

# Whom to Blame for the 11 April Terrorist Attack?

In less than two days after the 11 April attack, Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced that the investigation resulted in capture of the suspected terrorist. According to Belarusian security services, the terrorist was a mentally ill person who had constructed a unique radio-controlled explosive device using the internet.

Police also detained a few more people from Vitsebsk, a regional center in Northern Belarus, in connection with the blast. The authorities also announced that the same people prepared two other blasts in public places in 2005 and 2008. The team of investigators, led by Andrei Shved, shared little evidence to support their findings. The authorities also made sure that their findings were not questioned in the state-controlled media. As a result, the Belarusian public remains very suspicious.

For instance, the leading Belarusian portal tut.by (which is not linked to the opposition) showed that over 60% of people polled linked the terrorist act with the authorities. The portal had to promptly remove those results from their website in order not to anger Belarusian authorities. Polls on opposition web sites showed even more mistrust towards the officially announced version.

President Lukashenka continues to hint at links between the opposition and the blast without giving any evidence to support it. Yesterday several human rights activists were detained in connection with the blast. No further details of their alleged involvement were given. In less than two days after the 11 April attack, Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced that the investigation resulted in capture of the suspected terrorist. According to Belarusian security services, the

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Belarusian authorities prevent any discussion of the terrorist act in state-controlled media. As a result, Belarusians have to relieve their thirst for uncensored information on Internet. The number of visits to independent and opposition web sites has grown significantly. Although web sites such as charter97.org were blocked in Belarusian state establishments and suffered from DOS attacks, their popularity is much higher than that of the state-run media. Last week, the authorities issued official warnings to the leading independent newspapers – Nasha Niva and Narodnaya Volya and several journalists. Nasha Niva may now be shut down at any time.

The reason for the Nasha Niva warning was that the newspaper published information that while Lukashenka was visiting the crime scene there was a young woman still alive. It appears that the woman was not there, but subsequently released pictures showed there were a number of uncovered dead bodies when Lukashenka visited the scene.

Belarusian authorities cracked down not only on independent newspapers and internet web sites, but also on individual bloggers for “spreading rumours”. Several people were detained for posting untruthful information on the internet. Massive

repressions, however, against the opposition comparable to the post-election crackdown have not yet followed. With the exception of the yesterday's detentions, the authorities primarily use the terrorist act for propaganda purposes.

Both the opposition and the authorities accuse each other of using the terrorist act to reach their immediate political goals. Mutual accusations of the regime and the opposition in organizing the terrorist act show just how bad the political climate in the country is. It is hardly possible to imagine that authorities in Russia or Ukraine, let alone Western countries, would blame their opposition for terrorists acts. In Belarus, however, it is becoming the norm.

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## **Amnesty International's Key Human Rights Concerns in Belarus**

As Belarus prepares for elections on Sunday 19 December, Amnesty International UK outlined key human rights concerns in the country. The organization urged its members to sign a petition addressed to the acting Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and to the 19 December 2010 newly elected President of the Republic of Belarus.

The petition calls for Belarus to fulfil its human rights obligations, in particular, those which may be at risk of being violated during the election period. The closing date for the petition will be announced shortly – it is likely to be a couple of days before the (new) President is inaugurated.

According to Amnesty international UK, the main human rights concerns in Belarus include:

*Freedom of expression*

*Most printed and electronic media remains under state control and the state press distribution system maintains a monopoly. However two independent newspapers – Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) and Nasha Niva (Our Field) – have been allowed to use the state press distribution system.*

*Amnesty is calling for a prompt, impartial and effective investigation into the recent death of the founder of the unofficial news website Charter'97, Aleh Byabenin. Shortly before his death, he had joined the campaign team of Andrei Sannikov, presidential candidate for the civic movement "European Belarus". He was found with a rope around his neck suspended from the banisters of his country house on 3 September this year; an initial investigation said the cause of death was suicide. In November two experts commissioned by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) agreed with the official conclusions that Byabenin had committed suicide, however, their mandate had been to review the materials already compiled by Belarusian prosecutors and no autopsy was carried out.*

*Colleagues and friends questioned this possible cause of death as Byabenin was a happily married man who had arranged to meet friends at the cinema the following day. Eyewitnesses saw bruises on his body and dirt on his hands, suggesting a struggle. Aleh Byabenin had been attacked in the past and in March this year, the Charter'97 offices were searched by police, allegedly in connection with a criminal investigation into corruption in the police force. Colleagues say they have received anonymous threats since Aleh Byabenin's death.*

*On 1 July, Presidential Decree No. 60 "On measures to improve the use of the national segment of the internet" came into effect. The decree requires that Internet cafés check the*

identity of all customers and keep records of internet use; and that internet service providers check the identity of subscribers in person and make information about subscribers available to the authorities. Other measures limit access to information that could be classed as extremist, pornographic, linked to illegal migration and trafficking, or that promotes violence and other illegal acts. According to a study commissioned by the OSCE these measures "lead to unsubstantiated restrictions of a citizen's right to receive and disseminate information", and give the authorities extremely broad powers to limit access to certain sources of information.

#### *Freedom of assembly*

The authorities continue to violate the right to freedom of assembly by not permitting demonstrations and public actions. The very restrictive Law on Public Events requires demonstrators to apply for permission to the local authorities to hold an event, and bans all demonstrations less than 200m away from underground stations and pedestrian crossings .

There have been allegations that excessive force has been used to disperse non-violent demonstrations, and peaceful demonstrators have been detained.

On 24 March, Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovich and Iryna Toustsiuk of Human Rights Centre Viasna were detained overnight and fined for holding an unauthorised picket when they unfurled a banner against the death penalty in front of the Presidential Administration building.

Amnesty is campaigning for three youth activists who fled Belarus after they were convicted for their involvement in a peaceful public protest about taxation. Tatyana Tishkevich left Belarus after she was expelled from university because of her political activities. She was sentenced in her absence. Alyaksei Bondar and Mikhail Kryvau also left the

country after they were sentenced. All three face up to three years' imprisonment if they return to Belarus as leaving the country means that they have automatically violated the terms of their sentence.

The original sentence against Tatyana Tishkevich, Alyaksai Bondar and Mikhail Kryvau was in violation of their right to freedom of assembly. Amnesty is calling on the Belarusian authorities to allow the three to return to Belarus without any risk of being charged for violating the terms of their sentence. The organisation is urging people to take action on this case at [www.amnesty.org.uk/minsk](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/minsk)

### *Death penalty*

Belarus is "Europe's last executioner" – the only remaining country in Europe and the former Soviet Union which still carries out executions.

In March this year, Vasily Yuzepchuk and Andrei Zhuk were executed by a shot to the back of the head. Vasily Yuzepchuk was sentenced to death in June 2009 for the murder of six elderly women, after an investigation and trial which, according to his lawyer, were fundamentally flawed. The lawyer also claims that Vasily Yuzepchuk was beaten in detention to force him to confess. Vasily Yuzepchuk belonged to the marginalised Roma ethnic group, and was originally from Ukraine. He may have had an intellectual disability and, according to his lawyer, he did not know the months of the year and was illiterate.

Three men are currently on death row. Two were sentenced to death by shooting on 14 May 2010 for crimes committed during an armed robbery on a flat in Grodno in October 2009. Both men had their appeals dismissed on 17 September by the Supreme Court and have now appealed to the President for clemency. On 14 September, Ihar Myalik was sentenced to death by Mahilyou regional court for a series of armed assaults and murders, committed in 2009.

### *Fair trials and torture*

*Nineteen years after independence, Belarus retains many repressive features of the Soviet criminal justice system. Judges routinely do not exercise their authority to independently and impartially decide on the legality of an arrest or detention nor the need for continued detention.*

*There is credible evidence that, under pressure to solve crimes, police investigators sometimes resort to torture and other ill-treatment in order to force confessions. These confessions are subsequently admitted as evidence in trials.*

*On 18 January a Minsk prosecutor turned down a request for a criminal investigation into allegations of torture made by Pavel Levshin. He had been detained by police officers on 9 December 2009 on suspicion of theft. Levshin claims that on 10 December from 5pm to 8pm police officers subjected him to torture and ill-treatment: they handcuffed him, laid him on his stomach and inserted his feet behind his hands in a position known as "the swallow". They then beat him with a rubber truncheon and with plastic bottles filled with water. They also put a plastic bag over his head and held it there five times until he came close to suffocating. A forensic medical report confirmed that he had injuries consistent with his allegations, but the Prosecutor quoted the police report and stated that no evidence of torture had been found.*

### *Human rights defenders*

*In January 2009, the human rights organisation, Nasha Vyasna (Our Spring), previously known as Vyasna (Spring), applied for registration for the third time. This request was refused for reasons which appear to be politically motivated, including reference to previous convictions of members of the group on administrative charges, inaccuracies in the list of founders, the fact that the mechanism for electing the Chair and the Secretary was not described, that the name of the organization was missing from one document, and that the headquarters of the organization were too cramped.*

*On 24 July 2007, the UN Human Rights Committee had ruled that the dissolution of the human rights organization Vyasna in 2003 violated the right to freedom of association and that the organisation was entitled to an appropriate remedy, including re-registration and compensation*

*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights*

*The Minsk City Executive Committee refused permission for the Slavic Pride march to take place on Saturday 15 May 2010. The organisers of the march received a letter on 8 May from the Minsk authorities, prohibiting the march on the grounds that the proposed route violated Article 9 of the Law on the staging of public events. The Article stipulates that public events cannot take place within 200 metres of underground stations and pedestrian crossings.*

*Amnesty International believes that the strict application of the law in this case resulted in a disproportionate and unjustifiable restriction on the rights to freedom of assembly and expression of those organising and wishing to take part in the march.*

*Violence against women Adequate resources and structures to respond to violence against women are lacking in Belarus. There are only two shelters for victims of domestic violence, financed from a combination of state and non-governmental funding. The recently-introduced Law on Crime Prevention specifically referred, for the first time, to domestic violence and called on state bodies including the Ministry of Internal Affairs to investigate all cases of domestic violence and to prosecute the perpetrators.*

UK office of Amnesty International has issued a Media Briefing which outlines Amnesty International's key human rights concerns in Belarus.\*

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# Young European Federalists Plan New Action of Solidarity with Belarus

✘ Ahead of the upcoming presidential election in Belarus, the Young European Federalists plan to organize a pan-European solidarity action to demand the Belarusian government to hold the election free and transparent. Considering that the European leadership has virtually given up demanding this and seems to have nearly accepted the new reelection of the current Belarusian president, this action is especially important.

New elections will be held in Belarus on 19 December. Media, academics and NGO representatives announce already that they will be neither free nor fair.

This is why JEF is organising the 6th edition of its pan-European Belarus action on Thursday 16 December! All sections, NGOs and activists in Europe and across the globe are called upon to join in a massive protest against the last dictatorship on the European continent and ask for the democratisation of the country. The people in Belarus must be given a real choice as well as a voice to speak up!

The action will consist of:

- The traditional gagging of statutes in the streets. Pictures will be uploaded on JEF's Flickr account.
- A number of Press Releases, also in Russian and Belarussian
- Facebook and Twitter campaigns. Follow us on Twitter via: @freebelarusjef
- A dedicated week of articles about Belarus on

www.thenewfederalist.eu

– Lobby actions among political decision-makers in Brussels or elsewhere

Stay tuned for more info coming soon! We are counting on your support and involvement!

[Read more on jef.communicate-europe.co.uk](http://jef.communicate-europe.co.uk)

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## **Luzhkov and Lukashenka – Political Twins and Business Partners**

✘ Belarus President Lukashenka has one more reason to be angry. His friend and business partner Yuri Luzhkov is no longer the Mayor of Moscow.

Luzhkov and Lukashenka have many things in common. Lukashenka has been a president for 16 years and Luzhkov occupied the position of Moscow mayor more than 18 years. Their political views are also similar – both are anti-Western populists praising the good old Soviet days and and trying to stay in power at all costs.

But perhaps what makes Lukashenka particularly angry about Luzhkov's dismissal is that they have vast common business interests. Lukashenka privatized Belarus while Luzhkov helped his wife to become one of the richest women on the planet.

Moscow is one of Belarus's biggest investors. Companies controlled by Luzhkov's family undertake massive real estate

development projects in Minsk, and involved in other businesses – from building and running restaurants in Minsk to selling plastic chairs for Belarusian stadiums. Now that Luzhkov is no longer occupying one of the most powerful positions in Russia, the future of those business projects is far from certain.

Kremlin is very unhappy both with Luzhkov and Lukashenka. In [God Father-IV](#), a new sequel in a [series](#) of anti-Lukashenka movies produced by Moscow, Luzhkov is placed the same line of “friends of Lukashenka” as Mikheil Saakashvili and [Kurmanbek Bakiyev](#). The movie hints that Lukashenka is likely to follow the fate of Luzhkov in the nearest future.

Time will show whether this prediction is right. But it is already clear that the Moscow Mayor’s dismissal was a serious blow to Lukashenka’s lobby in Russia and a number of Luzhkov’s business projects in Belarus.

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## Prominent Belarusian journalist found dead in his summer cottage



**Aleh Byabenin** was one of the founders and leaders of charter97.org website.

According to the Belarusian independent news portal

**charter97.org** \*, the body of Aleh Byabenin was found on September 3, at 5.30 p.m. in his summer cottage not far from Minsk. The reason of death is not clear.

Aleh Byabenin was born in 1974. He graduated from the Belarusian State University, department of journalism. In 90s he occupied the position of the deputy chief editor of Imya, an independent Belarusian newspaper. Since 1998 he was the founder and head of charter97.org website. Aleh Byabenin had a wife and two sons.

In just few hours after publication of sad news about two hundred visitors of the website have expressed their deep condolences and concerns that the Belarusian government could be involved in this tragic incident.

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## **How Much Having an Embassy in Minsk Costs**

It is hardly a secret that establishing diplomatic relations with an authoritarian state is a gamble. One never knows what one's embassy in Minsk may suffer if it crosses swords with the Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

On the night of August 30, two Molotov cocktails were thrown into the compound of the Russian Embassy in Minsk. Three days later, an obscure anarchist group said the attack was a reaction to Russia's crackdown on activists protesting the plans for a new highway around Moscow. But the uproar caused

by the bombing is unlikely to end so simply and so quickly.

In fact, it is unclear whether the attack was an act of hooliganism or a premeditated political move. Political or not, once it happened, the incident has become a part of the whirlpool of politics. It is interesting to observe of what Russia and Belarus make of the attack to advance their political goals.

The initial rumor that the embassy was attacked by the Belarusian hooligans in response to the Russian movie "Godfather" seems to have already played out in Lukashenka's favor. Whether or not they are true, the rumors of this sort will undoubtedly help Lukashenka gain additional support in the upcoming presidential elections.

Incidentally, a high percentage of the Belarusian population choose not to believe the movie and continued to stand by Lukashenka. Instead, these people are likely to believe Lukashenka's claim that the embassy attack was the work of Russian agents. The Belarusian police has been seriously considering the possibility that Russia bombed its own embassy to escalate the so-called "media war" with Belarus. According to Lukashenka, as quoted by Interfax, the Russian "thugs and scoundrels" needed the attack to say, "Look at the [Belarusian] government, at Lukashenka, who almost himself masterminded this terrorist act, as they call it, and torched the Russian embassy car."

More careful with language, the Russian Foreign Ministry somewhat vaguely accused "certain forces" of trying to "bring distrust and tensions to [Russia-Belarus] bilateral relations." Moscow seems to be viewing Lukashenka's claim as yet one more sign that its former strategic partner cannot be trusted, is unreliable, and even, at times, irrational.

This view will unlikely result in Moscow's throwing its weight behind the Belarusian opposition all of a sudden. The Kremlin

knows that Lukashenka will remain in power for the indefinite future and has to learn to work with him, foreseeing and mitigating the consequences of his vagaries. To make such vagaries less frequent, Moscow is already becoming less shy about applying economic and political pressure. Of course, the Belarusian leader has so far excelled at turning even this pressure to his benefit, increasing his popularity by claiming that Moscow “wanted the [Belarusian] president to bend [to their will] – but they got just the opposite.”

This is not the first attack on a foreign embassy in the Belarusian capital. The previous embassy accidents had either happened in the midst of a diplomatic crisis between the Belarus and that embassy’s home country, or were suspiciously close to presidential elections in Belarus.

In 2001, a few months before Lukashenka’s reelection, a grenade blew a 17-centimeter hole in the Russian embassy grounds as leaders of former Soviet republics, including Russian leader Vladimir Putin, were flocking to Minsk for a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Belarusian regime was able to turn the 2001 incident to its advantage. Minsk upped the pressure on the opposition by having the KGB interrogate the leader of the “Youth Front,” Paval Sevyarynets, as a suspect.

Interestingly, the embassies of the democratic countries in Minsk seem to have much more civilized incidents with the Belarusian government (although with far greater consequences). In 2008, angered by the continuation of US sanctions against Belnaftakhim and by US criticism of Belarus’ human rights violations, Belarusian authorities gave US ambassador Karen Stewart 24 hours to leave the country before she would be declared persona non grata. Shortly afterward, Washington was accused of organizing a spy ring in Belarus and was [asked](#) to cut the staff of its 35-employee embassy in Minsk by half. A month later, ten more US diplomats were ordered to leave.

In 2006, as Belarusian-Polish relations reached a yet another low, Belarus' state-controlled media accused the Polish embassy in Minsk of mediating between the Belarusian opposition and the West. Throughout the last decade, Poland was accused of spying in Minsk just as often as the human rights abuses and repressions in Belarus were denounced by Warsaw.

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## Belarus After Lukashenka

It is hard to say who will become Belarusian president after Lukashenka, but it is easy to predict what kind of political system will be left in Belarus. Although there was no massive violence, the authoritarian rule in Belarus has leveled the playing ground of Belarusian politics. Currently it looks more like a desert place with only primitive forms of political life.



Belarusian people are unfamiliar with political pluralism and open debated in public sphere. Most people know nothing about political movements and politicians except for Lukashenka. The parties established after the Soviet Union collapse enjoyed a short period of relative freedom and since late 1990s they do not play the role which parties usually play in democratic societies. A period of prolonged inactivity has weakened their structures, activists, as well as resulted in impoverishment of their professional and political skills.

The recent [performance](#) at the BBC's 'Hard Talk' by an expected Belarusian presidential candidate demonstrated that if politicians stay for a while outside the public sphere it brings them no good. Speaking in London studio Mr. Andrei

Sannikau stuck to old the motives of Belarusian opposition known from 1990s, which made him sound somehow anachronistic to those who follow events in Belarus.

According to Sannikau, Lukashenka's regime has not changed since 1996. Simply denying statistics on economic advances of the Belarusian regime, he proposed to compare Belarus not to Ukraine, but to Baltic states. This would be very misleading because Baltic countries have a very different history and are in many respects incomparable to Belarus.

He boasted about stopping disappearances in 1999-2000 – actually there were 3 cases involving 4 persons, though Sannikau hinted that there were probably more disappearances and one murder – and only speculation on motives and other details. That is all.

There are, however, many new things to sort out – the lack of modernization and degradation of infrastructure, deterioration of education and health system, murky deals with state property and much more. Indeed, Belarus is loosing its development prospects. Yet opposition is hotly discussing every new propaganda movie on Russian TV and flatly ignores that perhaps most valuable asset of national economy – potash company – can be sold to the Chinese behind closed doors dooming the nation to economic hardship for years.

Of course, Lukashenka's monopoly on politics exhausted and diminished not only Belarusian opposition. It also transformed the government itself into an amorphous mass of managers unable to work on their own. There seem to be quite few persons among regime's servants who can become public politicians. The current Belarusian leader always promoted not politicians but 'able functioners' ('khozyaystvenniki') in his system. Even pro-president organizations established at some moment apparently in an attempt to provide a popular basis for

regime and possibly serve as a source of new elites – like Belarusian Republican Youth Union or Public Association “Belaya Rus’” – could not persuade Lukashenka remained just some shabby institutions with colorless leaders.

With some reservations, the Belarusian regime can be considered a ‘sultanistic’ because there is no real politics in the country outside the presidential palace. Under sultanistic regimes American scholar Richard Snyder means ‘the ruler’s maintenance of authority through personal patronage rather than through ideology, charisma or impersonal law’.

Political scholars have already studied transformations of such regimes. And their predictions are gloomy. Sultanistic regimes have immense problems with transit to democratic government (comparing to authoritarian), and even if they manage to build some kind of democracy it displays many features of sultanism for many years ahead. However, only charismatic leaders with democratic beliefs usually manage to lead their nations from sultanism to democracy.

It appears that Belarus currently has no politicians who would be charismatic enough. No wonder, some political analysts are exploring other scenarios of Belarusian political development in near future. Zmicier Pankaviec of ‘Nasha Niva’ gave up his hope for Democratic opposition and is seeking for a Lukashenka’s successor among regime’s ‘soft-liners’.

*It seems that the best exit-option for Lukashenka, Russia, West and opposition could be some kind of successor to the current president. For Lukashenka himself, as it is a guarantee of his own security. For Russian and Europe, since they get rid of an unreliable leader in a neighboring country. For opposition, because it would ensure some – however, little – democratic changes. I am sure, any new president after Lukashenka will be more democratic and will tilt toward the EU.*

He believes, Presidential Administration head Uladzimir Makiej can be a new president. If so, Belarusian leadership can reproduce the earlier political succession maneuvers of Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev in Russia.

There are some signs – however scarce – that Lukashenka is thinking about a successor. Usually he implicitly and explicitly claimed himself to be indispensable and irreplaceable for the nation. But two years ago, while answering a question whether he is going to rule the country for the 4th term, he said that there are already people in the country who are able to run it, besides him. Of course, he did not elaborate on persons, yet anyway such statements are only available material to analyze Belarusian government politics extremely closed to any observers. Do not forget, so far Belarusian leader did not announce he would participate in the presidential elections due at the end of this year or in early 2011.

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## An American in Belarus



I came to Minsk in order to brush up on my Russian before taking a language exam as part of my Master's degree requirement at George Washington University. Now the reader may think, "Why would you go to Belarus in order to study

Russian?" That would be a perfectly legitimate question if the reader is unfamiliar with Belarus, as is often the case in the West.

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

All the same, there is a Belarusian language and it is present; aside from the most noticeable forms, which include street signs and metro announcements, there are a growing number of Belarusian speakers. I, however, had only one real encounter with the Belarusian language, and that was at a play performed in Belarusian that I attended with a Belarusian friend at the Republican Theater of Belarusian Drama. "[Adamavy Zharty](#)" was an interesting take on the creation story that started out conventionally with God taking one of Adam's ribs, but devolved into a busty Belarusian maid making advances on a demon while trying to sow discord in Adam and Eve's relationship – the audience loved it. It was quite good, and I enjoyed it with the help of my friend and knowledge of Polish.

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

But like most anywhere, the people I did not become acquainted

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

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

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

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

should be held accountable for their decisions, Belarusians are avoiding the risks involved in attempting to hold authorities in Belarus accountable.

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

There is a lot to be said for stability, which seems to be at the heart of what Belarusians want. What good is democracy if you can't feed your family or find work? The prospect of going through the political and economic turmoil that has accompanied even peaceful transitions to democracy, to say nothing of the potential for violence, understandably weighs into the calculus of Belarusians when they actively or passively avoid becoming involved in politics. Indeed, the fire sale of Russian industry and the political turmoil of the 1990's, combined with the widely perceived failure of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, have made a swift transition to democracy accompanied by mass privatization in Belarus a rather large pill to swallow.

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

year's post-election crackdown in Iran.

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

Belarus is very much in a period of flux: most certainly in its relations with Russia and the European Union, its two largest neighbors. Lukashenka is likely trying to perform a balancing act between maintaining enough control to avoid jeopardizing his grip on power and being perceived by the West as too overtly oppressive as to disqualify himself from EU aid programs.

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

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

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

*by Andrew Riedy, Contributing Writer*

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## **Russia Is Not Willing to Pay for its Imperial Prestige**

This week, after a bitter gas transit conflict with Belarusian government, Russian Gasprom declared that preliminary gas prices for Belarus next year should be about USD 250. Now it pays 185 dollars. Even some naïve oppositional analysts welcomed what they considered 'European' prices, joking of Lukashenka's 'stupid' wish to live 'of Russian cost'.

The prices for gas and oil, they forgot, are specific prices. Since gas and oil depend on infrastructure to ship them to consumers, therefore the Russian gas price for Belarus shall be different one than tariff for more distant Germany or Belgium. Furthermore, the prices for such strategic commodities are anyway politically influenced. So, Belarus which has allied itself with Russia since 1995, has all reasons to demand be given cheaper gas and oil than other countries.

And at least it should not be suddenly hit by arbitrary Russian decisions to increase price by almost 100 dollars.

After all, the Belarusian side has carried out its part of agreement with Kremlin – it gave Moscow a small bit of imperial grandeur by agreeing to be a ‘small brother’ and ally, it secured a segment of Russian borders and followed most Russian foreign policies. So why Russia agreed to sell China its gas considerably cheaper than Belarus?

It seems that this time it is Russia that wants to live as an empire ‘of Belarusian cost’, by giving Lukashenka nothing for it, and even openly threatening and abusing him. Russian elites’ greed is stronger than imperialistic appetites? As a columnist Vitaly Portnikov put it in his article published on grani.ru,

*... if there are no money, why to play an empire? If Belarusians and Russians are almost one people, then is it acceptable to send brothers an ultimatum? Freeze them [by cutting gas supplies in winter]? Threaten with sanctions? Indeed, that state, whose abolishment has been named a biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century by Medvedev’s predecessor [Putin], that state began to fall apart not the moment when US President Ronald Reagan declared it to be ‘an evil empire’, and not the moment General Secretary Gorbachev proclaimed ‘glasnost’ and ‘perestroika’. It has fell apart when Moscow decided to put a blockade on Lithuania [which was then a part of the USSR].*

Something similar is now happening with integration initiatives of Belarus and Russia from previous years. Really, Moscow presently pursuing a greater aim – Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan – did not even bother to do anything with numerous previous agreements with Belarus – on integration and establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia – which legally stay in the way of new Russian endeavor to reconquest lost lands.

They were not cancelled, nor amended, nor even mentioned by

anyone, as Belarusian political analyst Vitali Silitski points out in his article on the website of BISS. It seems, that for Russian not only pathetic alliances and brotherhood but even solid legal documents are just empty papers to be torn anytime deemed necessary. Or as a Russian proverb put it,

*A guy is a master of his word, he can give it and he can take it back.*

Or as Silitski said,

*All treaties concluded with today's Russia and its leadership preoccupied with [imperial] greatness can remain just a useless scrap of paper, if Kremlin sees an opportunity to act according to the right of the strong. The [European] enthusiasts of various 'Streams' [projects to build pipelines to ship Russian gas and oil into Europe – Nord and South Streams] should think better on it.*

Such behavior makes today's Russian government a clear security threat not only for former Soviet republics, but even for Europe as a whole. The post-Soviet countries realized it, and Moscow does not allow them to forget – going from aggression against Georgia to gas conflicts with Belarus and Ukraine and continuing with coup d'état in Kyrgyzstan.

So far, European Union did not react to Russian policies strongly enough to stop Kremlin. Eastern Europe clearly lost its importance for European strategists, preoccupied with southern and southeastern flanks of European foreign policy. Yet the time might show that Russia and aftermath of its activities in former Soviet countries will pose much bigger threat to European security. After all, it is Russia which while ever more supplying Europe with oil and gas, demonstrates outright contempt for agreements with partner countries and maintains a lawlessness on its own territory.

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# Role of the Military in Belarusian Foreign Policy



Belarus' voice is seldom heard on the international scene, and its concerns are rarely taken into account. Minsk has not succeeded in achieving its major foreign policy goals and appears to lack an overall strategy. The much-disputed [customs union](#) with Russia and Kazakhstan, the feebleness of its [military alliance](#), and its [prospects for EU accession](#) are three key examples of Belarus' foreign policy failures.

Belarus seems to be seeking a "[third way](#)" between Moscow and the West, but it is doing so with essentially no international influence. Belarus has few levers to pull and little to bring to the negotiating table. The traditional currency of power in international relations is a strong military backed by a strong economy. Unfortunately for Belarus, it has neither. In order to successfully pursue an independent course in the international sphere, Belarus needs to get its economy on

track, rethink its military posture and alliance affiliations, and modernize both its military structure and equipment.

Belarus' 2009 defense budget was \$611 million, which somehow financed an active force of 72,940 and a paramilitary force of 110,000. With a budget of \$611 million, it is hard to imagine that Belarus could project a modicum of force beyond its borders or equip its soldiers with new weapons. Clearly, Belarus is unable to stand up to serious pressure from an external foe. To successfully embark on "a third way" in the international sphere, Minsk needs to develop the military power requisite with such a strategy.

Switzerland, for example, runs a strictly neutral and independent foreign policy, only contributing troops to peacekeeping and monitoring operations – currently 7 international missions. It has a robust territorial defense plan and an impressive logistical operation. It spent \$4.51 billion on defense in 2009 and will spend another \$4.9 billion in 2010. Switzerland's 174,000 reserve force can be mobilized in the event of a crisis, and that force will be equipped with modern military hardware.

Switzerland's fully capable military allows the country neutrality and independence in its foreign policy decision making, and its military is supported by a \$532 billion GDP. It stood up to the German War Machine in World War II, and will not easily cave to future external pressure.

Belarus, on the other hand, would have to spend 13.3% of its GDP to equal Swiss annual defense expenditures, which would bring it to a level not seen since days of the Soviet Union. The key then to independence in Belarusian foreign policy lies in the economy. Until Belarus can significantly raise its \$60 billion annual GDP to support a modern, fully equipped military, it will not likely be able to run an independent foreign policy able to withstand external pressure.

Belarusian military forces are deployed in a defensive posture that aligns with the military doctrine of the Republic. The military's purpose is to guarantee the inviolability of Belarusian borders and to prevent foreign invasion. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable to assess that the Belarusian defense budget and force posture align well. It does not take a lot of money to fund domestic troop deployments where little is spent in the way of new platforms and military infrastructure.

A military posture centered on strict territorial defense works for a country such as Switzerland that is self-sufficient and runs a historically neutral and independent foreign policy. But for Belarus, which is not quite neutral and hardly self-sufficient, a single-track defense posture, supported by an antiquated and under-funded military is not requisite to achieving foreign policy goals, as it gives the country no bargaining power and likely would not stand up to outside pressure. Instead, Belarus should consider aligning itself militarily more closely with Europe – and of course economically.

Yes, close military alignment with Europe is a euphemism for increasing cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), with the prospect of eventually gaining full membership status. Participation in the military alliance would begin a process of gaining international credibility for Belarus, as NATO assistance would eventually lead to a complete overhaul of Belarusian force posture, structure, and equipment.

As a member of the world's most powerful military alliance, Belarus would be able to effectively contribute to global security by participating in peacekeeping, counter-terror, counter-proliferation, and stabilization operations around the globe. NATO's new strategic concept, that is currently being developed, could see the Alliance expand its role as a caretaker of global security, and Belarus would gain much by

becoming a contributing member.

Currently, Belarus is a long way from qualifying for NATO military assistance, let alone a membership action plan; however, the Alliance eventually expanding to cover the entirety of Europe is not beyond the realm of possibility. There are even credible voices now and again calling for [Russian NATO membership](#).

Belarus essentially has two choices if it would like to get its foreign policy on track and begin to achieve some goals: it can open its economy to massive foreign investment, increasing its GDP and allowing it to develop the type of military commensurate with a self-sufficient state that is capable of pursuing a sometimes unilateral course of action, or it can work to more closely align itself with a capable military alliance that would help to modernize Belarusian force posture, structure, and equipment.

Belarus' current alliance affiliations and dependence on Russia give it little international leverage, and it has effectively alienated itself from the West due to political considerations. Yet, Belarus does not have the economic or military power to unilaterally achieve major foreign policy goals. Minsk would be well advised to adopt a strategy of closer economic and military cooperation with Europe, and eventually across the Atlantic, which would be in the best interests of its military, the state, and its citizens.

\*Data on defense data taken from:

[The Military Balance 2010](#), International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, England.

*by Andrew Riedy, Contributing Writer*

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# GMF on Lukashenka, EU's power and Belarusian civil society

It seems that pragmatism and realpolitik are winning at the moment over values-driven approaches in EU policy toward Belarus, while Lukashenka's power game continues eroding the EU's self-esteem. He is very well aware of the complicated procedural nature and internal problems of the EU and was not particularly shaken by the post-Lisbon proclamations that the EU would become a "more capable, more coherent and more strategic global actor." In spite of the shifts in policy in his favor and high-level handshakes from various European figures, Lukashenka openly criticizes the EU, including its Eastern Partnership program, for not doing even more; meanwhile, he ignores diplomatic messages related to his behavior and the new wave of repression toward the media and civil society groups. In GMF's *On Wider Europe Series*<sup>\*</sup>, Pavol Demes argues that it is time to realize how President Lukashenka has outmaneuvered the EU, and time to shift to a policy that places more emphasis on civil society as a motor of future change.

*On Wider Europe, June 18, 2010*

## **Lukashenka needs to feel EU's power**

*by Pavol Demes*

Due to ongoing and serious violations of human rights committed by the Lukashenka regime, in April 2010 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe decided to suspend high-level contacts with the authorities in Belarus. This decision reinforced the conclusion that the European Union's previous policy of engagement with President Aliaksandr Lukashenka had failed to lead to liberalization of his autocratic regime or real cooperation with the community

of democracies. That policy of engagement was launched almost two years ago, in 2008, when European Union leaders, responding to the release of internationally recognized political prisoners, suspended sanctions imposed against key figures in Minsk. Member states, together with the new post-Lisbon EU representatives, will review their policy toward Belarus in the fall of 2010, but most observers doubt they will re-introduce strict conditionality toward the Belarusian regime.

As a result, Lukashenka will continue bluffing and benefiting in the absence of a coherent, effective EU policy. Meanwhile, the 10 million people of this post-Soviet nation will continue to suffer under Europe's last dictator and will lose faith in receiving solidarity and support from the family of Western democracies.

### **The Sustainability of the Power of Aliaksandr Lukashenka**

The departure from office of the 55-year-old Belarusian leader has been predicted many times during his 16-year presidency. In spite of growing domestic opposition, sanctions by the West, and pressure from his former patron and sponsor, Russia, Lukashenka is still fit and in full control of his peculiar self-centered regime.

To rule, he doesn't need a political party; instead he employs a police network, a government, and a parliament that are mere instruments in his hands. Ask the average Belarusian who is the country's prime minister or speaker of the parliament, and you're likely to get a blank stare. Flagrant legal changes allow Lukashenka to remain at the top of the power structure indefinitely while he governs via a huge ideological machine and a fear-based system of control over the country's social, economic, and political life. Any attempts to challenge his power are crushed; his opponents are removed from their positions, beaten, imprisoned, their reputations ruined – and a decade ago, some even “disappeared.”

This self-confident “orthodox atheist” is not afraid of violating even traditional moral rules by putting his two grown sons in important positions and allowing his six-year-old illegitimate son (the child’s mother is carefully hidden from the public) to accompany him at state functions, including military parades where he wears the uniform like his proud father, and on foreign official visits (including the Vatican last year and a meeting with the Pope).

Among the most intriguing aspects of Lukashenka’s regime are the country’s elections, whether local, parliamentary, or presidential. Although elections are held, they are under the control and direction of the president who created the myth and state ideology that only he is capable of guaranteeing stability, order, independence, and the well-being of Belarusians.

He simply does not care about international electoral standards or criticism from foreign bodies. The bizarre, almost ritualized electoral system characterized by large-scale manipulation and cheating has reached a point that leads one to wonder why he even bothers with elections, particularly at the presidential level. They are a charade but serve to keep Lukashenka’s state machinery in permanent alert, allow him to maintain control, and keep elected bodies clean of critics. And since the people hear about elections in other nearby countries, he probably feels a need to satisfy his nation by imitating free choice.

The April 2010 local elections were a farce, revealing yet again the lawlessness in Belarus. The upcoming presidential elections, which should take place at the end of this year or the beginning of 2011 (depending on Lukashenka’s mood) are already exhibiting familiar features – intimidation and arrests of journalists and civil society leaders, violent disruption of peaceful demonstrations, manipulated court cases, etc. Every candidate who decides to challenge the “father of the nation” in his re-confirmation game must be

ready to pay a serious price – harassment, physical attack, even imprisonment. So far there are about ten Belarusians who have announced their candidacy for this dangerous electoral roulette at a time when Lukashenka stands ready to “serve” a fifth term while grooming his little son Kolya to one day succeed him.

### **The Sophistication of Lukashenka’s International Game**

One can hardly deny that Lukashenka is a master of manipulation not only within his motherland but also in the international arena. Not surprisingly, the key objective of his foreign policy is to maintain and prolong his own domestic power.

The logic of Belarusian foreign policy is simple: Those who help Lukashenka maintain his power benefit from it; those who do not are ignored or pay a price, whether they are his own people or foreigners. Lukashenka evolved from being a strong critic of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and propagator of the concept of unity with Russia to being a decisive fighter for Belarusian independence, particularly when he learned that the “big brother” might not guarantee his long-term future. Although Belarus was the only country excluded from the Council of Europe (in 1997) due to its autocratic political system, it has been better off economically and socially than other post-Soviet countries, enabling Lukashenka to remain popular among a fairly large segment of the population (though truly how large is virtually impossible to determine).

To his credit, Lukashenka has come to understand quite well how to adjust to today’s multipolar world. Paradoxically he has managed to turn current geopolitical shifts, including the world economic crisis, to his benefit, stressing the stability and security of Belarus in comparison with other countries.

He sees that the formerly self-confident and powerful West is

today preoccupied with multiple challenges, and he has rightly concluded that democratization in Europe's east is much less prominent on the EU's agenda than it was before. With some justification, he argues that democratic breakthroughs in some countries of the post-Soviet space did not bring more prosperity or clear prospects for joining European structures. He also sees that the newly assertive Russia has changed, is faced with its own challenges, and is not so "sincere and brotherly" as before.

As the biggest landlord able to single-handedly offer lucrative deals, Lukashenka is skillfully balancing between the two integration spaces – the EU and the Russian post-Soviet-space reunification project. At the same time, he has practically frozen diplomatic and many other ties with the United States, which, unlike the EU, has kept most of its sanction policy in place. (In fact, the Obama administration announced on June 8 its continuation of sanctions originally imposed in 2006.) To show his independence and self-confidence, and to compensate for some losses in the European and Russian markets, during the last few years Lukashenka has started to reach out to distant fellow autocratic regimes, especially energy-rich ones, with Venezuela and Iran at the top of his list. He even is willing to explore possible economic cooperation with countries in the Middle East and China. Even if these countries are geographically and culturally distant, the Belarusian leader appreciates that they never link progress on human rights or shared history to business deals.

### **Belarus as a Challenge for the EU**

There is no doubt that Belarus poses a special challenge for EU policymakers, both on the European and the national levels. Even with the wealth of experience with democratization and integration of the post-communist nations to the EU, Lukashenka's Belarus is a unique case that reveals long-term resistance to Western conditionality and the "sticks and

carrots" game.

Hoped-for improvements in finding more effective democratization policies toward Belarus, particularly through listening more to the new member states, did not materialize. Lukashenka's machinery was also able to neutralize any spillover effects from democratic development from three neighboring new EU members – Poland, Lithuania, Latvia – and from Ukraine, with which Belarus has a shared history and numerous people-to-people contacts.

This long stagnation led EU policymakers to their controversial decision in the last two years to open up dialogue with "Europe's last dictator," believing that if exposed to growing pressure from an assertive Russia and an economic crisis, Lukashenka might in return start a liberalization process and open Belarus to closer economic and political cooperation with the West. In the meantime, the EU has undergone profound changes as a result of the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and its own financial turbulence. Its new foreign policy chief is looking to consolidate its external relations and open up opportunities for Europe to act in a globalized world and its immediate neighborhood in particular. In September–October 2010, EU leaders will review any progress made by Belarus and decide which steps to take toward this rather peculiar member of the Eastern Partnership program during its increasingly repressive pre-presidential-election period.

The main arguments of prevailing skeptics of possible changes of "the Lukashizm" are as follows:

- 1) The position of Belarus in the European architecture. In the minds of those favoring continuation of current policy, this young, mid-sized post-Soviet country, even if governed with an iron fist and suffering from significant international isolation, shows relative prosperity and stability and does not pose significant threats to the EU or the region. It is

important to the EU as a transitional route for Russian energy products and for its potential for state-controlled companies that are bound to be privatized in one form or another due to Belarus' unsustainable centralized economic model.

If one compares the state of integration of Belarus in Western versus Russian-dominated structures two decades after the collapse of Berlin Wall and subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union, the picture is quite clear: Belarus has very few links to European and transatlantic institutions but is a member of the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States, Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Community – and its becoming part of a free trade zone is under consideration. Russia for sure has more ways and willingness to influence Belarus' future than the West in both the very near and the longer-term future.

2) The transatlantic divide and the lack of coherence in policy. For many years, the EU and the United States had similar positions toward the Belarus regime – sanctions and isolation due to the violation of human rights and the lack of political freedoms. However, during the last two years, this transatlantic commitment and unity was terminated. Although sanctions and low-level diplomatic contacts remain in force even after the change of leadership in the American White House, the United States' reset policy toward Russia is carefully taking into consideration any steps in its neighborhood. Those advocating for democracy and human rights are having a harder time convincing the new U.S. leadership to pay more attention to this isolated East European country.

On the other hand, the EU lowered its standards when it suspended its sanctions policy and reopened a more intensified dialogue with Lukashenka on the political and economic level, claiming that isolation of the autocratic regime failed to produce democratic change and even risked costing Belarus its sovereignty. Accordingly, the EU has adjusted to the situation in Belarus and sees little prospect for change in its policy

in the near future. Realists in Brussels' corridors claim that a return to the policy of isolation and sanctions is less likely than continued engagement in spite of the current level of repression and abuse of human rights in Belarus. In light of the U.S. decision to continue sanctions, the EU's position significantly reduces the odds of a joint transatlantic approach to democratic reforms in Belarus.

## **Risks and Hopes**

It seems that pragmatism and realpolitik are winning at the moment over values-driven approaches in EU policy toward Belarus, while Lukashenka's power game continues eroding the EU's self-esteem. He is very well aware of the complicated procedural nature and internal problems of the EU and was not particularly shaken by the post-Lisbon proclamations that the EU would become a "more capable, more coherent and more strategic global actor." In spite of the shifts in policy in his favor and high-level handshakes from various European figures, Lukashenka openly criticizes the EU, including its Eastern Partnership program, for not doing even more; meanwhile, he ignores diplomatic messages related to his behavior and the new wave of repression toward the media and civil society groups.

If the EU, the largest union in the world, is serious about its commitments and political and economic weight, it should become more serious and stop playing this asymmetric game controlled by one man. It should do this in closer cooperation with the United States. It should stop claiming that it has no alternative but to allow Lukashenka to ski in Europe's resorts, legitimize him in front of his scared population, and give him financial and other assistance to prolong his autocratic regime.

It would be more than a moral hazard if EU leaders were to decide this fall to essentially accept Lukashenka's increased brutality as the cost of doing business. If EU leaders could

focus on using their power effectively, rather than pointing to their own weaknesses, there is a good chance that the largest union in the world would be able to adjust its policy and come out with more uplifting approaches toward its small Eastern neighbor.

The upcoming presidential election period in Belarus, connected with a re-evaluation of EU engagement policy, offers numerous incentives and instruments for reintroducing strict conditionality toward Lukashenka's regime. Will the EU rise to the occasion?

**“It seems that pragmatism and realpolitik are winning at the moment over values driven approaches in the EU's policy towards Belarus.”**

We should remind ourselves of what worked in stopping similar autocrats during the last two decades, including the seemingly omnipotent Slobodan Milosevic, whose defeat ten years ago will be commemorated this fall. In all cases, brave local people, who were fed up with endless lies and manipulation, received foreign diplomatic, political, moral, material, and financial support to help rid them of their nefarious manipulators. In all democratic breakthroughs in Central and Eastern Europe over the last 20 years, it came as a surprise for the West that these autocrats were defeated.

We should be prepared for the fact that Lukashenka will be defeated as well. Belarus and the Belarusians are changing. For two decades, Belarus has continued to emerge as an independent country. That independence is increasingly beyond doubt, and now Belarusians have started asking the question of what kind of Belarus they want to live in. This will make it increasingly more difficult for Lukashenka to keep his people calm and resigned to a fate that has him staying at the top.

The opposition is far less weak than it seems on the surface. Lukashenka, supported until recently by Russia, has simply

adjusted his environment much more brutally than have other autocrats in this part of the world. The courage and resistance of countless Belarusians should give us hope, and demand from us that we encourage and support those working to liberalize Belarus and end its self-imposed isolation.

It is unlikely that Lukashenka's departure from power will take place via a standard electoral process. He is too scared to let that happen and lose. And for good reasons. Domestic dissatisfaction is growing, and Russia is losing patience with his arrogant behavior. The names of current nationwide civic movements in Belarus contain words like "freedom," "Europe," and "truth" (among them are the Movement for Freedom, the opposition group European Belarus, and the Tell the Truth! campaign). One can only speculate, but the fate of Lukashenka's Kyrgyz comrade Kurmanbek Bakiyev, to whom he provided asylum recently, provides an interesting scenario for the future destiny of such abusers of power.

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## **Belarus Not Worried about Losing Key National Companies**

The news on a legal move by the Belarusian parliament to allow privatization of most profit-making public property objects – the Belaruskali Company and strategically important oil

pipelines – generated little publicity. However, it is these assets that make up a major part of the Belarusian economy: the enterprise Belaruskali makes Belarus the world's third largest producer of potash mineral fertilizers, and the pipelines give Belarusian government a certain leverage in its relations with Russia and Europe. In addition, both Belaruskali and the pipelines are a major source of foreign currency for Belarus, which badly needs foreign capital.

As always, the rationale for the Parliament's decision was not announced widely and openly, as should happen when the companies of such strategic importance are involved. The Interfax news agency informed that the pipelines and Belaruskali will be excluded from the list of obligatory state property objects and that the latter will be transformed into a joint stock company. The decision has been taken by the Parliament that lacks independence due to the nature of the Belarusian political system and usually just rubber-stamps the bills upon the executive's request.

Will the Belaruskali and the pipelines be sold to the insiders and the cronies of the Belarusian regime or to other interested clients? There are good reasons to suspect that Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government is going to handle these trading matters secretly, as had happened in the so-called 'Oman deal' when a huge plot in historical area of Minsk has recently been sold – at unexpectedly low cost and under favorable conditions – to someone from the Middle East.

Many Western experts view privatization as a major step in the post-Communist transition process. They blame the failure to privatize for the consolidation of the current Belarusian regime. The Russian experience of the 1990s, however, suggests that privatization without strong legal basis, robust law enforcement agencies and transparent property administration system may have catastrophic consequences. In Russia, it ended with the destruction of the national economy and the enrichment of a few unscrupulous "businessmen" of criminal

nature who had connections to the Russian government.

Today's Belarus lacks the basic legal and law enforcement preconditions for privatization. It seems that, not unlike their Russian colleagues two decades earlier, Belarus' ruling elite is reaching consensus on the ownership issues behind the closed doors to hedge against an emergency departure from power. Because even the most durable non-democratic regimes one day expire, it makes perfect sense for the incumbent elite to worry about the future: to buy some state-owned objects for themselves, to sell them and divert some money to black accounts, or – last but not least – to prolong the regime's lifetime and trade some public property for loyalty of economic, administrative and local elites.

Such privatization will definitely cause only fatal economic and social degradation of the country. Nevertheless, the prospects of losing the national potash company and the pipelines hardly seems to cause any public concern in Belarus. Even during the presidential election campaign, the Belarusian opposition is so preoccupied with its internecine calamities that it pays no attention to the news about the imminent privatization of the key Belarusian companies.

Such behavior proves the conceptual and expert weakness of the Belarusian democratic opposition, which does not seem to have enough able professionals to run the country after the long period of political marginalization. Undoubtedly, any government due to come after Lukashenka will have no opportunity to reconsider dubious privatization deals or misused credits. It will have to pay for it by working under the constraints of the sold-out and degraded national economy.

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# Belarus in Amnesty International's Report 2010

Bellow we provide excerpts from the chapter.

***Background** European institutions continued their engagement with Belarus. In June, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe voted to restore Special Guest Status to the Belarusian parliament on several conditions. Besides a moratorium on the death penalty and registration of the human rights organization Nasha Viasna (Our Spring), terms included the immediate and unconditional lifting of sentences of restricted freedom imposed on several young people for their participation in a peaceful demonstration in January 2008. However, these terms were not met by the end of the year. In November, the EU Council reviewed the decision made in October 2008 and decided not to end the travel restrictions on senior Belarus officials, but to extend the suspension until October 2010. The majority of printed and electronic media remained under state control, and the state press distribution system maintained its monopoly. Two independent newspapers – Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) and Nasha Niva (Our Field) – were allowed once again to use the state press distribution system. **Death penalty** On 29 June, the House of Representatives set up a working group to draft proposals on imposing a moratorium on the death penalty. However, Belarus continued to hand down death sentences despite international pressure. Two men were sentenced to death for murder in the course of the year. On 29 June, Brest regional court sentenced 30-year-old Vasily Yuzepchuk to death; and on 22 July, Minsk regional court sentenced 25-year-old Andrei Zhuk to death. Both death sentences were upheld on appeal. – In January, Vasily Yuzepchuk and another unnamed man were detained and charged with first-degree murder, following the murder of six elderly women between November 2007 and January*

2008. On 29 June, both men were found guilty by Brest regional court. The second man, convicted as his accomplice, was sentenced to life imprisonment. Vasily Yuzepchuk was sentenced to death. On 2 October, the Supreme Court turned down his appeal and he subsequently applied for clemency. Vasily Yuzepchuk, originally from Ukraine, belongs to the marginalized Roma ethnic group, and may have an intellectual disability. His lawyer stated that the investigation and trial were fundamentally flawed and that Vasily Yuzepchuk had been beaten to force him to confess. On 12 October, the UN Human Rights Committee called on the Belarusian government not to execute Vasily Yuzepchuk until it had considered the case. **Freedom of assembly** The authorities continued to violate the right to freedom of assembly by not permitting demonstrations and public actions in accordance with the very restrictive Law on Public Events. There were allegations that excessive force was used to disperse non-violent demonstrations, and peaceful demonstrators were detained. – On 12 February, an application by a group of 20 people to hold a small public awareness action about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues was refused by the Gomel city administration. They said that the application did not include copies of contracts with the local police department, the health clinic and the waste disposal services to cover the expenses of ensuring public order, safety and for cleaning up after the action. Gomel District Court held that the application had been refused in accordance with the Law on Public Events and turned down the appeal. – Peaceful legal demonstrations to mark the anniversary of the disappearance of leading opposition figures Viktor Hanchar and Anatoly Krasouski, held on the 16th day of every month, were regularly dispersed using force. Viktor Hanchar and Yury Zakharenko, as well as businessman Anatoly Krasouski and journalist Dmitry Zavadsky, were subjected to enforced disappearances in 1999 and 2000. On 16 September, police officers in Minsk allegedly used excessive force to disperse demonstrators and detained 31 people for over three hours

before releasing them without charge. The demonstrators reported that they had been standing silently holding portraits of the disappeared when approximately 40 men in plain clothes approached and started to beat them, closely followed by riot police who detained them and took them by bus to Tsentralny District police department. According to one demonstrator, police officers did not explain the reason for their arrest and some of the detainees were beaten in the bus. At the police station they were reportedly made to stand facing the wall for three hours and subjected to verbal abuse, threats and beating. On 17 September, the Presidency of the European Union expressed concern about the crackdown on peaceful demonstrations in Minsk the previous day and urged the Belarusian authorities to refrain from excessive use of force in dealing with peaceful demonstrations.

**Prisoners of conscience** Several people continued to be held under "restricted freedom" following participation in a peaceful protest in January 2008. The conditions of "restricted freedom" are so severe that they amount to house arrest. Furthermore, although the sentence of "restricted freedom" is imposed by a judge, the details of the restrictions can be changed arbitrarily by the police officer in charge of the case without any possibility to appeal. This makes it very difficult for those convicted to comply with the conditions of their sentence. – On 7 July, Artsyom Dubski was sentenced to one year in prison by the Asipovichy district court in the Mahilyow region, and on 15 June Maxim Dashuk was sentenced to one year and three months of further "restricted freedom" by the Maskouski district court in Minsk. Both were convicted for violating the terms of earlier sentences imposed for their participation in the January 2008 protest and Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience. These young men had been among 11 people who were given sentences of up to two years of "restricted freedom" for "taking part in or organizing actions that gravely disturb public order". As of November 2009, five out of the original 11 had received amnesties, one

had had his restrictions reduced, and three remained abroad.

**Human rights defenders** Civil society organizations faced many obstacles in registering with the authorities before being permitted to operate. – On 26 January, the human rights organization Nasha Viasna (previously known as Viasna), applied for registration and was refused for a third time. The Ministry of Justice rejected the application on several grounds: previous convictions of the group's members on administrative charges; inaccuracies in the list of founders; the failure to describe the mechanism for electing the Chair and the Secretary; the absence of the organization's name on one document; and that the headquarters were too cramped. On 22 March, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of the Ministry of Justice after an appeal by the founders on 19 March. On 25 April, the founders applied again and on 28 May, registration was again refused by the Ministry of Justice. In addition to the reasons cited in previous refusals the Ministry of Justice claimed that the second part of the organization's name was not in line with its statute. On 16 June 2009, the founders of Nasha Viasna appealed against this decision, but refusal of registration was again upheld by the Supreme Court on 12 August.

**Violence against women** On 21 January, a new Law on Crime Prevention came into effect which for the first time specifically referred to domestic violence and called on state bodies including the Ministry of Internal Affairs to investigate all cases of domestic violence and to prosecute the perpetrators. However, adequate structures and resources to respond to violence against women were lacking. At the end of the year only two shelters for victims of domestic violence were financed from a combination of state and non-governmental funding. VB

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# Insider's view from Belarusian Gay Pride March

✘ Sergey Yenin, a vice chairman of the LGBT Human Rights Group GayBelarus.By and co-organizer of the Slavic Pride in Minsk shares his first-hand experience. Gay Pride March took place in Minsk on May 15. After some 200 meters, it was broken up by the riot police with twelve participants arrested after scenes of reported police violence. According to UKGayNews\*, these are probably the most dramatic 1,000 words written about a Gay Pride event anywhere in the world this year.

*Arrested, Beaten, Threatened, Jailed and Sent for Trial Just for Taking Part in Slavic Gay Pride ...Yet PROUD of what we all accomplished in Minsk By Sergey Yenin MINSK, May 19, 2010 – This is an account of the most dramatic 48 hours in my life as a gay activist in Belarus. There were four of us in the taxi. Myself, Logan (and Australian filmmaker), Jack (his boyfriend) and Chad (a photographer working on a project Walk with Pride). I couldn't help shivering in anticipation of the upcoming Pride march and the possible extreme few hours that I would probably face. But I couldn't let my friends worry as well. The taxi driver noticed that something was really wrong with the place he had to drop us off.*

*“What's going on here? Who are you?” – the taxi driver asked me. “Just tourists going to the hotel” – I responded. It was the place where the Pride was going to take place and was situated near a hotel. Logan prepared his camera and Jack took a paper notebook and a pen into his hands: “I hope I will look like a journalist,” he remarked. Seven taxis stopped in the immediate area and participants of*

the Slavic Pride got out of the cars. The place was full of journalists ready for the action. Everything looked like a flash mob: we all walked along the street a bit and suddenly one of us took out a 12-meter rainbow flag out of his bag. Later, events passed by very quickly. A group of Russian guys took out smaller flags and posters, I grabbed the huge flag and everyone rushed ahead shouting out slogans: "Homophobia is a disease", "Belarus free of homophobia" etc. The journalists didn't spend their time in vain: as soon as the notices the 12-meter flag were displayed, they turned on their cameras and aimed them at us. We stopped for a while near a Belarusian institute of arts, expanded the flag and continued shouting out our slogans. After a while we continued marching down the street. I noticed two journalists quarreling because one of them occupied the other's place for photo shooting and it made me smile. I suspect I had looked quite serious before. Suddenly a police car full of big, severe guys stopped. The doors opened and an army of policemen rushed on us. Oleg and I lost control and started running back. Everything messed up in my head and I couldn't understand where exactly I was running to. There was one aim: to run somewhere away from this massacre. Passing by one of the journalists I saw him throwing an egg at me. He missed, but it made me run faster. Two plain-clothes policemen were a real obstacle for me: I could figure out that these men were from the police only by a walkie-talkie stashed in a pocket of one of these guys. With great subtlety one of them hit my leg with his knee and threw me down on the ground. When I was recovering my glasses, he grabbed my collar and dragged me behind him for a while. With a rapid move he picked me up and punched me hard in the chest. I can still remember his face during this heavy handed treatment: his eyes were full of anger and the mouth was deformed with a blush of hatred. At the same time he understood I was his target and I was maybe twice young as him. He wasn't a human anymore... Another guy grabbed my

collar in order to prevent me from running away. Then I saw Oleg. He was suffering from pain caused by gastric ulcer he had, for which he needed [metronidazole 500mg tablets](#) to treat, but did not know at the time. No one was paying attention to his suffering, all the police were concerned about was a way to take us to a police department. The mother of one of our activists quickly appeared in front of us and introduced herself as a doctor in order to lead us away from the threat. She was totally ignored and we were tossed into a police car. We were sitting on the floor of the police department. I felt blood running down my arms. My shirt was tattered with dark red spots all over. I put myself together and made a statement that we needed an ambulance. Should I say that it's obvious that the statement was ignored? Then the others were brought-in. My friends were thrown out of another police car and were forced to go inside the police department. They looked so fragile in comparison to huge clumsy policemen. The short walk was followed by kicks. I could do nothing but look at this happening. I felt so helpless. The police then brought the 12-meter Rainbow flag in to the room. They put it on the floor and started mocking at us. One of my friends told me that while he was in the car the policemen were forcing a baton into his mouth and promised they would force it up his backside in case he tried sucking the baton. They then took us to another room for interrogation. We spent another two hours there. They were humiliating us all that time. One of them kept a gas balloon in front of my face saying: "I will fucking burn your eyes right now!" We were terrified. We couldn't ever imagine the safest place in the world could be so insecure... We were released on Monday. We were waiting for this moment eagerly all this time. Two nights in the police department seemed an eternity for us. So now when I'm free I can't keep it to myself. I don't appear to have any freedom of speech in my country, but I have the freedom on the internet. VB

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# (In) famous Belarusian Justice



Last week, two men were sentenced to death in Hrodna, Belarus. The previously convicted men have murdered three during an armed robbery. They have 10 days to file an appeal, which may extend their lives, if only by a short period, and probably bring them into the full glare of publicity. While their crime is severe, it is hardly uncommon. So the media attention they will get is all due to the gravity of their sentence.

Belarus is the only country in Europe to practice capital punishment. Passing death sentences is what keeps the Belarusian Justice Ministry on the front pages, and the ministry excels at making headlines no less than the Belarusian leader. To maintain its nonpareil reputation, the Belarusian Justice Ministry has to annually resort to capital punishment, bravely shouldering the criticism of the international community. Unfortunately, publicity is not the only effect of Belarus' insistence on retaining the death penalty. Capital punishment has kept Belarus out of the Council of Europe and leads to the violation of its commitments as a member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Belarus carries out executions in secrecy: the prisoners are informed of the execution only minutes before they are shot; prisoners' families are not notified about the execution, given the bodies after the execution, or told where the executed were buried. Statistics on execution are also kept secret, but human rights activists estimate more than 400 have been shot since 1991. Just this March, two men were secretly [executed](#) despite the fact that their applications were still

being reviewed by the UN Human Rights Committee. Alyaksandr Lukashenka's November 2009 promise to launch an information campaign on the abolition of death penalty has not yet been fulfilled.

But the death penalty is not the only trick that makes the Justice Ministry look famous and powerful. In March—for once taking up someone anything but defenseless—the Belarusian Justice Ministry filed a suit with the CIS Economic Court, arguing Russia's customs duties on oil supplied to Belarus was illegal. More often, however, the Ministry targets those who are weaker.

Time and again, the Belarusian Justice Ministry issues warnings of office closure to opposition parties and [harasses unions of minorities](#) and rights activists. It is even more fond of sentencing these activists to jail terms.

On May 6, the Belarusian Supreme Court sentenced four opposition activists to up to five years in prison on arms possession charges. The lucky four were acquitted of charges of forming a criminal group and plotting a terrorist attack for the lack of evidence. Good for them, for terrorism is one of the “grave crimes” that warrant the death penalty according to Article 289, Part 3 of the Belarusian Constitution. Those who disagree with the justice a-la Belarus undergo intense persuasion: the six protesting the five-year sentence in Minsk were detained.

Reacting to the sentence, on May 13 the United States issued a statement on the conviction that stressed the importance of observing due process. The [statement](#) reads:

*We share the concerns of our EU colleagues, as expressed in the May 10 statement by the representative of the EU Presidency in Minsk, regarding procedural flaws and apparent political motivations in the case.*

*In this and other cases, we have long stressed to the Belarusian authorities the importance of observing due process. We had hoped that the Belarusian authorities would take this opportunity to demonstrate a strengthening of due process and the independence of the judiciary. Unfortunately, there are reasons to question the conduct of this trial with respect to the civil rights of Mr. Awtukovich and the three others.*

*As we have noted before, improvement in the relationship of the United States with Belarus can come only when the Belarusian authorities show a greater respect for the basic civil and human rights of the Belarusian people.*