

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

EU Belarus Policy: The Toothless Tiger Strategy



The European Union looks like as a toothless tiger to Belarus authorities. It is large, makes a lot of noise but can't really do anything. Yesterday the European Parliament adopted yet another declaration condemning human rights violations in Belarus. The European Parliament's resolutions on Belarus seem to be based on the same template. First, the narrative correctly points out what is wrong in Belarus and then it goes on with the "carrots and sticks" part. The yesterday's resolution was not exception. First, the Parliament condemned measures taken against the Union of Poles, political activists Andrei

Bandarenko and Tatsiana Shaputska and prisoners of conscience such as Ivan Mikhailau and Aristryom Dubski. Then followed the "carrots and sticks" part.

The "sticks" part included a threat that "further violations of human rights and the rule of law in Belarus may lead to the revision of the EU's position towards Belarus, including reimposition of the sanctions". The "carrots" were better described – the European Parliament underlines that the EU dialogue with Belarus can be mutually beneficial and believes that Belarus can be supported in obtaining maximum benefits from the Eastern Partnership, in particular in the most effective use of funds allocated under this programme to infrastructure, energy and social projects and by application of other EU instruments and policies, provided the Belarusian authorities commit themselves to real changes in the area of freedoms, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, and in particular the rights of national minorities.

The "maximum benefits" part would make the regime in Minsk smile. Today's Belarus rulers already enjoy benefits unthinkable in a democracy. They are totally unaccountable to the voters, can remain in power for decades and still enjoy the benefits of Western civilization, such as skiing in Switzerland. Why would any dictator trade it for democracy which in the best-case scenario will leave them only with skiing in Switzerland?

The Belarus authorities understand that no serious sanctions from the European Union will follow. There are three reasons for that. First, Europe does not want to surrender Belarus to Russia. Second, Europe depends on oil and gas pipelines which go via Belarus. And, finally, blunt economic sanctions simply [do not work](#). Are the European resolutions worth the nice glossy paper on which they were printed or they simply make the regime laugh? Repeating the same things over and over will not persuade the Belarus authorities. It is time for the European Parliament to understand that democracy will not come

to Belarus because of the good will of its current rules.

Only civil society can bring democracy to Belarus. Instead of promising "maximum benefits" to the authorities, the EU should start providing "maximum benefits" to Belarus civil society now. Moral support is not enough. Europe should increase its financial support of the civil society coupled with effective supervision mechanisms. TV and radio [broadcasts](#) to the territory of Belarus and [helping](#) bright Belarusians return to their country should be the central part of such support. Poland now bears the main burden of supporting the independent Belstat channel and a number of other civil society initiatives. This could be the reasons why Belarus authorities put pressure on the Union of Poles in Belarus. The European Union should support Poland and do something more than self-righteous noises. Read the full text of the European Parliament Resolution [here](#).

YK

The Women's Unfeminine Holiday



March 8 in Belarus: a celebration of emancipation has turned into its opposite. An article by one of this website's authors on the occasion of the Women's Day.

Some countries of the former Soviet Union and Africa celebrate March 8 as the International Women's Day. This is perhaps the most "innocent" Soviet holiday which has not yet disappeared from our calendar. February 23 (originally Day of the Soviet Army), which in recent years actively establishes itself as a male counterpart of March 8, or, even more, November 7 (Day of the October Revolution) are highly politicized holidays. Therefore the tradition of celebrating them will disappear as soon the government takes a rational view on what should be celebrated as the Day of the Belarusian army. An even bigger question is whether it is worth for Belarus to celebrate anniversaries of the October revolution at all. March 8 is the only holiday which has no blood on it. It does not carry all these second-thoughts like holidays associated with the liberation of Belarus from Nazi occupation and the restoration of the Soviet dictatorship after that.

Nevertheless, the modern tradition of celebrating March 8 is an excellent example of how the Soviet government has been able to indoctrinate socialist ideology and system of symbols in the people's everyday life. The struggle against religion plus a massive urbanization caused the rapid loss of many folk traditions in Belarus. To replace rural traditions there came official Soviet holidays: New Year, the eighth of March, twenty-third day of February, the Seventh of November. March 8

originally arose as a day of women's emancipation. It was a celebration of women's struggle for their rights and against their traditional role in family and society. Instead of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* women demanded things that are obvious today: the right to participate in elections, better working conditions, better wages. On the other hand, after eight decades of celebrating March 8, the people's culture has indeed transformed the feminist holiday into a patriarchal one.

The modern image of a woman you congratulate on March 8 is no way the image of an emancipated courageous female proletarian. 8 March is an occasion to congratulate your mother or your loved, but not a battle comrade. According to the tradition of the last decades, on March 8 men promise to protect women and care for them. Women, in turn, should kindly allow them to do so. Men demonstrate features of knights and gentlemen, and women demonstrate those of noble ladies. A completed patriarchal idyll. As a celebration of emancipation March 8 has turned into its opposite – a celebration of femininity and motherhood. Such is the irony of fate. Post-Soviet feast of March 8 counters the views of both conservatives (as a secularized and communist holiday) and feminists (as day of knighthood and care for the ladies).

Day on March 8 became something like a Soviet version of Valentine's Day. After the collapse of the communist dictatorship it has become one more traditional shopping race for members of the consumerist society and just an other cause for good of human emotions. Maybe it is better this way.

by Alexander Čajčyc for Naša Niva

[Read the original story in Belarusian](#)

Kraków City Council Declares Lukashenka Persona Non-Grata

The council of the Polish city of Kraków has declared Aliaksandr Lukašenka, the President of Belarus, persona non grata in the city. It is a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the Union of Poles in Belarus. The city council has passed a resolution which appeals to the European Parliament to take all possible effective action against the Belarusian state to protect the rights of persecuted Poles in Belarus. The [conflict](#) around the Union of Poles of Belarus is quite far from what it may look like at the first glance. The specific is that the conflict has no nationalistic background at all.

In principle, one can find potential grounds for Polish-Belarusian nationalistic tensions on historical and geographic issues, just as there are tensions between Poland and the Republic of Lithuania around the Vilnius region or between Poland and Ukraine on the role of Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the 2nd World War. Polonization and repressions against Belarusian national movement in Poland-occupied West Belarus in 1919-1939, transfer of the city of Bielastok (Polish Białystok) and surroundings from Belarus to Poland by Joseph Stalin in 1945 or the fact itself that Poles are the only ethnic minority in Belarus that was largely formed not as a result of migration of people from mainland Poland but from Roman Catholics of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania adopting Polish self-identification – all these controversial historical episodes could have been used by a nationalistic Belarusian government as a reason for tensions with Poland.

As a tradition from Soviet times, September 17, the day of the Soviet invasion to Poland in 1939, is still commemorated as the Day of Reunification of West Belarus with the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, but nothing more than that. Belarus has avoided a wave of nationalistic self-esteem buildup all

other newly independent states, like Ukraine or the Baltic states, have been through. The regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka is far from being nationalistic. To the contrary, it seems more cautious about the Belarusian-speaking minority, that is mostly represented by urban intelligentsia and youth in opposition to Lukashenka, than about the Polish minority. There is an official Union of Poles of Belarus led by Stanislau Siamashka that is loyal to the government and that gets support from it.

The prosecution of the unofficial Union of Poles of Belarus led by Anžalika Borys is first of all a prosecution of an organization that is independent from the government and refused to demonstrate loyalty. It should be viewed together with the government's reluctance to register political parties (like the Belarusian Christian Democracy) or repressions against free press in Belarus – and not along with nationalistic tensions between certain parties in Poland and Ukraine or the Republic of Lithuania. Read stories by [Beloruskie Novosti](#), [Gazeta.pl](#) (in Polish) and [TVP](#) (in Polish). See also a [background story by Deutsche Welle Russian edition](#)

AČ

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 – Bronisław 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.

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Belarus Potash and Democracy

Stay off the potash is the title of Edward Lucas's recent article in the Economist, where he reflects on effectiveness of trade boycotts. Although the piece is on trade boycotts, the same logic applies to economic sanctions in general. As to Belarus, the point is well-taken – the more Europe isolates Belarus, the stronger will be its dependence on undemocratic regimes such as Russia or China:



Penalising weak-kneed European countries is hard enough. It is even more difficult when trying to put pressure on the source of the problem. If you want to boycott Belarussian goods, say, because of that government's persecution of its Polish minority, you are unlikely to change your lifestyle much, unless you use industrial quantities of potash or need a lot of cheap tractors.

For countries like Belarus, a trade boycott is outright counterproductive. The more Belarus trades with the rich industrialised world, the weaker will become the ties binding it to Russia. It may be reasonable to try to take custom away

from companies that owe their existence to commercial ties with sleazy politicians. But such bodies tend not to sell anything that a normal consumer in the outside world is likely to buy directly. You may not like the fact that some pennies from your fuel bills eventually trickle into the coffers of Kremlin cronies, but there is not much you can do about it.

Indeed, there were good reasons for the European Union to introduce economic sanctions, but their effectiveness remains [questionable](#). Belarus has not become more democratic, despite some promising rhetoric of its government and strained relations with Russia.

This suggests that different approaches are needed. Spreading uncensored information in Belarus and supporting Western-educated Belarusians to return home are likely to be the most effective.

The first method is easy, but has yet been taken seriously only by Poland. Democratic transformation in Belarus depends on public opinion, which is formed almost exclusively by television. Although internet and printed press are important, their role is marginal because only a small fraction of Belarus population uses internet or newspapers to for political information.

Other than [treatment of Union of Poles of Belarus](#), Belsat is the most important single reason for Belarus authorities strained relations with Poland. It is the only independent Belarusian television channel headquartered, which is headquartered and primarily funded by this country. The increased FM radio and television broadcasting from the neighboring countries is likely to break the information blockade of Belarus population. Once the majority of population gains relatively easy access to uncensored information, the political landscape of Belarus will change

dramatically.

The other approach requires more creativity. The European Union, United States and other countries spend significant amounts to educate and expose Belarusian youth to democratic values abroad. The theory is that once exposed, they will go back to Belarus and do good there. But in reality, foreign-educated youth cannot find its place in today's Belarus. Few employers in Belarus state-dominated economy value foreign language skills or western know-hows. The real unemployment is high and the salaries are ridiculously low. As a result, those Western-educated Belarusians who did not stay in the West, find themselves working in Moscow.

Instead of promoting [export of Belarusian youth](#) to the West and Russia, Belarus supporters should think of helping them return home. Surviving in Belarus for a year or two would cost a small fraction of the monies spent on education abroad. There is little doubt that supporting research, pro-bono work or teaching fellow Belarusians will be more effective than imposing boycotts or trade sanctions upon them.

Read "Stay off the potash" at [Economist.com](#).

Read "The Achilles' Heel of Autocracies: The Role of Media in Transition to Democracy" in [Willamette Law Review](#).

YK

**BBC Interviews Ivonka
Survilla – President of**

Belarusian Government in Exile

BBC features Ivonka Survila, the President of the Council (Rada) of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in a special broadcast on governments in exile.



According to the program author, Clive Anderson, the Rada is the longest-serving government in exile in the world. The Belarusian Democratic Republic's independence was declared on March 25, 1918 during World War I, when Belarus was occupied by the Germans according to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

After the Germans retreated from the territory of Belarus and the Russian Red Army started moving in to establish the Socialist Soviet Republic of Belarus, in December 1918, the Rada (Council) of the Belarusian Democratic Republic moved to Hrodna, which became the centre of a semi-autonomous Belarusian region within the Republic of Lithuania. During the subsequent 1919 Polish invasion, the Rada went into exile and facilitated an anticommunist struggle within the country during the 1920s.

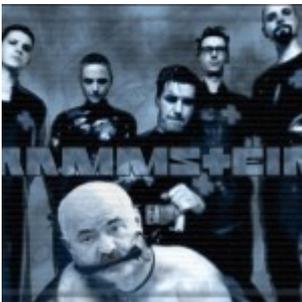
The BBC program examines interesting examples from around the world, which vary from the serious to the apparently ridiculous.

Clive Anderson examines one of the potentially strangest corners of international politics, the lesser-known governments or rulers in exile – a paradoxical area of international relations and surreal part of international law.

In Toronto, for example, a Belarusian government holds court, run by the charismatic Irvonka Survilla. Their version of Belarus only existed for nine months in 1918 before it was assimilated by the Soviet Union. Now that Belarus is independent, is there any reason for their continued existence?

The broadcast is available at BBC Radio 4 until 1 March 2010. To listen, click [here](#).

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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How can Brussels Help the Union of Poles?



Gone is the time when Belarusians were one of the smaller ethnic groups in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. And it is clear that the decades of Soviet rule made Belarus lose the traits that the *Rech Pospolita* was so famous for: ethnic diversity, religious tolerance, and democratic attributes of political system.

A brief thaw in the Belarusian-Polish relations came to an end once the Belarusian authorities cracked down on the Union of Poles in Belarus. Forty ethnic Poles in Belarus have been arrested, some sentenced to five-day jail terms, and Andzelika Borys, the leader of the Union of Poles, was fined for \$360.

On February 17, the Belarusian court ruled that the Union's headquarters must be turned over to a pro-Minsk Polish group that is not recognized by Warsaw. In short, the Union of Poles has suffered the fate of a typical Belarusian NGO.

Polish President Lech Kaczyński and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, who had in the past led the European effort to improve relations with Belarus, both chastised Minsk over its boorish behavior with regard to ethnic minorities. EU Parliament President Jerzy Buzek, a Pole, also called on Minsk to mind its manners when dealing with NGOs.

Even the EU's foreign representative Catherine Ashton joined in and warned that Belarus' place in the Eastern Partnership will be jeopardized if Minsk persists in violating minority rights. She said she was very "disappointed." Unfortunately, Ashton's "disappointment" will hardly make to Belarusian leadership lose sleep. Neither will it help the Belarusian Poles and other civil-society groups in Belarus sleep better and feel safer.

In the unequal match between the Union of Poles in Belarus and the Russia-Belarus Union state it is clear who will prevail. Of course, the Union of Poles has the entire EU on its side. But as long as Brussel's continues to seek improvement in its relations with Minsk more than Minsk itself does, the EU's support for human rights in Belarus will matter little.

Reaching out to Belarus as it bites the offering hand is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. It will not take this hand in earnest unless it indeed needs to be rescued, as had happened for a brief period in the beginning of the global economic crisis when the opportunity was missed.

Belarus Police Arrests Polish Activists Unloyal to the Regime



Tensions between Belarus and Poland rise as Belarus police arrested about 40 members of a Polish ethnic group. This is a continuation of increased [pressure](#) put against the Union of Poles in Belarus.

The Union is uncontrolled and unrecognized by the Belarusian authorities and competes with a pro-government organization of Poles. The Financial Times today devoted an article to the conflict:

Belarus, a country of about 10m, has a Polish minority of about 400,000, a remnant from pre-war times when western Belarus was a part of Poland. The Union of Poles in Belarus became the country's largest nongovernment organisation after most opposition groups were driven underground by Mr Lukashenko, prompting the government to form a pro-regime Polish organisation in 2005 which took over the assets of the independent group.

Mr Lukashenko's government was pushed to warm ties with Europe when his Russian allies tired of propping him up through cheap oil and gas and began to [demand](#) world prices for energy. Belarus's [ramshackle economy](#) needed investment and new markets to survive, and Mr Lukashenko released all of his political prisoners in 2008 as a way of improving relations with the west.

Polish President Lech Kaczynski, Prime Minister Donald Tusk and the Foreign Minister all take active part in trying to persuade the Belarus authorities not to prosecute Polish activists. Polish authorities already banned the Belarusian

officials implicated in violation of the rights of Polish minority to enter Poland.

Read more in [Financial Times](#) and at bbc.co.uk.

The Union of Poles Mistreated in Belarus

Ethnic Poles rising in western Belarus was what Minsk and Moscow happened to choose as a scenario for their 2009 joint military exercise. As if ashamed of its lack of judgment last year, the Belarusian leadership is now doing everything possible to make such a far-fetched plot more plausible.

On February 8, Belarusian police burst into the Polish House in Iyvanets, owned by the Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB), and ordered the staff to vacate the building. This wasn't the first attack on the Union of Poles and the Polish House by the Belarusian authorities. In 2005, Hrodna militia took the office of the Union of Poles forcing a change of leadership.

In January, Minsk also started a criminal prosecution against Taresa Sobal, the director of Polish House in Iyvaniec. Sobal is being accused of failing to properly register a 2004 financial grant received by the Polish House from the former leader of Polish Union Tadevush Kruchkouski.

Actions of the Belarusian authorities evoked sharp criticism by the president of the EU Parliament Jerzy Buzek, who is Polish. Speaking in Stasbourg on Feb. 10, Buzek urged Minsk "to stop taking drastic measures against the Polish minority." He said "acceptance of EU norms with regard to ethnic minorities" was essential for improving the EU-Belarus

discourse. Outraged by Minsk's treatment of the Polish cultural group, Poland recalled its Ambassador to Belarus

Henryk Litwin for consultations. In its turn, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus has complained to Litwin over Poland's statements regarding the oppression of the Belarusian Poles.

Poles constitute the third largest ethnic group in the country after Belarusians and Russians. There are 12 newspapers and magazines in Polish and 2 schools (in Hrodna and Valkavysk). With about 20,000-members, 75 registered primary organizations, and 17 "Polish Houses," the Union of Poles in Belarus is the largest public association of a national minority in Belarus. Founded in Hrodna in 1988, it aspires to promote the Polish language and traditions.

In 2005, the ZPB split, with a pro-Minsk alternative registered as the Union of Belarusian Poles. The unrecognized branch of ZPB elected Anzhelika Borys as its chairwoman; the recognized and pro-Minsk branch elected Stanislaw Syamashka. Warsaw recognizes Borys's ZPB as the sole legal representative of the Polish minority in Belarus, but the Belarusian government favors the union led by Syamashka.

According to the web site of the Belarusian Embassy in the United States, the issue "lies outside the sphere of inter-ethnic relations or those between the state and the Polish national minority in Belarus." Blaming the power struggle among the leaders of the Union, the Embassy claims that "instead of seeking a solution to this situation, complicated in terms of law, one of the conflicting sides started to actively politicize the situation and brought the conflict inside the Union to the international level."

According to the Embassy, "maintaining sustainable inter-religious and inter-ethnic peace is what the Belarusian state can pride itself on." Article 15 of the Belarusian

Constitution requires the state to “bear responsibility for preserving the historic, cultural and spiritual heritage, and the free development of the cultures of all the ethnic communities that live in the Republic of Belarus.” Such exemplary behavior has rarely been the case in Belarus, however.

The position of the Polish minority in Belarus started to worsen after a 1995 referendum, which reintroduced Soviet-era symbols and Russian language as a second national language of Belarus. In 1997, the Belarusian authorities accused the Union of Poles of organizing political provocations, and in 1999 the Union complained of being discriminated to the representatives of the Polish parliament. Authors of the 2003 assessment by the Minorities at Risk Project warned the situation was “likely to deteriorate in the future” as Belarus grew dependent on Russia. So far, this prediction has proven accurate.

Polish presence on what today constitutes Belarusian territory started to form in the times of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1569-1795). The Commonwealth was partitioned by its neighbors Austria, Prussia, and Russia in the late 18th century. Most of the future Belarus was annexed by the Russian Empire. As a result of the 1921 Treaty of Riga, Polish influence over the Western Belarus was restored for nearly two decades. However, in 1939 the Soviet Union invaded Poland under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Germany, and West Belarus was incorporated into the Belarusian SSR. After the WWII, the Poles who remained on the Belarusian territory faced four decades of Soviet repressions and discrimination.

Looking Back at Presidential Elections in Belarus



Next year, Belarusians will vote in the fourth presidential election in their history as an independent nation. Belarus has been led by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka since 1994. This blogpost provides a brief overview of the President's three electoral victories and may be helpful for anticipating the results of the upcoming 2011 elections.

2011 Election

So far, two oppositional candidates have announced running for the Belarusian presidency. Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the leader of the Movement for Freedom, will run the second time. Ales Mikhalevich, the former Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front, said that he would participate, too. Mikhalevich was expelled from the Belarusian Popular Front for criticizing the party's leadership. He plans to campaign for the maintenance of Belarusian identity and culture, teaming up with Western-educated Belarusian professionals. There is a high probability that a third oppositional candidate will stand in the elections representing the United Democratic Forces (UDF). Even under the most democratic conditions, that considerably reduces the chances of any of them reaching a second round.

All political activity in the country is currently oriented toward April 25 local elections. All and sundry parties and movements are busy registering their representatives for participation in the electoral councils.

The latest poll findings by the Independent Institute for Social Economic and Political Research indicate that 42.5 % would vote for Lukashenka, 4.3 % for Milinkevich, and 2.4% for Alyaksandr Kazulin, opposition candidate in 2006 elections.

2006 Election

The Central Election Commission approved incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Alyaksandr Milinkevich (United Democratic Forces), Sergei Gaidukevich (Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus), Alyaksandr Kazulin (Belarusian Social Democratic Party) to run in 2006 election. Lukashenka was eligible to run again because of 2004 constitutional amendment abolishing presidential term limits. The amendment was supported by 77 to 48 % of voters, depending on the organization counting the votes. Before the elections, candidate Kazulin was arrested, beat up, and held in custody for eight hours. Many opposition activists were arrested as well.

Milinkevich called the election the opposition's "last chance" and "last battle," and in a miraculous fit of political activism, 92.6% of Belarusians voted in 2006, according to the Central Election Commission. Lukashenka won by a landslide, getting 82.6% of the vote.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) declared that the election "failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections" and that Lukashenka "permitted State authority to be used in a manner which did not allow citizens to freely and fairly express their will at the ballot box, and a pattern of intimidation and the suppression of independent voices was evident." The United States did not "accept the results of the election" and "support[ed] the call for a new election." However, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) said the vote was open and transparent.

2001 Election

Lukashenka's original five-year term ran out in 1999. However, 1996 referendum extended presidential term to seven years. In 2001 Lukashenka ran against two candidates: Vladimir Goncharik, the chairman of the Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions, and a member of the parliament disbanded in 1996, and Sergei Gaidukevich, dubbed Belarusian Zhirinovskiy in some Western media and representing the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus.

On the Election Day, international websites covering elections had their IP addresses blocked and Belarusians could not access such websites as 'svaboda.org', 'charter97.org', 'racyja.pl', 'goncharik.org', and 'vybor.org', which covered Belarusian presidential elections. The media that were not hindered, accused the United States of launching a campaign to subvert the election and topple Lukashenka, following the blueprint used to overthrow Yugoslavia's Slobodan Milosevic.

The OSCE international election observation mission reported that the Belarusian elections "failed to meet the OSCE commitments for democratic elections" and could not be internationally recognized. However, Lukashenka called his re-election "elegant and beautiful" in his victory speech. Russian observers also decreed Lukashenka's victory fair and democratic, applauding what they dubbed a convincing win.

1994 Election

Setting the stage for the next 15 years, Belarusian first presidential election was dominated by debates about the country's relations with Russia. The debate was not between those for and those against closer ties with Moscow, however. Both candidates – Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich and populist director of a state farm Lukashenka – called for economic union with the Eastern neighbor and argued over who of them opposed the dissolution of the Soviet Union the most. A

crusader against corruption and inflation, Lukashenka scored an overwhelming victory, winning 80 % of votes. Interestingly, he told reporters he was “afraid that the election results will be falsified” and that is why he “sent 20,000 observers to polling stations.”

To read more about elections in Belarus visit:

[“Belarusian Opposition Prepares for Local and Presidential Elections”](#) by David Marples.

Newsline of Belarus’ local elections from the [special project by BelaPAN](#).

Q&A about Belarusian elections from 2008 in [BBCNews](#).

The Russia-Belarus Oil Dispute Settled. At Least for Now.

According to the deal, Russia will deliver 6.3 million tons of oil to Belarus duty free this year. This is exactly the amount Moscow had promised at the beginning of negotiations. Russia agreed that Belarus will raise oil transit costs by about 11 percent.

It turned out, that despite announcements of Belneftekhim to the contrary, the Russian side indeed suspended supplying oil to Belarusian refineries at some point.

Apparently, the issue of oil duties has been linked to other projects, such as building the nuclear station in Belarus.

However, full details of the deal has not yet been disclosed. According to the Financial Times:

Mr Sechin said Russia would allow Belarus to continue paying a favourable tax rate on oil supplied for its domestic needs in 2010. It was not clear how much tax Belarus will pay on oil it re-exports after processing in its own refineries.

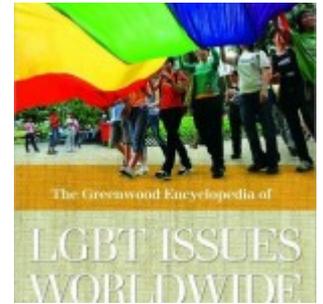
Welcoming the deal, Mr Sechin said Russian officials had given up their New Year holidays to negotiate the settlement with Belarus. "Belarus' position was very tough for us," he said in a statement posted on the government website. "We agreed a series of compromises taking into account our special relationship with the brother republic and with the people of Belarus." Talks between the two sides about co-operation in gas and atomic energy are to continue in the coming weeks.

Read full text in [Financial Times](#).

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**Belarus in the Greenwood
Encyclopedia of LGBT Issues
Worldwide**

The chapter on Belarus was included in the Greenwood Encyclopedia of LGBT Issues Worldwide published earlier this year. The three volumes account for more than 1300 pages of important and timely information. This set has an ambitious scope with the goal of offering the most up-to-date international overview of key issues in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Eighty-two countries are represented. Belarus chapter was written by Viachaslau Bortnik, Belarusian human rights defender and LGBT activist.



Bellow we provide excerpts from the chapter.

Overview of LGBT Issues in Belarus

While homosexual activity is no longer considered a crime in Belarus, and the age of consent for heterosexual and homosexual relations is equal, LGBT rights still remains a marginal topic in public discourse and does not play any role in national and or local politics.

Homophobia remains widespread throughout the country, and instances of harassment and discrimination appear occur regularly. Many Belarusians believe consider homosexuality to be a disease, and some see it as a sin, but few consider it a legitimate sexual orientation.

President Lukashenka and members of Parliament parliament often make negative statements about homosexuals, which strengthens strengthening the homophobia in society.

Homosexuality is frowned upon in Belarusian society and condemned by the church. Belarusian society is conservative in this respect, with homosexuals generally being socially stigmatized. Gay life in Belarus remains largely underground, and only a few homosexuals openly declare their sexual orientation.

The government-controlled media often attempts to smear the domestic political opposition by associating it with homosexuality. This strategy is also used against foreign countries; in one two year period, three foreign diplomats were expelled from Belarus on claims of homosexuality. Homosexuality is often seen by the government as allied with Western paths to development.

While the Belarusian Constitution constitution says it forbids discrimination, this prohibition has not extended to discrimination based on sexual orientation. Belarusian law does not provide protection for LGBT people against discrimination with regard to employment, housing, or family relationships. Although many people live together outside of marriage , domestic partnership and cohabitation is are not recognized by the government and LGBT Belarusian couples do not have any of the rights as of heterosexual couples. Gay men are also not allowed to serve in the armed forces.

Although hate crimes against homosexuals are not uncommon, homophobia is not recognized as an independent motive for crimes. LGBT people continue to face harassment and discrimination by the general population; and they cannot count on police protection protection, as the police often refuse to protect the rights of LGBT citizens. There is evidence that LGBT people are targeted for violence; in 2001–2002, five LGBT people were tortured and killed in Minsk. Other countries have granted asylum to Belarusians who claimed discrimination based on sexual orientation.

There is no official recognition of LGBT organizations in Belarus Belarus, although many groups continue to operate without registering, which makes them illegal. These groups face difficulties such as armed militia storming into their meetings to threaten and arrest their members, members; LGBT individuals and groups are also the target of hate crimes. Recent changes to Belarus's Criminal criminal Code code have given the authorities even more latitude to treat the

activities of LGBT groups as illegal attempts to discredit or bring harm to Belarus.

Outlook for the 21st Century

The Belarusian LGBT movement is one of the youngest in Europe. It operates in one of the most repressive political environments, nearly in full international isolation, without public support inside the country. Attempts of at consolidation undertaken by LGBT groups in 2007 give vital hope for a grooving, growing developing movement to benefit the Belarusian LGBT community as a whole. The most important step in the near future is seen to be a public campaign to change the legislation affecting the relationship between NGOs and the government government; that this will allow LGBT groups to work openly and more effectively. The second step is the promotion of antidiscrimination legislation. The Belarusian LGBT movement can only achieve these serious goals by working in alliance with other organizations that fight for human rights, women's rights rights, and other progressive causes in the country.

Undoubtedly, gradual change in the political regime and future integration within the European Union will play an important role in the improvement of the situation of LGBT people in Belarus.

The Greenwood Encyclopedia of LGBT Issues Worldwide/ Edited by Chuck Stewart, 2010.

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