

# Public protests as authorities destroy people's memorial in Kurapaty

On the morning of 4 April tractors began digging up 70 wooden crosses at the Kurapaty memorial site on the outskirts of Minsk. Police detained 15 activists that came out in protest. Later the same day around 200 people gathered in the Kurapaty forest to commemorate the victims of [Stalin's mass execution at the site](#), where over 150,000 people perished during the purges.

Today, more than 30 years after the discovery of the mass graves, Kurapaty still symbolises the most outrageous atrocities of the Soviet regime. Kurapaty has unleashed the potential social capital residing in Belarusian civil society and mobilised citizens to erect a people's memorial, which civil society has preserved despite the hostility of the authorities.

Many Belarusians worry about the future of the memorial site and the recent dismantling of the crosses because it relates to the 'sacred' sphere of commemorating the dead, something which many view as apolitical and something ostensibly beyond the control of the state.

## 'Let's go and eat' in Kurapaty?



Source: svaboda.org  
(RFE/RL)

After two archaeologists, Zyanon Paznyak and Yavhan Shmulakov, discovered remains of executed victims in 1987, Kurapaty soon found infamy for the mass execution of hundreds of thousands of people in 1937-41. The discovery proved that Soviet authorities committed serious crimes against their own citizens and this, along with the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe, later contributed to the national awakening of Belarusians in the late 1980s.

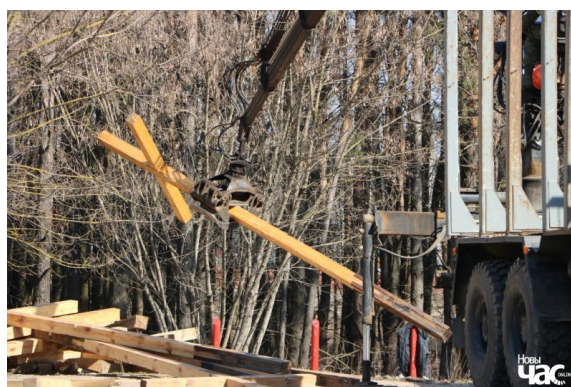
Although, since 2004, the Ministry of Culture included Kurapaty in the national register of cultural properties of Belarus, the state has not done much to commemorate it for some time. In 2017 a private investor upset many by purchasing a plot of land adjacent to the memorial and opening a restaurant 50 metres from it.

As a result, various civil society groups including the Young Front, the Belarusian Christian-Democratic Party, as well as ordinary individuals vocally opposed the restaurant. Some activists kept protesting in Kurapaty, as well as [picketing the entrance to the restaurant](#), hoping to make it less popular and unprofitable. Zmicier Dashkievich, a leader of the Young Front, joined several activists and began erecting crosses to mark the memorial site too.

Several public figures openly expressed their disapproval, including the Noble Prize Winner in Literature Sviatlana Alekseyevich. Recently, Archbishop Tadeuś Kandrusievich, the

head of the Belarusian Catholic Church, has called for a dialogue between the authorities and representatives of civil society groups. He called for greater respect towards the religious feelings of believers while resolving the conflict over Kurapaty: “I think that it is necessary to organise a public discussion about putting things in order in Kurapaty, with the participation of representatives of various faiths.”

Siarhej Liepin, the press-secretary of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, also disapproved of the methods used



Source: Novy čas

by the local authorities. He wrote in his blog: “Remember. The Devils are very afraid of the sign of the Cross of the Lord, for in it the Saviour has exposed and put them to shame.”

## **Who owns Kurapaty: citizens or state?**

In February 2017 the Belarusian authorities became more active in relation to Kurapaty. The state-run daily *Belarus Segodnya* organised a round table on its future. The participants of the discussion argued that the lack of commemoration activities has led to a vacuum which was filled by political forces. Also, they recommended establishing a National Mourning Memorial in Kurapaty, which could be supported by all

Belarusians. This would, in their view, prevent society from being divided. In fact, in June 2018, the Ministry of Culture announced that they had raised over 11,000 Belarusian roubles for the new monument and a special jury chose the best design.

The violent removal of crosses surprised many in Belarus. On 4 April Sviatlana Alekseyevich commented to the daily *Naša Niva* that Kurapaty remains a “symbol of national self-reliance, national memory. And the state does not want to accept it [...].” She aptly notes the uniqueness of a national monument spontaneously raised by Belarusians.

However, the press secretary of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, Natallia Ejsmant, has told the media that the head of the state is certain that “things should be put in order” in Kurapaty. In her words, he will do it “in accordance with the customs and religious tradition” of Belarusians. No details have emerged on how and when this will be done.

## **Unexpected mobilisation of Belarusians?**

Around 200 people gathered at Kurapaty. This shows that, aside from fairly organised civil society groups, ordinary apolitical Belarusians care about the matter too. After all, the topic does not relate to politics but is a highly sensitive one since it relates to a social taboo – death and the commemoration of those who died. Many Belarusians continue to practice *Radounica*, visiting graves of relatives, a tradition which stems from the Orthodox Church and Greek Catholic Church’s ritual.

By removing the crosses, the authorities have also touched upon a sensitive religious symbol – the cross. The removal of crosses was also happening during Lent and appears highly disrespectful to many Christians in the country. This

contrasts with the many official public statements in which the authorities strive to emphasise the importance of Orthodox values in Belarusian society.

## **Dialogue instead of pressure**

The nervous and unexpected reaction of the Belarusian authorities looks rather confusing. Officially, they want exactly the same what various different civil society groups aim for – a respectful commemoration of the victims of Soviet repression. But at the same time, they strongly demonstrate their exclusive right to present their own narrative on Kurapaty and shape all public manifestations of it.

The issue of Kurapaty seems apolitical because it concerns the commemoration of a couple of hundred thousand victims of Soviet repression. Yet, the people's mobilisation with regard to the memorial site, including marking it with the crosses, the defence of the crosses, and, finally, yesterday and today's prayers there, came as a shock to many in Belarus and abroad.

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## **10 Years Without Bykau**

On 22 June, ten years will have passed since the great Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau passed away. Bykau's works have become regarded as masterpieces of world literature. Foreign publishing companies translated his books into more than 40 languages, and the overall copies put out have reached up into the millions. The new film *In the Fog* was based on one of his books and has already won several awards in Europe.

For Belarus, Bykau symbolizes something more than just a

writer. He arose at the beginning of the Belarusian independence, helped the Belarusian Popular Front and publicly and consistently opposed Lukashenka's authoritarianism. His civil activity set an example of civic responsibility which public figures should live by.

### **Writer of the War**

Many know Bykau as a talented writer. His works depicted the war through the eyes of an ordinary soldier – the tragedy of a person and a human soul. He saw the war not from the position of the Communist logistical commissioners, but as a soldier who journeyed through the whole of Europe. It is precisely this, the centring of a person within a moral tragedy, that is found foremost in his books, a conscience choice made to force out the traditional Soviet pomposity of its great victory.

During World War II enemy forces wounded him several times, and he nearly died. His parents even received a letter that Vasil Bykau died in a fight, and the authorities embossed his name on a mass grave obelisk. However, he continued his military service and marched through Europe in a squad in the Red Army. Later, Bykau would say that Stalin took the victory away from the people, as “we achieved victory, but not freedom”.

After the war, Bykau started writing. He published his first book "The Last Fighter" in 1958. In 1965, Bykau published the novelette “No Pain for the Dead”. The Soviet authorities “appreciated” the book. However, “Unknown people” threw stones at his windows, showered his wife with tomatoes and beat the writer. The Communists hated Bykau and tried to do everything to make him emigrate.

Regardless, Bykau survived the harassment and soon the political thaw came. The authorities started giving Bykau state awards and adapting his novels to film. However, everyone knew it was just a game. In the end, it was clear

that Vasil Bykau and the Soviet authorities distrusted each other.

## **Belarus – the Years of Revival**

The Belarusian revival started in [Kurapaty](#), the stove where the Soviet authorities committed mass executions of ordinary Belarusians. A prominent Belarusian politician Zianon Paznyak published an article about the discovery of the truth about Kurapaty in 1988, but his article saw the light of day thanks only to Vasil Bykau. He wrote an introduction to the article and pursued its publication.

Approximately at the same time Bykau had become “the Godfather” of the Belarusian Popular Front, the movement that helped to achieve the country’s independence. Bykau protected the Front from the KGB provocations by his personal authority and helped the democrats to get into Parliament. Former MP Syarhei Navumchyk recalls that he got his mandate due to the words of support from Vasil Bykau, which were printed in his promo leaflets.

Later, Vasil Bykau became the member of the BPF Board and the main authority for the Belarusian opposition. However, Bykau defended not only Belarusians. When the Soviet troops invaded with their tanks in Vilnius back in 1991, Bykau supported the Lithuanians in their fight for independence. When the Communists made an attempt to preserve the USSR forcibly in the same 1991, Bykau bravely stood against them.

At the presidential elections in 1994, Vasil Bykau worked as part of the democratic candidate Zyanon Paznyak’s team. They lost the election to Lukashenka.

## **Forced Emigration**

When Lukashenka arrived on the national stage, the state publishing companies accepted Vasil Bykau’s works more and more rarely. One script idly remained with a publishing

company for three years. They say that the KGB monitored Bykau's phone conversations and watched his every move and state propaganda smeared the writer. The state newspaper "Nioman" called him a "corpse" when he was alive. Bykau used to say he felt no fear for his life, but "cannot write without freedom". During Soviet times Bykau managed to handle all this, but it caused him great health problems.

In 1998, Vasil Bykau accepted the invitation of the Finnish PEN-centre and went to write first to Sweden, and then to Finland. In 2000, Bykau returned for a short time, but decided to leave again. This time he moved to Germany for two years. The state propagandists rather enjoyed making light of the fact that in his elderly age Bykau emigrated to the country he fought against in his youth.

In 2002, President of the Czech Republic Václav Havel invited Vasil Bykau to live in the Czech Republic. The writer accepted the invitation but did not stay there for long. His health was deteriorating and even Havel's personal physician could not help. Vasil Bykau decided to return to Belarus until his last days were upon him.

## **The Comeback**

Vasil Bykau passed away on 22 June 2003. Tens of thousands of people came to bid him farewell, with the column of mourners stretching up to 15 kilometres. The official delegation left the funeral when Bykau's son covered the coffin with the [white-red-white flag](#). Current PM [Mikhail Myasnikovich](#) attended the funeral, one of the few authorities to do so. Lukashenka did not attend the funeral, while the state TV only briefly mentioned the event. Meanwhile, the Russian television made Bykau's funeral top news.

Bykau has always remained Lukashenka's enemy. He defended Belarusian independence while Lukashenka signed unification agreements with Russia. The great writer openly accused the



authorities of murdering politicians and journalists. Still, Lukashenka disliked Bykau the most for his position of authority in Belarusian society.

In 2010, more than 100,000 Belarusians signed a petition to name one of the streets in Minsk after Vasil Bykau, but the authorities continue to ignore their request. Even the memory of what many consider to be the greatest Belarusian remains a danger for Lukashenka's regime.

In 2005 Zina Gimpelevich from the University of Waterloo published "Vasil Bykau: His Life and Works", the only biography of Vasil Bykau in English. Before he died, Bykau wrote an autobiography "The Long Road Home". To this day, it remains a text in search of its translator.

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## Long Live Stalin?

Last Sunday, a thousand Belarusians carrying national flags and wooden crosses marched from central Minsk to the Kurapaty forest. Nearly 100,000 people were shot dead during the Stalin era in Kurapaty. On just one day 74 years ago, more than a hundred representatives of the intellectual elite of Soviet Belarus were also shot dead in the cellars of the Minsk KGB (then known as NKVD) internal prison "Amerikanka".

The archive of the President of the Russian Federation still keeps the list with the names of the 103 residents of Soviet Belarus who were sentenced to death by Joseph Stalin on 15 September 1937 and shot on the night of 29 October 1937. According to some historians, this was the way Stalin's assassins celebrated the day of Lenin's Komsomol – The Communist Union of Youth's anniversary. The victims were Belarusian writers (as many as 22 people), government

officials, labor leaders, prominent doctors, teachers, priests, military officers, students and others.

## **The Tunnel of Death**

Leanid Marakou, who is a researcher of Stalin's repressions in Belarus and an author of the multivolume encyclopedia with biographies of thousands of persecuted intellectuals, has documentary evidence that Soviet authorities repressed more than 600 public and cultural figures of Soviet Belarus in the three autumn months of 1937. In the period from August 1937 to December 1938, known as the "bloody tunnel of death", over 10,000 Belarusian people were killed.

Marakou estimates that the NKVD killed or exiled to concentration camps up to 90 percent of Belarusian writers (over 500), 100 percent of priests (around 3000), one in three teachers (around 4,000), around five thousand state officials (engineers, economists, and almost all directors of factories then in Belarus). According to Marakou, "the secret NKVD institutions worked for Stalin in the 1930s. They had already foreseen the huge potential in the geographic location of Belarus by that time".

He points out that Bolshevik authorities in Moscow were primarily concerned about the possible independence of Belarus and its separation from the Soviet Union. To avoid this, they destroyed the nation's intellectual elite and gene pool that had been accumulated over the centuries. Marakou explains that "the characteristic fear, indifference and passivity in Belarusian people today is a result of that genocide."

Once a successful businessman, Marakou left his lucrative job to start researching Stalin's terror 10 years ago when he learned that his uncle – talented Belarusian poet Valery Marakou – died on that terrible night on October 30, 1937.

According to the data of another Soviet totalitarianism

researcher Ihar Kuznyatsou, between 600,000 and 1,500,000 residents of Soviet Belarus became the victims of Stalin's repressions and terror: almost every tenth person, every third or fourth family. By official figures, 152,399 criminal cases and 235,552 people were revisited after Stalin's death. 175,914 of the repressed Belarusians were rehabilitated, but 59,638 of the victims were denied rehabilitation.

However, it is impossible to count the exact number of repressed people in Soviet Belarus. In today's Belarus, KGB archives are still closed to researchers.

### **Back in the 1930s**

Four years ago, prominent scholars and former political prisoners in Minsk organized a public tribunal to deal with the crimes of Stalinism in Belarus. They stated that it was not impossible for the country to become a rule-of-law state without having a fair trial over the communist crimes and criminals. Belarus has commemorated 20 years of its sovereignty this year, but the state under 17-years of Alexander Lukashenka's rule has not even tried to revisit the Soviet past. We witness attempts to rehabilitate Stalin and to level crimes of the Soviet regime in the country that has suffered so much from Stalinism.

New high school history textbooks downplay the scale of crimes of the communists. They stress the positive role of Stalin in the historical process. Official propaganda has the same attitude. For instance, in the biographical reference book "The Generals of the State Security of Belarus" (Minsk, 2008), compiled by KGB Major-General Ivan Yurkin, it is claimed that the KGB simply maintained "social order" and "implemented the leading party guidance". The growth in repressions was explained by the battle within the intelligentsia for whom it was a "quick and effective way to get rid of competitors."

In the summer of 2005, the historical and cultural complex

"Stalin Line" was opened not far from Zaslavye town near Minsk. On official holidays visitors can observe spectacular combat reconstructions between Soviet and Nazi soldiers. Official ceremonies usually take place next to the monument of Joseph Stalin which was erected there several years ago. Another bloody dictator's monument was installed in 2000 by the Belarusian authorities in the town of Svislach in Hrodna voblast. It happened almost four decades after a huge Stalin monument was removed from Minsk Central Square as a part of the Khrushchev Thaw.

In 2006, a three-meter monument to the founder of the KGB, "the initiator of mass terror, provocation, and the institution of hostages" Felix Dzerzhinsky was raised on the territory of the Minsk Military Academy. The initiator of that memorial was the Chairman of the State Border Guard Service Alexander Paulovski, for whom Dzerzhinsky was a "positive figure in our history." Another monument to Dzerzhinsky has been standing in front of the KGB headquarter in the center of Minsk since the Soviet era.

There are more similar stories to tell. Belarus remains the only post-Soviet republic which has kept the ominous name of the KGB without any changes and celebrates officially the day of the October Bolshevik Revolution.

In this context, all the events that have taken place after the brutal crackdown of opposition protests on the day of presidential elections on 19 December 2010 in Minsk seem very symptomatic. Lukashenka's special riot forces arrested dozens of opposition figures, journalists and civic activists, including five presidential candidates. They were thrown into the same "Amerikanka" prison – nowadays the Minsk KGB detention center.

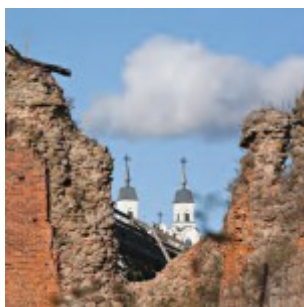
If someone thinks that Stalinism is impossible in the 21st century right at the center of Europe, the Belarusian authorities are trying to prove the opposite. The recent

amendments to the Belarusian law related to financing of parties and NGOs from abroad, holding mass rallies and expanding powers of the KGB that were [introduced](#) in October, are another step in this direction.

Kanstantsin Lashkevich

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## Minsk in Top 10 Eastern European getaways



For years Eastern Europe was the undiscovered half of the continent, where architectural gems, wonderful landscapes and buzzing cities saw only a fraction of the number of visitors heading to Western Europe.

Things have changed, with Eastern Europe now drawing travelers by the trainload, but the diversity and appeal of the region's highlights remain the same. Whether you're discovering them for the first time or coming back for a second dose, you won't be disappointed.

*Lonely Planet* placed Minsk on the closing position in its top 10 Eastern European getaways.\*

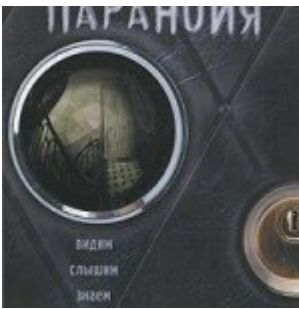
*Minsk, Belarus: Minsk will almost certainly surprise you. The capital of Belarus is, despite its thoroughly dreary sounding name, an amazingly progressive and modern place. Here fashionable cafes, wi-fi-enabled restaurants and crowded bars and nightclubs vie for your attention. Sushi bars and art galleries have taken up residence in a city centre totally remodelled to the tastes of Stalin. There are relatively few*

*traditional sights in the city but myriad places of interest for anyone fascinated by the Soviet period, and plenty of cosmopolitan pursuits to keep you entertained come the evening.*

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## Timothy Snyder on Belarusian History and the KGB



New York Review of books published a book review of Timothy Snyder, a Yale professor of history. He reviewed *Paranoia*, a book of Belarusian writer Victor Martinovich. The review is accurate in almost all respects other than one. It is too paranoiac about the role of KGB in Belarus. KGB is presented as the almighty organisation similar to that which was in the Soviet Union.

The reality is different. When people in Belarus try to be optimistic about political situation in their country they say – it is much better than in the Soviet Union in any event. Indeed, the state is no longer totalitarian. It has turned into a milder authoritarian regime. Although Belarusians are deprived of political freedoms they can freely travel abroad, use internet without any major restrictions, watch satellite TV and even buy opposition newspapers in kiosks.

According to the book review, KGB agents are checking passports of all those arriving to Belarus without even introducing themselves. Those who travel to Belarus do not

usually encounter anybody other than the border control and the customs officials. If there are any KGB agents at the Minsk airport – they are very good in hiding themselves. Perhaps the reason why Western scholars are so keen to demonise the powerless Belarusian secret service is because it is using the KGB brand. In reality, it is a weak and inefficient organisation more interested in doing business with loyal businessmen than in uncovering foreign plots.

Otherwise, Professor Snyder's review does justice to the Belarusian history, its relations with Russia and other neighbours and the nature of Lukashenka's regime. The summary of key events of the Belarusian history demonstrates that the author is knowledgeable about the subject:

*Until the modern period, Belarusian history was quite distinct from Russian... A heartland for half a millennium of the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, it became a borderland of the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century. Because all of what is now Belarus was under the rule of the tsars in the nineteenth century, it was difficult for a national movement to emerge. The major local religion had been the Uniate Church, Eastern in rite but subordinate to the Vatican. It was merged with Russian Orthodoxy. The local language, Belarusian, was close enough to both Russian and Polish that local elites seeking social advancement tended to choose one or the other. The Belarusian movement began to gain supporters in the early twentieth century, but a short-lived Belarusian National Republic was absorbed by Bolshevik Russia. The Soviet leadership at first encouraged Belarusian culture, until Stalin had almost all of the significant Belarusian writers murdered during the Great Terror of 1937–1938.*

Also, Timothy Snyder's description of Lukashenka's propaganda is straight on point:

*Lukashenko's propaganda presents his own people, the Belarusians, as something less than a mature political nation. They are rather an ethnic group, dressed in Soviet-era folk costumes, somewhere amidst the livestock and the crops, mindful chiefly of food and shelter.*

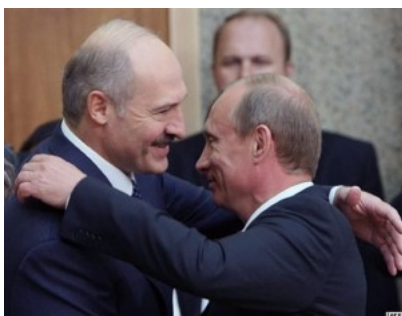
Perhaps the author's exaggeration of the role of KGB in Belarus can also be explained by the title of the book under review. Fair enough, those dealing with Paranoia may find it difficult to distinguish real from illusory threats.

Read full the full text of review at [NYbooks.com](http://NYbooks.com).

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## American media on Russia-Belarus information war



Recent Russia-Belarus information conflict is still attracting attention of leading international media outlets. The latest dispute broke out in June when Russia and Belarus tussled over natural gas prices, and continued when Mr. Lukashenko nearly scuttled a planned customs union between his country, Russia and Kazakhstan that had been a pet project of Vladimir V. Putin, Russia's prime minister and pre-eminent leader.

Michael Schwartz of The New York Times\* reflects on the mudslinging, which has played out in both countries' government-controlled media in recent weeks.



## ***In Information War, Documentary Is Latest Salvo***

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

*The New York Times*

Published: July 31, 2010

*MOSCOW – A new documentary film about the Belarussian president, Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, portrays him as a bumbling tyrant enamored of Hitler and Stalin. He has political opponents killed, journalists silenced and elections rigged in the film, all while keeping his faltering country locked in a Soviet time warp.*

*For years, human rights groups and Western governments have been leveling similar accusations. But the latest salvo against Mr. Lukashenko comes from an unlikely source: Russia's government-controlled television.*

*The documentary is part of an all-out propaganda war that has erupted between Russia and neighboring Belarus, two former Soviet republics that were once so close they had been on track to reunite. When the documentary, titled "Godfather," was aired this month on Russia's NTV television, it seemed to signal that the marriage was officially off.*

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[Read the full story.](#)

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# **The Wall Street Journal: Europe's Last Dictatorship**

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Wall Street Journal published an article of Jeffrey Gedmin, president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, who recently visited Belarus. He urges the U.S. to consider lifting sanctions only on the basis of strict conditionality. He also suggests that the EU insists that any economic assistance be closely tied to political reforms and respect for human rights. Here is the text:

*Minsk, Belarus – One of the questions I was repeatedly asked during a recent trip to the capital of Belarus was whether the Obama administration would opt for greater pragmatism at the expense of idealism in foreign policy. Both the government and opposition in this country have a vested interest in the answer. As early as next week, the U.S. will decide whether or not to continue sanctions against the country known as “Europe’s last dictatorship.” The European Union faces fresh choices as well.*

*NATO sees Belarus as a potential threat to neighboring Lithuania. Russian tanks stationed in Belarus can be in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, in about 90 minutes. This small nation of 10 million can threaten in other ways: 20% of EU gas imports from Russia pass through the former Soviet state.*

*Belarus also remains a notorious human-rights abuser. In its press-freedom index, Freedom House ranks Belarus 188th out of 195 countries. Transparency International rates Minsk as more corrupt than Moscow. Minsk can feel like a time warp: Main avenues in the capital are still named after Lenin, Marx and Engels.*

*On my trip, I attended a dinner with leading oppositionists in a private room at a local restaurant. It was private except for the two minders who were stationed about five feet away from us. At a meeting of former political prisoners at the U.S. embassy to celebrate the 55th anniversary of Radio Liberty broadcasts to Belarus, I met a former trade minister*

who had served two years for breaking with the regime. Another young, charismatic businessman had spent six years behind bars for his pro-opposition views.

The man who rules Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, is severe. In 1995 he had his air force shoot down a hot air balloon that had strayed into his air space, killing two Americans.

The U.S. and the EU need to consider two issues in their relations with Belarus. It's only through a coordinated approach that we'll make progress towards reform.

The first issue has to do with democratic development. The heady days of the 1990s, when it appeared that freedom was on the march around the world, have given way to a decade of democracy recession. The most troubling developments have taken place in Russia and its periphery.

Democratization in countries such as Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine will almost certainly help to curb Russia's imperial appetite. Faced with neighboring democracies, Russia would be forced to take greater stock of its affairs at home. Garry Kasparov, the chess champion turned Putin opponent, thinks of an inside and an outside game if you want to support Russian democracy today. Mr. Kasparov argues that the outside game – what happens in Russia's neighborhood – may be as important as what's happening inside Russia.

Let's encircle Russia with states that provide a powerful model for democratization. It has been 20 years since George H.W. Bush gave his "Europe, Whole and Free" speech in Mainz, Germany, and the project is only half complete.

Second, the prospects for political change in Belarus may not be as bleak as some believe. True, the opposition is weak. For his part, Mr. Lukashenko never fails to disappoint. Despite all evidence to the contrary, the regime calls into question the fact that the mass graves on the outskirts of Minsk are the work of Stalin's henchmen. And Mr. Lukashenko

*is the only ex-Soviet leader to have proudly retained the name "KGB" for his security services.*

*Yet every dictator has his Achilles' heel. For the authorities in Belarus, theirs may be the economy. The Russians, with whom Mr. Lukashenko has a "close but dysfunctional relationship," as one EU diplomat puts it, have reduced their economic support for Belarus in the last couple of years. Moreover, Belarus has not managed to remain immune from the global financial crisis. According to that same diplomat, some 25% of state-enterprise employees are now working on reduced hours. Mr. Lukashenko is in trouble if his social pact begins to seriously fray.*

*What to do? The civil-society leaders I met were in agreement that the recent release of political prisoners was the result of U.S. and EU pressure. That pressure must be sustained. The U.S. should consider lifting sanctions only on the basis of strict conditionality. Washington should not give in to the temptation to accept the return of the American ambassador, who was expelled last March over U.S. sanctions, as sufficient. Belarus must be pressured to have more independent media, to investigate the cases of missing dissidents, and to end the practice of jailing oppositionists. For its part, the EU should insist that any economic assistance be closely tied to political reforms and respect for human rights.*

*This will be slow, tough going to be sure. But now is exactly the wrong time for a short-sighted realpolitik approach.*

Source: The Wall Street Journal of 29 May 2009, page A13.