

# The Free Cinema of an Unfree Belarus

The West has never been interested in Belarusian cinema, but things are changing now. For the first time in history Belarus has a few films that international audience can appreciate.

Although we cannot consider the existing films as 100% Belarusian, "Above the Sky", "In the Fog", "Viva Belarus" have become breakthroughs for Belarus. All three films represent Belarus from different angles.

"Viva Belarus" shows the fate of young people, who, despite their own desires, are forced to get involved in politics. They learn the downsides of the Belarusian system and alter their predestination.

"Above the Sky" also depicts a story about young people, however the writers target social issues more in this work. The protagonist of the film has to get used to the idea that he has HIV and remains unexpectedly close to his deathbed. "In the Fog" shows the realities of the Second World War and its moral tragedy.

Very little Belarusian money went into these projects. Poland's Ministry of Culture together with the French Canal+ financed "Viva Belarus", while the UN Program of Development paid for "Above the Sky". Belarus only allocated a small quota of funding for "In the Fog". Germany, Russia, the Netherlands and Latvia provided a considerable amount of money to support the film.

## **Viva Belarus**

"Viva Belarus" remains the most controversial film about

Belarus that has ever come to light thus far. The crew was working on the film in Poland, while Belarus proper has very little space in the film. The stories of the Belarusian political soldiers – youth activists illegally [drafted into the army](#) – became the basis of the plot. One of them, Franak Vyachorka, became a script writer and the prototype for the main character.

The premiere of the film took place at last year's Cannes film festival, while in 2013 the film got second place at a film festival in Prague. Very few Belarusian artists have an opportunity to present their works at Cannes and even fewer are able to win an award at an international film festival.

The plot develops around a Belarusian musician, illegally drafted to the army despite numerous health problems. In the army, he endures beatings and betrayals, and becomes disabled at the end of the film. Cult rock-musician Lyavon Volsky composed the music to the film – and indeed the soundtrack can be considered one of the strongest points of the film.

The film's creators advertised it as “based on real life events”, still, the film contains many speculations. For example, police never disperse concerts in clubs using tear gas shells in Belarus. An influential opposition newspaper Nasha Niva accused the authors of making a picture of North Korea rather than of Belarus.

Such problems occurred due to the weak and limited influence of Belarusians throughout the process of shooting the film. Polish director Krzysztof Łukaszewicz showed Belarus through the eyes of the West, not of Belarus: everything seems worse than it actually is with a huge Lenin monument on the screen to make it look even more horrible.

Despite its hyperbolisation, the film has become a noticeable event in Belarus, and Lukashenka's regime reacted sharply to it. The Belarusian Ambassador to Poland called the film an

attempt to make Belarus and Poland enemies.

## **Above the Sky**

The film creators could not put the UN-sponsored film "Above the Sky" officially on screen for a long time. According to scriptwriter Andrei Kureichyk, the UN Development Programme tried to impose political censorship on the film, so the authors published their finished version on the Internet a year ago. "Above the Sky" got more than 100,000 views on Youtube in a short period of time. Then the video hosting service deleted the film at the request of the copyright holders – the UNDP.

The film tells a story of a young musician who has the [HIV](#). The character should rethink his life and realise he was to die in the near future. The plot at first appearance is rather classic for such type of films. However, "Above the Sky" does not only tell the story of living with HIV, but also goes to great lengths in portraying the Belarusian reality: from the negative sentiments of youth to the dullness of everyday life. It was precisely this that made it problematic for the film to be aired on Belarusian TV.

The film contain some scenes that even more horrible than those found in the "Viva Belarus". However, the filmmakers made it less politically biased, and the Belarusian audience accepted it more willingly. The film is not without its faults, and while it became the debut film for many of its actors, their acting could have been much better. Dzmitry Papko, the leading actor in "Viva Belarus", also made his debut in "Above the Sky" .

## **In the Fog**

"In the Fog" has one great advantage over the other films. Syarhei Laznitsa, the script writer and director, based the film on the novel by Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau. Bykau

remains the main icon of the Belarusian literature. Foreign publishers have translated his works into more than 50 languages.

The story begins in 1942, when German troops arrest an ordinary Belarusian and then release him unexpectedly. The partisans suspect the main character of treason and take him to the forest to shoot him dead. However, an ambush waits for them there. One of the partisans die, and the main character must explain to the other that he was not guilty.

The International Federation of Film Critics awarded a special prize to the film at the Cannes festival in 2012. The critics accepted the film warmly, despite its moral seriousness. As it is not an easy film, it takes time and a conscientious moral effort to really understand and appreciate the film. The film depicts the war not as a struggle between people, but rather as a moral struggle within people.

### **The Future of the Belarusian Film Production**

Belarus has suffered from the absence of domestic contemporary filmmaking for a long time. "Viva Belarus", "Above the Sky" and "In the Fog" remain rare exceptions to this, films that coincidentally all came out at around the same time.

Low salaries in the film production sphere force actors and directors to emigrate and build up their careers abroad. "Above the Sky" script writer Andrei Kureichyk earns money on writing scripts for the Russian comedies, while "In the Fog" director Syarhei Laznitsa has lived in Germany for more than 10 years by now. It may sound ridiculous, but Belarusian operators earn more filming weddings, than in films.

The authoritarian character of the country has never facilitated the development of cinema. Creative personalities cannot work in the conditions when they have to coordinate almost every scene with the authorities. Until Belarus has

money and the proper conditions for the development of the film industry, the perspectives for Belarusian cinema will be lost in the fog.

Some of the festivals in the West continue to show these films. One of them – “Viva Belarus” – you can also view on [YouTube](#) with English subtitles.

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## **Do Belarusians Want to Join the EU?**

On 2 March, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies presented a report on geopolitical preferences of Belarusians. The media paid little attention to the document presented by an influential Belarusian think-tank, although the conclusions of this report could be important for Belarus.

Despite the crisis in Europe, the regime’s anti-European propaganda and the EU’s weak informational policy inside Belarus, the number of Belarusian euro-enthusiasts continues to grow, slowly, but still. At present moment, 17 % Belarusians consistently support the idea of European integration. Moreover, if we held a referendum on Belarus’ joining the EU tomorrow, 38,2% Belarusians would have said “yes”.

The new thing about the research is that the biggest group of respondents – 30,9% – does not want to see Belarus involved in any integration processes at all. 23,3 % Belarusians stand for integration with Russia. This is more than for joining the EU.

But despite state propaganda the level of pro-Russian orientation keeps going down. Primarily because the Russian

integration supporters are the people who lived most of their lives in the Soviet Union, and their number in the society is gradually decreasing in a natural way. 20,0 % want integration with both Russia and the EU and see Belarus as a sort of a bridge between the East and the West.

## **Europe's Casus**

The European Union has an unbelievable Soft Power in Belarus, it stands steadily even under the influence of the external conditions.

On the one hand, the regime has been promoting the anti-European propaganda in the state media for many years, focusing on the crisis in the eurozone or economic problems of the "new Europe" countries. After the election-2010, Lukashenka [accused the West](#) in attempt at the state turnover in Belarus.

On the other hand, the European Union has a very weak communication strategy inside Belarus. The EU remains a key donor of Belarus. It has provided € 510 million of technical assistance during the years of independence. But according to BISS analysts only 4,6% Belarusians have any idea of the ["European dialogue for modernization of Belarus"](#). The Belarusian authorities keep silence about the European projects while Brussels put little effort into conveying this information directly to Belarusians.

Despite all this, European integration has become the most stable geopolitical choice. Moreover, there appeared a trend of growth of the pro-European moods in Belarus. The data presented by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies in September 2003 shows that 23,4 % Belarusians are ready to vote for joining the EU in case of a referendum. This number increased by 15% in 10 years regardless of the unfavourable conditions. The trends when Belarusians should choose between joining the EU and

integration with Russia look even more interesting.

	06`06	12`07	12`08	12`09	12`10	03`11	12`11	03`12	09`12	03`13
<b>Joining the EU</b>	29,3	33,3	30,1	42,1	38	<b>50,5</b>	<b>42</b>	37,3	<b>44,1</b>	<b>42,1</b>
<b>Integration with Russia</b>	<b>56,5</b>	<b>47,5</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>42,3</b>	<b>38,1</b>	31,5	41,5	<b>47</b>	36,2	37,2

*Data provided by the IISEPS*

The data shows that the pro-European vector of the Belarusians' preferences increases every year with regard to the integration with Russia. There are several factors that facilitate growth of the pro-European moods in Belarus.

In Belarus, European goods, European living standards, the social model, and culture have high respect. Even Lukashenka, ordering to improve the functioning of a certain enterprise, says "make it work like in Europe".

Success of the former Soviet block members – the new EU members – also plays a significant role in the pro-European moods of Belarusians. After independence resume, Poland and Belarus started from identical positions, but Poland had become an example of the economic development. The BISS research shows that residents of the Western Belarus, the region that has intensive connections with Poland, have more pro-European moods than others.

Belarusians [often visit the European Union](#) and notice the positive sides of the European life model. The more Belarusians have an opportunity to go to the EU, the more students study in the EU, the quicker the pro-European moods will grow inside the Belarusian society.

### **Other Geopolitical Choices of Belarusians**

Despite the stable trend of pro-EU moods in Belarus, other geopolitical options presented in the BISS studies stay on the table.

There appeared a trend that no one noticed before – pro-independence moods in the Belarusian society. 30,9% Belarusians want neither European integration, nor integration with Russia. 20 years ago, in 1993, 55,1% Belarusians stood for the revival of the Soviet Union, so the views supporting total sovereignty surprise.

Russia is gradually losing its “Western Outpost”. Only 23,3% want to unite with Russia. Given that Kremlin used to see Belarus as a natural part of its empire, today’s results may seriously upset the Russian leaders.

The peculiarity of Belarus lies in the fact that 20,0% Belarusians want to be in a union with both the EU and Russia. On the one hand, it shows poor understanding of the integration processes by ordinary Belarusians. On the other hand, this confirms the Belarusian idea of a country as a bridge between the East and the West.

### **So Where?**

The pro-European orientation of Belarusians has become a noticeable trend, but we cannot claim its stability.

The people of Belarus have few means of influence the authorities. The regime did not ask the people’s opinions when it took the decision to join the Customs Union. It looks highly possible that Belarusians become just passive observers of the process of further integration with Russia. Kremlin desires to adjoin Belarus to Russia more than the European Union wants to accept it as a EU member. Moreover, Russia has much more finance and means of influence inside Belarus.

The European choice of Belarusians will always be jeopardised by the opportunistic policy of the regime and Kremlin’s imperialistic approach. The only way to turn the pro-European orientation into reality is to let Belarusians vote in free and fair elections. This may take a long time but it appears Belarusians remain pro-European despite years of propaganda

and authoritarian rule.

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## **Belarus' Model of Economic Development May Fail to Pass the 'Endurance Test'**

The Belarusian authorities count on the country's economic growth without taking into account dangerous trends in the demographic situation and its consequences for the labour market. These conclusions appear in a study made by economists of the IPM Research Center, shared with Interfax-West news agency.

"Intentions of the Belarusian authorities to proceed with large-scale modernization of public enterprises imply that accumulation of capital which formed the basis of the expansionary policy is still deemed to be a major factor of the long-term growth", the study says.

Meanwhile, the economists point out that growth of the potential GDP slowed down in 2012 compared to mid-2010s, economic impact of investments decreased, and further extensive accumulation of production factors cannot serve as a basis of the GDP growth in the long-run period. These conclusions also appear in last-year analytical papers of the World Bank and forecasts of the Eurasian Development Bank as well as of a number of international financial institutes.

At the same time, the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-2009 and the currency crisis in **Belarus** in 2011 "raised the issue of limits of resources of the **Belarusian** economic policy model", the researchers point out.

According to them, the question is foremost of the risks which are already present in the country's labour market and caused by demographic problems and an increase in labour migration.

### **There will be no one to work?**

The researchers point out that since 2005, the economic growth in the country was positively influenced by the demographic situation. At this particular time, people born in early 1980s, during the previous fertility peak, reached reproductive age. However, today the birth rate is significantly lower, while the death rate keeps up at a consistently high level: its decline was recorded only in 2012.

"Before 2007-2008, in the population structure there was a decrease of share of people in the under-working age and simultaneous growth of share of population in the working age. In the late 2000s, trends became even less favourable. Thus, along with population decline in Belarus, ageing of population began, which has negative impact on the labour market", the study says.

Relying upon the Belstat data, the researchers acknowledge that a decrease in economically active population was recorded in Belarus in 2011-2012. "A decline in employment is evidenced during the last two years. According to the Belstat data, at the end of 2012, the total decline against the maximum level of 2010 was 2%, or almost 100,000 people. If the current demographic trends remain unchanged, the situation in the labour market will worsen", the IPM economists forecast.

These forecasts are supported by a Belstat forecast, in accordance with which in 2020 the working-age population will decrease by 0.5 mln compared to 2012.

"Forecasts of the United Nations Population Department are even more pessimistic. In accordance with the middle scenario, Belarus is faced with a decline in population at the age of 15

to 59 from 6.4 to 5.7 mln during 2010-2020", the researchers say. Moreover, according to the UN, the situation will not improve before 2050.

### **Extent of Labour Migration**

As noted in the study, the demographic situation is aggravated by the fact that they proceed from neutral assumptions of relative migration and suppose that migration flows will remain at the same level. "In the case of Belarus, there is a danger that such an assumption may be too optimistic", the experts believe.

The researchers remind that migration flows in Belarus intensified in 1990s when after the restoration of independence of ex-Soviet republics people began returning to their historic homeland. Later on, the extent of migration dramatically decreased, and already since 1996 the number of migrants never surpassed 20,000 people a year.

Besides, Belarus shows a positive migration balance. "However, an analysis of official documents shows that between 2000 and 2009, 254,000 people, or 2,5% of population who lived in Belarus at the beginning of 2000, and not 113,000 people, left the country", the study says.

The researchers also point out that no reliable data is available in Belarus about the number of Belarusian citizens who left the country to work abroad. "The official statistics isolate people working abroad. However, these figures include only those who went working abroad under an official contract. These statistics do not reckon in those who have seasonal employment nor those who do not register the fact of being employed abroad nor those who are employed unofficially", the experts say.

According to them, this problem is especially acute in the case of labour migration to Russia which does not have border control on its border with Belarus, and where all employment

barriers were removed after the Common Economic Space was established.

"The extent of labour migration is difficult to estimate. Officially, according to statistics, about 4,000 Belarusians work abroad, which is at least one order of magnitude less than the actual value", the study notes. According to the census of 2009, 41,900 people worked outside of Belarus, including 37,700 who worked in Russia, which is by an order of magnitude less than the data received through the analysis of employment contracts concluded by the Belarusians abroad.

### **Why Do They Leave?**

The Belarusians are actively considering employment opportunities abroad, as evidenced by a poll conducted by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) in 2009. The results of the poll show that 18.8% of respondents would like to leave the country, and many of those who were inclined to stay in the country took this decision only because they lacked money for emigration (12% of respondents). Other 6.4% of respondents were not sure that they would find jobs abroad.

"The main reason which prompts people to move to another country is a desire to improve their financial situation. This reason for a possible emigration from Belarus was cited by 81.8% of respondents wishing to emigrate ", the IPM experts say.

The researchers point out that after the crisis of 2011 these trends gathered momentum, and pretexts for emigration strengthened.

Russia continues to lead the way in the list of countries which are the most attractive for labour migrants. Thus, despite the fact that after the stabilization of the Belarusian economy in late 2011 the income gap for work in Belarus and Russia narrowed, Russia attracts Belarusian citizens by lack of language barrier and simple employment

procedure.

The experts also point out that the labour outflow to Russia is more apparent in eastern regions of the country as well as in small towns.

### **Look Who Left**

"However, one cannot assert that poverty pushes people to seek employment abroad. The most socially vulnerable groups in Belarus are unemployed and economically inactive population which cannot find jobs even in the country. The international labour migration is chosen by rather well-off city dwellers who in such a way receive additional income for improving their financial situation and not for combatting poverty", the experts stress.

The average age of labour migrants is now just over 37 years (economically active population – 39 years), and it is basically the same for all areas of labour migration. At the same time, those who go to Russia include young professionals as well as people of middle and older age, while EU countries attract skilled youth mostly.

Studies conducted by the IPM show that men dominate among those who go to Russia to earn money, and women amount to 9.4% only, while in other directions their share amounts to about one third. "Gender differences can be explained by differences in demand for workforce: probably, "traditionally male" professions are in higher demand in the Russian labour market", the researchers say.

The labour migration is simplified by the fact that some Belarusians can get the Pole's Card and go to work in Poland, for example. Some people have relatives in Russia, which facilitates their adaptation to a new job.

The experts also point out to usually higher level of education and skills of people going to work abroad. Almost a

half of labour migrants from Belarus employed in Russia work in construction, about 30% are working in transport, retail trade and provision of other communal, social and personal services.

### **Impact on the Economy**

The researchers note that the labour migration has an ambiguous effect on social policy in Belarus. On the one hand, the population has a short-term effect of additional income in the form of transfers from labour migrants. However, on the macro level, labour migration places additional burden on the Social Protection Fund as a part of contributions to pension benefits are lost.

While the amount of transfers from labour migration in 2011 is realistically estimated at 3.2% of GDP, the Belarusians are by no means inclined to invest these funds in new businesses or to make long-term savings in their bank accounts.

The researchers point out that Belarus faced a large scale labour outflow in 2011. It was felt most acutely in construction, health care and IT domain.

"In the medium term, Belarus, according to demographic projections, faces reduction in workforce. Thus, the need to resolve macroeconomic problems is complemented by the need to reform the social protection system and the labour market, without which the reform in other sectors will not be efficient enough", the researchers sum up.

In their opinion, we need not only changes in regulation of labour market (employment policy and wages) but also far-reaching reforms in the real sector: privatization and restructuring of public enterprises, improvement of business climate and liberalization of product markets.

The experts note that the recommendations made by the World Bank in the Country Economic Memorandum 2012 and some other

documents are still relevant for the country. In particular, this concerns abolition of administrative control over wages and employment in public enterprises, improvement of social protection for unemployed and reform of the pension system.

*The original article appeared in Russian on [interfax.by](http://interfax.by).*

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## **Belsat TV Struggles to Survive**

On 26 November the only independent television channel Belsat broadcasting for Belarusians cut the broadcast and sent a significant number of its employees on leave. Earlier this year Belsat broadcasted for 17 hours a day. Today it is only six and a half hours.

An independent TV channel that broadcasts from Poland to Belarus failed to raise necessary funds to continue its work in the old format. After the economic crisis Western donors are financing Belarusian independent television less and less.

Five years ago when the channel was founded, independent Belarusian community had a very sceptical attitude towards Belsat. In 2008 cultural analyst Maxim Zhabankou, who hosts a TV-program on Belsat, called the channel a propagandistic, provincial and superficial.

However, after a significant improvement in the quality of broadcasts, the criticism significantly decreased, and Belsat became one of the most popular independent media.

**Month of Reduced Broadcasting**

Belarusian democratic community has long sought to establish an independent television, which would be a response to the official propaganda. After the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus the project was launched in Poland, with the financial help of local authorities. On 10 December 2007, the day of human rights, Belsat began its broadcast.

From a financial point of view Belsat launch timing was off. The global economic crisis has dragged on, being the main reason why western countries designate less funding for the channel.

Most funding comes from Poland. In 2008 Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs directed 20.9 million zloty to Belsat (\$8,500,000), in 2009 – 20.7 million zloty (\$6,900,000), in 2010 – 16 million zloty (\$5,600,000), and in 2011 – 19 million zloty (\$6,400,000). In 2012, Polish authorities have allocated 17.6 million zloty (\$5,100,000). Each year, the governments of Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and several other countries give several million zloty for Belsat.

This year, the channel has made a good leap forward in quality, but probably did not run their finances properly. For example, since September there was a nearly three-hour block of live studio broadcast, something that no other Belarusian TV-channel has. Leaders of Belsat risked when they started high quality expensive projects, knowing about the poor state of financing. The price of this risk was a month of reduced broadcasting.

Broadcasting reduction may be the reason for the increased financial assistance during the 2013. Especially as the quality of the channel improves. On the other hand, Belarusian audience will have to be watching for a month broadcasts where news blocks do not have a narrator and where most programmes have disappeared.

**Is Belsat a Successful Channel?**

Since its foundation, Belsat channel has been facing constant criticism, deserved and not. First of all, it is the criticism of colleagues and analysts that has to do with money. According to Alena Rakava, an economist, Belsat has little impact on Belarusian society retaining high costs of production.

Television, unlike other media in Belarus supported by the West, is expensive. At the same time, the channel has no commercial profit, as private companies are afraid to advertise with Belsat.

TV channel regularly orders sociological surveys of its audience. Last sociological survey by social studies centre Zerkalo-Info was done in May 2012. According to the survey, 22.4 per cent of people in Belarus are watching satellite TV, 55 per cent of which watch Belsat. 31.5 per cent of satellite TV users never heard of Belsat existence and therefore represent the main target field for channel's marketing team.

If Zerkalo-Info figures are right, the channel's audience is approximately 970,000. Many are sceptical about such figure, and believe that a few hundred thousand less people actually watch Belsat. Despite the difference in numbers, Belsat remains the most popular independent media in Belarus.

According to Akavita, Belarusian Internet-counter, every day Belsat web-page is visited by just a little over 2000 unique users. Belsat loses in comparison to other Internet media resources. Belarusians visit independent media web-sites more during significant events. For example, the latest wave of rising attendance was during the parliamentary elections in 2012.

Belarusian authorities are attempting to do their best to make fewer citizens watch Belsat. The channel is not on cable TV networks in Belarus, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does

not give accreditation to its journalists. According to the Belarusian legislation, employees of Belsat are currently working illegally in Belarus.

Alexander Lukashenka personally outlined the channel as "stupid and uncongenial project". At the times of the wave of repressions, the Belarusian authorities have [no mercy for Belsat employees](#) as well. The courts arrested the channel's journalists many times, while the KGB officers summoned the journalists "for a talk".

Founders of Belsat wanted to create a full-fledged TV channel with informational and entertainment programmes. And if the first part was successful, the second one was not. Belarusians are primarily watching Belsat for its news programmes. Belsat shows these soap-operas instead of good quality films and shows. The reason is the same – no money to create original material or [purchase recent western production](#).

Moreover, Belsat has a strained relationship with the Polish television, where it is based. In 2009 the Polish TV officials even fired Romaszewska-Guzy from being the head of Belsat. Then several other employees of Belsat declared their resignation in solidarity with the dismissal of Romaszewska-Guzy. Later, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervened and returned the position to Romaszewska-Guzy. The future of the channel, then as much as now, seemed uncertain.

## **The Future of Belsat**

On 10 December Belsat will celebrate its fifth anniversary. At the time of its foundation in 2007 the channel's future did not look promising and the quality of programmes was very low. However over the years Belsat has succeeded in creating new Belarusian television.

Expansion of Belsat audience is taking place mostly only among the users of satellite antennas, so it is very limited. Belsat future will depend upon its strategy to overcome the

limitations set by the Belarusian regime. First, Belsat needs to improve significantly its web page and also make its broadcasts available on YouTube and social networks. Second, Belsat needs to pursue a more aggressive marketing strategy.

Belsat today makes a decent media product, but it does not always deliver it effectively to potential audience. And the real measure of the channel's success is its popularity among ordinary Belarusians.

*Ryhor Astapenia*

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## **Election Campaign, Opposition and the Struggling Economy – Digest of Polish Analytics**

Polish analysts focus on the results of the recent parliamentary elections and their consequences for Belarus. Experts also take a closer look at the opposition and its performance before and during the elections.

Since the economic indicators provide some worrisome trends, analysts also examine Belarus's economic position in the aftermath of Russia's entry into the WTO.

In *New Eastern Europe* Kamil Klysinski describes negative tendencies that appeared recently in the Belarusian financial market. At the same time, the analyst argues that Minsk does not respond to these increasing difficulties with adequate reforms. He indicates an increase in the amount of money in the market turnover of 21 per cent.

Another factor relates to a significant increase in demand for foreign currency when compared to supply. According to the analyst, the increasing rates of income in the state sector explains the present tendencies. The analyst notes that it is related to the September parliamentary elections. Moreover, the possible dissatisfaction of the state-owned company workers might lead to protests.

In another text for the [Centre for Eastern Studies](#) Kamil Klynski elaborates on the current economic situation of Belarus. He comments on the loss of an important source of income from exports. This is caused by Moscow, which decided to block the re-export of Russian oil products to the EU countries without export duties. The author argues that because of such practices Minsk could have earned \$2.5bn.

The expert notes that Russia has tolerated these duty free exports since the beginning of 2011. However, due to the lack of proper concessions for the privatisation of strategic Belarusian companies, Moscow decided to sharpen its stance and cut Minsk practises. In conclusion, Klynski suggests that the economic situation of Belarus is going to deteriorate within the next few months. The Belarusian authorities can decide to devaluate the Belarusian ruble and at the same time, seek more subsidies from Moscow.

### **Failed Elections Campaigning?**

In a [Bulletin](#) issued by the Polish Institute of International Affairs Anna Maria Dynier analyses the pre-election situation in Belarus. According to her, the whole campaign had only marginal importance. She notes that because of the repressive regime imposed by the state, a dialogue between the authorities and society did not happen. Thus, the limited airtime given to the candidates, but also lack of interest in the issue among the state media, determined the pre-election mood in the society. Moreover, the analyst argues that no serious discussion concerning the situation of Belarus was

carried out in public.

Dyner takes a closer look at the opposition's problems. Among the most burning issues she raises is a lack of united action, but also limited financial resources to run a campaign. The analyst critically evaluates internal divisions within the opposition and their inability to reach out to the Belarusian electorate. At the same time, the opposition parties did not manage to prepare a comprehensive political programme.

She recommends that Poland and the EU prepare a consistent and long-term programme of support for Belarus. So far temporary and short-term actions undertaken by Brussels have failed to bring about any changes. At the same time, she underlines that support for Belarusian society should remain on the EU's agenda.

The opposition's performance in the elections often appears in other comments. In a commentary prepared for the [Centre for Eastern Studies](#) Kamil Klysinski argues that the elections proved not the opposition's only weakness, but also its inability to work out a unified position had a detrimental effect as well. Moreover, the analyst concludes that since the election results have not been recognized internationally, it might lead to further isolation of Belarus and its closer cooperation with Russia.

### **Fragmented Opposition**

In the [Korespondent Wschodni](#) Wojciech Borodzicz-Smolinski analyses the Belarusian opposition. He notes that one of the factors that helps Lukashenka stay in power is the lack of a political alternatives for society. According to him, the divisions within the opposition have two sides.

First of all, they are due to ideological factors. Nonetheless, more important are the apparent private animosities which hinder the integration process of the opposition. Borodzicz-Smolinski highlights the particular

moments when the Belarusian opposition attempted to unite. One of the most crucial moments was before the December 2010 presidential elections. The analyst notes that the EU and the West still have to wait for a serious partner from those among the opposition with whom to discuss the future of Belarus.

### **WTO, Russia and Belarus**

Kamil Klysinki also discusses, for the [Centre for Eastern Studies](#), the consequences of Russia's entry into the WTO in August 2012. Minsk will have to decrease the level of import tariffs which in consequence may require a larger opening for foreign goods. At the same time, the Russian market will have to be more open for imports from the WTO member states. Thus it will become more competitive for the Belarusian companies. The analyst notes that all of that does not make Belarus an attractive country for investment and may delay Belarus's entry into the WTO.

The author concludes that Lukashenka argues that there have been high costs from Russia's entry into the WTO for the Belarusian economy, in order to gain more financial aid from Moscow. Minsk can also aim to export more to non-European markets, which appears as the short-term and temporary solution. Klysinki emphasises that the Belarusian regime has to urgently implement economic reforms.

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## **Nuclear Race in the Baltic Sea Region**

In the coming years virtually all southern Baltic Sea region states will be involved in a nuclear race. Disagreements between Vilnius, Minsk and Moscow over the Russian and

Belarusian nuclear plants in the vicinity of the Lithuanian border is just a part of the picture.

In late June, Lithuanian parliament approved the concession agreement for the new Visaginas nuclear power plant. The old Ignalina plant shut down a few years ago in accordance with Lithuania's accession agreement with the European Union. Japanese GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy is to become a strategic investor of the project, Lithuania (Visagino Atominė Elektrinė) would share 38%, Latvia (Latvenergo) 20% and Estonia (EestiEnergia) 22%. Despite these agreements, the Lithuanian nuclear power plant remains a hotly contested project.

### **Three Baltic States in the Nuclear Plant Business**

During the pre-voting debate in the parliament, Lithuanian prime-minister Andrius Kubilius urged to vote in favour of the Visaginas project, saying “those who vote against, vote for Belarusian and Russian nuclear stations”. Earlier, he publicly stated that Belarus and Kalingrad regional nuclear plants from the outset were envisaged as projects that would potentially stop the Visaginas plant project.

There is no unity among the Lithuanian political elite on this issue. On 16 July the Lithuanian Parliament voted for the referendum on a nuclear plant in Lithuania, thus highlighting disagreements between the opposition and the incumbent government.

Over the last two years previous years, Lithuanian officials on numerous occasions expressed their discontent with the planned Russian and Belarusian nuclear power plants in their backyard. Lithuanians are alarmed by the fact that both plants did not come through the procedure or an environmental impact assessment pursuant to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention).

In 2009 Implementation Committee of the Espoo Convention initiated a special case about Belarus Astravets power plant reviewing the implementation of Belarus' international obligations at the planning stage. An additional complaint to the Secretariat of the Espoo Convention was lodged with Lithuania in mid-2011.

Taking into account the slow procedures in the Espoo Convention and weak mechanisms to ensure state compliance with the recommendations made, Lithuanian authorities initiated a proposal in the EU organs to conduct the so called "stress tests" for nuclear reactors. Such tests are usually required for nuclear and radiation safety both for EU member states and neighbouring states when implementing their nuclear projects. The Commission submitted a report on "stress tests" to the President of the European Council in mid-2011 and assured that efforts would be made to engage Belarus and Russia in the process.

### **Planned Nuclear Power Plants**

Although Russia and Belarus have not finalised appropriate procedures according to the Espoo Convention obligations, both have already started preparatory work on the new construction sites. Russia started construction of a nuclear station in Kaliningrad in 2010 and in spring 2012 work on concrete pouring into the foundation began. Belarusians got down to developing the foundation pit for their nuclear plant in late May.

Commissioning of the first Kaliningrad nuclear reactor is expected in 2016, followed by the Astravets first reactor in 2017 and Visaginas in 2020. The projected capacity of the latter is 3.4 thousand MW, Russia's and Belarus' power plants are somewhat less powerful at 2.4 thousand MW each. Estimated cost of both Russian and Belarusian nuclear projects is around \$9bn, while Visaginas expenditures are projected to be as high as \$5-7bn. The cost of the Lithuanian power plant is cheaper

primarily because the Visaginas plant is designed to be placed in the area of the old plant, which removes the need to create extensive infrastructure from scratch.

✘ 1 – *Baltic NPP (Kaliningrad NPP)*

2 – *Astravets (Belarusian) NPP*

3 – *Visaginas NPP;*

4,5,6 – *three potential localizations (Żarnowiec, Choczewo, Gąski) of the first planned Polish NPP.*

*(Prepared by the author)*

Poland is somewhat lagging behind the neighbours. According to the strategy of the Polish Energy Group that was given a mandate to build two nuclear power plants, the first one is to be completed in 2025 and the second in 2029.

Currently Polish energy matrix almost exclusively (94%) consists of coal and Warsaw plans to diversify its energy mix. Out of hundred proposed locations three were pre-selected for the first nuclear power plant site, all near the Baltic coast. The final decision on the construction site is expected to be unveiled in 2014 together with the winner of the bid.

The Baltic Sea region is becoming intensively saturated with nuclear plants that would change its regional energy pattern in the coming years and decades and would require an intensification in the realm of nuclear cooperation between Baltic Sea region states in the near future.

### **Juggling the Energy Figures**

Officials of the Baltic Sea region states involved in the nuclear race operate with contradictory scientific data to support their intentions. On the one hand, Lithuanians are allegedly puzzled why Russians push a nuclear project in Kaliningrad which has enough to satisfy its energy demand

without a nuclear plant.

Lithuanian prime-minister Kubilius lamented that Russian officials failed to explain this to him. Some even say that Russia's Baltic nuclear power plant risks becoming bankrupt as Polish energy giant PGE announced its decision to stop negotiating on power imports from Kaliningrad. Interestingly, PGE was considered a probable investor in the Visaginas NPP too, but later withdrew from the Lithuania project.

Contrary to the calculations of commercial detriment to the Baltic nuclear power plant without Lithuania's and Poland's interest in buying its electricity, Russians insist that the project will surely be profitable. According to the official "Energy strategy in Kaliningrad until 2015", the region may start suffering from an energy deficit by 2015. Rosatom also refers to the energy balance scenarios in the Baltic region by the year of 2020, prepared by the European Network of Transmission System Operators. According to them, energy deficit in the region is inevitable.

Belarus ruler Aleksandr Lukashenka in the manner so characteristic to him, explained these contradictory regional energy estimations by unfair competition. According to him, Russians in Kaliningrad and Belarusians in Astravets took the lead making in Lithuanians and Poles start "screaming" and coming up with various arguments in order to undermine the success of their neighbours.

For all that, in the regional nuclear power race Belarus seems to be the weakest link. Its Astravets power plant totally [relies upon Russia's money and technology](#), in contrast to the other players that either aim to diversify their energy mix or lessen their energy dependency on their big resourceful neighbour.

*Andrei Yeliseyeu*

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# **Broadcasting Democracy to Belarus**

Many Belarusians who decided to greet the New Year watching Belsat TV channel were disappointed. In the last minutes of 2011, instead of entertainment or good wishes, Belsat exposed them to a cold shower of videos of the April Minsk terrorist attack, political prisoners and graphic images of police cracking down on post-election protests. This was not just an editorial mistake, but a typical weakness of an underfunded broadcasting project.

Belarusian exile media suffers from technical and professional weaknesses and lacks sufficient funding. Although recently Western funding has somewhat increased, the bulk of financial burden of broadcasting to Belarus is borne by the United States and Poland. Another Belarusian neighbor, Lithuania, apparently will not risk worsening relations with Lukashenka. For instance, the Baltic Waves radio station project broadcasting to Belarus from Lithuania between 1999-2001 with the help from the United States was short-lived.

Currently one TV channel (Belsat) and three radio stations (Euroradio, RFE/RL and Racyja) broadcast on a daily basis to Belarus from the West. However, their coverage and financing is incomparable to that of Belarusian state media propaganda. Starting this January, even the harmless Russian edition of the Euronews channel has been excluded from the standard cable TV package in Minsk. Entertainment programs produced by

Russian TV channels almost completely dominate the Belarusian media landscape.

### **Belsat: Poland Doing EU's Work**

Belsat TV, the only Belarusian-language TV channel, broadcasts from Poland and is undoubtedly the most important exile media. In June 2006, the Polish Foreign Ministry and Polish Public Television signed an agreement on the long-term development and financing of Belsat. The channel went on air in December 2007. In 2009, internal conflicts in Poland threatened its future when the Polish Public Television announced that it would not finance Belsat anymore. Fortunately, the channel is still alive, and its importance is growing.

The Belarusian authorities initially feared Belsat and even launched a wide-scale campaign in the country to register and effectively ban individual satellite dishes. Then they apparently decided that Belsat presented little danger for the regime and stopped prosecuting the owners of satellite dishes.

However, the regime continues to put pressure on Belsat journalists. Unlike other projects of foreign broadcasting to Belarus, Belsat has no official office in Minsk and its journalists cannot get official accreditation. That makes them an easy target for regular persecution by the Belarusian authorities.

Scarcity of funds is one of the main problems faced by Belsat. The channel had to build up its facilities and a network of correspondents from scratch and needs to do much more to train its staff. Currently Belsat is a heavy burden for Poland both in political and financial terms. Strengthening multilateral support for Belsat would reduce Polish dominance on the channel and improve its credibility among Belarusians who still remember old historical grievances between the two nations.

Belsat cannot afford to purchase enough good quality foreign movies and programs. As a result, old Polish movies constitute much of its content. This reduces its appeal to the average Belarusian. Perhaps the Western media and institutions could allow Belsat to use their products free of charge or for a symbolic fee. They would hardly lose profits were Belsat to dub some movies into Belarusian and broadcast them in a country where the copyrights are not implemented anyway.

### **European Radio for Belarus: Politics + Music**

The other joint US-Poland project is European Radio for Belarus. It has been broadcasting since February 2006, mixing political, social, cultural and other information with extensive modern music and entertainment programs. At its inception, the project won a tender from the European Commission and that ensured its funding for two of its most difficult initial years.

Euroradio runs a lot of original stories and focuses on simplicity. Moreover, it avoids over-politicizing its content, offering social and life-style information interesting to regular Belarusians instead. Euroradio manages to cover its own unique themes because, besides Warsaw's central office, the radio has an office in Minsk and a considerable network of reporters. It also succeeded in using new media such as Twitter to broaden its audience base.

### **Radio Liberty (RFE/RL): The Good Old Cold War Style**

The oldest broadcaster is Radio Liberty/Radio of Free Europe, financed by the United States. Its Belarusian program started in 1954 and became legendary in Soviet times. Headquartered in Prague, Radio Liberty broadcasts eight hours a day and is well known in Belarus. Today Its website is probably better known than its airwave programs. Radio Liberty is conservative in its work and format. It has certainly lost some of its audience by excessively focusing on negative, anti-regime

content.

### **Radio Racyja Targets Western Regions of Belarus**

In February 2006, another radio station on Polish territory – Radyjo Racyja – resumed work. Radyjo Racyja's ambitions are smaller than those of other projects due to limited funding. Initially, Radio Racyja targeted primarily the Western regions of Belarus. Now it attempts to reach all Belarusians. But because Racyja is located in the Polish city of Bialystok, a region with a traditionally large number of ethnic Belarusians, Western Belarusians remain its primary listeners.

### **The Short-Lived Deutsche Welle Belarus Program**

In 2005, the European Commission granted German Deutsche Welle (DW) the symbolic sum of 138,000 euros to organize programs for Belarus for one year. The Belarusian project at DW failed, and only a tiny Belarusian section, a part of DW's Russian Service, continues to operate. DW's Belarusian programs were broadcast in Russian with short Belarusian fragments.

The DW content often had a pro-Russia bias, perhaps because the programs were made by people from Russia rather than Belarus. This is particularly [evident](#) in DW materials on relations between Belarus and Russia. The short-lived DW broadcasting for Belarus demonstrates the failure of attempts to consider Belarusian matters in the context of a Russian framework.

### **More Money, Better Connection with the Audience and Using New Media**

The Belarusian exile broadcasters would benefit from better financial support, enhanced connection with their audience in Belarus and experimenting with new forms of Internet-based products.

Some of the current projects, in particular Belsat, appear to be chronically underfunded. Funds allocated to the democratization of Belarus could be redirected to the media sector.

At the same time, the media in exile should improve their interaction with the Belarusian audience. It is very important to ensure that the projects do not live in a foreign bubble. In 2008, Belsat established a Public Council consisting of prominent Belarusian intellectuals whose task was to supervise and consult the channel in order to improve its performance and appeal to Belarusians. Unfortunately, the council's activities are either kept secret or do not exist.

Finally, the exile media should seriously consider the newly available forms of [Internet communication](#). For instance, Russian radio stations such as Ekho Moskvy broadcast their programs not only in radio format but also as videos on the Internet. Radio Liberty has already started a joint program with Belsat, but more should be done to respond to the growing number of Internet users in Belarus.

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## **Border Forever: Minsk Restricts Local Border Traffic with EU States**

On December 1, Belarus and Latvia took a new step toward opening up their common border. They signed a local border traffic agreement allowing their residents to visit each

other's border regions for up to 90 days every six months without visas.

One could argue the achievement is modest: the eligible regions span no more than 30-50 km and visitors cannot travel to other parts of the host country or work there. Belarus gains little when compared to the Eastern European states that joined the EU and now enjoy Brussels' regulatory and funding support.

However, the agreement with Latvia is significant in other ways. Given Belarus's difficult experience with Europe, it represents a small step towards establishing normal communication with neighboring countries. More importantly, Lukashenka's ambivalent attitude toward local border traffic agreements underlines their broader political significance.

### **Who Wants Belarus Out of Europe?**

For the residents of Belarus border regions, the border traffic agreement allows reestablishing old commercial and family ties disrupted by the more recent creation of national borders. The frontier with Poland dates back to the late 1940s, while the Lithuanian and Latvian borders only came into existence in the 1990s.

Unfortunately, broader political interests often obscure the Eastern European natural borders. The severity of EU visa requirements implies Belarusians somehow pose a danger to the EU security or economic interests. Such measures only exacerbate tensions with the Lukashenka regime which benefits politically from the country's closure. At the same time, European attempts to use visa restrictions as a means to force internal liberalization only serve to increase Minsk's resolve.

The peculiar nature of this dispute was captured in a December 7 statement by Štefan Füle, the EU Commissioner for

Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy. Mr Füle expressed his dissatisfaction that the Belarusian authorities have expressed no interest in the border issue. He said: “[W]e waited for Belarusian authorities to respond to our request to conclude such agreements for many months now [...] When such an agreement is concluded, there is no reason why we cannot move further towards a non-visa regime as our ultimate goal.” But Mr Füle's assumption – that Belarusian regime wants to remove visa barriers and open up the country – may be completely wrong.

Like the EU visa situation, agreements on local border traffic illustrate that the Belarusian regime is not keen to remove borders anytime soon. Ukraine has already ratified and implemented a well-functioning local border traffic regime with some EU members. Belarus, by contrast, is trying to use such agreements as an instrument to confront the EU. Besides Latvia, Belarus has signed local border traffic agreements with two other neighboring EU nations – Lithuania and Poland. Officials and diplomats of these countries insist, however, that the Belarusian government delays further implementation.

On November 25, Lithuanian foreign minister Audronius *Ažubalis* said Lithuania could already have launched its local border traffic mechanism with Belarus in November if Minsk had not hampered the process. More frankly, Polish diplomats stated in November that Belarus had ignored ratification for more than 14 months. The Polish ambassador to Belarus even alleged that Lukashenka had signed the agreement in December 2010 yet Belarusian government was technically unprepared to implement it.

### **Polish Fears of the Belarusian Regime**

There is some logic behind Minsk's divergent approaches to opening its borders with neighbors. The agreement with Latvia, first of all, is most amenable to the Lukashenka regime because Latvia has not exerted much diplomatic pressure on

Minsk in recent years. Indeed, Latvia has even supported Belarus in some of its disputes with the EU. Moreover, the Belarusian area bordering Latvia is sparsely populated, so the actual effect of the agreement is insignificant.

Border traffic agreements with Lithuania and Poland, however, are a different story. In the former, approximately 800,000 Lithuanians and 600,000 Belarusians would be allowed to visit each other without visas. Some major cities on both sides of the border would be affected – Hrodna, Lida, Ashmiany and Pastavy in Belarus, and Vilna, Ignalina, Varana, and Druskininkai in Lithuania. Even more dramatic would be the effect on border traffic between Belarus and Poland, covering a larger swathe of Belarus, including the provincial centers Hrodna and Brest, and encompassing around two million people on both sides of the border.

But the Belarusian regime has its reasons for delaying the agreements with Vilnius and Warsaw. Relations with Poland are tense because of its resolute support for Lukashenka's opponents. Although relations with Lithuania are in much better shape, the country hosts numerous Belarusian opposition groups and events. Over the past decade, Vilnius has become for Lukashenka's opponents what Miami has always been for the opponents of Cuban dictators – a safe haven next door to the home country.

Second, Belarusian authorities maintain a Soviet era attitude to controlling borders. In the Soviet Union, entire regions along the borders were considered to be border security zones. They were strictly patrolled by KGB, and even Soviet citizens needed special documents to enter them. In early 2009, the Belarusian government finally reduced the size of border zones and abolished the special documents required for its own citizens to enter these areas. But old attitudes die hard.

Third, Lukashenka has always been suspicious of the 400,000-strong Polish ethnic minority in Belarus. For years, police

and security agencies have led a coordinated struggle against the independent leadership of the Polish minority union. In this context, local border traffic could be suspected as a channel to strengthen potential opposition movements among ethnic Poles in Belarus.

### **Opening the European Union to Belarusians**

The very best sanction against Lukashenka's regime would be a unilateral opening of the European Union to Belarusian citizens. This would be a positive policy not linked to any bargaining game with the Lukashenka regime. Visa-free travel would be much more effective than border traffic agreements, which ultimately are just half-baked measures.

Without this, Belarus will remain closed to the West – its rulers are not at all interested in establishing more links with the rest of Europe, which they consider a threat to their own survival. The absence of freedom of movement to the West carries adverse geopolitical consequences not only for Belarus, but for Europe as a whole.

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## **Belarus Defense Digest: F-16 Fighters Stationed Closer to Belarus**

Among recent events related to the national security and defense two stand out. First, the deployment of the U.S. F-16 fighters in Poland and the need for the adequate response.

Second, new evidence in the criminal investigation against the ex-commander of the Air Force and Air Defense Ihar Azarenka.

**Deployment of F-16s in Poland.** Although the official explanation on this account was not provided by the parties, it became known that the relocation of a few dozen American jet fighter aircrafts F-16 to Poland from Italy is planned. In view of the fact that in the Polish Army the 48 planes of this type are in service, their total number will approach 90.

It should be noted that although F-16 refer to the class of fighters, they are designed primarily to attack ground targets, i.e. they are primarily offensive weapons. The aims and motives of the United States and Poland in deciding about the placement of the strike air group (if we exclude aggressive ones), remain unclear. The placement of a large number of offensive weapons near the Belarusian border will require adequate response. As such, the following options can be considered:

- additional supply of ZRK S-300 from the stock of the Russian army;
- supply of "Su" fighters and "Su-34" bombers;
- permanent deployment at the one of the national army airbases of the Russian airborne early warning planes "A-50".

The possibility of supply of S-400 complexes is currently remote due to the low rate of their production for the Russian army and the need for primary coverage from the air strikes against the strategic targets in Russia in the first place – the places of the Strategic Rocket Forces destination in the European part of Russia.

Belarus authorities may decide to create a storage (base) of the Russian weapons, supply of which to Belarus is banned

under the international treaties. In the first place these weapons would include cruise missiles and R-37, KS-172 missiles. The base staff can consist of unarmed Russian technicians. The protection of the base should be provided by Belarus. In parallel, it is necessary to carry out the training of Belarusian soldiers, so that they could act, if necessary, as operators of the stored weapons.

The presence on the territory of a neighboring state of a significant number of offensive weapons puts the question before the military-political leadership about the forming of a full-strength "long arm". However, due to the financial crisis and the continuing conflict with Russia, all of the above response options are theoretical, it is unlikely that in the foreseeable future Belarus shall be able to take adequate for the threat preventive measures.

**Ihar Azarenka.** There is new information about the ex-commander of the Air Force and Air Defense Ihar Azarenka. Currently, he is released in his own custody. In a criminal case against the General a preliminary investigation proceeds, although on January 26, 2011 the Minister of Internal Affairs Anatoly Kuleshov said that the evidence in the case against Ihar Azarenka is sufficient and in the near future the criminal case would be transferred to the prosecutor for the referral to court.

The release indicates a weak evidence base and confirms our version that the main purpose of the criminal case was to discredit a military commander. This is a demonstration of a nearly unlimited power and capabilities of the current Minister of Defense Yury Zhadobin. In light of the systemic crisis facing Belarus authorities, the imbalance of the decision-making mechanism, the presence of the opposition sentiment among the high-ranking nomenklatura, it is not desirable to concentrate such a vast amount of information and capabilities in the hands of one commander, even if now there is no doubt about his reliability.

**MILEX – 2011.** The Belarus authorities are satisfied with the results of the exhibition MILEX – 2011, although the specific results were not reported. Interesting is the fact that almost immediately after the event the military delegation from Jordan visited Belarus. Although the details of the negotiations were not reported for obvious reasons, the most likely areas of cooperation can be the upgrading of armor and artillery systems, the production of the unmanned aircraft systems and the training of special operations forces. In our opinion, these areas are of the most concern for Jordan due to the neighboring Israel and the general growth of tension in the region.

In general, foreign consumers may be interested in the 927th center for training and use of unmanned aircraft vehicles (UAV) in terms of training the relevant specialists. A major shortcoming is the lack of the strike UAV in the Belarusian Army.

*This material originally appeared in Russian on Belarusian Security Blog, which is operated by a group of young professionals in Belarus analyzing political, economic and security issues in Belarus.*

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## **Who Needs the Eastern Partnership?**

While the European Union is yet again considering using sticks against the Belarus regime, it is unclear what carrots it can offer. Lukashenka's opponents often point to the de-facto exclusion of Belarus from the Eastern Partnership after the post-election crackdown. The question is whether Eastern

Partnership has ever been of any value for Minsk – economic or political.

Belarusian regime is unwilling to get closer to Europe due to its background and worldview differences. Very often Europe pays only lip service to the Belarusian issue. The head of the European Parliament Jerzy Buzek recently said in Tbilisi that “the worst situation is in Belarus. The EU has shown willingness to dialogue with Minsk. However, the response to our openness was police and prisons for the opposition”. Yet such openness does not cost much in economic and political terms. Politically, the European Union has done next to nothing in its Belarusian policy. No wonder, Belarus borders on no major European state, except for Poland, which has its own problems with the rest of Europe because of its pro-American stance.

The Polish analytical journal 'Nowa Europa Wschodnia' recently published an article criticizing Eastern Partnership. The article authored by Przemyslaw Zurawski vel Grajewski concluded that this EU initiative has never been a serious undertaking. Now it is so hopeless that even Poland which has been one of its main proponents should better put it aside altogether. So what is wrong with Eastern Partnership?

The Eastern Partnership has been conceived by Poland and Sweden in 2008 to respond to the French idea of 'Union for the Mediterranean'. Poland, Sweden and Germany were particularly worried about that French idea. Yet, when Poland and to a lesser extent Sweden were always interested in dealing with Eastern Europe, the German government probably was motivated by competition with France, argues the Polish scholar. This French-German quid pro quo allowed for the European Partnership to proceed behind the realm of thought.

Russian aggression in the Caucasus in August 2008 caused a wave of protests in the West which created a favorable momentum for the new European policy towards post-Soviet

nations. Yet that shaky foundation has predetermined the future of this endeavor. No other major EU country displayed any interest in it, and even Germany effectively disengaged itself by the very first summit of the Partnership in Prague, in May 2009. Germany did not send any high rank officials to that meeting, reminds Zurawski. Russia again became an acceptable partner for the EU. Strong Eastern Partnership risked to become just a nuisance in the EU-Russian relations.

No wonder, that the Eastern Partnership initiative failed to receive significant financial support from Brussels. To fund cooperation with all six Eastern European countries the EU was willing to spend just 85 million Euro in 2010, 110 million in 2011, 175 million in 2012 and 230 million in 2012. And though further funding can be available from other parts of the EU budget, it is obvious that the Eastern Partnership was never at the top of the EU agenda.

It appears that the only serious proposal to Belarusian government was made during the visit to Minsk by foreign ministers Sikorski of Poland and Westerwelle of Germany prior to the 2010 presidential elections. They offered 3 billion Euro for election process minimally acceptable for the EU. Belarus authorities eventually decided that it would be a suicidal move for them to follow those minimum standards. Instead, Lukashenka is hoping to get financial support from Moscow without taking the dangerous European route. Ironically, he hopes now for the similar sum from Moscow, and has also to accept some not completely disclosed conditions which may be not less dangerous for his political survival than the Polish-German proposal.

It is clear that at the moment and in the foreseeable future the EU is unlikely to make any major changes in its policy towards Belarus. Perhaps, only the threat of total economic collapse and political instability in the country will make the European politicians change their minds. Jerzy Buzek pointed out other potential troubles that the Belarusian

regime may cause, "what is attempted there will be copied by other countries in some other regions of the world. Belarus is becoming a social and political laboratory for non-democratic forces. This is why we cannot be indifferent". Do not forget, however, he is Polish and very often Polish voice has been neglected by western Europeans.

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## **Instead of Landing in Minsk, Kaczyński's Plane Crashed in Smolensk**

 In September 2009, the President of Poland Kaczyński sent his condolences to the President of Belarus because of the death of two Belarusian pilots in a crash of Su-27 fighter plane at an air show. Today, state leaders around the world are condoling with the Poles at the loss of President Lech Kaczyński and 95 others in a plane crash near Smolensk.

On April 10, Lech Kaczyński was flying to commemorate the deaths of thousands of Poles murdered by the Soviet Union and buried in the Katyn Forest just across the eastern border of Belarus. On March 5, 1940, Joseph Stalin signed an order to execute 25,700 Polish prisoners of war in the camps of Ostashkov, Starobelsk, and Kozelsk. Only in 1990 did the Soviet authorities admit responsibility for the Katyn murders.

Because of the fog, it was difficult for the pilots to land in Smolensk airport, near the Katyn Forest. Polish media

report that air traffic controllers had advised the Polish pilots not to attempt to land at the airport, but turn around and head for Minsk, the capital of Belarus. The obscure military aerodrome near Smolensk lacked the necessary navigational equipment to receive planes in heavy fog. Despite these warnings, Polish pilots, apparently under pressure from their VIP passengers, decided to take the risk of landing in Smolensk. Perhaps, the Polish delegation had its own reasons not to land in Belarus.

Few people outside Warsaw and Minsk know that Lech Kaczyński was one of the staunchest defenders of human rights in Belarus and a vocal critic of its president. Just last month, condemning the detentions and trials of activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus, Lech Kaczyński wrote a personal letter to Alyaksandr Lukashenka defending the Polish minority. Having received no response from the Belarusian authorities, Lech Kaczynski appealed to the European Union's institutions through the President of the European Union Herman Van Rompuy and European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek.

Notably, Belarus did not send a delegation to the earlier ceremony in Katyn. This is despite the fact that Katyn's victims included hundreds of Belarusians who served in the Polish Army in 1940 when Western Belarus was a part of Poland.

If the Belarus president were to fly to Smolensk, he would not have used an old Soviet plane for that. Ever mindful of what losing their leader would mean for the Belarusian people, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has long ago switched to the sleek and safe US Boeing. Lech Kaczyński was flying a 20-year old Tupolev Tu-154. Tupolev's long history of crashes has never been a secret, but the Polish leadership considered buying a new US-manufactured Boeings

an unnecessary indulgence during the financial crisis.

Seventy years after the massacre orchestrated by Stalin, the Polish people once again lost some of its best compatriots in the cold foggy forest near Katyn.

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## **Russian-Belarusian exercises made Poland ask for help from US**

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

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

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

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

Experts note that many people in Poland were disappointed by the decision of the US not to deploy anti-missile system elements in Poland.

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

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

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

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

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

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