

Belarus: from Democracy to Dictatorship through Elections



Charismatic Alyaksandr Lukashenka was elected in 1994, when Belarus had its first and so far the only relatively free presidential elections. Lukashenka won giving promises of cash, refrigerators and TV sets to Belarusians impoverished as a result of the Soviet Union collapse. Following the decades of Soviet rule, the country had no well-rooted traditions of democracy or even its own statehood. As a result, civil society and national identity in Belarus was weaker than in any other Soviet republic. The prospects of populist politicians such as Lukashenka looked particularly bright.

The Role of Russia

As a highly industrialized and export-oriented country, Belarus depended in early 1990-s on Russia's markets and raw materials. President Lukashenka skillfully courted the Russian political elite by introducing Russian as the second official language, favoring Russian military bases in Belarus and constantly promising Russia a reunification. The country's pro-Russian foreign policy starkly contrasted with those of Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine were increasingly pro-Western and pro-NATO. The post Cold War political elite of Russia viewed Belarus as its only outpost in the West. Lukashenka's hope was that Russia would support Belarus in the West a similar manner as the United States supported Israel in the Middle East.

Russia was happy to pay for this demonstration of loyalty. For many years, the Russian Government has been heavily

subsidizing the Belarus economy by providing subsidized natural gas and oil. The cheap natural gas helped inefficient Belarusian enterprises to survive. The discounted oil had been processed and sold to the West at much higher prices. In addition, Belarus was often used by Russia as an intermediary for selling military equipment to “rough” states and other murky dealings. All that helped the Belarus regime to survive and keep the economy under state control without almost any foreign investments.

Belarusian Civil Society

Unfortunately, cheap oil and gas are usually detrimental to democracy and Belarus was not an exception. Its political parties were turned into small clubs of dissidents, opposition received zero access to state electronic media and virtually all employees were transferred to short-term contracts which made them dependent upon their employers. With most of the economy owned by the state that meant that people were afraid to protest because of the fear to lose their jobs.

While courting Russia, Lukashenka tried to make sure that the civil society in Belarus, particularly media, and political institutions were under his tight control. As a result, by the end of the 1990-s the parliament and the courts had been replaced with rubber-stamp institutions bowing to the presidential administration. The nearly wiped-out civil society makes Belarus very different from Ukraine and Georgia which had relatively independent media, parliaments and judiciary during their “revolutions”.

Russia was always helping the Lukashenka regime at difficult times. When he was nearly impeached by the Belarusian Parliament during very early years of his rule, the Russian prime minister and speakers of both Russian houses of Parliament came to Minsk to rescue Lukashenka. Quite often, when the United States or the European Union imposed sanctions against Belarus for human rights violation, Russia’s immediate

response was to provide even more economic aid.

Russia or the West?

Recently Russia started to demand something more tangible than anti-Western rhetoric from Belarus for its economic aid. In particular, Russian businesses are interested in privatizing Belarusian companies and the Russian political elite cannot see any real steps towards the promised re-unification of two countries. Reducing subsidies to the Belarusian economy made Alyaksandr Lukashenka look elsewhere to keep the economy going. Meetings with top European politicians, joining the Eastern Partnership and launching more creative projects such as exporting oil from Venezuela were the steps in that direction.

It is difficult for the European Union to ignore Belarus which borders three EU member states and is an important European transit hub. It is also not in Europe's best interest to leave Belarus to Russia. For Russia Lukashenka is still better than an uncertain alternative president, no matter how pro-Russian he sounds. Almost a decade ago, Russia supported Milosheвич not because he was the most pro-Russian politician of the region, but because he was the most isolated from the West. Lukashenka understands what drives Europe's and Russia's policy towards Belarus and tries gain something both from Europe and from the West to ensure that his regime survives.

The 2010 Presidential Elections

It would be naive to expect that this presidential elections are going to be fundamentally different from the ones it had in the past. True, Belarus authorities registered a number of alternative presidential candidates, introduced some minor changes to its elections regulations and the police so far seems to be less brutal. However, this cosmetic refurbishments have not affected the substance of these elections. According to the Organization on Cooperation and Security in Europe

around 86% of all information in electronic media is about Lukashenka and is positive. All nine alternative candidates have just 14% and they are portrayed almost exclusively in negative light.

In addition, the votes are unlikely to be counted. The election committees consist of the very same people who falsified elections in the past. The central election committee is chaired by the notorious Lidia Yermoshina, who was banned from traveling to the European Union and the United States for rigging Belarusian elections. In her safe hands the result is going to be exactly as Mr Lukashenka wants it to be.

The opposition candidates urged their supporters to come to the main square of Minsk to protest. Thousands will come out tonight. But it would take tens of thousands to make any real impact. Not surprisingly, the elections are held at the end of December, when Belarusian winters are particularly cold. The authorities even took care of removing tents and sleeping bags from Minsk shops and made a huge skating rink in the middle of the square where the protests will take place.

What should be done?

First, if the elections are rigged they should not be recognized. Europe and the United States did it many times in the past and there appears to be little reason not to do it this time. Second, it is important to help Belarusian civil society, and in particular its media. If the eyes and the ears of the Belarusians are closed how can they make a choice in favour of democracy, let alone defending it? After all, most people in Belarus do not really know what democracy is.

YK

An American in Belarus



I came to Minsk in order to brush up on my Russian before taking a language exam as part of my Master's degree requirement at George Washington University. Now the reader may think, "Why would you go to Belarus in order to study Russian?" That would be a perfectly legitimate question if the reader is unfamiliar with Belarus, as is often the case in the West.

The answer is because they speak Russian in Belarus, albeit with an accent, which I haven't noticed. But then again for foreigners, it's often difficult to pick up on nuances, cultural or otherwise. Belarusians often joke that politicians here speak Russian with a Belarusian accent in an attempt to gain the sympathies of the villagers, but such nuance is lost on me. In fact, the only politician I have heard publicly speak is the President, Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

All the same, there is a Belarusian language and it is present; aside from the most noticeable forms, which include street signs and metro announcements, there are a growing number of Belarusian speakers. I, however, had only one real encounter with the Belarusian language, and that was at a play performed in Belarusian that I attended with a Belarusian friend at the Republican Theater of Belarusian Drama. "[Adamavy](#)

[Zharty](#)" was an interesting take on the creation story that started out conventionally with God taking one of Adam's ribs, but devolved into a busty Belarusian maid making advances on a demon while trying to sow discord in Adam and Eve's relationship – the audience loved it. It was quite good, and I enjoyed it with the help of my friend and knowledge of Polish.

Belarusian people are on the whole very warm and nice, but can be definitely separated into those you are familiar with and everyone else. For instance, the ladies that ran the administration and taught at [Minsk State Linguistic University](#) were a delight. They genuinely care for the students and provided a great atmosphere for learning, not to mention at a very affordable price as compared to similar programs in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

But like most anywhere, the people I did not become acquainted with were simply strangers. With strangers in Belarus, there isn't a necessity to exchange pleasantries like in the West, which can be good or bad. Consequently, I am sure that I know where I stand with most Belarusians. If I am greeted or if my greeting is returned, it is from a sincere place. On the other hand, when a cashier at the store stares daggers at me instead of offering a "thank you," like I am used to; it can be a bit tiring. Back home, I know that most people could care less how I'm doing, but they still ask, and it's okay; we both know that it is just a common courtesy. In Belarus, not so much.

When writing about Belarus it is impossible to pass over the political situation. Anyone involved in European politics knows that Lukashenka has been called the "Last Dictator of Europe," and the truly observant know that he was recently shown in a Russian-produced, [made-for-TV-movie](#) called "Godfather". But before rushing to judge Belarusians on what appears to be their acquiescence to strong-arm leadership tactics, one must understand the political context leading up to the current situation.

Belarus lacks the political history and citizen participation in the government that has defined the history of many Western states. Many of the citizens' movements in the United States for example, such as women's suffrage, civil rights, anti-war, and various others, simply haven't happened here. Belarus lacks the political history and associated norms that many Westerners take for granted.

I also get a sense of fatalism about their political future from Belarusians, which I've come to think of as a defense mechanism. We all have learned to live with certain things that we cannot change, and of course it doesn't make much sense to sit and stress about those things. But if we realize that a situation can change, then it necessarily becomes our duty to do what is in our power to bring about the desired change, even if it comes at a personal sacrifice. By not acknowledging the reality that political leaders can and should be held accountable for their decisions, Belarusians are avoiding the risks involved in attempting to hold authorities in Belarus accountable.

The majority of Belarusians that I spoke with cling to the notion that the government is so far removed from the people that it effectively remains unaccountable to them. Moreover, attempts to criticize or hold the administration accountable could result in repression of some nature, whether it be the loss of a job, a visit by the tax police (usually in Russia), or the denial of admission to a state run university. The cost-benefit analysis that takes place when calculating the amount of personal risk one is willing to accept in order to bring about political change is currently weighted in favor of inaction.

There is a lot to be said for stability, which seems to be at the heart of what Belarusians want. What good is democracy if you can't feed your family or find work? The prospect of going through the political and economic turmoil that has accompanied even peaceful transitions to democracy, to say

nothing of the potential for violence, understandably weighs into the calculus of Belarusians when they actively or passively avoid becoming involved in politics. Indeed, the fire sale of Russian industry and the political turmoil of the 1990's, combined with the widely perceived failure of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, have made a swift transition to democracy accompanied by mass privatization in Belarus a rather large pill to swallow.

The populace has, thus far, opted for stability. Regardless of the feelings that the reader may have for Lukashenka, he has presided over economic growth, attempted to lead an independent foreign policy, and maintained internal stability. There have been repressions, and it is widely said that there are consequences that can come from becoming too involved on the wrong side of the political spectrum, but the country has been able to avoid mass repression on the scale of, say, last year's post-election crackdown in Iran.

Belarusians for the most part are correct in their innate sense that when a leader is able to maintain his grip on power, consolidate the authority of the government in the executive branch, and monitor and censor the communication activities of its citizens, it widens the gap between the authorities and those from whom their authority is derived, making it more difficult to hold them accountable. Where Belarusians are wrong is in thinking that nothing can be done to narrow the gap. It is through demanding government transparency, civil liberties, and the proper enforcement of the law, citizens can begin to hold policy-makers accountable. It is highly unlikely that such accountability will be the result of self-administered reforms, for as long as leaders are able to act with impunity, it is likely they will.

Belarus is very much in a period of flux: most certainly in its relations with Russia and the European Union, its two largest neighbors. Lukashenka is likely trying to perform a balancing act between maintaining enough control to avoid

jeopardizing his grip on power and being perceived by the West as too overtly oppressive as to disqualify himself from EU aid programs.

If the Lukashenka regime is able to maintain its balancing act absent real political reform, then stability will be maintained and Belarus will continue to politically and economically lag behind the West. Until that paradigm falters, it is likely that Belarusians will be content to allow the slow erosion of their civil liberties and the continuance of near economic stagnation.

Belarus is a pleasant country with welcoming and warm people and a rich history. It should rightfully take its place among the developing and developed democracies of Europe, acting as a bridge to encourage the eastward spread of European and American norms of governance and economic development.

In order to do so, the Belarusian people will need to choose to hold their leaders accountable. Once that choice is made, it will then be the job of external observers to encourage grass-roots political participation and offer support if it is requested without interfering in the country's natural development. I am confident that Belarus will eventually join the West and end its political and economic isolation, albeit on its own terms.

by Andrew Riedy, Contributing Writer

Election 2011: How realistic

is the regime change?

David Marples, professor at the University of Alberta, Canada and a President of the North American Association for Belarusian Studies is on the research trip to Minsk right now. In the article for the Jamestown Foundation [*](#) he reflects on possible outcomes of the Belarusian presidential election of 2011. The expert is analyzing the most recent opinion poll results in order to support his predictions.

Prospects For Regime Change in Belarus

By: David Marples

The Jamestown Foundation

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The approach of a new election always leads political analysts in Belarus to revisit a familiar question: is regime change possible or remote? Are Belarusians in general satisfied with the presidency of Alyaksandr Lukashenka? Will the current rift with Russia lead to the downfall of the leading politician in Belarus and, if so, who is likely to succeed him?

Before each election, Lukashenka adopts the posture of a man too busy to deal with the petty intricacies of a campaign. True to form, he stated in mid-July that his priorities at present are the forthcoming harvest campaign, decisions on the annual and five-year budgets, and the convocation of the so-called All-Belarusian People's Congress, an unelected body that is assembled prior to each presidential election as a means to approve the general economic policies of the leader. Traditionally also, he lambasts the opposition, and he has referred to them this time as "leeches" who simply take "grants" from foreign sources to enrich themselves. He had anticipated the nomination of two or three candidates, he commented, "but not ten!" All of them, he added, have to live

off these grants because they do not work. They are thus homeless and jobless. Their goal of agreeing upon a single candidate to replace Lukashenka is a “fantasy” (Belarusian Telegraph Agency, July 16).

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[Read the full story.](#)

Election 2011 Persona: Ales Mikhalevich



Opposition leaders were unable to adopt a procedure for selecting a single presidential contender at their meeting in Minsk at the beginning of July, BelaPAN reported*. According to Uladzimir Kolas, chairman of the Rada (Council) of the Belarusian Intelligentsia (RBI), the process of selecting a single presidential contender had taken too long and might soon be of no use, as there would not be enough time for preparations to ensure an efficient and successful campaign. If the selection of a single candidate continues to be delayed, the RBI may withdraw from this process, Mr. Kolas noted.

Two presidential candidates Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Ales Mikhalevich have refused to be involved in the process.

Ales Mikhalevich was the first opposition candidate to launch his presidential campaign bid at a presentation on January 27,

2010 in Minsk*. The politician said he would rely only on Belarusian resources in his campaign. According to Mikhalevich, his team will comprise representatives of a new generation of the Belarusian society. He regards urban youth as his main support base. Mikhalevich is also the youngest candidate. He just turned 35 this May.

Biography

Ales Mikhalevich was born in Minsk in 1975 to a family of research associates of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. He attended the Belarusian State University, graduating in 1997 with a degree in Political Science and Law. While at university, Ales headed the Belarusian Students' Association, a non-governmental organization dedicated to protecting the rights of Belarusian students. He also undertook periods of study at the University of Warsaw, Poland and University of Oxford, UK.

After graduation Mikhalevich worked in tourist business as well as a crisis manager accredited at the Ministry of Economy, a legal consultant at the Association of Disabled Veterans of the War in Afghanistan, and a lawyer at the Belarusian Independent Trade Union.

In 2004-2008, Mikhalevich served as a deputy chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). Following his nomination to the position of the party chairman in 2008 and proposed program of party reforms, he was expelled from the party for publicly criticizing BPF leaders.

In 2003-2007, Mikhalevich was a member of the Pukhavichy district council, Minsk region and coordinator of the Assembly of Members of the Local Councils.

Ales is married and has two daughters.

Program

On May 27, Ales Mikhalevich presented his electoral program*. Its name is "Belarus: a strategy for evolution" and it consists of three pillars: economic growth, effective state, and active society. "For me and my team the most important thing is make people vote for us," said the politician.

The aspirant to participate in the presidential elections is in favor to support the private business, local government, constitutional reform, return to the separation of powers, and privatization of state-run mass media.

Another point of the politician's election program is a territorial-administrative reform, which stipulates the abolition of regions and the republic's division at 17 povets (districts) with centers in Brest, Pinsk, Mozyr, Gomel, Grodno, Baranovichy, Slutsk, Bobrujsk, Molodechno, Borisov, Mogilev, Krichev , Glubokoe, Polotsk, Vitebsk, Orsha. Moreover, in his opinion, it's necessary to create a separate administrative and territorial unit of Minsk and Minsk region.

"Belarus needs an active self-management, which provides the decentralization of political, economic and financial power in favor of regions and local authorities," stressed Ales Mikhalevich.

Opposition politicians stated that after the election's victory he was going to expand the use of Belarusian language in the country, however, the presentation of his electoral program was made in Russian.

"My campaign will be mostly carried out in Russian. Russian is the language used by most part of our country citizens," said the politician.

In addition, among his priorities Ales Mikhalevich named the private ownership of land, moratorium on the death penalty, neutrality of Belarus on the international scene, withdrawal from the Union State with Russia, cancellation of nuclear power plant construction, ban on the production of fruit

wines.

Being an advocate of Belarus' neutrality, Mikhalevich does not have plans to bring the country closer to NATO. As for the European Union, the country's admission might become a priority. But it is not included into the current program*.

The politician's team consists of philosopher Ihar Drako, economists Ales Lukashevich and Viktor Yawmenenka, scholar Kanstantsin Lukashow, and pharmacist Danuta Chyhыр.

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Money and Brotherhood: What Belarus Means to Moscow?

Every time facing confrontation with Moscow, Belarusian president speaks about immaterial and spiritual – common Slav roots, history and kinship of Belarusians and Russians. Emotions and sentiments can matter a lot in international politics and are an effective tool in national foreign policy of some countries. Reiterating his declarations on Belarusians' and Russians' unity, Lukashenka is undoubtedly targeting Russian sentimental bonds to his country, not his Belarusian compatriots.



Russians are mostly longing for their imperial and Soviet history to be appreciated and positively articulated abroad. Lukashenka perfectly realized it a very long time ago. He

understood that huge potential of Russian frustration and anger at loosing former imperial greatness had harbored immense opportunities for political projects in Russia. One did not need to be even a Russian politician to conquer neighboring country's hearts and minds by playing old imperial motives!

After coming to power in mid-1990s, Lukashenka shrewdly posed himself as a warrior for restoring Soviet Union and his version of pan-Slavism. It fared quite well for a while and he got very popular in Russia whose residents ever more were seeing him as a fine alternative to hard-drinking Boris Yeltsin in 1990s. Belarusian president was firmly on his way into Kremlin. But then Colonel Putin unexpectedly put an end to it at millenium turn. Lukashenka could not compete with dynamic new Russian leader.

Belarusian regime's Russian policy contracted to more humble limits. It began to implement a new, however, pretty familiar paradigm – while playing on emotional, spiritual and mythological bonds to Belarus in Russian mentality, Belarus should have become the very best Russia's ally to be cared of and defended at any cost by Moscow support and money. Actually, one can guess that Lukashenka wanted to be for Russia what Israel is for United States, i.e. a strategic ally which significance is not limited to solely economic or military issues.

In this context many of his words do not appear so irrational. Thus, these days, after new gas complications with Kremlin, he said:

It is unacceptable to treat Belarus this way [as Russian leadership now] It doesn't matter that we had difference in cost [for gas]. After all, for Russia itself there is a big difference between Belarus and other nations... Belarus for Russia has quite another value We will survive. However, I

believe, it is unacceptable to treat so an allied people [Belarusians] with which you [Russians] together were dying in the trenches [during the World War II]. And these are no emotional speeches, though emotions for us, Slavs are also important.

In 2009, Lukashenka himself indirectly admitted using 'Israel model' in his Russian policy in an interview in an extreme right-wing Russian newspaper "Zavtra":

Americans are funding Israel and give it as many credits as they [Israelis] can spend and then cancel their [Israelis'] debts. They [Americans] are completely financing Israel's defence. Let's not literally but conceptually use their model. After all, we are more for you than Israel for America. We are part of your defense, part of your security.

Of course, Russians feel themselves more emotionally attached to Belarusians than to most other post-Soviet nations. Yet, Minsk despite all efforts did not manage to implement the 'Israel model'. Perhaps, since it could not organize effective pro-Belarus lobby in Moscow. Or the reason for this failure can be found in another more tragic case of imperial sentiments for lost Slavic lands that led to a political catastrophe. Probably, Belarus seems to Russian politicians more like Kosovo for Serbs. They want it merely back.

They are not ready to tolerate its distinctiveness and freedom, nothing to say about supporting its independence and prosperity. On the contrary, America consider Israel a partner and ally. Russian political elites view Belarus as some remnant of their great empire and treat it as they treat.

SB

Will the Kremlin Foment Trouble For Belarus' Presidential Elections?

The most important issue in Belarusian politics today is the next presidential election. However, the candidates that have been proposed by the parties so far are no major politicians as the opposition has been kept out of the parliament since 1996. As a result, they see the election as little more than an opportunity to announce their existence to the broader public. Having selected relatively unknown candidates to represent them (such as Romanchuk, Kastusiou, Hlushakou), the opposition parties seem to already consider the election a lost cause. They as if avoid risking the reputation of their better known party members.

The issue of most interest in the next election is the extent and the nature of the Russian involvement. For the first time, Moscow is thought to have abandoned the side of the incumbent president Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Looking back at the demise of the Kyrgyz government with Russia's blessing in April, one wonders how the Kremlin's disfavor could affect the current Belarusian regime.

As a colleague versed in the Kyrgyz politics has recently explained to me, the Russians did not initially plan to get rid of president Kurmanbek Bakiyev for good. Instead, they hoped to merely to rein him in once Bakiyev stopped supporting the Russian interests in his country. The US influence was also critical for this self-serving Central Asian kleptocracy. Because of the increasing problems with the US military base in Kyrgyzstan, Washington was encouraging Bakiyev's opponents

hoping to tilt the scales in favor of a more reasonable regime in the country.

Of course, neither of the world powers had wanted a revolution. But the Kyrgyz opposition understood their message in its own way. Seeing Moscow as ready to help out with ousting the Bakiyev's regime and Washington as not opposed to the idea enough to stall it, the opposition rushed to attack the governmental institutions.

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Having inadvertently created so much havoc, Moscow may have decided to not challenge a post-Soviet regime to such an extent again. In this case, the Kremlin's meddling would hardly be disastrous for Lukashenka. The leader has a lot to worry about if Moscow has instead adopted a strategy that includes the option of ousting 'unwanted' leaders in the post-Soviet countries, however. This would mean that after expelling Bakiyev, Moscow could go after the Georgian and the Belarusian leaders. This is why the Belarusian political scene has been seething with rumors about the money and support that the Kremlin is supposedly channelling to one or the other public initiative or politician. The most probable actors to be receiving such support are the public initiative "For the Truth" ("Za Pravdu") and the United Civic Party (AHP).

In reality, the question of whose bid for presidency Moscow is going to support is far from clear. Newsweek

wrote about former Deputy Foreign Minister Andrej Sannikau as the Kremlin's stooge; however, some political analysts close to the right-wing Belarusian People's Front Party (BPPF) believe Russia does not support a single candidate. They write that "Russia is preparing its scenario of regime changing in Belarus through controlled chaos" and destabilizing Belarus by all possible means. Last week, BPPF declared its intent to contend the next elections 'on two fronts', i.e. both against Lukashenka and the pro-Russian forces.

Excluded from any involvement in Belarus' political decision-making since 2000, the Belarusian opposition is getting increasingly marginalized. As a result, many political analysts have stopped studying the internal affairs of the Belarusian opposition. The fact that the country's political forces are too disorganized and weak to participate in the political struggle proves the gravity of Belarus' political problems. This holds even for the loyalists of the current Belarusian regime: as typical for the populist regimes, Lukashenka does not have an organized political basis to support him. Because Lukashenka's attempts to create mass organizations have failed, the President will hardly be able to defend his regime were a large-scale public confrontation to happen in the streets during the next presidential election.

In these circumstances, the threat of the Russian intrusion seems even greater. Having crushed the pro-independence forces, the Belarusian regime stands alone against the most serious foreign threat in its history. This threat is not the US or the EU support for the Belarusian Nationalists vilified by the state propaganda machine for all these years. This threat is Moscow, which has been repeatedly declared by Lukashenka to be his closest ally.

The good news for Lukashenka is the West's benign neglect to his regime that has developed since 2008. The EU was the first to apply the principle that "everything that exists has an explanation for its existence" to the Belarusian regime, changing its policies to accommodate and engage Lukashenka. Washington has recently followed, reluctant to get involved with Belarus' democratization efforts again, just as was expected to happen after Barack Obama's presidential victory in 2008.

Historically, the West was far less interested in the Belarusian politics than Russia, and even the EU bids to support changes in Belarus have been always far less

impressive than the Kremlin's meddling. Thus, while he may face an energetic Russian support for the Belarusian opposition, Lukashenka will probably bask in the West's friendly neutrality.

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Belarus-Russia Oil Dispute: Nothing Personal, Just Business



A commentary by one of this website's authors on the Russian-Belarusian oil duties dispute, for [Novaja Eŭropa](#) on-line magazine

Let's admit, Belarusian authorities have no effective arguments in the current oil dispute with Russia. Therefore we must accept the fact that they will lose this fight sooner or later. In close future oil will become expensive, the Belarusian economy will face increasing difficulties, and a whole new stage of relations with Russia will come. Nothing surprising – we were going towards this all the past fifteen years.

Nothing to answer with

Note, Russia proposes to continue to charge no export duties for oil supplied for internal Belarusian needs. The new duties will only affect the (bigger) portion of the oil supply which

enables the Belarusian state oil refineries to gain excess profits. Thus, it will first strike the rent part of the Belarusian economy which rather benefits from artificial privileges granted by Russia instead of creating a product competitive on the market.

Some Belarusian journalists support the official Belarus' position on the reasonable ground that a customs union, which our countries seem to be building together with Kazakhstan, by definition means removal of customs barriers and not their introduction. Nevertheless, the full terms of the customs union treaty have not yet been published.

In any case, it would be strange to see Belarusian authorities talking of the implementation of signed agreements as long as they themselves are responsible for actual sabotage of so many previously signed agreements – of all those treaties on a common currency with Russia and on integration with it in “unions” and a “union state”.

Fundamentally, Moscow has the stronger arguments in the dispute. Belarus, unfortunately, has nothing to oppose Russia's pressure with. In late 2009 Russia launched the first string of the Eastern Oil Pipeline (ESPO), which runs from Russia to China. The construction of the pipeline will be completed in 2014. Russians have diversified markets for their oil, so its price for Belarus and Western Europe will now only grow. Why didn't Belarus, in turn, diversify its sources of energy?

The cursing miracle

Whatever the result of the Russian-Belarusian oil war, lessons for both sides were evident before and will be stressed again.

In a comment to the New Year's greetings by opposition leader Aliaksandr Milinkievič on the website of the newspaper Naša Niva, one reader wrote that he could not imagine this

politician holding tough negotiations with the Russians on gas prices.

But as a matter of fact, tough negotiations with Russian monopolists shouldn't have become a New Year tradition for Belarus at all. Latvia, Poland or the Republic of Lithuania do not conduct annual dramatic negotiations with Russia on oil and gas, as they have no preferences and pay the market price. The Czech Republic has even built a gas pipeline from Germany to provide access to Norwegian gas.

To the contrary, the strategy of the Belarusian regime in the last decade has been the exploitation of Russian post-imperial phobias and the struggle for the preservation of politically motivated preferences in regards of oil and gas supplies. Sooner or later it had to end. Playing manipulatory games with the Kremlin is neither perspective nor moral, even though the game has so far been successful for Belarus. Relations between our two countries should be market-based: Nothing personal, just business.

Politicians make reforms only when the absence of reforms threatens the stability in the country more than the changes. Another new year's oil crisis has once again shown that the reforms had to begin a long time ago and that the so-called *Belarusian economic miracle* of the recent years was in fact a curse for the country. Belarusian authorities have had a major source of cash but the economy could remain unreformed and non-upgraded. Now the cash source disappears but market reforms in Belarus, according to Belarusian businesspeople, still haven't got the proper quality.

Finally, the independence of Belarus means market-based relations with Russia, plus the diversification of energy sources, plus market reforms in the country.

Rebooting relations

The news about Belarus' intention to cut Russian electricity

transit to the Kaliningrad region could only have brought you a sad sarcastic smile: the verbal “everlasting brotherhood” of Russia and Belarus has actually turned into open hostility. It is noteworthy that Belarusian authorities have begun to threaten Russia with leaving the just created customs union almost since the very beginning of this conflict.

For Russia the dispute must therefore be another demonstration that any integration initiative can become an arms against Russia in the hands of official Minsk. The Belarusian regime can use every opportunity to accuse the Kremlin of sabotage of the “brotherly integration”.

Therefore, both Belarus and Russia need a rigorous audit (and possibly termination) of the empty “unions”. Not only is the pathos of the Belarusian-Russian integration untrue, it also discredits the very idea of any constructive relations between our countries for decades ahead.

The hangover from the long-standing pseudo-integration extravaganza will for a long time spoil the atmosphere of Belarusian-Russian contacts. Constructive relations with the largest neighbor are absolutely necessary to Belarus, but they apparently will have to start from scratch. The time for it is coming.

By Alexander Čajčyc

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