 January, Lukashenka expressed his pessimism and doubts about the prospects of normalising relations with the West: "I don't really trust our Western partners... No major shifts in relations between Europe and America and Belarus will happen until after the presidential election".

The Belarusian ruler also exhibited conflicted feelings about attending the Riga summit.

I'm not eager to go to this Eastern Partnership [summit]. I'm sick and tired of having these meetings the past twenty years. I know how they deal with matters there. Although I don't reject [the summit].

The Riga summit provides a convenient and comfortable setting for Lukashenka to make his European comeback – a familiar circle of his CIS counterparts joined by top EU officials. In the current geopolitical situation, the Belarusian regime needs the Eastern Partnership to counterbalance the smothering embrace of Russia. If nothing else, he could use closer ties

with Europe to blackmail Russia and extract tangible economic benefits.

However, the price of his ticket to Riga has a ceiling. He fears appearing soft and manageable in the eyes of his voters and Russia by making open concessions on the sensitive topic of political prisoners.

Tough bargaining on the conditions of his attendance is bound to stretch on over the next several months. Speaking on Belarusian TV on 8 February, Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#) stated that Belarus' participation in the Riga summit was conditioned on an invitation "on an equal footing", "without any discrimination".

The outcome of the [visa facilitation talks](#) may also influence Minsk's decision. The government would enjoy having something tangible to show for Lukashenka's participation.

Mending relations with the Holy See

On 30 January, Vladimir Makei received Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, the Apostolic Nuncio to Belarus. The minister hastened to mend the rift that recent rash statements by senior officials caused in ties between Belarus and the Catholic Church.

The Belarusian authorities value the relationship with the Holy See, one they have been at work on for years. Alexander Lukashenka has often praised the Vatican's role in improving Belarus' relations with the West.

A week prior, Lieanid Huliaka, the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, speaking at an annual meeting of his Office, accused "some Catholic priests from Poland" of meddling in politics. "They don't like our country, our laws, or our leaders".

The Roman Catholic Church in Belarus has a serious shortage of

locally born clergy. According to official statistics, out of 430 Catholic priests serving in Belarus, 113 are foreigners, mostly from Poland.

Bishops' Conference: the regime's accusations are "a baseless insult to the Catholic Church"

On 29 January, President Alexander Lukashenka voiced the same concerns. At his meeting with the press he said, "As for the Polish clergy, I am not very happy with the service of some Polish representatives here... On occasion, they are doing things they should not be doing".

These converging statements from top officials alarmed the Catholic Church in Belarus. On 30 January, the Conference of Catholic Bishops issued an urgent statement calling these accusations "a baseless insult to the Catholic Church and the incitement of ethnic and religious hatred".

Vladimir Makei went out of his way to defuse tension created by his boss and colleague. The minister described the Holy See's position and practical activities towards Belarus as "very constructive and balanced".

He conveyed the president's appreciation for Pope Francis' efforts in combating poverty and promoting peace and stability and offered to be a bridge to open up discussion of possible issues between all concerned parties. The foreign ministry would obviously hate to see its friendly ties with the Vatican crumble following a few opportunistic statements.

Friends of Traditional Families

Belarus has made an important step in institutionalising its top-priority multilateral initiative. On 20 January, the international community saw the emergence of a Group of Friends of the Family in New York, when Belarus' Deputy Foreign Minister [Valentin Rybakov](#) made a statement on its

behalf at UN headquarters.

It took a few weeks for Belarusian diplomacy to pull together 18 like-minded countries.

Hard-line regimes dominate among "friends of family" group led by Belarus

As will readily be observed, Islamic nations from Asia, the Middle East and Africa dominate the group, and it does not have a single representative from the Western hemisphere or Europe (besides Belarus). It is interesting to note that a common characteristic of the group's members is their autocratic or even dictatorial domestic regimes.

[Speaking at the UN](#), Valentin Rybakov reaffirmed that the family remained the natural and fundamental unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state. The statement called for the systematic mainstreaming of "the family" across the post-2015 development agenda. It avoided making an explicit reference to what the definition of a family is, though still failed to gain broad support.

Despite the limited support enjoyed by its pet initiative, Belarus is determined to keep it alive at all costs. As it capitalised on its highly successful [initiative on combating human trafficking](#), Minsk wants to maintain its standing in multilateral international diplomacy.

Why Belarusians Turned to

Shopping Abroad

With the economy dominated by the state and its illiberal trade laws, many Belarusians are increasingly taking to shopping abroad; especially when they get coupons from <https://www.raise.com/coupons/ebay>.

In the the middle of November, Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba Group reported that customers from Belarus ranked fifth in the number of purchases, leaving behind the US and Canada in the online sales on Chinese anti-Valentine's Day holiday known as "Singles' Day."

Meanwhile, shopping tours in neighbouring EU countries remain a favourite weekend trip for many Belarusians. This autumn the sharp decline of the Russian rouble sparked a shopping frenzy, with Belarusians rushing to Russian cities because of the lower prices.

The authorities in Minsk have repeatedly expressed their concerns about its citizens' shopping habits, which drain Belarus of foreign currency. Belarusians spend nearly \$3bn annually abroad and domestic producers continue to lose their local markets.

However, radical restrictive measures to halt the large influx of imports is highly unlikely. The regime needs to maintain its economic contract with the public. Minsk permits people to satisfy their material needs in exchange for political loyalty. Joining the WTO could resolve some of the issues Belarus is facing, but Belarus needs to see a substantial change in relations with the West and economic reforms to obtain membership.

Belarus, an Unexpected Leader in Online Shopping

Singles' Day in China takes place annually on 11 November.

Originally a holiday commemorating unmarried young people, it has since become one of the largest online shopping day in the world. This year, the Alibaba company, one of the most active promoters of the holiday, made \$9.3bn in sales – a world record for online shopping. Also, check out [misfits market discount code](#) and save some extra money.

Strikingly, Belarusians appeared to be among the most active buyers outside of China, achieving a top 5. Russia led the ratings, followed by Brazil, Israel, Spain, ending with Belarus. Belarusians even outdid the US and Canada during this global shopping frenzy.



The Belarusian state-managed economy still cannot satisfy the consumer aspirations of its citizens. Consumers lack access to world famous brands locally and the seasonal discounts regularly found in market economies. Foreign companies in this sector are only starting to enter the Belarusian market.

Domestic prices remain high, so people prefer to shop in neighbouring EU cities like Vilnius, Bialystok and Warsaw. Recently, Russia also became a popular shopping destination, as the rouble's devaluation made Russian products more affordable for Belarusians.

Internet usage is fast growing in Belarus. According to research conducted by the Analytic Centre of the Presidential Administration, as of autumn 2014, 62% of Belarusians used the Internet, and around 50% of them were mobile Internet users. Just this June the PayPal online payment service started operating in Belarus, which makes online shopping more accessible to Belarusians.

However, a study by MASMI, a market research company based in the UK, from May 2013 showed that only 20% of Belarus' urban populace shops online. And only a quarter of them, or 5% of the urban population, made purchases on foreign web sites.

More recent data is unavailable, but it appears that Belarus witnessed a rapid growth in online shopping over the past year. The trend may be here to stay. Threads that discuss online shopping attract the largest readership on onliner.by – the most popular Minsk Internet forum.

The Russian Auto Fever

The recent economic developments in Russian provoked a real pilgrimage of Belarusians to its eastern neighbour to buy up cheap cars and high-tech gadgets. In 2014 the Russian rouble has lost 45% of its value, and this autumn it fell particularly quickly.

However, Russian businesses did not rush to raise prices to the same rate, and Belarusians had a unique opportunity to buy cheap products without visa or customs restrictions. Tourist services, cars and electronics were among the most wanted products according to stories circulating around Belarusian airwaves.

A representative of the Pegas Tourist company based in Russia told TUT.by that, “because of economic downturn many Russians have cancelled their plans to visit resorts this winter, and tourist firms have to offer discounts to attract clients”. This especially concerns distant destinations like Cuba, Mexico, and Thailand. Coupled with devaluation, it has reduced travel prices considerably.



Electronic gadgets also became a hot good for Belarusians in Russia. The difference in prices between buying domestically were offset by travelling to Russian.

The biggest purchasing rush was for automobiles in Russia. The difference in automobile prices in Minsk and Moscow currently vary from thousands to tens of thousands dollars in the case of luxury automobiles.

At the moment, around 250 cars from Russia are registered in Minsk alone and around 500 throughout all of Belarus. Belarusians prefer to buy newer cars, as most of them are no older than 2008.

However, the car rush created a fertile environment for crime in car sales. Belarus's police force reported that they have uncovered several schemes of legalising the purchase of stolen cars through their registration in Belarus and other related illegal activity. They are currently investigating the history of 110 vehicles to determine their origins.

EU Shopping Concerns

While shopping in the common economic area of Eurasian Union cannot be restricted by any means, the Belarusian government continuously expresses concerns with the EU import that Belarusian shoppers bring home.

In recent years, Lithuania has been [the nearest EU shopping destination](#) for Minsk residents, being less than 200 km away. However, currently Lithuania becomes more expensive, as it introduces Euro since 2015. Belarusians continue to visit Vilnius on the weekends, but their interests are shifting from shopping to entertainment – cafes, pubs and concerts.

Meanwhile, shopping crowds have reoriented towards Poland, which is now popular not only among traditional visitors from the [border regions](#), but for people from every corner of Belarus as well. Many companies and individual entrepreneurs offer shopping tours to Bialystok and Warsaw. According to the Polish Statistics Office, in July-September 2013 Belarusians [spent \\$250m in Poland](#), more than either Russians or Ukrainians.

In September 2013, Aliaksandr Lukashenka made an announcement which gave many Belarusians pause:

[the West] criticises us for being a poor country, but our

people send \$3bn abroad annually and import goods which we also produce ourselves. So I have already ordered a decree – if you go abroad, you pay a \$100 fee and then you are welcome to buy things. [This way] people would go to our shops and buy our refrigerators instead of carrying them from abroad.

So far these measures have not been introduced and are unlikely to be at all.

The economic contract with population means that Belarusians can satisfy their material needs in exchange for political loyalty. However, Belarus remains the only country in the region that has not yet joined the WTO. Its Eurasian Union partners, Russia and Kazakhstan, already enjoy the benefits of it, while Belarus protectionist policies keep domestic prices high.

Effectively, this means that Belarusians will carry on their mass consumerist pilgrimages to the West and East. The Belarusian government needs to intensify its WTO negotiations in order to combat this problem in future, and working on improving political relations with the West could play a major role in this process.

Belarusian Espionage: Abroad and at Home

On 10 November the General Prosecutor's Office of Lithuania reported that a Vilnius court will try a Lithuanian citizen on espionage charges. The Lithuanian authorities claim that he cooperated with Belarusian security services.

As other cases from recent years prove, Belarusian intelligence is quite interested in its immediate neighbours – Poland and Lithuania. Belarusians usually seek military intelligence and generally probe opportunities to advance Belarusian economic interest in these countries.

Belarus's EU neighbours regard Belarusian intelligence as being, more or less, on par with its Russian counterpart. However, despite close ties since Soviet times and cooperation agreements, Belarusians may have a separate agenda, as Lukashenka's attempts to pursue a more independent foreign policy.

Inside Belarus, recent public spying cases have involved only local citizens. As either Andrej Hajdukoŭ's or priest Uladzislaŭ Lazar's cases show, the authorities can use espionage charges to intimidate the opposition or independent institutions.

A Spy with Belarusian Roots

A former worker of Oro Navigacija, a Lithuanian air traffic control agency, is suspected of committing espionage against Lithuania for Belarus's security services. He may receive up to 15 years in prison as a result. A Vilnius circuit court will hold his trial in January. At the moment the suspect's name remains unknown.

The investigators claims that the suspect secretly photographed documents in his office, including various objects tied to Lithuania's military and civilian infrastructure, and then proceeded to hand them to the General Staff of the Belarusian armed forces. "He gathered and passed on to Belarus information on the Lithuanian armed forces, its state enterprises, objects of strategic importance for national security in Lithuania", stated a press release from the General Prosecutor's Office.

The Chief of Lithuania's Security Department Gediminas Grina noted that Russia could also use this information, because Belarus and Russia have a military alliance and share intelligence data.

Having Belarusian roots, the suspect visited Belarus a couple of times a year to see his relatives and friends. His two sons have business partners in Russia, and regularly go there on to tend to their affairs. These facts could easily become rounds for Lithuania's own security services to become interested in him.

However, espionage scandals more often than not arise Belarus's other neighbour – Poland. In recent years several incidents have occurred with Belarus citizens being charged with spying.

Belarus Intelligence: Poland in its Sights

The Polish Agency of Internal Security in its annual 2013 report noted that Russian and Belarusian spies have shown the highest level of activity in Poland. Russians are interested mostly in the energy sector, such as liquid gas and nuclear power, as well as EU and NATO's eastern policy.

For Belarus, the report says, Poland is a priority country for intelligence gathering. Belarusian spies search for markets to sell Belarusian goods, firms that can invest in Belarus, possibilities of becoming beneficiaries for EU assistance programmes and assess the nation's military capacity.

In March 2014 the Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza reported that the Polish Internal Security Agency detained two Belarus citizens with charges of spying for Russia. One of them, a Military Attache of Belarus in Poland Dzmityry Žukaŭ, took pictures of a NATO training centre in Bydgoszcz. Another Polish newspaper, Gazeta Prawna, added that he sought contacts with veteran societies, retired soldiers, and youth scout groups and often visited their gatherings and events.



A few month before this episode, Polish counter-intelligence detained a Hrodna resident named Jury, who also took pictures of military-related objects.

Another Belarus citizen, known as Aliaksandr, remains in Polish custody for already two years now. He apparently cooperated with officers from the shuttered Polish Military Information Service.

They regarded him as a source in the Belarus security services and paid him \$300,000 for his assistance. But a subsequent investigation proved that he was misinforming the Poles and carrying out the orders of his bosses in Minsk.

Spies inside Belarus

In 2011 the Belarusian KGB reported that it had terminated the activity of 23 agents of its foreign security service. However, there was never ever any concrete cases data that appeared in the media. The people whom the authorities publicly charged with espionage or treason were all Belarusian citizens.

In 2012, the Belarusian KGB published information on two Belarus citizens, Aliaksandr Fenzeliaŭ and Jaŭhien Kačura, who were allegedly spying for Lithuania. The KGB detained a Lithuanian intelligence officer and two Belarusians who passed to him secret information about something related to the military. The agency was able to prove their case by gathering information and, later on, the suspects confirmed their guilt during trial. The court found them guilty and imposed a 10 and 8 year sentence on them, respectively.



Another case to surface was that of Andrej Hajdukoŭ, one that appears to be politically motivated. Opposition activist and

leader of the youth organisation “Union of Young Intellectuals”, he was detained in Viciebsk by the KGB in November 2012 and faced charges of treason.

When taking a look at the KGB's official position on Hajdukoŭ, his tactics look rather ridiculous in an era of digital technology. For one, he allegedly hid secret information for foreign agents in a mail drop box. Nevertheless, he was tried and sentenced to 1.5 years in prison on a less serious charge – an attempt to establish contacts with a foreign agency, or in his case, with the US embassy.

In July of this year Lukashenka revealed information that one of the officers serving in Belarusian security agency, “was connected to foreign states via a Catholic Church representative. He not only passed information on to them, but also caused trouble for our people who were working abroad”.

Soon, information appeared that the KGB had arrested the catholic priest [Uladzislau Lazar](#) on charges of state treason. After spending half a year under investigation, he was released due to the prosecutor's inability to prove his case.

As these cases show, the charges mounted against individuals by the Belarusian authorities sometimes appear to be more an issue of exerting political pressure on the opposition or independent institutions (like Catholic Church). Real instances of the apprehension of foreign spies remain unknown to the public, although the KGB continues to boast about its achievements in this arena.

According to the words of Polish and Lithuanian officials, these countries (and perhaps the whole west) regard Belarusian intelligence as being one and the same as Russian intelligence. They continue to work in close cooperation and are committed to sharing any and all needed information. Indeed, such agreements have legally existed since the early 1990s, and these close ties have continued to exist since

soviet times, when they were originally established..

However, as the retired KGB lieutenant-colonel Valer Kostka said in an interview to Charter97.org web site, "if there is a common goal, the special services make a deal over it, no matter if it is CIA, Russian FSB or Belarusian KGB. It is a complicated hidden mechanism. If a certain interest exists, Lukashenka will make an agreement with Putin, so Belarusian intelligence will cooperate with Russians, and vice versa".

This means that Belarusian intelligence and special services may have their own agenda separate from Russia's, with which Lukashenka can attempt to pursue a more independent foreign policy.

Poland, Belarus and Ukraine To Revive the Baltic – Black Sea Water Route

Belarus and Ukraine are currently studying the economic feasibility of reviving the E40 waterway which goes along the Vistula and Dnieper rivers. It will connect the Baltic and Black Seas and make inland shipping cheaper and more environmentally friendly.

On 10 October the trilateral commission presented their project on the route's restoration at the international exhibition "Transport Week – Belarus 2014" in Minsk.

The Oder-Vistula-Dnieper route, which had operated since the 18th century and connected the two seas till World War II, has laid in ruins for decades. At present, interest is growing

again not only in the Eastern Europe region, but also in Scandinavia and Turkey.

Belarus and Ukraine water transport agencies seem to be quite happy with the project, while Polish civil society express their concern about its potential impact on the environment – it can damage natural water reserves and cause flooding.

Earlier on, the Latvian government turned down a project that would connect the Daugava and Dnieper rivers for the same reason. According to their assessments, the reconstruction of the ancient trade route “from the Varangians to the Greeks” could endanger Latvia's greatest river environment.

The Vistula-Dnieper project

The Oder-Vistula-Dnieper inland waterway emerged in the 18th century and crossed several countries in Eastern Europe, including the lands of modern Belarus. As a trade route, it connected the Baltic and Black Seas and operated until World War II. After the war part of the route, stretching from Warsaw to Brest, stopped working. Soviet leaders thought about reviving the route, but never got any further than talking it over. Since 1990s, however, these newly independent countries have renewed their efforts to restore the trade route.



Recently, discussion over the restoration of the route led to the project “Restoration of Inland Waterway E40 in the Dnieper-Vistula region: From Strategy to Planning”. The project is an attempt to prepare an economic and technical justification, as well as a comprehensive study of its environmental impact and other potential consequences which its reconstruction might lead to.

Costing \$1m, it is being financed by the EU cross border cooperation programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine. The study will be carried out from 2014 to 2015. The reconstruction of the

waterway itself is estimated to cost around \$150-200m.

After a conference in Brest in March 2014, a permanent commission for discussing the Dnieper-Vistula route was founded. It includes both national and local governments as well as experts and NGOs from Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. In July, a conference took place in Warsaw with about 100 politicians, officials and experts to discuss the project.

Economic Benefits and Environmental Concerns

The countries of the Black and Baltic Sea regions, and transit countries like Belarus, are all interested in using the waterway to ship their cargo at lower prices and with greater ease. Inland waterway transportation consumes less energy, as it can move with the river's current without consuming fuel for hundreds of kilometres at a time. Moreover, it causes less environmental pollution than both railroad and motorway cargo transportation.

According to Polish experts from the trilateral commission, the E40 route operation will reduce the cargo transportation time between the two seas by 21 days, will cut fuel consumption by a third and relieve the current cargo loads of the Polish ports in Gdansk and Gdynia. After its complete reconstruction, the route will be able to ship 8m tonnes of cargo annually.

Belarus and Ukraine are the project's primary advocates. In more democratic Poland, civil society is voicing its concerns on how the government's economic interests may impede on the environment's health. A part of the Bug river is located within a natural reserve that makes up part of the EU Natura 2000 network. Poles also worry about the impact of the project, particularly its potential to flood the Vistula river in Poland. Of course, the same problems may also arise in Belarus, but no one is able voice their objections to the project if a decision has already been made at the top.

The Belarusian Fleet

If implemented, as an inland country, Belarus would get access to two seas, with the Baltic Sea ports being the most lucrative. It would allow it to cut shipping costs for Belarusian exports like potash and oil products, as well as the freight of its Eurasian Union partners. This would make Belarus a major player in the European waterway transportation system.

Belarusian representatives view the project as being of strategic and long-term importance. Back in 2008, a Ministry of Transport official Branislaŭ Havarouški said, “the time will come when the EU will engage in the project to relieve railroad and motorway East-West routes”. It appears, he may have been right.

In Belarus, the waterway's infrastructure has depreciated considerably, though the government is currently trying to repair it. The areas currently under considering include the western Bug and Prypiac rivers since they are part of the E40 route. However, the facts on the ground seem to demonstrate that the project has largely been a failure. In January 2014 a state agency inspected the work of inland waterway transport companies. It concluded that the sector is stagnate and the state's development programme for the sector over 2011-2015 had failed.

The number of usable vessels continues to decrease in number and even the capacity currently available is scarcely used. These newly created companies, which should have been working to develop the water transportation network appeared to rather be dealing with trade and not the inland fleet's development. In other words, the industry has plunged into corruption and is in a critical state.

Will the Vikings' Route be Revived?



In early 2000s, the Belarusian government announced plans to restore the Daugava-Dnieper waterway. This waterway served as a part of an ancient trade route that stretched “from the Varangians to the Greeks” and connected Scandinavia, Kievan Rus’ and the Byzantine Empire via the Baltic and the Black Seas.

According to Belarusian officials, an international consortium have expressed their readiness to implement the waterway restoration project worth \$10bn, with Kaupthing Investment Bank from Iceland providing a bulk of the investment. The authorities have estimated the annual freight that will pass via the route to be around 100m tonnes.

Talks surrounding the project took place in 2004 at a session of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Soon after, however, the Latvian Ministries of Transportation and the Environment announced that they thought the was a potential threat to the environment as it could negatively affect the Daugava river in terms of the quality of its water and its overall environment. Furthermore, they claimed the project was economically infeasible.

So far, the project is stuck in a stalemate, with neither Belarus nor Latvia possessing the political will or the funds to implement it. Nevertheless, the inland waterways remain a potentially lucrative area for development and the governments seem likely to return to it when the necessary conditions emerge.

Meanwhile, the Vistula-Dnieper route's reconstruction may yet see the light of day in the coming years. With the obvious economic and environmental advantages, the project can benefit both EU and Belarus, as it will help it further integrate into the European economic space and attract foreign investment.

Belarus Smuggles EU Food to Russia Despite Sanctions

On 19 September Russian Agricultural Control announced that Russia can restrict the imports of fish and dairy from a number of Belarusian companies. These companies allegedly violate the sanctions regime by re-exporting EU products under fake labels.

Since the very imposition of sanctions, Russia has constantly charged Belarus with cheating. Belarusian officials have denied the accusations or blamed incidents on technical mishaps.

For Belarusian food producers, Russia's ban on Western food imports has become an opportunity to cash in, and they have been willing to take risks in order to earn money.

A Klondike for Belarusian Food Producers

On 6 August Russia imposed a ban on the import of food products from the Western countries that had previously supported sanctions against Russia. Russia also sought to counterbalance the loss of imports. Western producers who worked on the Russian market experienced serious problems, while non-Western countries benefited by increasing their exports to Russia.

Belarus reacted to these developments immediately. On 7 August the Deputy Minister of Agriculture Leanid Marynič said in an interview with RIA Novosti that Belarus is ready to replace the banned products, calling the situation a "Klondike for Belarus." The Ministry of Agriculture officials reported that

they could earn an estimated \$200-400m more this year thanks to the sanctions.

Vladimir Putin called Lukashenka on 7 August after the sanctions were introduced, asking him to “accept this measure with understanding” and protect the Russian market. Apparently, Putin anticipated the unscrupulous behaviour of Russia's Customs Union partner. Unsurprisingly, Lukashenka promised full transparency for any goods that were to cross the Belarus-Russian border.

The head of the Russian Agricultural Control Agency Sergei Dankvert arrived in Minsk on 12 August and urged Belarus to increase agricultural exports to Russia. Dankvert reported that Belarus would be allowed to process EU food products and export them to Russia. In response to this, Deputy Prime-Minister [Michail Rusy](#) confirmed that Belarus was in full control of the situation and that the deliveries would proceed in full compliance with corresponding agreements.

Meanwhile, Lukashenka described his opinion of the situation in a very simple way: “We need to move on this, seize the moment and makes some money. We did not commit ourselves to any restrictions regarding our own internal market. We can import the [food] products from anywhere, process them, and sell them to Russia”.

The Dishonest Partner

Despite the ongoing public assurances from Belarusian officials, the Belarusian side was caught cheating friends in the east on multiple occasions.

On 18 August Dankvert told the ITAR-TASS agency that Russia had detected attempts to re-export EU fruits and vegetables via Belarus. He said some EU countries do not indicate the place of origin of their production or mislabel their goods before sending produce to Belarus, from where exports eventually travel to Russia.

✘ The goods sold to Russia sometimes lack accompanying documentation. Upon examining the goods on the Russian side, it was found that many products actually originated from Poland, Slovenia, the Netherlands, and Lithuania.

Interestingly, state-owned company Belmytservis, founded by the State Customs Committee, was listed as one of the main violators of the Russian embargo on EU food products.

Dankvert urged Belarus to monitor the situation more closely and threatened to impose restrictions on the imports from Belarus if violations persisted. However, the Ministry of Agriculture of Belarus has denied all accusations. The Minister called Dankvert privately, but and received no confirmation of the alleged violations, according to a Ministry official who spoke to BelaPAN news agency. Nevertheless, the Russian Agricultural Control Agency has continued to report violations on a daily basis.

Collapse of TIR Business

Although Belarusian officials hoped for a Klondike, many Belarusian businesses have actually suffered from sanctions. One example is TIR companies, which owns large trucks and specialises in transporting goods from the EU to Russia. The imposition of Russian sanctions have led to a sharp decline in TIR's business.

The owners of Belarusian transport companies say that the ✘ market is virtually collapsing, with orders falling by about 30% in recent months. Competition grew sharply, and many companies offer cut-throat prices in order to attract customers.

As Stanislaŭ Savicki, the director of the Autamahistral company from Belarusian border city of Hrodna said in an interview to *Naviny.by*: "The European market is dead for us. Profits have fallen by 60%. At the moment, selling the trucks looks more reasonable than using them."

Competitors from Russia and the EU have flooded into the Belarusian market, as they are also losing their markets. Companies that own refrigerator trucks became especially vulnerable to competition, since these vehicles have been traditionally used exclusively to transport food stuffs. Now they are loaded with anything for the businesses to stay afloat.

Many companies have turned to the Belarusian Ministry of Transportation offering their vehicles for transporting the allegedly increased exports of Belarusian foodstuffs to Russia. Even so, this is unlikely to make up for their losses due to the imposition of sanctions.

Sanctions Bring EU Investment

EU businesses are demonstrating renewed interest in investing into Belarus. Several EU producers have offered Belarus to cooperate in processing and selling EU goods to Russia, which was permitted by Moscow.

Aliaksej Bahdanaŭ, head of the Foreign Trade Department of the Belarusian Economy Ministry, said the Ministry is currently examining offers from potential partners. Officials from Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have already discussed possibilities for cooperating with Belarus as far as dairy exports are concerned.

The Polish Minister of Agriculture Marek Sawicki [visited Minsk on 14 August](#) to discuss the increase in supply of Polish fruits and vegetables to Belarus. Twelve Polish companies attended the meeting. After the meeting, Sawicki announced that Belarus would be buying 200,000 tonnes of Polish milk per month.

Moscow's sanctions are thus having divergent effects on the Belarusian economy. On the one hand, sanctions have benefited food producers and may increase Western investment in Belarus. On the other hand, the food ban has harmed delivery companies

that relied on EU-Russia trade.

The ongoing re-exports of goods also show that Belarus seeks to make money on the tensions between Russia and the West, using Russia's momentary weakness to its advantage.

For Lukashenka, the Eurasian Union does not present itself as a union of values, but rather a means of [extracting as many economic benefits](#) as possible to support his regime.

The Union's architect Vladimir Putin seems to understand this. Given the difficult circumstances, however, he needs as much Belarusian support as he can get – and he is ready to pay for it.

Talks with Neighbours and the EU, Ties with Iraq – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest

The gathering on the Ukrainian crisis mediated by Belarus and held on 26 August in Minsk became one of the most important recent global events.

The Belarusian government tried to make maximum use of this opportunity to promote its own national interests in its relations with the EU and its other neighbours.

Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#)'s recent visit to Warsaw focused primarily on regional security and trade relations. Belarus also managed to substantially improve its ties with Iraq.

Lukashenka Talks with Neighbours, EU Officials

The key foreign policy event for Belarus in August was the Minsk meeting of the Eurasian "troika", the Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and three top EU commissioners. Belarus Digest covered the background and political ramifications of this meeting for Belarus in [a separate story](#).

It is telling that although [Alexander Lukashenka](#) and Vladimir Putin held no bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Minsk summit, the Belarusian president held bilateral meetings with all other parties in attendance.

His meeting with Catherine Ashton was more an issue of protocol than anything else, without any joint statement or even a mention of the bilateral discussion. Still, any dialogue at such a high level seemed impossible only a few weeks ago.

Time will tell whether this meeting helped the parties to start building the trust they need to design and implement a package of reciprocal steps to normalise their relations. However, Lukashenka's appreciation of the EU's role in the peace process in Ukraine, expressed during a phone call with his Serbian counterpart on 1 September and made public by his press service, looks like a positive sign.

Lukashenka and Poroshenko discussed several bilateral issues besides the Ukrainian crisis, including strengthening of mutual trade and economic relations, especially in the energy arena, and the official demarcation of Belarus-Ukraine border. However, Lukashenka's press service chose to keep quiet about these bilateral discussions. They focused solely on the crisis in Ukraine and potential implications of the country's association agreement with the EU for its neighbours.

Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev chose to stay in Minsk overnight after the Minsk meeting to continue his discussions with Alexander Lukashenka. The two leaders may

have found common ground with regard to their status in the Eurasian Union. However, unlike Nazarbayev, Lukashenka now prefers to refrain from any public statements criticising the EaEU.

Warsaw and Minsk Discuss Ukraine

Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei paid a working visit to Poland on 28-29 August. In Warsaw, he met with his Polish counterpart Radosław Sikorski and Janusz Piechociński, Polish Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy.

The talks focused on the situation in and around Ukraine. Vladimir Makei shared his assessment of the Minsk meeting. Radosław Sikorski said that the fact that Russia and Ukraine were Belarus and Poland's immediate neighbours was "the cause of their great concern about what was happening between these two countries."

Poland certainly values Belarus as an important source of insider information about Russia's intentions towards Ukraine. The Polish government also appreciates the measured position the Belarusian authorities have taken in the Ukraine crisis from its very inception.

Polish PM Donald [Tusk already called Lukashenka](#) in April to discuss this issue. This move surprised many of those who are aware of Lukashenka's pariah status in the West. National security considerations seem to have outweighed the reluctance of dealing with Lukashenka's regime. Sikorski's invitation to Makei to visit Warsaw is a continuation of this policy line.

No Breakthrough in Polish-Belarusian Relations – Yet

The foreign ministers also discussed bilateral relations. Radosław Sikorski expressed Poland's satisfaction with the progress achieved during the bilateral talks. Indeed, the two countries have recently established [contacts](#) on the level of

deputy ministers on a monthly basis. The dialogue has focused predominately on trade, visa issues, trans-border and cultural cooperation.

At the press briefing after their meeting on 28 August, Sikorski mentioned some conversations on consular matters, the forthcoming signing of an agreement in the field of education as well as increased historical dialogue among positive examples of cooperation. The Polish minister spoke in favour of upgrading the existing legal framework of bilateral relations as "some agreements dated back to Soviet times". He also rejoiced in Makei's meeting with the minister of economy, seeing it as another positive step forward.

Vladimir Makei refrained from highlighting any specific areas of bilateral cooperation during his press briefing. He announced that the parties had agreed on "holding a separate meeting on bilateral relations in the future". However, according to Makei, "this meeting requires thorough preparations".

Translated from diplomatic language, this means that such a meeting is unlikely to happen any time soon. Any breakthrough in bilateral relations will come only after Belarus takes serious steps to calm the West's concerns about political freedoms and the human rights situation in the country.

Belarus Successfully Restores Its Relationship with Iraq

Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei made an official visit to Iraq on 23 and 24 August. This was the highest-level Belarusian delegation to visit this country in the post-Saddam era.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime by the US and allied military forces in 2003 dealt a crushing blow to relations between Belarus and Iraq. Lukashenka's regime was then one of the staunchest supporters of Hussein in the world. It used this status mostly to promote its economic interests. Some allegations were also made about [military cooperation](#) between

the two regimes.

The new Iraqi authorities had little appreciation for this old friendship and relations between the two nations practically froze. Belarus closed down its diplomatic mission in Baghdad, and Iraq reopened its embassy in Minsk only three years ago.

However, this difficult period seems to be over. Vladimir Makei met with several of the most important top-ranking Iraqi officials during his trip to Baghdad. This list of officials included the president, the current and future prime ministers, parliament's speaker, and foreign and oil ministers. Iraq's President Muhammad Fuad Masum interpreted Makei's visit as a sign of support to the Iraqi authorities in their ongoing fight against extremism.

During its visit, Belarus' top diplomat predictably emphasised its trade and investment interests. Belarus seeks to enter Iraq's lucrative oil market with its equipment. Two countries signed an agreement on mutual protection for investments. They also confirmed plans to organise another meeting of the bilateral commission on trade and economic cooperation and a visit of Iraqi businessmen to Belarus.

Minsk now seems to be ready to stage a comeback in Iraq. Yet much depends on whether Belarusian business will be able to deal with Iraq's omnipresent corruption.

**Belarus in World Rankings:
Strong Potential, Weak**

Performance

The most well-known international indexes show that Belarus is maintaining the potential of its people, although its governance, economy, political and economic freedoms remain at a very low level.

Belarus has had a rather good showing in the UNDP Human Development Index, the Legatum Prosperity Index and the Ease of Doing Business Index.

But the results of Economic Freedom Index, Press Freedom Index, Freedom House Index, Global Peace Index, Corruption Perception Index and Sovereign Credit Rating are nothing short of disastrous. In some of them, Belarus finds itself in close company with Third World countries.

Compared to other countries in the region, Belarus usually finds itself ranked above Ukraine or Russia, but lower than Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

Below, we compare Belarus' current standing in the world rankings with those of 2010, when Belarus Digest [first collected](#) all available ranking data in one article.

Rankings in Which Belarus Had a Good Showing



According to the **UNDP Human Development Index**, Belarus is a country that enjoys a high level of human development. Belarus occupies the 50th place, with Croatia ranking 47 and recognised as a country with a very high level of development.

This index takes into account life expectancy, education level, and GDP. Belarus looks better than Russia (55th place) and Ukraine (78th position), but is worse off than Poland (39th), Lithuania (41st), and Latvia (44th). Notably, Belarus has actually improved its position since 2010.

The **Legatum Prosperity Index**, which measures wellbeing and satisfaction with one's life, ranked Belarus 58th while placing Russia at 61st, Ukraine at 64th, Lithuania at 43rd, Latvia at 48th and Poland, with the highest score in the sample, at 34th. All of these countries belong to a single group consisting of nations ranked in an upper-middle range. The Index demonstrates that Belarus has great educational and social capital, while its overall governance and economy are still in bad shape. According to these results, Belarus has moved up in the rankings since 2010.

Belarus occupies the 63rd place in the Ease of Doing Business Index. World Bank Group admits that people can easily start a business, register property or enforce contracts in Belarus, however it remains difficult to pay taxes or obtain a credit. As is in the case of the Human Development Index, Belarus is doing better than Russia and Ukraine, but worse than its neighbours from the European Union. Belarus has worsened its position since 2010.

Rankings in Which Belarus did not Fair Well

✘ According to the **Economic Freedom Index**, Belarus remains a country with a mostly unfree economy and finds itself in the rankings inbetween Nepal and Ethiopia.

Belarus has severe issues with the rule of law, as well as monetary, investment, and financial freedoms. The Heritage Foundation and the The Wall Street Journal placed Belarus at 150th and Ukraine at 155th, both abysmally low rankings when it comes to overall economic freedom.

All the rest of Belarus' neighbours appear to have more economic freedom. When compared to the results from previous ratings, Belarus has more or less retained its previous position in the index, acquiring only a few more points. In 2010, Belarus sat at 48.7 and was able to climb slightly up to 50.1 in 2014.

According to Freedom House's criteria, Belarus is an unfree country. Russia has approximately the same ranking, while Ukraine appears to be partly free. According to the 'Freedom in the World 2014' report, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia are free countries. Belarus retained its previous position and has the same freedom rating as China.

Reporters without Borders show that **freedom of the press in Belarus** (157th place) is on a par with that in Swaziland (156th position) and Pakistan (158th rank). Ukraine occupies the 127th slot and the Russian Federation comes in at 148th place. While Belarus has improved its position since 2010, its EU-member neighbours make its ranking look all the more deplorable as Poland achieved 19th place in the rankings, and Lithuania and Latvia placed 32nd and 37th, respectively.

The Institute for Economics and Peace, one of the Economist's analytical centres, measures the peacefulness of 162 countries. Its **Global Peace Index** utilises three main criteria: the level of safety and security in society, the extent of domestic or international conflict, and the degree of a nation's militarisation. Again, here Belarus has gained some ground since 2010. In the global standings, Belarus found itself ranked 92nd, routinely doing better than either Russia or Ukraine, but worse than its neighbours from the European Union.

☒ Transparency International regularly evaluates countries' **perception of the level of corruption** and this time around Belarus found itself ranked 123rd, the same as the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Togo.

According to expert estimates, Belarus has improved its position since 2010 and remains less corrupt than Russia (127th position) and Ukraine (144th position), but performs poorly when compared to Poland (38th), Lithuania (43th), and Latvia (49th).

Sovereign credit rating is considered by foreign investors an assessment of the investments made in the economy of a particular country. Standard & Poor's assessed Belarus' local currency rating, foreign currency rating, transferability and convertability to all be a B-. Unfortunately, in this index, Belarus has seen its position to have fallen considerably since 2010.

Where Belarus Gains and Losses

When [Compared to 2010](#), Belarus improved its position in the Human Development Index, Legatum Prosperity Index, Press Freedom Index, Global Peace Index and Perception of Corruption Index. This is evidence that quality of life remains one of the primary tasks that the authorities work on, as they see economic stability as a means to legitimise their rule.

Belarus retained its previous position in the Economic Freedom Index and Freedom House Index, which shows that Lukashenka's regime is still opposed to political and economic freedom.

Belarus' position in the Ease of Doing Business Index and Sovereign credit rating has worsened since 2010 for a number of reasons. Namely, the authorities have failed to implement a successful economic growth policy and do not see business development as a way out of their ongoing economic crisis.

It should be noted that despite these positive indicators in some of the indexes, Belarus' ascent in the rankings in some studies may also be linked to the worsening of other countries' positions, or to changes in research methodology. The same logic may apply to the worsening of some of Belarus' positions.

At any rate, the rankings show that Belarus has great potential, but in the end continues to suffer from inefficient governance.

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 bureaucratized 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.

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.