

# BelarusHeadlines

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Photo by Anton Motolko

For a third Wednesday in a row, thousands of young social media activists chose the offline approach by holding banned rallies in cities and towns across Belarus.

## Main News

**The Council of the European Union** decided on June 20 to strengthen its restrictive measures against Belarus in view of the deteriorating human rights, democracy and rule-of-law situation in the country. It will now impose an arms embargo and an export ban on materials that might be used for internal repression. The Council has also decided to add further names to the list of individuals subject to EU travel restrictions and assets freeze and to freeze the assets of three companies linked to the regime.

**Russia** threatened to retaliate against Belarus after President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said he was considering trade restrictions to conserve scarce foreign currency reserves and warned that his country needed to be ready for a "catastrophe". Russia's Economic Development Minister Andrei Slepnyov said the restrictions would violate an agreement with Belarus' partners in a three-country customs union, including Kazakhstan and Russia, which started this year. The Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin said the transfer of the first loan tranche, worth \$800 million, was being prepared for payment. But the second \$440 million tranche due for payment by the end of the year could be withheld.

**The UN Human Rights Council** with 21 votes in favour, five against, and 19 abstentions voted on 17 June to condemn human rights violations before, during and after the presidential election in Belarus and urged the Government to end the persecution of opposition leaders. The Geneva-based Council also urged Belarus to release all political prisoners, respect freedoms of expression and association, and cease the detention and expulsion of international monitors.

**Alyaksandr Lukashenka** during his more than four-hour long press-conference for the central Belarusian media said he could shut the country's borders down and tighten controls over imports to cope with the financial crisis. He blamed journalists for fomenting fear that resulted in a run on the country's currency and outside forces for using "trash called the Internet" to disseminate misinformation. He also warned that he would not tolerate any further street protests. He promised however to resolve a deepening financial crisis within several months but announced no concrete steps. Lukashenka also said that he might free several jailed politicians so that they would no longer "defile" the country's prisons, but he would not be forced into it by the West.

**Catherine Ashton**, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, announced the appointment of Maira Mora the Head of the European Union Delegation to Belarus on 17 June. Mrs Mora is a career diplomat with long experience at the Foreign Ministry of Latvia, including as the Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia to Belarus and at the Latvian Delegation to the OSCE in Vienna. She speaks several languages, including Belarusian.

**Export-Import Bank of China** agreed on 14 June to provide over \$1 billion in loans to finance joint projects in Belarus. China's Eximbank and Commercial Bank of China will allocate a \$654 million loan to build a cellulose plant which may then export its produce to China, \$340 million to modernise a highway linking the capital Minsk and Belarus' second largest city of Homel and \$64 million to a smaller railroad electrification project.

# Editorial

Recent protests and the rapidly deteriorating economic situation in Belarus are the focus of the second issue of Belarus Headlines. We analyse why the Belarusian opposition has become almost invisible despite the growing discontent of Belarusians with the economic crises. We take a closer look at the difference between the very active position of Russia, which is increasing economic pressure on Lukashenka, and the more passive position of the West, choosing to adopt merely symbolic measures.

For many, Belarus still remains terra incognita. Our authors will continue to help you discovering the land, and this time, by offering gentle guidance on its capital city Minsk.

We are happy to welcome the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) which joined the editorial team of Belarus Headlines. For this issue BISS provided a summary of their most recent research projects. However, at the same time we are saddened by the loss of our good friend and colleague, Vitali Silitski, the first director of BISS.



Yaraslau Kryvoi



Tatiana Kouzina



Olga Stuzhinskaya

We hope you will like the second issue of Belarus Headlines and would very much appreciate your feedback.

Co-editors:

Olga Stuzhinskaya, director of the Office for Democratic Belarus  
Yaraslau Kryvoi, editor-in-chief of Belarus Digest  
Tatiana Kouzina, administrative director of BISS

## News In Short

**During a meeting of the OSCE** permanent Council on 16 June, Emmanuel Decaux, the OSCE Moscow Mechanism rapporteur presented his report about the human rights situation and implementation of OSCE commitments in Belarus since the December 2010 presidential election. The report and recommendations contained therein were discussed by all OSCE delegations. Among them were: conducting independent and impartial investigation into the circumstances of the attack against presidential candidate Uladzimir Nyaklayeu as well as the disproportionate use of force by the police while dispersing a demonstration on 19 December; an investigation of reported ill-treatment, including torture and degrading conditions of detention, of those arrested and detained in connection with 19 December events, initiating a review of court judgments in cases where individuals were found guilty under various provisions of the Criminal Code for their participation in the December protest and ensuring fair trial in all pending cases.

**Belarus raised its main interest rate** by another 2.0 percentage pointing to 18 percent. The hike, which went into effect on June 22, is the second in just over two weeks, a span that has seen rates rise by 4.0 percentage points. The National Bank of Belarus said the rates were raised to boost the attraction of local currency investments and "strengthen the protection of Belarusian ruble bank deposits against inflationary processes." The crisis grew out of a massive trade imbalance sparked when Russia elevated the price it charges for Belarusian energy shipments. Its finances were hit further when President Lukashenka boosted state salaries and issued cheap credits ahead of his re-election last year. The resulting hard currency shortage prompted the government to introduce artificial exchange rates, with the Belarusian ruble now exchanged at 5,000 to the dollar at state institutions and around 8,000 to the dollar on the street.

**The US President Barack Obama** on 14 June extended sanctions on Belarus over its violent suppression of protests and arrest of opposition figures in the wake of December's election. He ordered that sanctions adopted on June 16, 2006 by then-president George W. Bush continue beyond their expiration. Washington froze the assets of a number of top officials, and in January vowed to "significantly expand" the number of Minsk officials banned from travelling to the United States.

**An International Monetary Fund (IMF) team** led by Christopher Jarvis visited Belarus during June 1-13, 2011 to conduct post-programme monitoring discussions and exchange views with the authorities on possible next steps in response to their request for a Fund-supported programme. Belarus asked for up to 8 billion dollars in stabilisation loans from the IMF to overcome a growing economic crisis. According to Jarvis, the discussions were initiated on a possible IMF programme. He reminded that the IMF and Belarus need to agree on structural reforms to improve the efficiency of enterprises and the financial system so that in future growth would be strong and durable. Above all, he stressed, the authorities had to be committed to macroeconomic stabilisation and structural reforms.

**The price of Russian natural gas for Belarus** in the next three years is expected to average out at no more than \$250 per 1000 cubic meters, said the Russian business newspaper Marker with reference to reports for a general meeting of Gazprom's stockholders. Belarus reportedly bought gas from Gazprom at \$193 per 1000 cubic meters in late 2010 and at \$223 in the first three months of this year. According to First Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka, the price for the second quarter of the year will be \$244.7. Eventually, in 2007 Belarus agreed to sell a 50% stake in the company for USD 2.5bn. The sale came in four stages and was finalised in February 2010.

In June 2011, Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller both said that negotiations over the acquisition of the remaining 50% stake in Beltransgaz were in the final stage.

**Andrej Pochobut**, a Belarusian-Polish correspondent for the Gazeta Wyborcza, is accused of insulting Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. His trial is being held behind closed doors. He could face up to two years in jail if convicted of insulting the president or up to four years in prison if convicted of libel that "damages the personal honour and dignity of the president." Pochobut went on trial on June 14. He was detained in April and charged with insulting the "personal dignity and honour" of the president in newspaper articles and online comments that he had written.



## In Memoriam



Vitali Silitski 25 December 1972 – 11 June, 2011 recently passed away in Minsk (Belarus).

In 2007, he was appointed director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, a think tank pioneering research to be effectively used in public policy processes. His work has been widely appreciated in and outside of Belarus and BISS has been serving as a model for many researchers in the region.

Vitali Graduated from the Belarusian State University (department of Philosophy and Economy, program in Sociology) in 1994. He holds an M.A. in Politics (Central European University, Hungary) and a Ph.D. in Political Science (Rutgers University). In 1999-2003, he worked as associate professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, a position he lost when the university administration took orders from the authorities to punish him for publicly criticising the government of President Lukashenka. Afterwards he was a Reagan-Fascell Democracy fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy (Washington D.C.) and visiting scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (Stanford University). He authored 'Postponed Freedom: Post-Communist Authoritarianism in Serbia and Belarus' (in Belarusian, published at ARCHE magazine in 2002) and Historical Dictionary of Belarus (with Jan Zaprudnik, Scarecrow Press, 2007). He also authored over 100 publications on issues of democratisation and authoritarianism in the former USSR, electoral revolutions and pre-emptive authoritarianism, politics of economic reforms, EU relations with Belarus, Belarus-Russia integration, etc

*"I was deeply saddened by the news of Vitali Silitski's passing away, and angry over the unfairness of a man in his prime having to go. So much would have been left for him to do. I will miss him. All those who knew Vitali will always remember him for his bubbling personality and great sense of humour. He was full of life. At the same time, he was an extremely sharp and cool-headed analyst, seeing not just black and white in developments in his country, but carefully discerning all possible shades of grey which lay in between extremes. He did not assign blame, but looked for solutions. Vitali was passionate about helping Belarus onto the right path, about searching for the right policies to move things forward. He never let this passion cloud his judgement. It is now for those Vitali left behind to build on the legacy of joy of life and intellectual integrity he left behind".*

**Pirkka Tapiola, Strategic Planning Division, European External Action Service**

*"He devoted his life to study Belarus; he made out of the country an internationally recognised case study and leaving a promising international academic carrier he moved back to change things at home.*

*Vitali Silitski's death leaves a gaping hole in the Belarusian and European civil society and expert community. Educated both in an Eastern and Western context he, like few others, was familiar with Belarusian, European and American culture and thinking. Sometimes I felt his main mission was that of a tireless messenger between these – due to the sad Belarusian isolation – separate worlds. This endeavour was sustained by Vitali's humanity and conviction of democracy as the only appropriate model of development for his country, which he loved and never failed. What made Vitali unique was his ability and willingness to find compromises where others adopted radical positions. The EU and Belarus have lost an important mediator in one of the darkest periods of their mutual relationship.*

*I will always remember our discussions and joint work, Vitali's knowledge and eagerness for intellectual exchange, but also his openness, humanity and warmth. My thoughts are with his loved ones and friends. We will all miss him greatly, and we need to do our best to carry on his mission and his ideas."*

**Sabine Fischer, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris**

*Rest in peace, our dear friend. You lost the struggle against cancer, but throughout your life you have won the hearts and minds of many people from different countries, especially in your beloved Belarus. Your ideas will continue to live: we will do our best for them to become reality. One day we will come to your grave to tell you about the new Belarus, for the transformation of which you have made an enormous contribution. With love.*

**Colleagues and friends from the Office for a Democratic Belarus (ODB)**

*"I will miss Vitali's voice, his sense of humor, his presence, his keen mind. And all he has contributed to the development of political science and civil society in Belarus. His writings and the concepts he develop also through BISS research projects have been very important for my understanding of Belarus and of transition more generally. No serious scholar working on these issues can ignore this important work. Concepts such as the "social contract" and the BISS book on the topic changed the whole paradigm of serious research on Belarus. Vitali represented the best Belarus can offer, and hope for its future in the hands of a new generation. His absence will be sorely felt in many ways as the many gifts he brought to those of us who had the privilege of working with him."*

**Margarita M. Balmaceda, Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki**

*"He devoted his life to study Belarus, he made out of the country an international recognized case study and leaving a promising international academic carrier he moved back to change things at home. He was big in all of the spectrums but one – his own health. Although he lost his last fight, his heritage will withstand the years. We, at BISS, will do our best to continue his work and be big enough to develop his heritage further. We are proud to call him a colleague and a friend."*

**Colleagues and friends from the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS)**

*"I only had the privilege to know Vitali briefly, but in that time, when he was already sick (even if he did not know it) I benefited greatly from his wisdom, as did all those of us who are careful watchers of Belarus, and who care about the future of its people. But I benefited also from Vitali's great humanity. In an irony of fate--ironia sudby--it was during his own last months that Vitali came to see me when I was sick in the hospital in Minsk. We talked work, a little, but mostly simply sat and reflected on our shared humanity, and our shared vulnerability. It was an unexpected moment of light and of enlightenment for me in an otherwise very dark time. Vitali taught me something about Belarus, of course, but unexpectedly also about myself. We are all human, we are each vulnerable, and we owe it to Vitali to care for his country's future as he did."*

**Matt Rojansky, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**

*"At a time when civil society is facing continuing restrictions in Belarus, and three opposition presidential candidates have been given long prison sentences after the presidential elections of December 2010, Vitali's memory should serve to remind us of the many positive voices for freedom and a democratic future in Belarus. I am convinced that those of us who knew him in Belarus, throughout Europe and the US, and everyone who cares about Belarus, will join together in our efforts to realise Vitali's own wish for which he worked so long - to "light the candle of freedom" in Belarus."*

**Jeff Lovitt, PASOS (Policy Association for an Open Society)**

*"Vitali will be missed as an extraordinary personality and a great believer in a mission he has been promoting; I can imagine how you, his friends and colleagues, will miss him; and how much the whole country will miss him..."*

*Vitali will be missed for all of us who are fortunate to have gotten to know him, and to have been able at least somehow to work with him. It has been a great privilege, and I will never forget him."*

**Sergej Michalič, independent expert, Slovakia**

*Vitali was born a few days ahead of me; thus perhaps I can claim that one of the biggest thinkers of our Central and Eastern European generation is gone.*

*I met Vitali ten years ago and since I have had the privilege of enjoying a vibrant working relationship and compassionate friendship. To the surprise of many he moved back to Minsk to assume the responsibility of building up the Belarus Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS), interrupting - as many thought that time - a developing international academic carrier. However, he devoted his life to Belarus, this was his destiny. He subsequently became one of the most noted experts on authoritarianism and democracy. Given the dedication demonstrated by Vitali and his colleagues, I am sure that his heritage in his main project - BISS - will serve to move Belarus forward.*

**Balazs Jarabik, FRIDE, Associate Fellow**

*We have lost a friend and a great professional. Vital is now somewhere else but his legacy remains and will continue to inspire us. I am speaking of this very special combination of commitment, professionalism and openness which even made opposing parties consider his analysis and vision. I enjoyed the numerous meetings which we had together, especially on the occasion of BISS events. I won't forget that we were together in the Square on 19 December and that he ensured my safety when the crackdown started. This is Vital; committed and supportive, a great friend and a great Belarusian.*

**Jean-Eric Holzaphel, Charge d'affaires a.i. of the EU Delegation to Belaru**

## EU-Belarus

## Policy Towards Belarus: Russia Is Pressing, Europe Is Watching

By Yaraslau Kryvoi, London

While Russia is increasing its efforts to push Belarus into its geostrategic orbit even further, Europe appears to have taken the "wait and see approach". The latest arms embargo and sanctions targeting Belarusian companies is a moral gesture, which will have little effect in Belarus. Those who wish to see change in Belarus may be losing the momentum.

Russia is pressing Belarus to privatise its most lucrative assets. The highly profitable Belarusian state enterprise, Belaruskali, may end up in the hands of the Russian tycoon Kerimov. The Kremlin also appears intent on setting higher prices for energy supplies, undermining the main cornerstone of Belarus' "economic miracle". Moreover, 'Russian officials have been embroiled in a bitter dispute over the import of Belarusian dairy products, with the potential for renewed trade restrictions casting a shadow over Belarus' fragile economy.' Russia has additionally warned Belarus that if it further restricts Russia's media outlets it would face difficulties securing Russian loans in the future. Russia is getting nearly everything it wants.

Europe is losing on nearly all fronts because of its passivity. Some in the European Union think that relations with Belarus have reached their lowest point and can only improve. This may not be the case because the human rights situation may further deteriorate as Lukashenka tries to resist growing public unrest. The EU's role in Belarus is usually manifested in declarations, which are ignored by the Belarusian authorities, and NGO programmes of a very limited scale compared to similar initiatives elsewhere in the region.

Although Russia is likely to wait until the Belarusian leader is on his knees before bailing him out, keeping Lukashenka on its balance sheet may become expensive for Russia. Despite oil prices remaining high due to

recent unrest in the Arab world, the Kremlin will require additional funds before the parliamentary elections later this year. Moreover, Russia has to feed not only its impoverished South, rife with separatist groups and radical Islamic movements, but also other regions such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This is why Belarus will have to keep looking for money elsewhere. It was Russia's Finance Minister Kudrin who recommended that Belarus apply for an IMF loan a few months ago. Belarus has done so, but the chances of getting more money from the IMF look uncertain.

In light of Russia's influence in Belarus, the West needs to keep talking to the Russians. The Kremlin needs to understand that if Belarus experiences a change of presidency, it will not lead to a collapse of Belarus-Russia relations. Moscow's fear that Russian-speakers will be prosecuted if Lukashenka goes have little substantiation. Unlike the Ukraine or Baltic States, the vast majority of people speak Russian as their first language. It is inconceivable that this will change any time soon. If Belarus becomes a market economy, joins the WTO, and freely trades with both Russia and the European Union it can only benefit Russia's own economy.

However, talking to Russia should not be the main policy tool of the West because there are nearly 10 million people in Belarus who need to be reached. With a reduction in economic subsidies from Russia, many Belarusians for the first time have seen that their king is naked. Public dissatisfaction is growing and there appears to be no quick fix for the Belarusian economy.

The West needs to ensure that Belarusians understand why this is happening and have access to uncensored information. It is not enough to allocate funds for Belsat or radio stations based in Poland. It is important to monitor whether information they produce actually reaches an average Belarusian.



If media output only reaches opposition activists, the effect will remain limited. With frequent blockades of Internet web sites and traditional opposition media on the brink of survival, cross-border broadcasting, similarly employed in the Soviet period, remains the only way to spread uncensored information. Given that Belarus is a relatively small country, broadcasting signals from neighbouring Poland and Lithuania can reach many people in Belarus and help them understand what is going on.

Secondly, the West needs to continue supporting nation building in Belarus. One of the reasons why Ukraine is more independent now is because at some point in its history the Austro-Hungarian Empire actively supported nation building in Western Ukraine. Many historians agree that this helped mature the nation.

In Belarus the situation has been different. Over the last three centuries Belarusians were regarded as Poles by the Polish and as Russians by Russia. Now it is in Europe's interests to help the Belarusian people to mature from Soviets to Belarusians. Helping them mature as a European nation would serve the long-term goal of the country's independence. On a practical level, the West should strengthen its support of the Belarusian language and national identity. This could include programmes to facilitate the study of history,

translation of movies and books into Belarusian, teaching in the Belarusian language - in Belarus and elsewhere, such as at the European Humanities University in Lithuania. If the Belarusian government is not doing that, there are good reasons for the West to do it.

Finally, Europe should simplify and make less expensive visa procedures for Belarusians. It is unacceptable that Belarusians have to pay 60 euro for a Schengen visa, while Russians and Ukrainians pay merely 35 Euros. Rapid impoverishment of the Belarusian population is creating a new iron curtain for many Belarusians. Moreover, getting a multiple entry visa for a citizen of Russia with a population of over 140 million people, is easier than for citizens of Belarus with a population of less than 10 million and traditionally low crime rates.

Facilitation of the free movement of Belarusians within the European Union would help them appreciate the advantages of democracy and market economy. Coupled with ensuring better access to uncensored media, these measures could achieve far more than yet another round of symbolic gestures from Brussels.

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## Politics and Society

## Belarus' Opposition: The Silence of The Lambs

By Siarhei Bohdan, Minsk

Several months into a grave economic and social crisis the Belarusian opposition movement seems to be concerned with only two problems – the release of political prisoners and keeping their offices. The issues of crisis, impoverishment and looting national property are not being used to mobilise the people.

The first social-related event of the so-called 'People's Assemblies' has been prudently scheduled by a veteran of the Belarusian opposition, Viktor Ivashkevich, for as late as 16 October. Other politicians prefer to limit their activities on social problems to media comments. The post-election repressions proved effective – opposition affiliated politicians have become extremely cautious.

**Right-Wing Democracy: an Infantile Disorder**

Many years of continuous failures have had a negative effect on the intellectual capacities and institutional structures of opposition. Many able individuals have left to avoid remaining permanently suppressed for years. To be an underdog may be tragically romantic for a time, yet after a while it makes more pragmatic people think twice about their future prospects and they go elsewhere.

Now, the proportion of emotional romantics in the Belarusian democratic opposition is disproportionately high. However, there are not enough pragmatics. No wonder then, that analytically and strategically the opposition looks little better than the government which has eliminated its brain in another way – by strict censorship. In any event, even to launch a campaign against social problems or against selling out state flagship companies seems to be an insurmountable task for the opposition at present. And quite probably not because of a fear of consequences, but because there are apparently not enough methodological and analytical capacities to produce such new concepts, and parties' regional structures are disintegrated as never before.

It is hard to say whether the opposition itself can realise their predicament. Anyway, they lack a mirror to look into. Lukashenka has nearly extinguished most

independent media outlets and the state media provide no constructive feedback, only propaganda.

This uncritical approach to the results of their own activities since 1996 on the part of the opposition is combined with an ideological right-wing tilt. There are no left-wing parties in Belarus to be on par with the right-wing political organisations. Even worse, the right-wing parties are taking purist-rightist stances and – contrary to their Western European counterparts – they are yet to adopt a social agenda. Thus, for instance, the Christian Democrats effectively take as their model the US Republicans and not Western European Christian Democratic parties, which long ago understood that social matters should have a place in the programmes of non-left parties as well.

Commenting on the last Internet-organised protests in Minsk, one of the leaders of the Christian Democrats Dzianis Sadouski, declared on 15 June, "We should not go to a social action with party flags". Instead, the Christian Democrats are going to hold 100 pickets and other actions supporting political prisoners in all regions of the country and start collecting the signatures under a petition calling for their release. A former presidential candidate, Vital Rymasheuski emphasised, "...no loans, no anti-crisis programme will work in Belarus, unless the main political demands are provided for. That is — free elections, media freedom and freedom of public organisation and political parties' activities."

Such ideological right-wing purism, deliberately blind to social issues, is pursued in a country where social and welfare traditions of Soviet times have formed a significant part of common people's beliefs. That omen loomed over the democratic opposition in Belarus since its beginning in the late 1980s. The then opponents of communist rule positioned themselves as representatives of spiritual heirs of pre-Soviet times nobility; disregarding the fact that Belarusians are essentially a peasant nation with strong egalitarian traditions. The democratic opposition subsequently suffered numerous setbacks yet did not give up on 'socialism-bashing' as their major idea.

The same fear of touching any presumably socialist-sounding themes may explain why nobody is attacking the government for selling Belaruskali; the giant potash mining campaign and the most valuable asset of the Belarusian state. Even the media has adopted a neutral tone in its coverage of the situation.

Without doubt, the sale of Belaruskali – comparable in its importance to national oil companies in oil-producing countries – under such opaque conditions could be the cause of a nationwide protest campaign. After all, almost no news on a potential Belaruskali deal with a Russian oligarch has reached the public, and given the track record of the Belarusian regime, expectations are low that any deal will be executed transparently. The opposition, however, is hibernating and has not touched the issue.

Yet even in a purely rightist view it is evident that any government to come after Lukashenka will find empty pockets, with Belaruskali sold and money for it already spent. It will simply have no more internal resources for reforms – on any ideological platform. Besides this, there are doubts behind the rationale of privatising a mining company per se.

**0+0=?**

Perhaps a divided opposition is unable to take a stronger line toward the government and is therefore avoiding the risk confrontation? There has been a lot of talk about uniting the opposition movement. Yet, unity makes sense only when the forces to be united amount to a sum greater than zero independently of one another. To add many zeros does not eventually bring any increase in strength as the 2006 presidential election demonstrated. Though the last election in December demonstrated the untapped potential of protests in Belarus, seemingly the people were gripped by the appeal of candidates and not political parties – whose popularity is negligible.

The outcome of more than a dozen years of democracy proponents struggling against the regime is not impressive – Lukashenka has won, the opposition is defeated and its structures eliminated, while independent media and NGOs have suffered the same fate. Recent protests at the Belarusian-Polish

border have shown that the angry Belarusians are not talking the language of opposition and possibly would not articulate their condition in political terms at all. They even sang the state hymn – a Soviet-style song reinvented by Lukashenka's regime and outrightly rejected by opponents of the existing Belarusian regime.

One thing is clear: this opposition may not be involved in future political developments in the country even after Lukashenka's rule is over. The government is currently overcoming its weaknesses – through the terrible price of selling the best national companies – and is going to retain its control of the nation by gradually, although not acutely, impoverishing the people while suppressing any protests with force. Arguably, the democratic opposition is effectively assisting it. In the end, either Lukashenka will prevail or some figures of his regime will emerge as new rulers in Minsk – but not the old-style Democrats.

The question of who is guilty for the defeat of the democratic movement in Belarus cannot be explained only by recent repressions. Of course, repression has played its part, yet the opposition is weakening itself by behaving this way and dropping the most pertinent issues. As a result, it is losing popular support, and remains a weak and unimportant partner for the government and – last but not least – is extremely susceptible to foreign pressure.

Apparently, foreign support from abroad – moral and material – both helped the Belarusian democratic opposition to survive, while simultaneously rendering it inefficient. The most evident example is the OSCE intrusion in 2000-2001 when the opposition found itself too weak to resist the foreign friends' proposal to put Uladzimir Hancaryk as its single candidate.

To achieve a more critical view of its own activities, the Belarusian democratic movement needs a more robust media and think tanks which will let it see itself from the outside. Meanwhile, not only should the media and think tanks be developed, but also the opposition should learn to listen even to its most outspoken critics.

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## Politics and Society

## The Promise of Revolution in Belarus?

By Nadine Lashuk, Minsk

Facing the worsening economic crisis, the Belarusian regime is getting visibly nervous. When on Wednesday several thousand gathered for a meeting in the capital of Belarus and in over 30 smaller towns, the authorities blocked the city centre of Minsk and made it impossible to access the central October Square. The so-called silent gatherings are organised via social networks. Protesters meet in central places without banners and in silence to protest against the situation in the country. Up to 450 protesters in the whole country have been arrested, among them nine journalists and a Swedish diplomat, who was released after showing his diplomatic ID. A march of millions and a general strike are planned to take part on July 3rd, the Belarusian Independence Day.

In the run-up to this week's protests, Lukashenka announced that he will not accept any protests in the country. Lukashenka has to fight a battle on many fronts at the same time: against the West, against the opposition, against international media outlets, against the internet and now against discontented social groups. According to rumors, access to social networks could be blocked in Belarus.

If we believe in what the Western press writes these days, Belarus is not far away from a revolution caused by mass protests. According to certain media outlets, a large number of Belarusians have started demonstrating against inflation, rising prices, stagnating wages and export limitations for a week now. During the previous years, a very popular thesis among



Photo: nn.by Several hundred car drivers took part in a mass protest action called "Stop Gazoline" against the rising fuel prices

Western observers and diplomats in Belarus has been that the only thing that will make people take part in mass demonstrations will be an extreme deterioration of their living conditions. They were convinced that, as long as Lukashenka could maintain relatively high living standards, low food and communal services prices, Belarusians would not care to take part in demonstrations.

What has happened in Belarus in the last two months is exactly the scenario that Western observers would have expected to be at the origin of mass protests leading to an end of the Lukashenka regime. However, over the preceding weeks it became clear that galloping inflation and rising prices would probably not lead to the predicted mass protests. Instead of demonstrating, Belarusians bought what was left of cheap products, they organised a black market website for currency exchange- but no discontent reached the public space.

It is a revealing characteristic of contemporary Belarusian society that what has finally

brought them to the street is the rise of fuel prices. Several hundred car drivers have taken part in a mass protest action called "Stop Gazoline" against the rising fuel prices in the Belarusian cities of Minsk, Homel, Brest and Mahiliou on 7 June. This protest had been organised by the automobilist association "Za-Avto" and not by a political party or movement.

In the aftermath of the protests, the main activists were arrested and sentenced to pay fines. The organisers of the rally collected 8 kilos of paper money to pay the fines to demonstrate the loss of value of the national currency. However, the protesters succeeded in achieving their goal - Lukashenka ordered to lower the price of gasoline.

The "Stop-Gazoline" rally has been a starting point for demonstrations elsewhere in Belarus. Shuttle trader drivers blocked a Polish-Belarusian border crossing to protest against the limitations of travelling abroad with full tanks. The police dispersed the protest using tear gas. At another crossing point 100 people gathered to express

their dissatisfaction about new export restrictions.

Indeed, last week's events clearly show that Belarusians are ready to protest against the economic situation in the country. It just isn't working out the way the West would expect it to. Those people protesting at the moment are acting in their own and immediate interest. They protest against fuel prices and against export restrictions. They belong to the middle class; many of them have recently bought those new Western cars that can now be seen in large numbers on the streets of Minsk. Cars are their status symbol.

However, the vast majority of those middle-class Belarusians do not protest because they fail to make a connection between their president's mismanagement and the current economic crisis. Belarusians are not protesting for more general ideas such as violations of human rights, repression against opposition groups or media censorship. They are protesting only against their personal deprivation, which is starting to take extreme forms. For some retired people it is difficult to afford even basic food supplies.

And it is only on the day that people make the link between the political and economic situation in the country that Lukashenka has to start getting nervous. Ensuring that Belarusians have access to uncensored information is the best way to help them understand this link.

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## Finance &amp; Commerce

# Belarus Getting Loans Under Strict Conditions

By Darya Bespyatova, Brussels

On 4 June, Belarus secured a 3bn dollar loan from the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) that consists of 6 countries – Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The first transfer of 800 million dollars was made on 21 June; another 440 millions dollars will be transferred by the end of 2011. The spokesperson for the Russian Prime Minister, Dmitri Peskov, has stated that 800 million dollars will be allocated to Belarus in 2012, and the rest of the loan of 1bn dollars are planned to be transferred to Belarus in 2013, published AFP (Agence France Press) on its website on 4 June.

However, in return for the loan, Russia has demanded that Minsk not only carries out partial reforms to stabilise the macroeconomic situation, but above all that it should start privatisation. Under the present circumstances, the only real buyers of the vast majority of key enterprises in Belarus could be Russian investors. According to The Economist, M. Kudrin, the Russian Finance Minister, declared that Belarus had to perform privatisation valued at 7.5 bn dollars for the next three years. Thus, Russia's actions towards Belarus can be seen as a tactical-profitable approach. Russia could make a unilateral loan to Belarus, but has in fact chosen to do so under the banner of the EurAsEC to create the impression that this is a collective decision, part of a rescue plan for a member state (as happens within the International Monetary Fund). Moreover, the current loan is in no way sufficient to rescue Belarus' financial system (according to calculations by independent Belarusian economists, approximately US\$10 billion would be needed to fully stabilise the situation by the end of 2011).

It is possible to predict that within the next few months, Moscow will take advantage of the difficult situation in Belarus in order to achieve its own interests. As of this moment, the sale has been announced of a 50% stake in the Belarusian firm Beltransgaz (which owns Belarus's gas pipelines) to Russia's Gazprom, which already owns half the shares. However, Minsk has made this transaction conditional on price discounts for supplies of Russian gas, which may postpone the signing of the contract. Later this year, Russia expects to sign an agreement to merge the Belarusian motor vehicle plant MAZ with the Russian KAMAZ. Furthermore, it will be important for Russia to obtain guarantees from Minsk, which will protect the rights of Russian investors in Belarus, says the Center of Eastern Studies



in its analysis of the current situation in Belarus.

It is necessary to take notice that nothing is predictable with Alyaksandr Lukashenka in power, and even well calculated Russian economic strategy might be left aside. Belarus has applied for a new billion dollar loan from the

International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Government and the National Bank have asked the IMF for an extension of the stabilization loan, said Prime Minister Mikhail Miasnikowitsch in Minsk. He expects a loan of 3.5 to eight billion dollars (2.4 to 5.6 billion euros) over a period of three to five years. A potential IMF loan, however, is likely to come with equally stringent conditions for austerity measures and economic reform. An indication of that came in the IMF's most recent assessment, where the fund called on Minsk to take some "difficult decisions", claimed BBC News in a recent article.

The situation is even more difficult when taking into consideration that Russia may limit the volume of its loans to Belarus if the state continues limiting the circulation of Russian media in the country, Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin said on Thursday, 16 June 2011 to RIA Novosti. "The government of Russia is concerned with the Belarusian Administration's measures on repression and limitation of mass media from Russia," Kudrin said. The minister added that if cases of Russian media repression continue in Belarus, "we [Russia] preserve the right to limit financial support to Belarus."

At the same time Lukashenka, during his annual press conference to Belarusian state and regional media, warned that: "If it gets really bad, then we will close the borders and only purchase our own things, but I hope that we won't have to do that." The statement invoked yet another wave of harsh criticism from the Russian side.

In addition, the international community is continuing to put pressure on Lukashenka through economic sanctions adopted towards Belarus by the European Union and USA.

## The Lukashenka Style of Economic Governance

By Volha Dudko, Praha

On May 13 a special IMF mission completed its work in Belarus. But instead of granting the financial support long awaited by the Belarusian government, the mission merely issued a number of recommendations on how to overcome the economic and financial crisis in Belarus. According to the IMF's official statement, Belarus can count on the Fund's financial support only when it really proves its readiness for structural reforms. That means that Belarus should start to make concrete measures to implement reforms, not only to prepare drafts of reforms. But the recent government exports bans and price restrictions adopted in June illustrate only the opposite intent.

### The loan and its price

On 31 May Belarus officially applied to the IMF for financial support. According to Prime Minister Myasnikovich, Belarus is awaiting to

receive 3.5-8 bn USD from the Fund to overcome the financial crisis. The conditions of the IMF loan are much better than those of Russia, which appears to be waiting for the right moment to grab the best Belarusian state enterprises. But this time the IMF mission had rightly decided not to waste money on empty promises.

While negotiating with the IMF, Belarus managed to receive a loan from the Eurasian Economic Community, a post-soviet international organisation dominated by Russia. On 4th of June at the Summit of the Eurasian Economic Community, it was decided to grant Belarus a 3 bn USD loan, to be paid over the period of three years. And this time Russia has been stricter with the implementation of its requirements than before – to receive the loan Belarus should privatise its assets to the amount of 7.5 bn USD over three years by 2.5 bn USD every year.

The bargaining for the price of most lucrative Belarusian companies has already started. Negotiations for the privatisation of the Beltransgaz company with Gazprom have a long history. This

## Finance &amp; Commerce

## The Lukashenka Style of Economic Governance

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(continued from page 7)

transportation and infrastructure company is one of the most strategically important assets of Belarus, even though Russia has declared that it has little interest in it. Indeed, after Russia launches the oil and gas pipeline "North stream" under the bottom of the Baltic Sea, Belarus will lose its advantage as an energy transit country. But as the columnist of Naviny.by Ivashkevich wrote, without controlling its energy transportation system Belarus would find it difficult to diversify the energy suppliers in future and participate, for example, in the BEMIP (Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan), financed by European Union.

Between 2007-2010, Gazprom purchased 50% of Beltransgaz for 2.5 bn USD. Now Belarus is trying to sell the rest of its share in the company for another 2.5 bn USD in a bundle with a contract for lower prices of gas supplies. Gazprom is strongly opposed to mixing these two deals and decrease gas prices, which are already the lowest in the region. The average gas price in Belarus this year will be around 250 USD/1m3, while in Ukraine it is 290 USD/m3 and in Poland - 401 USD/m3.

The second very important asset for the country, and particularly lucrative for investors, is Belaruskali – one of the biggest producers of potash fertiliser in the world. Soon after Belarus received a loan from Eurasian Economic community, the Belarusian media began to discuss the news that Russian investor and major shareholder in Uralkali, Suleyman Kerimov, was negotiating with the government (or more precisely with the Presidential Administration) the terms and price of the controlling stock of Belaruskali. The estimated price of the whole company, named by A. Lukashenka, is to be 30 bn USD. Yet, a week later new reports emerged indicating Suleyman Kerimov was not going to buy any share in Belaruskali. Seemingly, negotiations with the Belarusian government became rather tough. Or Kerimov realised that even the purchase of major stock would not give him requisite control of the company.

According to the requirements of the loan received from Eurasian Economic Community, Belarus has to prepare a list of companies it is going to privatise until the end of the year. But Lukashenka, who acts as the sole owner of the whole country, will do as much as possible to postpone this privatisation. Instinctively he understands that privatisation will inevitably change the structure not only of the economy itself but will be a trigger for changes in the political structure as well.

**The economic policy in Belarus – ban, restrict, punish**

Belarus has finally received the loan but it is unlikely to assist in pulling the country out of the crisis. The foreign currency market is still paralysed, only aggravating negative tendencies in the economy. The currency is still impossible to find in exchanges for the officially declared exchange rate, even though it was finally devalued by 50% starting from March. Interbank operations are also stuck, as the government threatened to punish commercial banks if they increased the exchange rate to more than 2% of the official one. State officials are afraid to let the market reach the equilibrium exchange rate because it can appear too high and reduce people's income even further.

On the other hand, foreign currency reserves are also too small to start any interventions on the exchange market. From the beginning of the year it decreased by 28.6% and comprised only 3.59 bn USD as of 1 June. With the first tranche of the loan of 800 m USD the government can start interventions. But with high probability this money will be "eaten" by the economy in a few months.

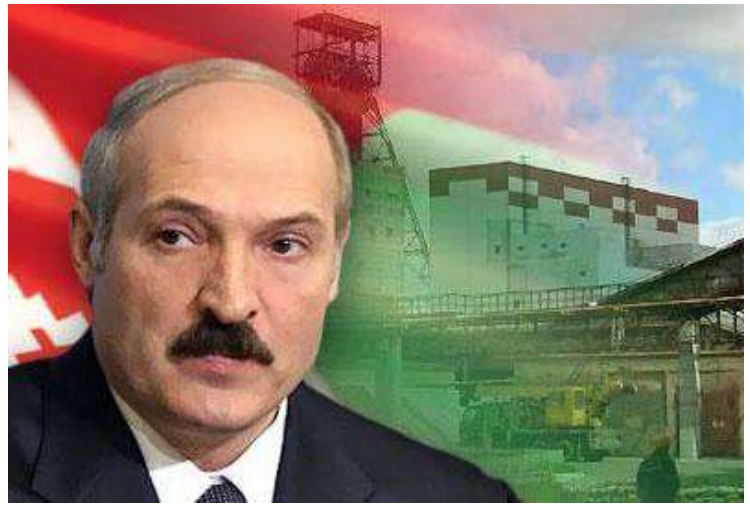


Photo: regnum.ru

The absence of any economic decisions over the last months has only increased panic in society and untwisted the devaluation and inflation spiral. People have started to withdraw not only ruble deposits but the foreign currency deposits as well. The financial crisis and government restriction on interbank operations have dried out the credit rivers – in response, banks have curtailed their consumer credit programmes. The important pillar of A. Lukashenka's social programme – preferential crediting of housing construction – is also about to be cancelled. According to this programme a large number of Belarusians received preferential housing credits with the interest rate of only 5% for 40 years (lower than the inflation rate). And finally, the government has abandoned this programme, gradually leaving its model of socially oriented economy, as there are no more sources to support it. For many years the preferential crediting of agriculture, state enterprises and housing contracting was undermining the Belarusian financial system, a policy now in part to blame for the present economic and financial crisis.

The only kind of political and economic decisions the Belarusian government is able to provide at the moment are bans and restrictions. From 1 June the regulation of prices on most socially important goods was renewed, likely to result in the deficit of these goods. So the attempts to liberalise prices, undertaken at the beginning of the year were abolished. But at the same time on 7 June, a decision was taken to increase prices for gasoline. It led to a car drivers' protest in the center of Minsk. Frightened, the president ordered to return prices back the next day. But such artificial decreases are not economically justified and will only bring losses for Belarusian gasoline producers.

In the following days (on 10-11 of June) two other decrees came. The first decree banned people from travelling abroad with a full tank as a mean to avoid contraband export of cheap Belarusian gasoline. The second decree banned the export of several types of products: pasta, refrigerators, and gas stoves amongst others. These decisions have led to protests by shuttles and smugglers on the Belarus-Poland border. Unfortunately, it only resulted in fines imposed on a number of participants. Some were also prevented from travelling abroad for one year. The export ban can hardly be explained by economic logic as most of Belarus' exports goes to Russia, with which it has no border, and to countries of the Common Economic Space.

With the deterioration of the economic situation, the Belarusian government is likely to impose more bans and restrictions. The President is simply trying to restrain natural economic laws, which are working against him.

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## Research

By Inna Buhstynovich, Stockholm

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biss

In this section the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies and the Agency for Policy Expertise present a digest of their new studies, publications and expert opinions on the most burning issues of political, economic, and social life in Belarus. For your attention we offer a review of the publications for the period of May – June 2011.

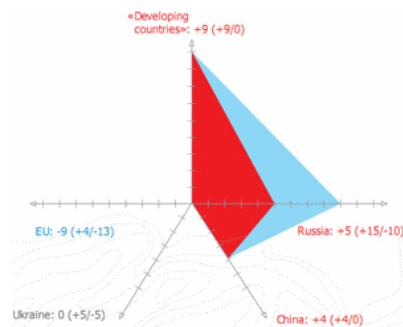
### Pros and Cons of the Growth in Belarus' Foreign Debt

Examining the issue of the growth in Belarus' external debt, required to preserve relative economic stability, BISS asks the questions if it is worth propping up stability in the first place and what the cost of these efforts is.

The payments on the debt, while now not as significant, will peak in 2013-2014 reaching \$2.7 and 2.5 billion respectively. According to IMF forecasts, this would amount to 3.7-3.8% of Belarus' GDP. This could prompt budget cuts of more than 10% on social programs, health, education and infrastructure. Given the current deficit it will pose a significant challenge for economic policy and will threaten long-term economic growth. In such circumstances, further growth of public external debt should be regarded as undesirable.

The bailouts from both the IMF and the Eurasian Economic Community will considerably soften the foreign currency crisis however loans themselves won't address the underlining problems. The Fund, if it does provide a loan, will demand the commitment of Belarus' administration to structural reforms. Clearly, launching reforms will be impossible without transformation in the regime. The implied political conditionality (release of political prisoners as a necessary condition to extend the loan) will also be in the loan conditions, although no one will articulate these terms openly. The government's readiness for this is a question of trust for the creditors. The BISS analysts conclude it is geopolitics and not economical logic that is likely to drive the process.

[The full version](#) of this article in Russian, Belarusian and English appeared on the BISS website on June 6



### Belarus' Foreign Policy Index

The second issue of Belarus' Foreign Policy Index, an analytical report by BISS assessing the key trends in international relations engaging Belarus, marks a significant reduction of foreign policy space and a growing trend of self-isolation. The reviewed period of April 1 through May 31, 2011 contains a number of important events that affected Belarus' foreign policy: trails of the participants of the December 19 events, the terrorist explosion in a Minsk subway, the foreign currency and economic crisis, and the search for external funds. On the one hand, the findings presented in the report may indicate a strengthening of the repressive practices inside the country, and on the other, signal that in the near future the Belarusian foreign policy pendulum could swing in the opposite direction – to the West.

Compared to the foreign policy “wind rose” in the beginning of the year, one can notice that the formerly super-positive Russian vector has significantly shriveled and is now exceeded by a negative European vector. Meanwhile the vectors of China, the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America and the newly added Ukrainian vector remain little affected. This situation does not allow for the tactics of balancing the Russian vector with European, and Belarus is therefore forced to agree to the format and content of bilateral relations set by Russia. The latter is pursuing the process of “dismantling” the authority of Lukashenka and the “Belarusian model” and attaching conditionality to the aid, and this trend is expected to continue. Condemnation of the human rights situation in Belarus by the Russian media became indicative in this regard.

As for Belarus' relations with the EU, the escalation of the conflict continues while a search for potential ways out of the conflict is beginning to take place. Another trend is an intensification of the strategic uncertainty of Europe regarding Belarus: most of the EU statements and decisions seem to be made in the style of “a tooth for a tooth”. This can be partially explained by the developments in the Middle East and the Mediterranean that have distracted Europe's attention.

[The full version](#) of Belarus' Foreign Policy Index report in English, Belarusian and Russian is available on BISS website

### Living in Credit: Old Approaches in New Situation

Alena Rybkina reflects on the response of the Belarusian authorities buffeted by the economic crisis. She notes that that there is no coherent position among various governmental bodies, which is only intensifying the panic among the population. Furthermore, the approach to replenish swiftly diminishing currency reserves remains the same – asking for loans instead of initiating structural reforms. The author calls “living in credit” the quintessential feature of the Belarusian economy. And now, having alienated external borrowers, Belarus needs to look for money from domestic sources – population, banks and businesses by imposing new regulations and deranging the earlier program on economic liberalization. For example, export businesses are forced to sell 30% of their foreign currency income to the state that sets the exchange rate. Banks are “offered” to participate in social programs on providing loans to rural areas. Moreover, according to the governmental decree repayments on loans guaranteed by state, mainly for the purchase of agricultural equipment (4.5 trillion rubles, or \$1.4 billion according to the National Bank) are frozen from April 1, 2011 to December 31, 2012. This will hit state banks with new losses. The author observes, that the economic crisis expected to peak in fall-winter, is turning into a political crisis.

[The full version](#) of this article in Russian appeared on the Agency for Political Expertise/ BISS website on May 13, 2011

## Research

**Loans in Portions for Privatization in Portions**

Talking about a much needed \$3 billion bailout from the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Community, Tatiana Manionak discusses the most probable “candidates” for sale in the result of privatization of state property – a condition with which the loan has been updated. While officials in Russia say that Belarus is free to decide what to sell, it is the assets that are of interest primarily to Russian monopolies and corporations that Belarus is forced to sell, as the country has locked the possibilities to cooperate with the West and the IMF.

The most likely list of assets includes a gas transportation company Beltransgaz, potash producer Belaruskali, oil refinery enterprises, producer of nitrogen compounds and fertilizers Azot, and Belarusian oil transit operators. Moreover, the previously announced prices of some assets are unlikely to remain the same. Thus in the case of Beltransgaz, \$2.5 billion for 50% of stocks (the remaining 50% is already owned by Gazprom) is likely to be dropped. In May, Russia completed the construction of the first line of the North European gas pipeline and the second line will be completed in 2012, decreasing the volume of gas transit through Belarus. Retaining Belaruskali, the most liquid Belarusian asset, is going to be difficult following the merger of Russian potash producers initiated by the Kremlin, coupled with the situation of Russia's programme of “pointed” loans.

The author concludes that Russia's help is not going to come for free anymore. The loans will be provided in portions in exchange to the guaranteed sale or abatements of state assets.

[The full version](#) of this article in Russian appeared on the Agency for Political Expertise/ BISS website on May 23, 2011

**Investigation Wide Open**

Aleksei Medvetsky scrutinizes possible implications behind the leaks around the most high-profile case in Belarus in recent years – the April 11 bomb explosion in a Minsk subway station killing 14 people and wounding about 200. While capture of the perpetrators was unprecedentedly swift, the informational work was an unprecedented failure. The author asks how it is possible that a Russian website became the main channel of insider information on the investigation when the investigation was personally controlled by the president and when the authorities in Belarus exercise all power over the media. A poor level of coordination over the three agencies in charge of the investigation – the Attorney General, KGB and Interior Ministry – could be named as one of the reasons. However an initial implication is that the state was not a victim of circumstance but purposely used the leaks to solve its own tasks.

First, the information leak concerning the suspect having an appearance of a person from the Caucasus was followed by a meeting on the work of the State Border Committee. Besides the issue of illegal migration, the president talked about “performance management” and one can only guess how to interpret this. Another piece of information leaked to the media was that the suspect had been fingerprinted just days before the April 11 terrorist act within mass fingerprinting of the male population following a 2008 bomb explosion. This might not have such straightforward implications, but it does raise serious questions of another kind. If fingerprinting of the suspect holds true, it could have been a probable motive for the crime as the perpetrator had only several days before his fingerprints would be processed.

[The full version](#) of this article in Russian appeared on the Agency for Political Expertise/ BISS website on May 10, 2011

**Public Policy for Civic Activists**

BISS presents a practical guide on public policy prepared by Iryna Vidanava within the European Commission project “Development of Social Dialogue on Socioeconomic and Political Alternatives: Strengthening the Capacity of Civil Society in Belarus”. This is the first publication on the subject in Belarus. As the author writes ‘Modern theory and the practice of public policy may seem a far cry from the reality of today's authoritarian Belarus. But even here, where political processes are distorted, and civil society has to fight not only for its rights, but also for survival, the state loses its monopoly in the sphere of public policy’. Referring to some examples from Belarus, such as 2007-2008 civic campaign against the construction of a nuclear power station, and noting their defensive nature for the most part, Vidanava's book aims to supply Belarusian civil society activists with theoretical and practical skills to ensure that in future they are able to ‘fully and effectively engage in the process of democratization and reform’.

The publication covers the basic theory and practice of policy analysis and design, legitimization and implementation of public policy, focusing on the participation and the role of civil society in public policy process. As Vidanava points out, public policy has gone far beyond the concept of governmental policy and management. In democratic societies, governments are connected to citizens and non-profit organizations in the way that civil society not only demands but also offers their own solutions to existing problems, and governments not only inform and listen but respond and include citizens in decision-making process. The book looks in detail into the aims of civic participation in public policy, stakeholder analysis, and mechanisms of participation. Discussing the role of public-private partnership programs in the design and implementation of public policy, Vidanava notes in Belarus that they are still to emerge as the country ranks last in USAID's NGO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

[A PDF version](#) of the handbook is available on BISS website



## Unknown-Belarus

## Minsk: Gentle Guidance for Prospective Tourists

By Olga Loginova

Photo by Olga Loginova, Alena Lis

A cup of coffee, a bagel, and a newspaper with crisp, freshly printed pages - that's an ideal for me that, while reading online newspapers in the baking summer heat of my Minsk apartment, seems almost unattainable. Reading the morning press lately, I have been delighted to realise that after years of neglect, Belarus, and Minsk as its capital, has become famous at last. I cannot say that the publicity my City received was the best kind, but as you know something is better than nothing. At least now people know where we are situated, and after all the historic innuendos and literary parallels so lavishly used by journalists, many of us expect an avalanche of tourists wishing to check out the Soviet-like reality of the city situated in the centre of Europe (Which is exactly what our authorities have always strived for).

Still, I wouldn't say Minsk is ready for this kind of attention: the information you can find about our city is rather formal and lacks emotion, not too many people can speak English, and besides, the entertainment here is scarce, food is expensive and the weather is nasty. This is why, to contribute to the development of the national tourist industry, I am writing this short travelogue that will hopefully catch the attention of prospective tourists, and help them to see the city I have spent so many decent days in from a different perspective. Here I start, with a brief history.

**History of Minsk**

With no intention of exhausting prospective tourists with loads of boring information, I'll try to specify the most important dates in Minsk history. We native dwellers take great pride in the fact that our city is almost one thousand years old (944, to be precise). Although, unfortunately, due to the devastating bombings that practically eradicated the city during WWII, it is hard to tell at first sight. Unlike our neighbouring capital Moscow (that is almost one hundred years younger) we cannot boast the

elaborate 14th century mansions and churches randomly incorporated in the eclectic urban design; Minsk looks young, concrete and clean.

The first time Minsk's location was mentioned in history was 3 March 1067, the date when four Slavic dukes clashed on the banks of the Nyamiha River, right under Minsk murals. This fact was well described in the early Slavic literary texts, which all Belarusians are supposed to study at school. By the way, the remains of the Nyamiha River are still running in the tubes deep under the City surface, which is in many ways very typical for this City: if you want to find something really interesting, you need to dig deeper.



Saint Simeon and Alena's Catholic Cathedral (Independence Square)

The following centuries were rather favourable for the city. By the end of the 15th century Minsk, which was a part of the Great Duchy of Lithuania at that time, was granted the right of Independent Rule (The Magdeburg Right); the Town Hall that was erected at that time to symbolise this important step in the City's history became the administrative and political centre of the City. Shortly after, Minsk lost its self-rule to the Russian Empire, the Magdeburg Right was abolished, and the Town Hall was destroyed. In 2004 however,

a new Town Hall was built on the same spot (at Freedom Square), employing the designs of the original building.

After the Red Revolution the City was briefly occupied by German troops during WWI. The Bolsheviks who in turn also tried to establish their rule on the territory fled for a short time, and in 1918 the first truly independent Belarusian state, the Belarusian People's Republic, was founded. However, this independent state did not last for a long time, as just a year later in 1919; Minsk was declared the Capital of the BSSR, part of the newly founded Soviet State.

With the acquisition of a high political status, Minsk received additional funding for construction: some of the most significant state buildings, such as the Academy of Science, the beautiful Ballet theatre, and the old Lenin's Library were built in the 30s and became signature landmarks of the capital.

The devastating years of WWII crushed the prosperous city, demolishing it to the ground. But as soon as the war ended, the best Belarusian architects cooperated to rebuild Minsk to its modern state: with spacious streets, solid buildings (known as the Stalinist architectural style), and flourishing parks.

After this reconstruction Minsk became tranquil. It grew steadily, welcoming newcomers with its affordable tiny apartments squeezed into the newly built apartment blocks at the city outskirts. Present estimates indicate there are a little bit less than 2 million people living in Minsk.

A new wave of major rebuilding (which one day will undoubtedly bear the name of its spiritual leader) started after the Collapse



The Palace of the Republic (October Square) of the Soviet Union. Among the most prominent buildings of this architectural epoch are the

Railway Building, the new National Library (called the Diamond of Knowledge by some officials, and one of the 'ugliest buildings on Earth' by some architecture lovers), the Palace of the Republic (distantly reminiscent of Malevich's famous Black Square) and numerous sporting facilities and Arenas. They can be easily recognised by the abundance of mirror like glass, pompous forms, and slippery tiling. Basically with a few omissions, these are major historic events in the life of the City. As you can see, many of them have been reflected in its architecture, which leads us to the next part of this article.

**Sightseeing**

Don't ask me why, but one of the most popular questions journalists like to ask visiting celebrities is what they like about Minsk. The unanimity of the reaction to this question is hard to ignore: celebrities get confused, blush a little, and mumble that Minsk is a very clean city.

Of course, Minsk is neither Barcelona, nor Paris, or Rome. The historical lifelines of the City have been erased by the wars and changes of political currents. Still, a few traces that have been miraculously preserved can speak wonders to a curious traveller. Choose a warm sunny day (which is quite rare here) and spend it wandering along

## Unknown-Belarus

## Minsk: Gentle Guidance for Prospective Tourists

By Olga Loginova

Photo by Olga Loginova, Alena Lis

spacious Victors' and Independence Avenues, considered to be the main arteries of the City.

Victors' Avenue runs parallel to the river Svislach and cuts the city into two distinct parts: the business district to the right, and recreational to the left.

According to some pessimistic calculations made by unknown weather oracles, the Belarusians have only 28 sunny days throughout the year. Knowing their weather all too well, Minsk residents (me included) take advantage of every single sunny moment, be it a weekday, or a national holiday. You can rarely see Minsk overcrowded, but in the summer, the business district seems absolutely empty, while the recreational area tries to accommodate all the people who intuitively squeeze closer to the River and several man-made lakes.

Belarus is not surrounded by any big masses of water, although Minsk has its own sea, which was excavated in 1956 and since then has become a favourite resort for the city residents. Two other favourite places for tanning and swimming are Lake Kamsamolskaye, and Drazdy. Periodically, when the temperature hits its maximum, the man-made lakes get infested with various bacteria and consequently get closed by the sanitary inspectors, which does not, however, prevent people from swimming and getting infected. In fact, ladies in bikinis and middle aged men in boxers, as well as random cows wondering idly among the sunbathing masses are lovely summer symbols of our capital.

Getting closer to the City centre, look to your left, and admire the most beautiful (to my taste) scenery in Minsk: the Trinity Suburb and the Opera and Ballet House rising over the River. Isn't it lovely? (That's a

rhetorical question, as even the most picky architects say it is very lovely).

The Trinity Suburb - the cute little city corner tiled with stones and built up with almost fairy-tale like one-store houses - is by far the biggest tourist attraction in Minsk. Miraculously, this historic artefact that dates back to as early as the 12th century, has survived the two World Wars and the Perestroika. In fact, in 1985 the Suburb saw major reconstruction, which allowed the district to accommodate craftsmen, several literary and music museums, numerous cafes and restaurants, and even the Marriage Registry Office.



Minsk Sea is situated outside the city but is very popular among its dwellers

Another elaborate building right across the street is the Opera and Ballet House designed by architect Joseph Langbard, and built between 1934 and 1938. The theatre was bombed during WWII, but the building stayed almost undamaged. However, the Nazis turned the theatre into stables, looting the most precious furniture, scenery and decorations. After the war the theatre opened again and became one of the most popular

entertainment attractions in the city. After a major reconstruction that ended just a few years ago, the Opera House got completely renovated, and the famous lime tree park was modernised with beautiful fountains, also used as swimming pools by the overheated city dwellers.

Go a few meters further and you'll get to Independence Avenue. If you are reminded of visiting the USSR, you have got it absolutely right. The hallmark of this Avenue is the Stalinist Imperial architectural style, demonstrated by magnificent buildings with mouldings of hammer and sickles, inspired looking workmen and heavy women holding concrete

sheaves of straw. To cap it all off, the infamous Vladimir Lenin (in concrete) rises above thousands of workmen's bodies and stares into the future of Communism, represented by the main building of the Belarusian State University.

KGB, two City Central Stores (GUM and ZUM), the Palace of Trade Union, and the House of Officers, the Post Office, The National Bank, and the Circus, Victory Square with its Victory Monument and many other buildings are united by the same motif of the ideal communist society. According to Arthur Klinau, the Belarusian artist and author, Minsk

can be declared the embodiment of the Ideal Sun City (the architectural and ideological utopia attempted by all Soviet cities). Indeed, our City is the essence of political solidity and the state's superiority over ordinary citizens. So, if you are a Soviet history fan, welcome to the USSR of the 21st century.

Finally, for the spiritual travellers, Minsk offers a wide

choice of churches and cathedrals. The neo-roman Saint Simeon and Alena's Catholic Cathedral is probably the most beloved Catholic Church in the City. Ask anybody here about the history of this church, and they will undoubtedly tell you this beautiful and sad legend: at the beginning of the 20th century Minsk was a very prosperous city, and the local nobleman Eduard Vainilovich was perhaps the richest person in town. Not only was Vainilovich greedy, he was faithless, and only through suffering could he gain redemption. He launched the construction of a Cathedral, after both his young children Simeon and Alena died of an unknown disease. According to the legend, before their death, the children saw Mother Mary who showed them the design of a future church. The nobleman's daughter Alena, who was a gifted artist, drew the Cathedral and gave it to her father before she passed away. Vainilovich grieved the loss of his children so much, that he repented and built the church based on the divine designs shown to his children by Mother Mary. During WWII the Cathedral was often under fire, and still it miraculously survived. During the Soviet period the beautiful church was turned into a theatre, and then a film studio. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the building was returned to the Catholic Church.

The Orthodox Cathedral rises majestically over Niamiha Street. Unlike the majority of orthodox churches, which are famous for their traditional onion-shaped domes, this Baroque Cathedral built in the 17th century as a catholic monastery by the Bernardine monks, and later used as a Union Church, changed its architecture and denomination several times before getting its present façade. The architectural style of the building is very peculiar and thus



## Unknown-Belarus



One of the streets in downtown Minsk

demonstrates an interesting fusion of different architectural styles. This Cathedral serves not only as a church, but also as a museum, so feel free to visit it and admire the spiritual tranquillity and healing power of prayer.

### Conclusion

There is much more to say and see about Minsk, and I am afraid I have not managed to describe even a tenth of the City's attractions: its quiet suburban yards, its green parks, and the all time favourite Botanical Garden... This City is definitely not the flamboyant

kind that likes to boast of its numerous endeavours, so to appreciate it you need to be patient, kind and understanding, willing to listen and see the mysteries Minsk will uncover to the humble and grateful traveller.

And finally (and I really mean it) don't judge us, the city residents, by our facial expressions - even if you don't see many smiling or happy looking people - it doesn't mean we are rude or unfriendly. The city made us shy and watchful of strangers, so smile at us first, and we will definitely smile back at you.

P.S. To artistic souls or people who prefer visual information to print, I would highly recommend listening to the song by the Belarusian NRM band. (YouTube link provided below) Apart from the music, which is always great with this band, there is a very nice video of Minsk streets. As for the lyrics, the song tells a story of the official Minsk, the boring ideological capital of the quasi-Soviet republic and its ghost twin brother Mensk, which lives in the hearts and souls of its people.

By the way, Mensk was the name originally given to city when it was built on the banks of the River Menka many centuries ago. Although this name doesn't have an official status, 'Mensk' is still considered by many city dwellers a sacred and authentic name of the Belarusian capital.

[A song](#) about Minsk by the Belarusian band NRM

See also [a nice video](#) about Minsk by Artsyom aka zweizwei

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## In Fact

- The Belarusian language never ceased to exist, even after the ban of its official use in 1699 and following decades of Soviet era neglect. What is now called "Old Belarusian" was the official language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania up to the end of the 17th century. The Third Lithuanian Statute (1588), which is considered to be acme of medieval Belarusian culture and sometimes referred to as the "first written constitution in Europe", was written in Old Belarusian.

- In 1926, the coat of arms of Belarus bore the inscription "Workers of the World, Unite!" in all four of the country's languages - Belarusian, Russian, Polish and Yiddish.

- Belarus is the birthplace of Tadeusz Kosciuszko, who played a key role in the American Revolution.

- Belarus is the only place in the world where you can see ancient European Bison (Belarusian Zubr) in their natural environment.

Belarus Headlines is a joint project of the Office for Democratic Belarus, Belarus Digest and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. More information about these organisations can be found on their web pages.

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