

Belarus Headlines

Analysis

Eastern Partnership Summit and Belarus: Nothing for Nothing

Warsaw played host to the second summit of the Eastern Partnership initiative on September 29-30, which failed to generate a new impetus for the development of that political dimension, and where Belarus was represented at the minimum possible level.P. 3

Lukashenka and the Middle Eastern Regimes: Rogue Friendship?

It is very probable that in trying to mend fences with the West Lukashenka may use some of his friendships with anti-Western regimes as a bargaining chip to negotiate better terms for his regime. Yet their price – with the remarkable exception of China – is not high.P. 6

Research

BISS' POLLING

MEMO:Belarusians are in between - but no one is there to represent them

The prevailing displeasure of Belarusians has increased since June, reaching its peak in September. Two thirds of Belarusians believe their country is heading in the wrong direction and there is a national consensus that Belarus is stuck in an economic crisis. While a considerable part of the Belarusian electorate continues to be loyal to Lukashenka, his rating constantly drops.....P. 8

Unknown Belarus

Rakaw: Belarusian Wonderland

After WWII, having lost a considerable part of its population, Rakaw has become a quite village. However, for centuries the town has been notorious for its prosperous smuggling business and bustling social life and the whole place seems to have been built on the treasures hidden in the ground. P. 10

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Belarus Central Bank Chief Nadzeya Ermakova at the press-conference where she announced the Devaluation of the national currency. 20 October 2011, Minsk. Photo by svaboda.org

Main News

The parliament of Belarus has passed in a closed session a series of measures tightening restrictions on opposition groups and expanding secret police powers.

Under the new measures, political and civil-society groups are banned from receiving foreign assistance and from keeping money in foreign banks. A new ban on receiving foreign funds carries a two-year prison sentence, while simply calling for an anti-government protest can send someone to prison for three years.

The police have been given a formal justification for clamping down on those taking part in the protests despite the absence of any political demands. Gatherings for "active inaction" will now be banned. As well as lifting restrictions on the KGB's use of weapons, the legislation gives KGB officers the authority to break into residences and offices.

A separate legal amendment expands the definition of treason to include "assisting a foreign state, a foreign organisation or its representative to the detriment of Belarus' national security," which is punishable by a prison sentence from seven to 15 years. Human rights experts have compared the mandate of the country's law enforcement agencies with the same rights that the Soviet secret police had in the Stalin era. The EU expressed its concern with the bill. Maya Kotsiyanchich, the spokesperson for the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, noted that "the law further limits the right

of citizens of Belarus on freedom of speech and assembly" as well as aiming to undermine "the international support to Belarusian civil society and political oppositions."

Belarus devalued its domestic currency by 52 percent. The new unified trade session, held on 20 October, was meant to eliminate a black market that moved a large part of the economy underground and discredited state attempts to show that it was keeping price inflation in check. The free float of the national currency is necessary to restore the balance between supply and demand for foreign currency and should help economic growth by restoring the competitiveness of exporting sectors and reducing demand for imported goods.

According to the National Bank of Belarus, as of the beginning of October the country's gold reserves amounted to more than \$4.7 billion. However, by year-end gold reserves could grow by \$2.5 billion through the sale of a Beltransgaz stake to Gazprom. In addition, reserves will also include the potential credit from the Russian Sberbank for \$1.44 billion from the Moscow led EurAsEC Anti-Crisis Fund.

On the same day Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said his government would work to prop up Belarus' economy, in part, with preferentially low prices for Russian oil and gas. Belarus buys around 22 bcm of Russian gas a year with the current price peg set at around \$300 per 1,000 cubic metres, already the lowest rates among Russia's customers.

Editorial

The fourth issue of Belarus Headlines features a review of the most important developments in the political, social, and economic life of the country as well as a number of articles.

The article on the EaP summit analyses a proposal articulated by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to provide financial assistance of nine billion dollars to Belarus if the country meets EU conditions. It also pays attention to the efficacy of Belarus' diplomacy in dealing with EaP countries to prevent them from aligning with the EU position on Belarus. The article on Belarus' friendships in the Middle East takes a closer look at Belarus' cooperation with Iran and the Arab states and tries to determine if these friendships are profitable for Belarus or if they are a ploy to be used in negotiating better terms for the regime in its talks with the West.

In addition, we offer a review of the criminal trial concerning a terrorist attack in Minsk in April this year.

The Research section of the bulletin provides an analysis of the latest public opinion poll conducted by the Independent Institute for Social and Political Studies (IISEPS) which recorded the lowest rate of support of the incumbent president ever. It also provides a summary of the analysis of reasons behind the attractiveness of the Russian labour market for Belarusians as well as the strategy by the



Olga Stuzhinskaya



Tatiana Kouzina



Yaraslau Kryvoi

government to attract low-skilled migrants to the Belarusian agricultural sector.

In the "Unknown Belarus" section we offer you a trip to the Belarusian wonderland of Rakaw, once a prosperous town famous for its crafts, trade, smuggling business and bustling social life, which has now turned into a quiet village. However, the place still has a lot to offer a curious traveller or treasure hunter.

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

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News In Short

The International Monetary Fund has completed its visit to Belarus. Chris Jarvis, who led a two-week long mission, said the country needs to show its commitment to market reforms and prove it with concrete steps to get a bailout from the fund. The IMF called on Belarusian authorities to cut inflation which was eating away at ordinary Belarusians' incomes and raised inflationary expectations, and to continue cutting state spending and increase interest rates above inflation, as well as to restrain wage growth, explaining that the wage increase in November 2010 spurred the March 2011 financial crisis.

Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Siarhei Rumas said the government arrived at the decision to abandon a multiple exchange rate and unify two trading sessions: one at which the rate was set by supply and demand and the other where the central bank actively intervened. Belarusian Prime Minister Mikhail Miasnikovich, meanwhile, in a statement said Minsk hoped to obtain between three and seven million dollars in new IMF loans. Belarusian officials also shared their plans to privatise major state-owned corporations in 2012, further reduce social spending, tighten credit and cut imports.

Belarus has already borrowed a total 3.4 billion dollars from the fund in 2009 and 2010. In June, Minsk received the first \$800 million tranche out of a \$3 billion bailout from the anti-crisis fund of the EurAsEC, a post-Soviet economic bloc led by Russia.

The general contract for the construction of Belarus' first nuclear power plant was signed with Russia's AtomStroyExport (ASE), for the construction of a 2400 megawatt plant of the untested AES 2006 (NPP -2006) design. The site for the plant is in Astravets in the Hrodna region, close to Lithuania – which has vociferously protested the building of the nuclear power plant. The cost, including infrastructure, is put at \$9.4 billion. Russia has pledged to provide Belarus with a loan that will cover 90 percent of the costs of the nuclear power plant project in the country. Moscow and Minsk signed a contract Tuesday on cooperation in the construction of the power plant, which is worth \$9.4 billion. The plant is scheduled to be operational by 2017. The International Atomic Energy Agency further legitimised the project by promising to cooperate with Belarus in the Astravets plant's safe operation. The new contract has already been denounced by over 50 environmental organisations from Belarus and Russia as being dubious and opaque.

On 10 October, the European Union extended sanctions against Belarus, imposing asset freezes and travel bans on 16 officials to ramp up pressure on the government of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka to free political prisoners. The new measures, agreed by EU foreign ministers during a meeting in Luxembourg, extend the list of people targeted by the EU to more than 200. The Belarusian Foreign ministry traditionally called the sanctions "irrelevant in itself". According the Ministry's spokesperson Andrei Savinykh, "the EU has no rational policy towards Belarus and calms itself by an imitation of action."

The European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Stefan Fule, commenting on new sanctions against the Belarusian authorities, said October 11 that the EU would continue to apply sanctions against those violating human rights. However, he noted that the EU was looking for new ways and opportunities to support democracy in Belarus.

On October 8, some 500 opposition activists and their supporters gathered in the Peoples' Friendship Park (Minsk), to adopt a resolution addressed to the government. The resolution demanded wage rises; an end to price hikes; the release of all political prisoners; and new, free presidential elections under the supervision of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Other meetings were held in cities and towns including Brest, Mahileu, Hrodna, and Slonim with 1500 people attending altogether.

The tactics of the police were not to violently break up rallies but to preventively arrest organisers and activists and seize equipment in order to make the rallies disorganized, small in numbers and less impressive.

According to Viasna, a Minsk-based human rights organisation, in the run-up to the Narodny Skhod (People's Gathering) rallies, at least three people in Belarus were sentenced to a number of days in jail and more than 10 people were fined for the dissemination of information about the forthcoming event.

EU-Belarus

Seminar "EU visa policies and Eastern Partnership Countries: Prospects and Barriers for Visa Liberalisation" in Stockholm



On 19 October, the Parliament of Sweden hosted a seminar "EU visa policies and Eastern Partnership countries: prospects and barriers for visa liberalisation", which was initiated and organised by the Polish and Hungarian embassies in Stockholm, the Ostgruppen Swedish civil society organisation and the Warsaw-based Batory Foundation. The event gathered members of the Riksdagen, representatives of the diplomatic community, journalists and civil society activists.

Speakers at the meeting from various non-profit organisations underlined the importance of visa liberalisation for EaP countries as a tool for further reforms and democratisation. Increased mobility for citizens of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine would help to send a powerful signal on behalf of the EU of seeing them as Europeans and as equals, experts said. Visa liberalisation would also bring economic benefits to the EU Member States, mentioned Joanna Fomina from the Batory Foundation. Many business deals between entrepreneurs from the EU and their EaP counterparts never happen due to limited travel opportunities for the latter.

The Representative of the European Commission in Sweden, May Ann Ramsay reiterated the EU's viewpoint that is reflected in a number of official documents, including the Declaration of the EaP Summit in Warsaw: the pace of progress in visa liberalisation, as well as progress

in EU relations with its Eastern neighbours in general, will depend on pace of reforms in individual countries of the Eastern Partnership.

Speaking of the situation in Belarus and the current (lack of) progress with regard to visa liberalisation, the Director of the Office for a Democratic Belarus, Olga Stuzhinskaya presented arguments in favour of easier travel for Belarusian citizens as a powerful tool for democratisation and transformation of the country through a change of the people's mindset, increased flows of information and participation in all-European processes in various spheres. She also posed the question of how to deal with the situation when the EU has offered to begin negotiations with the government of Belarus on the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements, though the administration has yet to respond to this request. The people of Belarus are hostages to a lack of political will on the side of their own government, she said. The EU does not have any instruments at its disposal to address the problem unilaterally. Belarus, like other countries of the EaP, will have to go through the Visa Facilitation and Readmission agreements before talks on visa liberalisation are possible.

The Office for Democratic Belarus expresses its gratitude to the organisers of the event and the attention paid to the issue of visa liberalisation. Easier travel conditions to the EU are what Belarusians see will be amongst the first tangible results of choosing the European path for development for their country in the future.

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Eastern Partnership Summit and Belarus: Nothing for Nothing

By Dzianis Melyantsou, Minsk

Warsaw played host to the second summit of the Eastern Partnership initiative on September 29-30, which failed to generate a new impetus for the development of that political dimension, and where Belarus was represented at the minimum possible level. Nevertheless, this country found itself in the limelight of the summit in connection with a new plan to salvage Belarus, proposed by the Polish premier.

No Breakthrough

The Eastern Partnership started showing definite symptoms of stagnation during the second year of its existence; the initiative clearly needs new impetus to continue its progress. Talks over European Union Association Agreements with the EU partners have been taking too long, the signing of the Agreement on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Ukraine has been postponed many times, and the visa liberalisation processes appeared to be much more complicated than originally planned. The Euronest parliamentary dimension of the Eastern Partnership was born in great pains and over an unexpectedly long period of time. In other words, the situation looks as if there is still a long way to go to attain the goals of the Eastern Partnership.

High hopes had been pinned on the Polish EU Presidency, which started on July 1, 2011, regarding the intensification of the EaP development. On the eve of the second EaP summit, analysts and observers in the EU and its partner countries shared the potential approaches that the EU could have implemented to enhance the appeal of the initiative, starting from a simplified procedure for cancelling visa limitations and finishing with a substantial increase in financial assistance and even the prospects of EU membership.

However, no proposals of this kind were made at the summit. The participants welcomed the establishment of the Eastern Partnership Business Forum and the launch of the Comprehensive Institution Building programmes, which are designed to support the implementation of the future European Union Association Agreements. Also, an agreement was reached on the speedy implementation of five pilot initiatives, announced earlier during the initial phase of the EaP creation. The delegates welcomed the inauguration of the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP)



Leaders of European countries pose for a family photo during the Eastern Partnership Summit at the Prime Ministers Chancellery in Warsaw September 30, 2011. *Photo by Reuters*

and reached an agreement that the Civil Society Forum must play a more significant role in the work of the Eastern Partnership.

However, the most crucial news coming from the Summit was the increase in the EaP budget for 2010-2013 to **1.9 billion Euros**, which nevertheless will hardly save the initiative. Therefore, when evaluating the EaP only as a potential instrument to extend financial support, it cannot be considered an attractive project.

Belarus' Empty Seat

The intrigue about Belarus' representative at the EaP Summit in Warsaw remained almost until the day of the Summit itself. The invitation to the summit had been addressed to the Belarusian Foreign Minister Siarhei Martynau rather than the head of state who was included in the visa ban list. Minsk decided otherwise, though: since Belarus is a full member of the EaP initiative, the invitation must be addressed to the head of state, who will decide independently, whom to delegate to the summit. Officials in Minsk interpreted it as disrespect for

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Belarus, and decided to reduce the level of its delegation to the summit to the Belarusian Ambassador to Poland. For its part, the EU considered it unacceptable that the ambassador would take part in a number of events that were to be held at the top level, which is understandable from the point of view of traditions and protocol. This, in its turn, resulted in a demarche from the Belarusian side, which announced its non-participation in the summit. Therefore, the misperception of the other party's conduct resulted in a notorious scandal and another wave of negative rhetoric.

But that was just one episode. The reason behind this conduct of the Belarusian side lies in its deep dissatisfaction about the Eastern Partnership and awareness that Belarus will not be able to gain rapid benefits from its engagement in the EaP. After the demarche of the Belarusian delegation, some observers mentioned the possible withdrawal of the country from the Eastern Partnership programme, however, this move seems unlikely, because the initiative itself does not threaten Minsk, and, despite the fact that it does not provide instant benefits, the EaP may start working at its full capacity in a few years to come. Furthermore, Belarus' membership in the Eastern Partnership offers Minsk additional bargaining chips in its talks with the Kremlin, providing the Belarusian authorities with room for maneuver, albeit at a minimum. The status of an EU partner is also positive for the image of the country.

The Belarusian administration could not have failed to realize that as long as the country had political prisoners and permanently violated human rights, the Belarusian delegation had no chance whatsoever of successfully negotiating the matter of attracting financial resources, whilst making itself a target for public and non-public criticism from representatives of the EU and the general public.

It is also important to note the exceptionally high level of the European politicians who received the delegation of the Belarusian opposition. This approach could not leave the official Belarusian delegation and the Belarusian authorities in general unembarrassed.

Finally, Minsk needed a scandal that would become another reason to step up its anti-European rhetoric. Once the information about the mission of Bulgarian Foreign Minister Mladenov and his correspondence with EU High Representative Catherine Ashton was leaked onto the Internet, it became clear that Aliaksandr Lukashenka had made up his mind to meet the conditions of the EU, at least as far as the release of political prisoners was concerned. The need to save face stands behind the disavowal of the statement about the possible roundtable discussions with the Belarusian opposition and the new round of tensions in Belarus' relations with the European Union. The EaP Summit thus became an ideal target for verbal attacks by the Belarusian state leader.

Three to Nine Billion

Amid the overall dissatisfaction with the result of the EaP Summit, the proposal of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk of a package of financial assistance to Belarus looked especially ambitious and sensational. The Polish premier offered the Belarusian authorities 9 **billion USD** if they met three conditions: to release and rehabilitate political prisoners, organise a dialogue with the opposition and conduct the next parliamentary elections in compliance with OSCE standards. According to Tusk, the money will be spent on reforms in Belarus and will be provided from various sources. Lukashenka's resignation is not on the list of these conditions. The "Tusk plan" looks a lot like last year's Sikorski-Westerwelle proposal, which, too, lacked specifics.

Come to think of it, what are these 9 billion dollars? It is not clear from Tusk's statement how exactly this money would be provided. There are more questions to answer. All these questions have prompted the Belarusian authorities to be watchful of any large figures, for it looks like Europe is trying to outbid Moscow in the haggle over Belarus while having no money at hand.

However, the figure is attractive enough for the Belarusian government to ponder that proposal: the difficult economic situation in the country, doubtful benefits of the Customs Union and permanent pressure from Russia make any alternative look more appealing than ever before. Brussels only needs to flesh out the framework of its proposal and work out a flexible implementation mechanism.

Belarusian Diplomacy: Senseless, but Efficient

The second Summit of the Eastern Partnership amply demonstrated another interesting phenomenon that needs to be taken into account when discussing ways to resolve the "Belarusian issue" – the high professionalism of Belarusian diplomats, and, on a broader scale, the higher efficiency of the authoritarian foreign policy compared to the general foreign political efforts of the European Union.

Some examples illustrating the success of Belarusian diplomacy include the collective address of parliamentarians from five partner countries to support Belarusian MPs in the Euronest dimension, blocking of the harsh Euronest resolution on Belarus in mid-September, organisation of a secret visit of the Bulgarian foreign minister without prior agreement with Brussels, and, during the EaP Summit, the successful blocking of the paragraph condemning Belarus in the Joint Declaration of the Summit. As a result, the resolution on Belarus was adopted separately and approved only by the representatives of the European Union, without the engagement of the Eastern European partner countries.

These facts prompt a few conclusions:

1. Belarus carries weight in the region and its interests must be reckoned with when working out initiatives in the framework of the multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership, otherwise the EU itself will see its image marred, like it happened to the Euronest and the Joint Declaration of the EaP Summit;
2. The EU is not capable of ensuring the isolation of Belarus. The current political isolation of this country does not result in its expulsion from interstate relations even with the EU member-states;
3. The EU is not able to efficiently influence the conduct of the Belarusian regime; therefore, this calls for the EU to set itself realistic objectives.

From Non-Paper to Non-Policy?

Both the EaP Summit and the context, in which it took place, emphasize yet again the contradictory and inconsistent nature of EU policy on Belarus. On the one hand, the perception of the economic crisis in the country as a window of opportunity to change the current regime in a revolutionary way, and on the other, an ambitious proposal of financial support addressed to the official authorities; on the one hand, the shift of the political focus entirely to the opposition and demonstratively high level of its reception in the EU, and on the other hand, secret talks with Lukashenka; on the other hand, pinpointed economic sanctions, and on the other hand, joint projects with governmental institutions (for example, the joint protection of borders, struggle against illegal migration, etc.).

This is a clear indication that the European Union has so far failed to identify the tasks and objectives of its policy on Belarus: either the change of the regime or its gradual transformation via dragging it into integration projects and work with society. These objectives call for various sets of instruments, and, consequently, in order to define the strategy and tactics, the EU needs to identify its goals first. So far, the EU has refrained from formulating a strategic approach to the resolution of the "Belarusian issue" for various reasons (different approaches of the member-states, weak interest in the region as a whole, lack of any experience in transformations of authoritarian regimes, etc.). This means Brussels will continue to use tested interaction mechanisms in its relations with officials in Minsk: as it happened in 2008, after the release of the last political prisoner in Belarus, the EU will get back to normalising its relations with the Belarusian administration and consider signing a cooperation agreement one way or another. Until the next presidential election.

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Politics and Society

Lukashenka and the Middle Eastern Regimes: Rogue Friendship?

By Siarhei Bohdan, Berlin

After the recent closure of a Belarusian oil extraction project in Iran, there was much talk about Lukashenka's failure in this Middle Eastern country. Yet following this event, an office of the Iranian National Oil Company has been opened in Minsk without any media attention, while the chairwoman of the Belarusian National Bank said Tehran is about to provide USD 400 million in loans to Belarus. Apparently, relations remain strong.

The Belarusian leader demonstratively maintains good relations with Tehran. Of course, he has always been active in the Middle East as part of his 'multi-directional' foreign policy since the late 1990s. Among Lukashenka's friends were numerous regional leaders – both ousted – like Saddam Hussein and Qadhafi – and incumbent – like Ahmadinejad and Assad. Is this the perfect case for branding the Belarusian strongman 'anti-American'? Not really, since the Belarusian government has good relations with such pro-Western regimes as Qatar, the UAE and Oman, too.

Lukashenka's August visit to Qatar was celebrated in the Belarusian state media as a major breakthrough. However, trade with this country has always been negligible or non-existent and the whole relationship may have more to do with the private interest of regime insiders than consistent national policy. Politically, this visit to the country sponsoring Libyan rebels has been lauded in the Belarusian media which has simultaneously offered fierce support for Colonel Qadhafi.

While promoting relations with Iran, Syria and pre-revolutionary Libya, Lukashenka also cares about relations with Israel. A number of rather high-level Belarusian officials even have

second Israeli passports – not permitted by Belarusian law, but nothing extraordinary for Belarus where Jews have always made up a big part of the national elite. Lukashenka has access to the Israeli government through Belarusian Jews now living in Israel. The paradoxes are numerous; nevertheless the balance of Belarusian activities in the Middle East is clear. Simple calculation is enough.

Much Ado about Nothing?

Essentially, there have only been two projects between Iran and Belarus that may be with reservations labelled as 'strategic'. Firstly – oil extraction in Iran, which for years was an item in Belarusian propaganda. However, this is no longer the case. The Belarusian State Oil Company "Belarusnafta" can no longer extract anything in Iran. According to official statements in August, the Iranian side declared that Belarusnafta had not fulfilled the contract's conditions and revoked its extraction permit.

Secondly – the production of Iranian cars in Belarus, owing to a lacking such industrial capacity in the country. The plant was established in 2008, but failed to organise a sustainable production of cars. Nevertheless, the project was important for the image of the Iranian company which has tried to go beyond national borders and become a global player.

The Iranian regime also used new contacts with Belarus in its propaganda – as a demonstration of a "breakthrough to a new European market." Iranian pro-government media devoted significant attention to projects, visits and exhibitions in Minsk. The negative aspects were omitted – even the opposition Iranian media this February failed to notice the statement by the Belarusian Deputy Prime



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Minsk (2007). Photo by AFP

Minister Siamashka that the project of producing "Samand" cars in Belarus had failed and the assembly line facilities may be given to another, Chinese automaker. Following this statement, the project has been publicly declared abortive by the Belarusian leader himself.

The Iranian news agency "Fars" still vigorously writes about the global success of "Iran Khodro" - the company implementing the project. Now, it exports cars to thirty countries and its production plants are located on four continents – in Syria, Venezuela, Belarus, Egypt, Senegal and Azerbaijan. "The Senegal plant procures the needs of the African market and the Belarus plant meets the demands of the Commonwealth of Independent States." At the same time Iranian media sources periodically discuss the possible bankruptcy of the company.

The economic effect of Belarusian-Iranian relations is modest. Just last year the bilateral trade volume exceeded the symbolic mark of \$100 million – although this target for trade volume was set long ago in 2004, during a visit by Iranian President Khatami. More

significantly for Belarus, in the last year more than ninety million dollars of this trade were Belarusian exports to Iran. For a nation with a chronic negative foreign trade balance it is a noticeable sum. However, this year for the first time even this positive achievement has been lost – Iranians are finally selling more to Belarusians than vice versa.

Other Iranian investments in Belarus materialised only in the form of quite ordinary construction, logistics, and low-technology production projects.

The cooperation with Arab countries has not been any better than with Iran. High-level friendship with Qadhafi's Libya never brought expected contracts and markets – the highest trade volume in the last decade was about USD 19 million. Syria has been a traditional trade partner since Soviet times and remained merely one of many destinations for Belarusian merchandise. Of course, Belarus has sold a significant amount of old military aircraft yet it was just one deal without many prospects for further business.

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Other countries have no essential economic links to Belarus or have them in absence of essential political support – in the instances of Morocco or Egypt. The only important exception is Sudan which, alongside Azerbaijan, is one of the few serious clients buying Belarusian weapons for many consecutive years. But the relations with Khartoum are largely limited to the military sphere with little trade and even less investments.

Middle Eastern investors willing to do civilized business in Belarus face the same problems as their European counterparts. As long as you have no contacts at the top of the regime your business is not secure because the law in Belarus cannot provide the necessary guarantees. No wonder, Arab or Iranian investors are not eager to bring their money there preferring even neighboring Russia.

To attract them the government has to propose something extraordinary – like the allowance given recently to members of the Qatari ruling family to build in a zone otherwise prohibited for construction for environmental reasons or even in natural reserves. Earlier Oman was given a large area in the historical center of Minsk with effective freedom to do whatever the developer wishes with every building existing on the ground.

The Man Who Would Be Big
In his Middle Eastern policy Lukashenka is driven not just by economic gains – no one will hold him accountable for them as he is absolute ruler – he also wants to play some big politics. An important detail worth noting is that relations between Belarus and most Middle Eastern countries, including some of them opposed to the West, existed before Lukashenka without much political noise.

Therefore, he did not establish them; rather he continued the traditional government line, although he created publicity around these relations.

Lukashenka, however, knows the costs of going beyond the red line in alliances with anti-Western regimes. So, he always distanced himself from the ideological and geopolitical premises of the Iranian regime, including its anti-Americanism and anti-Israeli rhetoric, especially after Ahmadinejad came to power. Lukashenka's attitude towards Iran, as towards the developing world in general, has always been opportunistic – to work wherever possible using capacities already existing in Belarus. However, the Soviet-era capacities of Belarus have rather limited his choice of partners. Unlike Hugo Chavez or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the Belarusian leader has no stable ideological preferences, except for general phrases about a multi-polar world, the tragedy of the Soviet Union's collapse and a 'great China'.

Throughout the 2000s, the Belarusian leader constantly lashed out at the US and the West for interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, declaring that he would never give them support in these campaigns. Meanwhile, the CIA 'ghost planes' with terrorist suspects were landing without publicity in Minsk airport as early as 2002. At the same time Belarus silently agreed to allow the transit of some cargo for the troops of the anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan, and some Belarusian air transport companies even participated in this business. Finally, in 2008, NATO officially declared it was negotiating with Belarus on a land route for delivering supplies to its troops in Afghanistan in order to avoid the dangerous maritime routes through Gulf of Aden and Pakistan. Another good example may be a

meeting held in Damascus in 2010. The initial idea behind it was to bring the foreign ministers of Belarus, Venezuela and Syria together to promote trilateral relations and forge some kind of alliance between three nations. Two of the ministers came to the meeting, but not the Belarusian one. Belarus sent an explicitly lower-rank official.

In this context, it is hard to anticipate Belarus selling sensitive technology or equipment to any dubious regime. Of course, theoretically there are some people in the country with experience of sensitive technologies – from the Soviet period or from cooperation with Russia. Of course, Lukashenka himself along with the regime's officials speaking in recent years about his space and nuclear power programmes – both so far defective – have mentioned their willingness to cooperate with Third World countries in these fields which are closely tied to the development of strategic missiles and nuclear weapons. Present and previous Iranian ambassadors stated their wish to engage Belarusian scientists in the nuclear field as well as to help Belarus in this area.

Yet Lukashenka knows what deadly repercussions it could have for him, and not necessarily solely from the West. Russia has also criticized the Belarusian strongman for his contacts with some developing countries, and Moscow has sufficient leverage both over Belarus and all its partners in the developing world, most of all Iran.

While working with Iran, some Belarusian companies were sanctioned by the US government. The sanctions were of a more preventive than punitive nature. In 2004, it was Belzneshpromservis (Belvneshpromservis), in 2011 –

Beltekhexport (Beltekhexport), BelOMO and Belarusnafta. Some experts believe that Belarusnafta decided to voluntarily leave Iran to avoid American sanctions rather than be thrown out by the Iranian government.

The Belarusian regime is extremely careful in dealing with Tehran. In particular it avoids high-level military-related contacts with Iranian officials. This approach contrasts with the usual policy of the Belarusian government which prioritises military and security-related issues in its cooperation with developing countries. Despite numerous allegations, Belarus most likely never tried to sell Iran anything sensitive, including anti-aircraft S-300 systems or radars. It is especially noticeable as the S-300 system is yet to be included on the UN sanctions lists.

Minsk sold Iran military equipment only in the early 2000s, in the form of T-72 tanks. The contracts were concluded with the support of Iranian reformist president Khatami. The statements on these contracts were duly filed with the UN conventional arms trade register.

It is very probable that in trying to mend fences with the West Lukashenka may use some of these friendships with anti-Western regimes as a bargaining chip to negotiate better terms for his regime. Yet their price – with the remarkable exception of China – is not high.

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Press Review

The Loudest Criminal Case of Belarus

By Dasha Bespyatova, Brussels

On 15 September 2011, an open criminal trial concerning a terrorist attack on Minsk metro (11 April 2011) started in Belarus. Dzmitry Kanavalau and Uladzislau Kavaliou stand accused of preparing and detonating explosives on the capital's underground network. This is the first major case brought on charges of terrorism in Belarus' recent history; a country that has not been involved in military conflict since the Second World War.

This criminal process is the most discussed and followed in the modern history of Belarus. The prosecution is completely convinced that these crimes have been committed by Dzmitry Kanavalau (lath operator) and Uladzislau Kavaliou (electrician), though there are several contradictory facts in the case: differences in the statements of Kavaliou during the preliminary investigation and in the court; the results of expertise provided by the Russian FSB; a mismatch in statements of the defendants and the official investigation version about the discovery of the location of Kanavalau and Kavaliou's arrest.

Uladzislau Kavaliou has acknowledged that he knew about the planned explosion during the preliminary investigation, but in the court he denied his guilt and confessed that he made these statements under the pressure of police agents. He also denies that he saw a bag with the bomb and the remote mechanism to manipulate it, though on the tape filmed during the preliminary investigation he stated the contrary position.

Investigative teams in Belarus have requested the external expertise of the Russian FSB in relation to the video tapes of the metro and city streets, where it is supposedly possible to recognise the faces and figures of Dzmitry Kanavalau and Uladzislau Kavaliou. The outcomes of the FSB analysis are quite contradictory: video from a camera in the metro station of 11 April has insufficient image quality to recognise the face, figure and clothes of Kanavalau. The video of 10 April from the tape in the metro near the railway station shows a "minimum of portrait similarity"; FSB experts claim that some video files have signs of interframe montage. On 12 September, a lawyer representing the interests of Dzmitry Kanavalau used these facts in his defence.

Another fact that seems to be questionable is the detection of the apartment where Kanavalau and Kavaliou were arrested on 12 April. According to the official version, Kanavalau left the apartment in the evening in order to go to the shop, and that is how the agents saw him and followed until the apartment where the arrests were made. But the statements of Kanavalau, Kavaliou and a female companion Yana, who spent the whole evening with them, stated that Kanavalau never left the apartment. This mismatch seems to be rather important, as it makes the whole procedure of the investigation and arrest of the accused unclear.

The process is planned to be finished in 2 months according to Belarusian officials, but there are still a lot of inconsistencies to be resolved.

Belarusian state and independent media continue to cover the events surrounding the bomb explosion in Minsk's metro. State media outlets (such as Belta, Sovetskaja Belarus) are publishing the news about the key developments, but fail to independently investigate the inconsistencies between different versions. Nevertheless, independent newspapers (Nasha Niva, naviny.by and others) are trying to analyse events and provide their opinion on the criminal case in published articles.



Dzmitry Kanavalau and Uladzislau Kavaliou stand accused of preparing and detonating explosives on Minsk underground network. Photo by Bymedia.net

Dzmitry Kanavalau was born in Vitebsk in 1986 and worked as a lath operator. He is accused of terrorism that caused the loss of people's lives, body injuries of varying severity, and other serious consequences; illegal activities with respect to explosives and explosive devices, and particularly malicious hooliganism, deliberate destruction and damage to property in a dangerous way. Dzmitry Kanavalau has acknowledged his guilt in the bomb explosion on the metro on 11 April 2011 and another explosion that took place on 4 July 2008 during the Belarusian national holiday. His stated motive was to scare the population in order to destabilize the situation in Belarus.

Uladzislau Kavaliou was born in Vitebsk in 1986 and worked as an electrician. He is accused of complicity in committing a terrorist act, the commission of malicious hooliganism and particularly, the deliberate destruction of property in a dangerous way; illegal activities with respect to explosives, of harbouring a person who has committed a serious crime, misprision of committed and impending serious crimes. Uladzislau Kavaliou is maintaining his innocence in court.

The maximum penalty for the most serious of the charges against Kanavalau and Kavaliou ("Terrorism") is the death penalty.

The prosecution is represented by three key figures, including Deputy Attorney General Aliaksei Knock. The criminal case is being investigated under the chairmanship of Judge Aliaksandr Fedortsau, First Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court.

Research

By Inna Bukshytynovich, Stockholm

BISS` POLLING MEMO: Belarusians are in between - but no one is there to represent them

The prevailing displeasure of Belarusians has increased since June, reaching its peak in September, according to the latest public opinion poll of the Independent Institute for Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS).

Two thirds of Belarusians believe their country is heading in the wrong direction (68.5%) and there is a national consensus that Belarus is stuck in an economic crisis (87.6%). A clear majority (61%) considers president Lukashenka responsible for the current crisis. While a considerable part of the Belarusian electorate continues to be loyal to Lukashenka, his rating constantly drops and his electoral rating fell from 53% in December 2010 to 20.5% in September 2011. This is Lukashenka's lowest rating ever (see Figure 1 below).

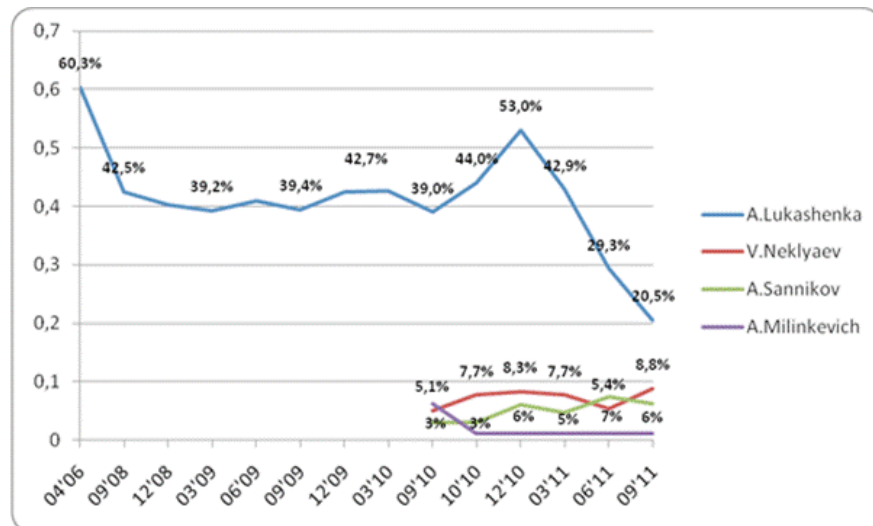


Figure 1. The dynamics of responses to the question: "If presidential elections in Belarus were held tomorrow, who would you vote for?" (Data collected by IISEPS: April 2006 – September 2011)

Lukashenka lost about 10 points of his June electoral rating, but even more – 11 points of trust – was lost by the Presidential Administration, in the same period of time. In September, 24.5% of the respondents said they trust the President, while 62% did not. In September, only 25% of respondents trusted the state media (11 points less than three months earlier) – and 62% did not trust the state media.

Yet, this widespread displeasure has generated nothing more significant than even more displeasure. Although the rate of dissatisfaction of the Belarusian population has reached unprecedented levels, including three thirds of those who blamed Lukashenka personally for the economic and social problems, this tendency did not lead to an increase in the number of those who declared

themselves "in opposition to the regime".

The number of those "opposing the regime" has been increasing much more slowly (28% in September) than those who distrust Lukashenka. The number of respondents calling for Lukashenka's immediate resignation (35%) was about half the number blaming him for the country's economic crises (61%). A bit less than the majority of Belarusians called for a "dialogue" – but there is nobody there to engage in one. The respondent's readiness to take part in protests (mass demonstrations) remains low, and despite the distrust in Lukashenka, Belarusians stay loyal to the state.

Therefore, more people prefer not to respond to the question about their electoral choice. In October 2010, more than a third of respondents declined to state their election preferences.

Overall, we can say that the new polling memo of BISS identifies a break with the past. The formerly popular autocratic regime of Lukashenka (supported by the majority of Belarusians) is losing its balance. The current crisis brings the majority of Belarusians and the political "exhaustion" of Aliaksandr Lukashenka to the 'political center'. Even though they want changes and reforms, there is no one to represent them. This outcome suggests that perhaps now is a good time to view Belarusian politics in a different light, away from the traditional "black and white", i.e. for or against Lukashenka. One could even conclude that the time has come for a new political force to emerge.

[The full version](#) of the article.

Earning in Russia with a Belarusian Passport

Ihar Drako of the Agency of Policy Expertise explores the export of the Belarusian labour force to Russia – a very obvious threat in the discourse of the absorption of Belarus by Russia. The author argues that the agreement allowing citizens of Belarus and Russia to seek employment in either country without work permits creates a significant bondage between Belarus and Russia. And the current economic crisis in Belarus is contributing to the influx of economic migrants to Russia.

Russia prefers migrant workers from Belarus over the local labour force because Belarusians are less likely to stand up for their labour rights. Compared to the guest workers from Moldova and Central Asia, Belarusians, besides being legal, are more skilled and ethnically similar to "European" Russians thus preventing tensions with the local population. The European look of Belarusians is also a factor as to why they are preferred over Chinese migrants, who can otherwise compete in terms of diligence, qualification and legality.

Europe in the western direction is another potential employer of Belarusian economic migrants. However this option is not open and welcoming – visas and work permits to enter the European market are difficult to obtain, making the offer of Russian wages a much more attractive choice. This attraction, however, is purely based on accessibility and economic reasons.

[The full version](#) of this article in Russian appeared on BISS/APE website on October 13, 2011

Research

The Politics of Oscillations or Luk_ault Pendulum

With a new tactical turn by Minsk towards a “dialogue” with the West, Janau Paleski of the Agency of Policy Expertise of BISS scrutinizes the political swings: from repression to liberalisation, from East to West, from “monologue” to “dialogue”. The analyst puts forward a thesis that the politics of the pendulum is first of all a systemic factor of the reproduction of the political regime, and secondly is a way to solve tactical problems related (in the current context) to overcoming the economic crisis and, in general, to keeping the political and economic situation under control.

Within the task of reproducing the system, the regime seeks to stabilize the political elite, preventing the formation of stable groups capable of monopolizing certain monitoring and control functions. Thereby, the security forces are balanced by a pool of civilian administrators. Another aim is to avoid institutional stability, which constitutes a threat to the stability of personal leadership. This is carried out by the redistribution of the presidential administration’s authority, the government and various committees and, thus, consciously imposing “structural blurring”. The politics of the pendulum also seeks to “stabilize” economic growth. The authorities are “making the economy” and the pendulum’s movement enables the elimination of accumulated imbalances in the economy through administrative means, which is done by crises in a capitalistic system. In the most general sense – the oscillating movements assist in avoiding extremes (and therefore threats to the system) of excess enthusiasm and apathy of both the political elite and citizenry. Here, the politics of the pendulum is hardly an invention of Lukashenka. Stalin practiced the strategy of the “artificial dialectic” by sequencing the periods of repressions and purges with “thaws”.

Within the tactical goals, the political swings seek to strengthen Belarus’ negotiating positions in trade and economic disputes with Russia. Another objective is to extend the possibilities of international lending for the Belarusian economy buffeted by crisis. A more distant goal is the preparations for the 2012 parliamentary elections.

Finally, Paleski observes that the recent pendulum swings have become chaotic. Lukashenka is releasing political prisoners and jailing new ones at the same time (for example, the case of Ales Bialiatsky). One day Belarus denies the Eastern Partnership and the next is ready to appear a prodigal son.

[The full version](#) of this article in Russian appeared on BISS/APE website on October 11, 2011

**Will Migrants Save Agro-Towns*?**

Can the mass attraction of low-skilled migrants to the Belarusian agricultural sector as proposed in a special section of the National Programme on Demographic Security, adopted in August 2011, become a solution to improving the country’s economy? Aliaksanr Chelin of the Agency of Policy Expertise of BISS seeks an answer in the study of the influence of migration flows on social and economic indicators in Belarus carried out by Aliaksanr Luchanok and Iryna Kalesnikava within the BISS project.

According to the official statistics Belarus has a positive migration balance. The figure, however, is not accurate enough, since not all departing for permanent residence abroad register in the relevant services. Furthermore, work migration exceeds permanent residence migration significantly, and the

unofficial figure is estimated to be 30 times higher than the official figure of 67 thousands work migrants who left Belarus during 1997-2010. Migration processes should not be seen only as a negative – remittances of work migrants are a significant source of foreign currency. Luchanok and Kalesnikava estimate them to amount to \$1bn in Belarus annually. However, the researchers conclude that work migration stimulates the economic growth of a country only in instances where a skilled work force is attracted, while low-skilled migrants can create an additional burden on social services and may lead to tension with the local population. In Belarus, however, two thirds of migrants leaving the country are skilled, while Belarus is attractive to low-skilled migrants arriving mainly from Ukraine, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Thus, the findings of the study are not very favourable to the proponents of mass attraction of low-skilled migrants to the Belarusian agricultural sector. As the researchers suggest it would be more appropriate to address the problem of labour shortages in Belarus through the elimination of redundant employment in industry and in other spheres of the national economy.

[The full version](#) of this article in Russian appeared on BISS/APE website on October 12, 2011

Unknown-Belarus

Rakaw: Belarusian Wonderland

By Olga Loginova, New York

Photo by Alena Lis

The snow storm raging through the night calmed down by the morning. Crisp ankle-deep snow, still white and almost untouched by feet and tyres, was sparkling in the cold sun. Our destination was Mizhrechcha, a place near Rakaw. The village didn't ring a bell for me at that time. According to the message left on our news department answering machine, there was a rabies outbreak among the foxes living in the local forests. As the footage of the sick wildlife and their terrified victims is an all time win-win story, the editor delegated me to cover it.

Viktar, the man who had left the voicemail, was waiting for us at the village gates. Once a staunch government supporter, and now a dissident in exile he had to flee to suburbia and redirect his political energy into social activism.

Fairly quickly we covered the story; walked in the forest almost drowning in the snow, chased a sick fox, and returned to Viktar's welcoming lunch table. I still had the whole day ahead of me, and frankly was very unwilling to return to the station. This is why, when Viktar pitched a new story to me, I jumped at the idea.

It appeared that the thick layers of snow covered more than just gardens and flower beds. Viktar took out a heavy leather purse and opened it, revealing old foreign coins. The whole place had been built on the treasures hidden in the ground by the people living here centuries before. The answer to the question where on Earth Belarusian peasants got all this money from waited for us in Rakaw. And this is how our travel in time began.

Feliks Yanushkevich

As we were approaching Rakaw I grew disappointed. Perhaps I expected too much from a place that looked exactly like thousands of other Belarusian places – two cathedrals, a village hall, a supermarket and a school museum. How boring.

As if sensing my worries Viktar said 'just you wait till you meet my friend Feliks', and whispered something to our driver.

The Art Gallery of the Yanushkevich brothers would put to shame even the most sophisticated city museums. It was as if the past met the present and got happily married to it. Solemn statues of ancient Dukes covered in snow, a smoking shed still sending off a sweet meaty fragrance into the crisp air, hundreds of hand-made

pots and chests and other utensils were waiting as if to tell visitors their stories.

The son of a Belarusian artist, Feliks Yanushkevich, one of five brothers, himself also an artist, collector, and historian greeted us enthusiastically. Speaking perfect Belarusian he passionately shared his knowledge of the gallery with us.

A decade before he had left his life in the city and returned to the village he believed to be his family seat. During the renovation of the house, that later became the art gallery, he had discovered several barrels filled with pre-war American dollars, chinaware and famous Rakaw ceramics. This is how his infatuation with the history of Rakaw began.

Not only had he started collecting artifacts and digging up the history of the place, but he also discovered the answers to the questions that nobody had dared to ask. In his Doctoral Dissertation he assumed that the Rakaw ceramics, that had brought this place so much fame in previous years, had been imported to Rakaw by the Chinese masters invited to Belarus by the **Ahinsky** family (if you are a music lover, this name should definitely have meaning for you).

Then, Feliks suggested that Nikolai II (the Russian Emperor killed by the Bolsheviks during the Revolution) and his kin came from Rakaw and its neighborhood. To support this, Feliks showed me the portrait of one of his relatives who in fact looked exactly like Tzar Nikolai.

In addition, Mr. Yanushkevitch is an adamant supporter of the legend that Napoleon's treasures, lost during his retreat from Moscow, had been buried not in the Byarezina River, but here, in the Islach near Rakaw.

Quite a story for one boring village, isn't it? And it's only the beginning.

A Few Historical Facts

It is hard to say when Rakaw was founded, but most scholars believe it happened sometime in the 15th century. Throughout its existence the place used to be a family seat to several renowned Lithuanian/Belarusian clans, such as the Kezhgailas, Zavish, Sangushkas, Salahubs and Ahinskies.

During the Sangushkas' rule Rakaw turned into a prosperous trade centre. It was privileged to hold two bazaars a year, which ensured the constant



One of the Rakaw's main streets

flow of money and ideas. By the end of the 16th century Rakaw society rejoiced over the opening of the first printing house in the town.

Religious tolerance came along with prosperity and literacy: Catholicism coexisted peacefully with the **Union church**, and later Orthodox Christians and Judaism (With trades flourishing, Rakaw soon became a home to hundreds and thousands of Jewish families, who by the beginning of the 20th century became the dominant nation living in the place).

Moreover, according to the orthodox legends, Rakaw is one of the six locations in Belarus where Mother Mary had made her appearance to the people.

In 1793 Rakaw was annexed by the Russian Empire as a result of the second partition of **Rzeczpospolita**. In 1921 it was given to Poland, and in 1939 it became a part of Soviet Belarus.

The Smugglers' Capital

Even in their worst nightmares, the residents of 19th century Rakaw could not have thought that this once flourishing place would in time turn into a dull province: for centuries the town has been notorious for its prosperous smuggling business and bustling social life. 134 stores, 96 salons and eateries, as well as four brothels welcomed anyone willing to spend some cash. (A comment by Feliks Yanushkevitch: Mademoiselles working in the brothels used to wear exquisite silk dresses imported directly from China).

The stream of goods and money pouring into the town would not stop even after the Revolution, when Rakaw became a frontier between the

Soviet Union and Poland. Trains loaded with gold, fur and diamonds would tear the darkness from East to West, and return nights later loaded with bricks of cocaine and marijuana for the Soviet Army.

Smuggling was a style of life at that time. From young children to grey-haired oldies, everyone would try to bring something across the border to get something else in return. For those who considered smuggling their profession, there even existed secret maps that would show the safest routes through the swamps and forests surrounding the frontier.

The first decades of the 20th century were indeed incredible and astonishing for Rakaw and its citizens. By the start of WWII it had transformed not only into the smuggling capital, but also into the city of spies. Three intelligence services - the Soviet, Polish, and German - had their residences in Rakaw. And there was one incredible man who succeeded to work for them all at once.



Feliks Yanushkevich in his art gallery (screenshot).

Unknown-Belarus



Cathedral of St. Mary

The Lover of the Great Bear

You may call him a gentleman of fortune, a literary genius or one of the greatest spies of all time. Sergiusz Piasecki (Syarhey Pyasecky) deserves all these titles. Born in 1901 in Lyahavichy as a result of a sweet but short affair between a nobleman Michael Piasecki and his maid, Sergiusz was determined to prove himself worthy to the world from his earliest years.

This he did; moving to Rakaw and working for all the intelligence agencies he could contact, and earning the title of the first terrorist in world history. No one knows what the historical outcomes would have been should Mr. Piasecki have continued his activity, but he was eventually caught and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Not able to plot further intelligence operations, Mr. Piasecki started to write, and in a little while was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature for his novel 'The Lover of the Great Bear', which not only brought him fame but an early release from prison.

The Second World War ruined his literary plans and gave his life a new turn. By the end of the war, he fled to Italy, and later England leaving his beautiful wife and son behind. After that there are few recorded facts left about his life. There are rumors that he could have been recruited by MI6, or became a prototype for the James Bond series. But I guess, we'll never know for sure.



The Church of the Transfiguration was built between 1730-1793 as a union church. It now belongs to the Orthodox Church.

War and Post-War Times.

Along with the rest of Belarus, WWII brought death and devastation to the town. 2000 Jews were burned alive in the building of Rakaw synagogue; countless numbers of people were killed, tortured and sent to concentration camps. But although they perished, their treasures discovered in the basements and gardens of the contemporary residents of the village still remind people of how fragile human life and material values can be.

After the war, having lost a considerable amount of its population, Rakaw has become a quiet village, surrounded by numerous summer camps and Soviet recreation resorts.

Back to Present.

Mr Yanushkevich glances pensively through the window onto the empty market place. I look in the same direction and just for a second the village street gives way to a bustling bazaar with merry merchants and traders, mademoiselles looking for new wardrobes, and mysterious clandestine-looking gentlemen hurrying through the happy crowds. It lasts just a second, and then the vision is over, dissolved by the pale rays of the winter sun.



Cover of the book by Sergiusz Piasecki in Belarusian and Polish

In Fact

- *Rzeczpospolita* was a Federation of the Crown of the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which emerged from the Union of Lublin in 1569. The new political alliance was the largest and one of the most densely populated countries in Europe in XVI-XVII centuries. It had a common Parliament (Sejm), monetary system and foreign policy.

- *The Union Church* (the Greek Catholic Church) was a result of the Union of Brest in 1596, when the Orthodox Church of Belarus and Ukraine merged with the Roman Catholic Church under subjection to the Pope. The Union church adopted the Catholic dogma, while continuing to maintain the Orthodox rites. The policy of the ruling circles of the *Rzeczpospolita* towards the Uniates was contradictory and depended on the socio-political situation. On the one hand, the government supported the Union church, as it was consistent with their policy of the centralisation of the state, on the other, it tried to merge the Uniates with Roman Catholics.

- *Mihal Kleofas Ahinski* (Michal Kleofas Oginsky) is probably the most famous representative of the Ahinski Noble family. A brilliant statesman and military leader (ambassador to the Sejm of Poland at the age of 20, head of the Treasury of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania at the age of 28, Extraordinary Ambassador to the Netherlands) Michal Kleofas is probably best remembered for his music inspired by the lyricism of traditional Belarusian folk songs. The most popular of his polonaises, called A-minor, "Farewell to the Fatherland", he wrote in his family estate in Zalesie (Hrodna Region of Belarus) before he had to leave the country after taking part in Kosciuszko's uprising against the Russian Empire.

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.

Opinions expressed in Belarus Headlines do not necessarily represent the views of the editors