

125 Cities Across the Globe for a Free Belarus



Solidarity and support from European civil society is crucial for democratic forces in Belarus. Belarus is indeed the last Eastern European country that has not joined the Free World after the breakdown of the totalitarian Socialist camp. It is one of the few countries of the region that have not joined the NATO and the EU and where the situation with democracy and human rights is still much worse than in other European countries.

Apart from that, Belarus is also one of the least known countries in the West. Actions like the one organized by the Young European Federalists are probably even more important than uncountable resolutions by the OSCE and the European Parliament. It is important not only to appeal to European politicians to have a firm position on Belarus, but also to inform the society in the EU about problems in its closest neighbour Belarus.

On the night of 18th March 2010 the Young European Federalists, political movement active in most European countries, and its global partners protested against Europe's last standing dictatorship. The event was dedicated to the fourth anniversary of the disputed presidential elections in Belarus. The fifth consecutive "Free Belarus Action" took place in 125 cities on four continents, including cities in almost all European countries, including Belarus. The Young European Federalists' collected signatures in the streets and posed with with signs reading "Give the people of Belarus a voice" in protest against Lukashenka's dictatorship. The current Belarus political regime has deprived 10 million Belarusian citizens deprived of fundamental human rights, including the right to free speech.

"Free Belarus means: when Belarus is free from the death penalty, celebrates good human rights, there is freedom of speech for all its citizens, freedom of press and NGOs and a process where the freedom of electing one's leadership in the elections is truly democratic – only then can we speak of a united, strong, and fair Europe," said JEF-Europe President Philippe Adriaenssens. "The European Union that JEF believes in is one with a clear foreign policy – not one turning a blind eye to human rights violations happening at its doorstep." "Actions speak louder than words," continued Free Belarus Action coordinator Elisabeth Velle, "yet every year we hope it will be the last time we have to organise this action." "Condemning a regime is not enough. The European Union should do everything in its power to support civil society within the Belarusian borders, make sure that the next general elections are under full observation of election monitors and guarantee the freedom of the press and political opinion.

Moreover, it is time that the suspension of sanctions on Lukashenko and his officials were lifted. Europe must send out the message that its core values do not allow it to silently tolerate human rights violations and that it in no way supports Belarusian dictatorship." "We urge European Commission Vice-President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton to foster greater co-operation between Member States and European Institutions, and to assist Europe in releasing the people of Belarus from the dictatorial grip.

This way, Belarus can be on its way to join the democracies of Europe," concluded Adriaenssens. For participating in the action, three young Russian activists, also associated with the youth branch of the Yabloko (The Russian United Democratic Party), were arrested and imprisoned in the Russian city of Omsk. Facing an unexpected early morning wakeup call in a harsh Russian prison, the three campaigners of conscious now

face a number of augmented charges, including vandalism and public disorder, which considering that no statues were damaged or public unrest was caused, is somewhat ludicrous.

See a press release on the [JEF website](#), see photos from the action [here](#).

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David Miliband on Responsibility to Applaud

The UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband singled out Belarus in his introduction to the Foreign Office's Annual Report on Human Rights 2009. According to Mr Miliband, human rights defenders protest against injustice in Belarus and "we have a responsibility to applaud these efforts, and to support them by challenging the notion that human rights depend on culture and circumstance." Although not as comprehensive as the US State Department [report](#), the Foreign Office summarises well the most pressing problems in Belarus such as detention of political activists, prosecution of unregistered organisations and pressure against journalists and Protestant churches.

Unlike the US report, it highlights that Belarus is the only country in Europe which still applies death penalty. What the British foreign service could borrow from their United States colleagues is making their report more user-friendly on internet. Currently, it is only available in English as one pdf file for all countries. This makes coping and sharing the report very difficult. The US Embassy usually promptly publishes Belarusian or Russian-version report on their web site while the Belarusian version of the website of the

British Embassy in Minsk has not been updated since October 2009. The Belarus section of the report is as follows:

The positive trend that began when Belarus released three political prisoners in August 2008 has continued, and there have been small but welcome improvements in the course of 2009. But the Belarusian authorities continue to harass civil society, NGOs, religious organisations and the independent media, using administrative powers to restrict their activities. In 2009, we continued our policy of engaging with Belarus through the EU. Belarus has played an active and constructive role in the multilateral part of the EU's Eastern Partnership launched in May. The Partnership is a long-term programme designed to promote democracy and good governance; strengthen energy security; promote environment protection; encourage people-to-people contacts; support economic and social development; and offer additional funding for projects to reduce socio-economic imbalances and increase stability. However, we have been concerned about Tatsyana Shaputska, a law student at Belarus State University, and the press secretary for the youth organisation, Malady Front, who was expelled from university after taking part in the EU's Eastern Partnership Forum on Civil Society in Brussels in November. Although the Dean of the Law Faculty said that she had been expelled for being in Brussels without permission, civil society activists argue that her participation in the Forum on Civil Society was a more likely reason. We and EU colleagues are following developments closely. The EU and Belarus held the first round of a Human Rights Dialogue in June.

Discussion focused in particular on freedom of assembly and association, including labour rights; freedom of expression and information; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; combating different forms of intolerance and hate crimes; the rights of migrants and persons belonging to minorities; combating trafficking of human beings; the protection of different vulnerable groups; situations in prisons and

detention facilities; and the death penalty. Although it will take time to produce meaningful results, the willingness of the Belarusian authorities to take part in this Dialogue is welcome. In 2009, along with EU partners, we agreed to retain the policy of suspended travel restrictions. We were disappointed that Belarus did not make enough progress on human rights for us to be able to remove sanctions entirely. The five areas that the EU will focus on when we review this policy in October 2010 are political prisoners and politically motivated criminal prosecution; liberalisation of the media environment; reform of the election code; conditions for work of NGOs; and freedom of assembly and political association. Belarus plans to hold local elections in spring 2010, and will hold a Presidential election before February 2011.

These are important opportunities for the authorities to demonstrate a commitment to improving the level of democracy.

We welcome the dialogue that has been maintained with the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) following the Parliamentary elections in September 2008, and look forward to seeing more information about the proposed reform of the electoral code. However, we were disappointed that an important change – the right of observers to view the ballot papers as they are counted – was not included in the proposed reforms. Freedom of Association and Assembly We remain concerned about the continued harassment of those who exercise their right to peaceful assembly. Although there has been a decrease in cases of administrative arrests against democratic activists during public political events, administrative fines for taking part in non-sanctioned events are still quite common. The authorities grant permission to very few demonstrations. The excessive use of violence by the police and special troops against peaceful demonstrators continues to occur. Particularly worrying are reports towards the end of 2009 from activists of "mock kidnappings". A number of activists say that they have been forced into a car,

threatened and beaten, had their mobile phones taken and are then released in remote locations. They suspect the security services of being behind these incidents. We are monitoring this new development closely, and have raised our concerns with the Belarusian authorities. NGOs, political parties and trades unions also continue to face harassment. Expensive registration fees and excessive legal requirements are basic obstacles to NGO activity. NGOs can find it difficult to rent property for meetings, and individuals who sign up in support of organisations report that they receive threatening phone calls encouraging them to withdraw their names. Any organisation independent of the government is perceived by the authorities as a threat. Registration is frequently rejected for minor irregularities in applications, including spelling mistakes and for criminal convictions of founding members – even when those convictions relate to their activity on behalf of the organisation they are attempting to register. Nasha Vyasna (Our Spring), an internationally respected human rights organisation, was refused registration for the third time in 2009.

Political parties are also subject to these laws – the Christian Democratic Party, the Party of Freedom and Progress, and the Belarusian Party of Working People were all refused registration in 2009. No new political party has been registered since 2000. In December 2005, Article 193-1 was added to the Criminal Code as part of a series of amendments that provided for harsh punishment “for activities directed against people and public security”. Belarusian human rights defenders and international human rights organisations have condemned this article, arguing that it was being used to apply pressure to activists and discourage them from supporting organisations that had not been able to register.

In November, the authorities suggested they would make it an administrative, rather than a criminal, offence to act in the name of a nonregistered organisation, punishable by a fine

rather than prison. While we welcome this step, it only partially addresses the problems faced by NGOs. Protestant churches continue to face a difficult environment. The most high-profile of these is the New Life Church, which in December lost its appeal against a decision to evict it from its current property on the grounds that the building, a renovated cowshed, did not have approval for use as a church. It is illegal for religious organisations to rent property in which to worship. Our Embassy in Minsk works closely with EU partners to raise our concerns about human rights issues with the Belarusian authorities. We maintain regular contact with civil society organisations devoted to human and civil rights, and observe their public demonstrations and court cases.

Freedom of Expression The Belarusian state controls all media outlets, meaning that only officially approved views are heard by most of society. Independent journalists are still frequently harassed. The Polish-based TV and radio stations Belsat and Radio Ratsyja have been unable to accredit their correspondents in Belarus, and journalists working for these organisations have received official warnings from the Prosecutor's Offices and the KGB. There are some signs of change. A number of independent newspapers have been given access to state-run distribution. This includes Norodnaya Volya and Nasha Niva in November 2008, and the local Bobrujski Kurier and Volnaje Hlybokae in July. European Radio for Belarus has received permission to open a correspondent's office for a year. Access to the internet is controlled through the monopoly of the national company Beltelkom, and strict rules are imposed on owners of internet cafés who are obliged to report when users visit banned websites. A more restrictive media law introduced in 2008 has not had any effect on internet access so far, although it remains possible that it will have some impact in future, particularly in the run-up to elections in 2010 and 2011.

Disappearances 2009 marked the 10th anniversary of the

disappearance of three opposition representatives, Yuri Zakharenko, former Minister of the Interior, Victor Gonchar, former Vice-President of the Belarusian Parliament, and businessman Anatoly Krasovski. The Belarusian authorities have failed to open an independent investigation into these disappearances. We support the efforts of activists in Belarus to maintain public awareness of the disappearances, including through a monthly Day of Solidarity since 16 September 2005, the anniversary of the 1999 disappearance of Gonchar and Krasovski. Although the EU suspended most of the travel restrictions on the Belarusian authorities in 2008, we have maintained restrictions on four people identified by the Council of Europe's 2004 Pourgourides Report as key actors in the disappearances and the cover-up that followed.

Death Penalty Belarus continues to use the death penalty. EU Member States are working with local and international NGOs to promote public debate, and publicise EU views on the death penalty. We continue to urge Belarus to abolish the death penalty or, as an initial measure, to introduce a moratorium. The Council of Europe (CoE) information point in Minsk has launched a campaign against the death penalty. During a visit in December, Jean-Louis Laurens, the CoE's Director-General for democracy and political affairs argued that no referendum was needed for the introduction of a moratorium, and expressed the hope that no executions would take place for the duration of the campaign. We support the CoE Parliamentary Assembly decision to offer Belarus honorary membership of the Council only after a moratorium is declared. There are some positive signs. A referendum in 1996 found that 80 per cent of the population were in favour of the death penalty. Encouragingly, independent polling in September found that 55 per cent of people supported abolition. In November, President Lukashenko pledged that an information campaign would be launched to discuss the death penalty, which we hope will lead to a national moratorium.

Politically Motivated Detention In May, Amnesty International announced that they considered 11 young people to be prisoners of conscience. They are currently serving sentences of restricted freedom after participating in a peaceful demonstration in January 2008. We are also concerned about the cases of other activists not recognised as prisoners of conscience. We welcomed the release from prison of Yury Lyavonau in August. But Mikalai Autukhovich and Uladzimir Asipenka remain in pre-trial detention since their arrest on 8 February. We welcome indications from the authorities that their trials will be open, but are urging that these take place as soon as possible.

Read full Annual Report on Human Rights 2009 [here](#).

YK

No Pro-Russian Political Forces in Belarus

What do you think is the difference between Belarus and Eastern Ukraine? Despite being as much slavophilic, predominantly Russian-speaking and Soviet-nostalgic, the Belarusian society seems to be less pro-Russian than the population of Eastern Ukraine. There are fewer ethnic Russians in Belarus than in Ukraine. Because of president Lukašenka's policy towards Russification and neo-Sovietism, there have been no tensions regarding mass introduction of the national language as in Ukraine. Groups potentially advocating a unification with Russia have never been too active in Belarus.

The question "West or Russia" has never arisen in Belarus as sharply as in Ukraine. Belarusians are pragmatic in this

instance, opinion polls show that equal parts of the population support integration with Europe and Russia – with a big proportion of those advocating them both at the same time. For some reasons we have started hearing of pro-Russian organizations in the last months, especially with the scandal around Andrej Hieraščanka (Gerashchenko) a month ago.

Hieraščanka was leader of a pro-Russian organization Russky Dom and a senior official in the administration of Viciebsk Province. He had given an interview for a Russian nationalistic website where he stated that he views "Belarus as an other Russian state and not a separate nation" and accused evil pro-western pro-Catholic powers of wanting to tear Belarus away from mother Russia. After the interview there was a scandal involving an alleged threat to fire Mr. Hieraščanka from his position. Russian pro-Kremlin media wouldn't find a case of discrimination of Russian speakers in Belarus (unfortunately, they don't care about discrimination of Belarusian speakers that is happening in Belarus). But at least a dismissal of a russophile from an official position would give a chance to accuse Lukašenka's regime of being russophobic. Luckily, the scandal has ended peacefully. It seems a specific feature of the region's modern political russophiles: for some mysterious reason they usually get active in a country once it starts having bad relations with Russia. Something tells that we'll see more of their activity in Belarus pretty soon.

Not a single political party in Belarus regardless of whether it supports President Alyaksandr Lukashenka can be described as pro-Russian, an indication of what the political elite in that country feels and what it assumes will attract the support of the Belarusian people, according to a Moscow commentator. Because Lukashenka dominates the political system, neither the government nor the opposition parties play a great role at least at present. But that does not mean that their programs should be ignored because those provide

important clues on what the leaders of these groups believe and think other Belarusians want. “Party ideologues,” he points out, “formulate political projects and ideas which reflect the views found among the politically active part of the population of the country” and they “actively promote their views and plans to the voters by means of both the print and electronic mass media.”

[Read the blogpost at Window on Eurasia](#)

Playing Chess with Belarus Dictator

In his newest blog entry Pavol Demeš of the Central and Eastern Europe program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States compares the last European dictator with tough chess player who frequently uses forbidden moves to win. “Despite opposition movements, Russian punishments, EU and U.S. sanctions, and color revolutions around him, he remains comfortably ensconced at his palace while European commissioners, patriarchs, popes, and other presidents have come and gone,” says Demeš. The author reveals the secrets of Lukashenka’s self-made practices in international relations through prism of recent crackdown on Belarus’ Polish minority and upcoming presidential elections.

Belarus’ Aleksander Lukashenko, European Chess-master *GMF Blog*
Posted on March 4, 2010 BRATISLAVA, Slovakia – When Aleksander Lukashenko, the authoritarian president of Belarus, began a recent campaign to intimidate and punish members of the country’s disobedient Polish community, he opened a new front not only with neighboring Poland, but also with the EU as a

whole that must now meet that challenge head on.

Lukashenko knows how to play and is an effective self-made practitioner in international relations. Having ruled with an iron fist over his country of 10 million since 1994, he is one of the longest-serving presidents in Europe and knows very well how to use internal and external conflicts to maintain his rule. As Lukashenko sees it, Belarusians love and need him as the guarantor of nationhood and stability. Despite opposition movements, Russian punishments, EU and U.S. sanctions, and color revolutions around him, he remains comfortably ensconced at his palace while European commissioners, patriarchs, popes, and other presidents have come and gone. But early 2011 will see a presidential election in Belarus and, in some ways, the campaign has already begun. Of course, it will be a campaign that is specific to Belarus and a select group of other countries of the former Soviet Union, where leaders are hesitant to retire anytime before they die. This type of election campaign is hardly recognizable to voters or politicians in democratic countries where ballots are actually counted.

The chessmaster Lukashenko understands that he is living in an interdependent and multi-polar world hit by an economic crisis, and he will use the time before next year's election to test new means of maintaining power that would allow his five-year-old son Kolya (who accompanies him regularly on his domestic and foreign trips) to continue learning from his powerful father until the time that he will be old enough to lead. Indeed, the 55-year-old Belarusian president, while shaping his peculiar autocratic regime, has learned a great deal about different mechanisms for controlling his own people and limiting the capacity of the outside world to influence his power games.

The recent attacks by the police on the Union of Poles, a group representing the Polish minority (there are about 400,000 Poles living in Belarus, some loyal to the regime,

others not) and their ramifications seem to be part of Lukashenko's skilful pre-election political engineering. The timing of his Polish crackdown coincides with the pre-presidential elections in Poland and allows him to simultaneously demonstrate his overwhelming power both at home and abroad. Paradoxically, neighboring Poland earlier played a key role in the EU's recent welcoming overtures toward a Belarus that it argued was undertaking political reforms seriously. But the recent persecution of Belarus' Polish minority outraged Polish public opinion; now Poland is engaged in a bitter bilateral diplomatic war and is talking about new sanctions, conditionality, and visa bans.

Polish President Lech Kaczynski and two potential presidential candidates – Bronislaw Komorowski, marshal of the Polish Sejm, and Radosław Sikorski, the foreign minister, are all scrambling to find solutions. They have rightly called upon the institutions of the European Union for help. The EU, which is still working to define individual roles in the post-Lisbon period, reacted quickly. Jerzy Buzek, the new president of the European Parliament, who coincidentally happens to be from Poland, did his European best to answer Lukashenko's challenge by calling for a wider approach that doesn't look only at the issue of the Polish minority. Catherine Ashton, the EU's new high representative for foreign and security policy, said that Belarusian actions "undermined our efforts to strengthen relations between the European Union and Belarus." Lukashenko is at his chess game again – and winning. Top Western officials are writing him letters, negotiating, and asking him politely to do the things they would like him to do. Fact-finding missions are coming to Belarus to discover what they knew before. While Poland and the EU take the time to consider their next step, Lukashenko is already way ahead of them. Indeed, his plans likely include making a grand display of stopping the attacks and beginning a reconciliation process between Belarusians and Poles. But before he does that, he'll ask for further international financial assistance and other

benefits from the very people and institutions who are now asking him to stop persecuting his country's minorities. And when that assistance arrives, he will use it to extend his control over domestic resistance and opposition before the new round of elections early next year. Lukashenko is a tough chess player who frequently uses forbidden moves (including removing pieces from the board) that throw his domestic and international opponents off-balance.

The new EU leaders should recognize that their peculiar neighbor will not respond to standard diplomatic warnings and pressure, does not care about EU membership, and is capable of creating the illusion of success for those who enter into negotiations with him. They must appreciate that he is fully aware of the West's political and economic weaknesses and the increasingly process-driven mentality when it comes to democracy assistance and the protection of human rights. In short, the policy of engagement that replaced the strict isolation of Lukashenko's regime needs to be rethought and recalibrated. Instead of watching Lukashenko choose the strategy and create illusions, the attacks on the Polish minority in Belarus and Poland's consequent seeking of European solidarity should help us to rethink our values, commitments, and actions in respect to human rights and democracy, and to come up with real and effective cooperation strategies in this field. If we succeed in European Belarus, we will do much better in other parts of world. Pavol Demeš is the director of the Central and Eastern Europe program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

VB

Opposition May Be the Only Party to Represent Belarus in EURONEST PA



An attempt to influence the Belarusian regime through the Eastern Partnership has failed. At least so far, at least the first attempt of it. Russian newspaper Kommersant [reports](#) that the negotiations between a delegation of the European Parliament and the Belarusian officials on Belarus' participation in the parliamentary assembly of EU and its Eastern neighbours (EURONEST PA) were unproductive.

It is now likely that the Belarusian delegation will be formed from the opposition parties and NGOs, Kommersant quoted MEP Justas Paleckis.

This means that once again the democratic opposition is likely to represent the country at an international forum. It would be virtually the same as if on such forum during the Cold War the USSR would be represented by the Soviet dissidents. The dissidents were brave and dignified individuals but they were neither politically influential nor representative of the whole country.

Belarus has been under authoritarian rule over 15 years. All these years the opposition has practically been deprived of any opportunities to influence on the government's policies let alone representation in the parliament. The opposition has now practically transformed into a semi-dissident movement. It is able to give a picture of what is going on in Belarus and give advise to the EU in what policy to pursue with Belarus – but these consultations and even some financial and organizational support to Belarusian NGOs can hardly be

considered a realistic policy.

It seems that in order to facilitate real change in the country one has to cooperate with the Belarusian authorities and try to influence them. To be exact, one must communicate with president Lukašenka, who is the primary decision maker in the country. As cynical as it sounds – a form of cooperation with the Belarusian government must be developed where officials would be present regardless of the democratic progress in the country. EURONEST PA should become such place.

The officials have refused to form the Belarusian delegation together with the opposition, on a 50/50 representation basis. It is a question whether the European Parliament should have followed the Belarusian officials' demands and let them have more than just 5 seats in the Belarusian delegation.

Maybe it did not play a significant role at all, as it seems that the political liberalization in Belarus is over anyway, at least till after the presidential elections of 2011, as a political expert quoted by Kommersant said. This sounds very realistic indeed.

Read stories by [Kommersant](#) (in Russian), [Lenta.ru](#) (in Russian), [Deutsche Welle Russian edition](#); [Belorusy i rynok](#) (in Russian), [Belorusskie novosti](#).

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Belarusian Ideologist Makes PR for a Concert of Rammstein



A senior ideologist Mikalaj Čarhiniec, who had proposed to impose censorship restrictions on a concert of the German industrial rock band Rammstein, has demonstrated what the ideology of the current political regime in Belarus is.

Official ideology of today's Belarus can be described as post-Soviet left-wing conservatism. The Belarusian government is principally averse to democracy and civil liberties. Therefore it also has a very negative attitude towards any cultural or social phenomena like drugs legalization or the LGBT rights movement.

Belarusian bloggers and foreign media have been actively discussing the prospectives if the concert's cancellation. However, Andrej Hiro, Ambassador of Belarus to Germany, pointed out [today](#) that members of Rammstein had all received visas for Belarus and that the proposal to impose censorship restrictions on the concert had been "a private initiative".

A scandal of this kind is nothing new for Rammstein. It could only increase the popularity of the band, which is probably more famous in Belarus than in Germany itself. In show business there is no such thing as bad PR after all.

Not content to oppress the country's democratic opposition or rail against Western imperialism, the autocratic regime of Belarus has declared the German industrial rock band Rammstein to be an enemy of the state.

The country's Morality Council announced on Monday that the Berlin-based group's songs were propaganda for "violence, masochism, homosexuality and other perversions" that could

“destroy the Belarusian state order.” The official opprobrium calls into question a planned concert in the capital Minsk on March 7.

The Belarusian moral authorities said “permission for a Rammstein concert is a mistake that can cost us greatly” and that the band would have to have its set list approved ahead of time in order to prevent “extremism” and to ensure the “dignity” the venue.

[Read the full story](#)

See also stories by [Deutsche Welle](#), [EU Observer Blog by Maryna Rakhlei](#), [RIA Novosti](#)

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Diaspora Against Internet Censorship in Belarus



Members of the Belarusian-American Association responded to the new attack of the government of Belarus on the constitutional rights of their citizens by staging a protest in the very center of Washington, DC. The Russian service of the Voice of America covered the event supported by the Reporters Without Borders and WE REMEMBER Foundation.

Behind the extensive control over Internet access and online content that President Lukashenka has the obvious intention to reduce free expression in Belarus. Last year, the government claimed that China was a model in terms of Internet control. This year, President Lukashenka signed a decree subjecting online access in internet cafes to an identity check or to prior online authorization that depends on the applicant.

VB

Opposition Demonstrators Beaten up by Riot Police in Minsk



Belarusian riot police has violently dispersed two peaceful opposition demonstrations in Minsk – on February, 14 and February, 16.

On Sunday the police has violently stopped a peaceful demonstration by the youth organization Malady Front dedicated to St. Valentine's Day. The organization wanted to present the award *Liubliu Bielaruś* ("I love Belarus") to people who had contributed to national revival and important social initiatives in 2009. After Hotel Crowne Plaza Minsk had unexpectedly cancelled the conference hall rent agreement, Malady Front decided to perform a ceremony near the Minsk city hall. As a result, over 20 people were arrested, some were injured. See photos by [RFE/RL Belarusian Edition](#) and [Naša Niva](#)

On February, 16 the police has beaten up a demonstration of solidarity of the Belarusian democratic opposition with the Union of Poles of Belarus. 28 people have been arrested including the well-known photographer Julija Daraškievič. See reports by [RFE/RL](#), [RFE/RL Belarusian Edition](#) and [Naša Niva](#).

Belarusian analysts relate the increased violence of the police's actions with the upcoming local elections and the presidential electoral campaign.

Belarusian State TV Accused of Ripping US Sitcom

Something the Belarusian bloggers have been laughing about during the past week: the state media had been actively explaining the necessity for the recently introduced [regulation of the Internet](#) by the need to fight copyright breach. And here we go – the state television itself is now being accused of the same, with ripping a whole sitcom being a much more serious thing than downloading pirate music from the web.



This scandal is not going to influence the introduction of internet regulations in any way but is simply more than illustrative.

The creator of Big Bang Theory has accused the Belarusian government of ripping off his sitcom.

The East European country has just launched its own sitcom called The Theorists based around the same premise as Chuck

Lorre's American series – in which two socially awkward geeks live opposite a hot waitress.

In the CBS original, shown on E4 in Britain, the main character are called Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, Raj and Penny; in Belarus they are called Sheldon, Leo, Hovard, Raj and Natasha.

Lorres pointed out the similarity on a '[vanity card](#)' – a mini-essay which flashes on the screen at the end of each episode, too quickly to be read. However, he also publishes the text on his website.

He said that even the opening credits – a fast montage from the dawn of time to the present day – are a carbon copy of the original.

[Read the full story](#)

See also stories [here](#) and [here](#)

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President Signed Decree on Regulation of the Internet

The Belarusian government's plans to regulate Internet have finally taken a form: last week president Lukašenka has signed a decree on "measures regarding improvement of the national segment of the Internet" (see Russian text of the decree [here](#)). The decree sets less strict regulation than in the [draft earlier](#)



[published by Belarusian media](#), but creates a wide area for potential pressing on freedom of speech on the internet. It seems like the decree would not affect the work of experienced internet-users but may scary regular users from accessing pro-opposition websites. According to the decree, many details regarding identification of internet users and licensing of internet providers are still to be defined by the Government by May 2010.

A Belarusian official says that people will only be allowed to enter Internet cafes with their passports beginning this summer, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reports.

Belarusian Communication and Information Minister Mikalay Pantsyaley said at press conference in Minsk that according to a February 1 decree by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, all Belarusians wanting to enter Internet cafes must have a passport starting on July 1.

Pantsyaley said the decree – which has been criticized by human rights organizations and many Western countries – obliges Internet cafe owners to identify those who enter cafes.

[Read the full story at RFERL.org](#)

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Repressions against Media in

the Wake of Presidential Elections in Belarus



As presidential elections are getting closer, Belarus authorities have stepped up their efforts to silence media not under their control. Over the last few days, the Council of Ministers imposed additional restrictions on accreditation of foreign media, the President of Belarus adopted a decree imposing new limitations on internet providers and earlier today police raided the informal office of Warsaw-based Belsat television channel. The office is informal because the authorities refuse to give Belsat accreditation.

Control over media is crucial for any authoritarian regime's survival. Belarus authorities have effectively shut down all meaningful alternative media within the country years ago. Although a few independent newspapers are still allowed to circulate in the country, they do not have any real impact on public opinion. Heavily subsidized state-controlled television, radio and printed periodicals completely dominate the media market of Belarus.

On the first day of February, after months of speculations, Belarus President signed a decree aimed at restricting activities of internet providers in Belarus. The decree makes it easier for Belarus special services to access information transmitted via Internet. The decree also requires internet providers to store the data of individual internet users, which could be later retrieved by Belarus authorities.

The Council of Ministers of Belarus has also restricted distribution of foreign media in Belarus. Among other things, the government has forbidden to distribute any "foreign products" which contain information "the distribution of which is forbidden or access to which is limited in accordance with legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus". This effectively means that any state organ may outlaw foreign periodicals without even having to give any explanations.

Both the decree and the Council of Ministers' regulations will be subject of future interpretations by the courts and other state bodies. It is unclear how zealous they will be in enforcing these new rules.

What is clear is that the Belarus authorities are trying to restrict access to foreign media, because they see it as a real threat to their political monopoly. Another brick in the information wall they are building is an attempted raid of Belsat office in Minsk. Belsat is an independent satellite channel headquartered in Poland. It is the only Belarusian-language TV broadcaster not under the government control. The number of people who can actually watch Belsat it is relatively small because of the expense of installing a satellite dish. However, it the broadcaster gaining more popularity and is perhaps the most influential independent electronic media in Belarus.

Last month, a large number of international organizations and NGOs protested against a warning, which the Ministry of Justice issued to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). This warning may potentially lead to closure of this organization. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has even devoted a special paragraph in its recent resolution condemning pressure on the BAJ. But instead of listening, the Belarusin authorities put even more pressure on independent media.

There is nothing new for the Belarusian authorities in

resolutions full of condemnations or even in economic sanctions, which make Belarus even more dependent on Russia. What Europe and the United States have not yet tried, is to take the issue of supporting foreign-based media seriously. This includes increasing FM- and TV broadcasting from the neighboring countries, so that Belarus population has access to uncensored information.

Corruption in the Belarusian Democratic Opposition Provokes Scandals



The Belarusian opposition seems to be heavily dependent on financing from abroad. During the past 15 years the Belarusian government has cut all the possibilities for it to get sponsors inside the country.

Belarusian businessmen attempting to sponsor the opposition are being persecuted. The best known case is that of Anatoł Krasoŭski, a businessman who, together with the opposition leader [Viktar Hančar](#), was abducted and presumably killed in 1999.

Foreign financing of the opposition in Belarus is conducted in accordance with the US [Belarus Democracy Act](#), among other regulations. According to the widespread rumours, foreign financing for the opposition comes through organizations in Poland and Lithuania. The scope of corruption that accompanies financing of the Belarusian democratic opposition is unknown.

The lack of transparency has caused scandals. For instance, former head of the Lithuanian Republic Parliamentary Committee on National Security recently said that the death of a Lithuanian state security officer in 2006 could be related to his investigation of the corruption involved in financing the opposition in Belarus. This hypothesis, however uncertain, [has appeared immediately](#) after the officer's death in 2006 and came up again in late 2009 ([Read the story on Delfi.lt](#)).

It seems difficult to accuse the opposition of the situation: in today's authoritarian Belarus its material and moral degradation is, unfortunately, a natural process.

On the one hand, foreign financing helps keep afloat several organizations that would have vanished otherwise. Existence of these organizations is important for the promotion of human rights, democratic values, and a vision of a different Belarus.

On the other hand, dotations prevent the opposition from regeneration and adaptation to the current conditions. And, of course, where there is money, there is corruption – not only within the Belarusian opposition, but also among relevant parties in Poland and Lithuania.

In the past, there have been scandals around the Kalinoŭski Education Programme. The programme was created after the presidential elections campaign of 2006 to provide study places abroad for students expelled from Belarusian universities for political activism. In fact, according to numerous evidence the programme had soon started accepting applications from regular students providing them with false evidence of political repressions against them.

How similar this situation is to dozens and hundreds of people queuing up for a status of a political refugee in the US and several European countries – also, with only a small part of them having really experienced repressions in Belarus. For

instance, the Swiss Russian-speaking newspaper Nasha Gazeta reports of 76 Belarusians that have applied for political asylum in the country in 2009 ([see story in Russian](#)). This is much more than the number of political refugees from countries like Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan that seem far more authoritarian. There has hardly been any news in the Belarusian media of notable Belarusian political activists asking for political asylum in Switzerland in 2009.

This does not diminish the gravity of political repressions that do take place in Belarus. However, it is obviously wrong to conceal economic reasons for emigration behind political martyrdom. It just seems much like the wrong people often getting help instead of those who really need it.

Neither corruption related to financing, nor the pseudo-political emigration have ever been seriously investigated by the Belarusian media. Being primarily a propaganda tool, the state media lacks objectivity and professionalism, while the opposition media is largely dependent on foreign financing itself. An investigation of these facts – either by the Belarusian media, or even by a foreign agency, is necessary, although it seems hardly possible before the political climate in Belarus improves.

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**Reporters Without Borders is
concerned about the**

government's plans to tighten control of the Internet in Belarus



Belarus authorities has threatened to introduce censorship on the Internet about a year before the next presidential election. Under a recently published draft decree "On Measures for Revising Use of the National Segment of the World Wide Web", websites and Internet users would be strictly controlled by the government and a special unit of the Presidential Administration.

The international press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders has made a statement of protest expressing its concern over the plans of the Belarusian government to tighten control over the Internet:

Government tightens grip on Internet

Published on 6 January 2010

Reporters Without Borders is worried about the government's plans to tighten control of the Internet in a country where free expression is already restricted. President Alexander Lukashenko acknowledged on 30 December that his government is putting the final touches to a bill to this effect. The draft decree was leaked to the media on December 14, 2009. The discussions around it remain secret.

"We must emphasize our concern about this bill, which threatens online free speech and everyone's right to express their views anonymously without fear of government repression," Reporters Without Borders said. "After placing most of the traditional media under its control, the regime is pursuing an offensive against new media."

The press freedom organisation added: “The president’s attempts to be reassuring cannot hide the repressive nature of this bill, which is liable to make netizens censor themselves. It should be abandoned so that Belarus is not added to the list of countries such as North Korea, China and Iran that Reporters Without Borders has identified as Enemies of the Internet.”

The bill would require all online publications to be registered and everyone going online to be identified, both in Internet cafés and at home. Internet café clients would have to show an ID document in order to go online, while Internet Service Providers (ISPs) would have to keep a record of this information and report it to the police, courts and the special agencies that monitor all news content published in Belarus.

Each website would have to register under a procedure to be defined by the cabinet and approved by the presidential office’s Centre for Operations and Analysis, which would be in charge of monitoring site content. If the site has information about Belarus, it would have to be registered under a Belarusian domain name (with the .by suffix).

Finally, ISPs would be forced to block websites deemed by government agencies to be “extremist.” This would be done without referring to any court.

Read the full text at Reporters Without Borders [web site](#).

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Belarusian Authorities Agreed to Extension of OSCE Mission



The OSCE Office in Minsk made Lukashenka's "nice list" last Christmas. As a result, it was given permission to extend its mandate for one more year, until Dec. 31, 2010. However, the mission's work has to abide by strict conditions. Were the Office to overstep the mandate and engage in "activities that go beyond the agreed parameters, the Belarusian side reserves the right to terminate the activities of the OSCE Office in Minsk" any time, as the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned.

The meaning of this decision – or rather its meaninglessness – is somewhat similar to that of the EU decision in December 2009 to extend sanctions while suspending their application. The OSCE mission is extended, but its actions are so restricted that its presence in Minsk makes little difference. The only difference is that – with or without the sanctions – the EU hardly has a say in Belarusian politics while the Belarusian authorities will continue to effectively dictate the OSCE what to do for years to come.

The decision to extend the mission was made at the session of the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna on Dec. 30, 2009. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry applauded the Office for cooperating with the Belarusian side in 2009. This is not surprising for there must be reasons why the Belarusian opposition and several OSCE member states complained over the actions and statements of the former head of the OSCE office, Hans Jochen Schmidt. Their complains led to Schmidt's early termination (his term was supposed to expire in February 2010) and appointment of German diplomat Benedikt Haller as his successor.

The OSCE Office in Minsk was established on 30 December 2002 following OSCE Permanent Council Decision No 526. Its objectives have been to work with the Belarusian government on the issues of institution building, consolidating the rule of law, developing relations with civil society, fostering economic and environmental activities. The Foreign Ministry said there were “no objective reasons today for the presence of the OSCE Office in Belarus.” Either the office has been so successful in achieving its objectives that there is nothing else to contribute, or the Belarusian government prefers that these objectives never be achieved.

Belarusian Visa Price Has Risen to EUR 180 if Issued at the Airport



The main aim of a visa regime is to regulate migration flow and to prevent eventual illegal immigrants from entering the country. What kind of illegal immigrants could come to Belarus from the EU or the USA?

How is Belarus going to become one of the world's top 30 economies by easiness of doing business, which the government has declared as its goal, if it has one of the most expensive visas in the world? The solution should definitely be to ease the visa regime or even its de-facto cancellation, as it has been done in Ukraine and Georgia.

The explanation for this Soviet-styled decision, however,

seems simple: the West is still seen by the Belarusian government as a potential threat and a potential source of danger for the regime. In the past, visa issues have been used as a tool to [force several Polish Catholic priests from Belarus](#). Along with Polish priests, who have presumably been promoting Polish nationalism instead of doing their primary spiritual work, foreign journalists, human rights activists and observers can easily be forced away from the isolated country in the middle of Europe.

However, if investment attraction is priority for Belarus, the visa regime for the EU and the US should definitely be liberalized. Besides, the EU itself could initiate this by lowering the Schengen visa price for Belarusians from the current EUR 60.

Starting 2010 the price for a Belarusian visa has risen to 180 euros for the citizens of the EU. First of all this concerns those who receive visas at the airport upon arrival to Belarus, the consular department of Belarusian Foreign Ministry told. The cost increase for Belarusian visas is due to new amendments to the Tax Code of the Republic of Belarus.

As explained in the Consular Section of the Minsk National Airport, potential tourists from the European Union, who wanted to come to Belarus, could previously have received a single journey short-term visa for USD 60. The new visa price is EUR 180. Long-term visas for citizens of the EU and the United States cost more than EUR 200.

Since the New Year the Belarus authorities charge for visas in Euros, not US dollars. Another change was introduction of three types of visas: transit, short-term and long-term. There is no separation between tourist and business visas, the Belarusian edition of RFE/RL reported.

“They have a choice, either to get the visa at an embassy of Belarus in their country for EUR 60 or at the airport for EUR

180,” – representatives of the consular department of Belarusian Foreign Ministry said.

In the consular at the airport “Minsk-2” noticed that foreign nationals are paid and the new tariffs. “Nobody yet refused”, – reported at the airport.

Tourism agencies say that foreigners are beginning to refuse to travel to Belarus because Belarusian visas are among the most expensive visas in the world.

[Read the original story at Telegraf.by](#)

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