

# Combating Human Trafficking: Belarus Leads International Efforts

On 30 July, the Belarusian foreign ministry held a large-scale commemoration of the first World Day against Trafficking in Persons.

Belarus prides itself upon being the driving force of multilateral efforts to combat this modern offshoot of slave trade.

In fact, it may be the only Belarusian foreign policy initiative enjoying strong international consensus and firm backing from many Western countries.

At home, the human trafficking remains an important problem, even if the number of victims decreases steadily from year to year. In its efforts, the Belarusian government depends substantially on technical assistance from foreign donors.

## Modern-Day Slavery

Human trafficking is a criminal activity that generates annually dozens of billions of US dollars around the world. Only the trafficking in drugs and the illegal arms trade surpass it.

The US Department of State estimates the total number of victims at 27 million. Women and girls constitute its lion's share – up to 80 percent. While the sexual exploitation remains the primary purpose of trafficking, millions of people also fall prey to forced labour exploitation.

Until after the Cold War, the human trafficking stayed largely outside of international attention. This perception began to

change in late 20th century and led to the adoption in 2000 of the Human Trafficking Protocol as a part of the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime.

Soon, several countries, including Belarus, began to recognise certain shortcomings of the international legal framework and practical policies in this domain. There formed a growing understanding of the need for better-coordinated and comprehensive efforts in combating human trafficking.

### **Fighting Trafficking at Home**

The human trafficking remains an important problem in Belarus, even if the number of victims decreases from year to year.

The sexual exploitation is the most widespread form of trafficking in persons. Thus, out of 5,063 victims identified in 2002–2014, 4,463 persons suffered sexual exploitation, 597 fell victims of forced labour exploitation and three had their organs removed.

Belarus is predominantly a country of origin of 'human commodity'. For sexual exploitation, traffickers send people mostly to EU and Middle East countries, but also to Moscow. Russia is the main destination country for labour exploitation, with a few cases recorded in Turkey and Poland.

Only a few times Belarus served as a destination country. The victims came from Russia, Ukraine and Moldova.



Belarus has cooperated with international organisations and foreign and domestic NGOs to warn potential victims about dangers of illegal migration. This information campaign has begun to pay off.

Since 2011, the number of Belarusian citizens subjected to exploitation within the country's borders steadily exceeded the number of Belarusians exploited abroad.

As for rehabilitation efforts, the Belarusian government has helped only about seven percent of the victims during the last six years.

All other victims got assistance from the Minsk office of the IOM or NGOs. This failure of the government to finance the rehabilitation activities has provoked criticism of Belarus' international partners.

### **Taking the Lead Abroad**

For the first time, Belarus brought up the issue of human trafficking at the UN summit in September 2005 in New York. [Alexander Lukashenka](#) then shortly mentioned the issue among a dozen problems the international community must deal with:

*Trafficking in persons has become a flourishing business. Sexual slavery of women and children is regarded as a common thing, almost a norm of life. Who will protect*

*them and bring to justice consumers of 'human commodity'?*

A few days later, [Sergei Martynov](#), then Belarus' foreign minister, speaking from the UN rostrum, developed his boss' rhetorical question into the idea of a global Partnership against Slavery and Trafficking in Human Beings.

Since then, Belarus made the fight against the human trafficking its key foreign policy initiative. Belarusian diplomats spared no effort at various international forums to promote this strategic idea.

In March 2010, the Group of Friends United against Trafficking in Persons emerged in New York at the initiative of Belarus. The Group currently includes 22 countries.

Belarus also managed to secure support from many Western nations. About a dozen of developed countries including Italy, Sweden, Portugal, Iceland, Australia and the US became co-sponsors of the latest UNGA anti-trafficking resolution originally tabled by Belarus.

Meanwhile, Belarusian officials insist on their desire to go well beyond the formalistic policy-setting resolutions. Andrei Dapkiunas, Belarus' Permanent Representative to the UN, stressed in his interview to BelTA news agency in December 2012:

*Belarus is not wasting time on inventing another routine document that will drown in a whirlpool of international bureaucracy in a year or so. Belarus invites the world to build an efficient, results-oriented system of cooperation between governments, international organisations and NGOs, the private sector and the media.*

On 30 July 2010, the UNGA adopted the Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons, also initiated by Belarus. The Plan prescribes specific measures for all stakeholders in the issue of human trafficking and encourages a greater degree of cooperation among all of them.

Belarus made the fight against the human trafficking its key foreign policy initiative

The events marking the first World Day against Trafficking in Persons on 30 July 2014 provided Belarus with an opportunity to maintain momentum in promotion of its most prominent initiative. On that day, the foreign ministry held a round table dedicated to this issue with support from the Minsk offices of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the UNDP.

On and before 30 July, Belarus diplomats co-chaired or attended the related events organised by UN agencies in New York, Vienna, Geneva and Paris.

The Belarusian embassies in over two dozen countries arranged conferences or briefings aimed at attracting attention to the problem of human trafficking and highlighting the role of Belarus in this domain.

Going beyond the UN framework, in November 2013, Belarus became the first non-member state to accede to the Convention of the Council of Europe on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.

### **Why Focusing on Human Trafficking?**

The fight against human trafficking is clearly Belarus' most successful foreign policy initiative. The Belarusian diplomats were able to identify a major international problem and deal with it without antagonising any foreign country.

Belarus has capitalised and continues to capitalise politically on this initiative. The country's efforts portray it as a responsible and active member of the international community. The wide geography of its anti-trafficking partners has allowed Belarus to build good relationship networks in UN agencies and beyond them.

Sanaka Samarasinha, UN Resident Coordinator in Belarus,

emphasised in one of his public statements:

*Combatting trafficking in persons was an important priority of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework for Belarus in 2011–2015. The UN and the UNDP have a history of working with Belarus to prevent and address the social consequences of human trafficking.*

Belarus' activities has helped it to win appreciation and technical assistance of many Western NGOs and private entities involved in combating the trafficking in persons. Taking into account the country's low credibility in the West, this appreciation would not go amiss in potential difficult situations.

Besides, the international community considers the human trafficking within the paradigm of human rights, namely in their economic, social and cultural dimension.

Belarus has an excellent opportunity to present itself as a human rights champion thus countering frequent criticism of its civil and political rights record.

---

## **Belarus at the EaP Summit in Warsaw: The Meaningless Scandal**

The main reason why the second ever Eastern Partnership Summit made it to the headlines of some Western media was a Belarus-related scandal. Otherwise, the Warsaw event got extremely poor coverage by leading news agencies. That clearly points to the low priority of the Eastern Dimension in the European Neighborhood Policy and the absence of any eye-catching

agenda. Had a new Belarus-related scandal not happened, the Summit would have been a total bore.

So what happened in Warsaw? The Eastern Partnership Summit is meant to be the top mechanism for making fundamental strategic decisions. It is held bi-annually and brings together the leadership of the states and institutions of the EU and the leaders of the East European partners (EaP-6) – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Therefore, the organizers of the Summit in Warsaw were supposed to invite all those heads of states. And they did so, with one exception: Belarus.

Since Alyaksandr Lukashenka is on the EU sanctions list and is banned from entering the European Union, he received no personal invitation. Instead, the organizers invited foreign minister Syarhey Martynau as head of the Belarusian official delegation. This very circumstance, apparently, brought some psychological discomfort to Alyaksandr Lukashenka. In the Belarusian political system it is considered unacceptable to establish and develop any official (and, even more so, unofficial) contacts avoiding the president.

It should be noted, however, that Lukashenka would not have gone to Warsaw even if he had received an invitation. As in 2009 when the First EaP Summit took place in Prague, he would have appointed someone from among the top bureaucracy (for example, Minister Martynov) as head of the delegation. But in the situation of 'no invitation for himself,' Lukashenka's political style demanded that he should respond from the position of strength and provoke a new scandal.

As a result, instead of Minister Martynov, Belarusian ambassador to Poland Viktor Haisyonak was appointed head of the official delegation. Now it was the EU's turn to be irritated and they decided not to invite ambassador Haisyonak to the official Summit dinner. They explained his level was

not appropriate to sit with the heads of states and governments. After that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus announced that the Belarusian official delegation was leaving the Summit.

Basically, this is the whole story. A typical one in diplomacy. But for some reason numerous commentators began to exaggerate its importance. Therefore, a number of points need to be clarified.

Everything that happened at the Summit makes absolutely no difference to the current and future state of EU-Belarus relations. Had Minister Martynov been present in Warsaw and had no other Belarus-related scandal burst out, the outcomes of the Summit for our country as well as those for the EU would have been exactly the same.

The European Union would have expressed the very same concerns and deplored human rights violations in Belarus. The same conditions for resuming active and open contacts with the EU would have been declared, i.e. that all political prisoners have to be freed and rehabilitated. Polish PM Donald Tusk would have announced the very same amount of resources available for reforms in Belarus in case of positive changes in the country. And this sum would have been just as doubtful as it is now.

Thus, in spite of the recent scandal, everything in current EU-Belarus relations remains intact. Belarus remains very interested in the Eastern Partnership as the only institutionalized platform for regular contacts with the European Union. The EU still has no idea about how to deal with a non-democratic regime which has no intention of reforming itself.

But at the same time the Union needs to preserve and develop contacts with the Lukashenka regime for a number of reasons. First, it really fears the possibility of full Russian



political and economic expansion in Belarus. Second, it does not see any alternative to the incumbent Belarusian ruler with whom to talk about practical issues (like, for example, the promotion of business interests). It appears that the promised release of political prisoners in Belarus might serve as a common denominator and bring to fruition this mutual interest in dialog.

Yauheni Preiherman

Yauheni Preiherman is Policy Director at the Discussion and Analytical Society "Liberal Club" in Minsk

---

## Lukashenka Plays the Ace Up His Sleeve



Two days ago, on the sideline of an OSCE meeting in Kazakhstan, Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov met with U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to announce that Belarus intends to get rid of all of its remaining highly enriched uranium (HEU) which just a few months ago seemed so [unlikely](#).

The terms of the deal are not completely clear, but it was noted in the joint communiqué that the “The United States intends to provide technical and financial assistance to support the completion of this effort as expeditiously as possible.”

It is not exactly clear why the Belarusian administration has decided to take this opportunity to utilize one its last few negotiating chips, but it could likely be in order to gain favor with the West prior to the December elections. As Digest

readers know, Lukashenka has had a [falling out](#) – to say the least – with its one-time benefactor Russia. In all likelihood, Lukashenko has decided to follow Kenny Roger's [advice](#) and play the ace up his sleeve as Belarus Digest already [discussed](#).

However, the Belarusian leader should not count on this buying him anything more than an invitation to the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, South Korea, which he has already received, and certainly not anything along the lines of what he likely has in mind – acquiescence from the West when the upcoming election turns out to be less than free and fair. In the spirit of not counting my money while I'm still at the table, I won't go quite as far as the [The Economist](#) and declare the election over because crazier things have happened, but I would also not recommend the reader to hold his or her breath.

*by Andrew Riedy, contributing writer*