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## EXILE FOR LUKASHENKO?

### HOW ADVOCATES OF DEMOCRACY ARE BEING FORCED TO EMIGRATE FROM BELARUS

*Stephan Malerius*

Since the end of 2010, Alexander Lukashenko has had a very poor record. On election night, December 19, he had seven of the nine candidates who were standing against the incumbent in the presidential elections arrested.<sup>1</sup> So many arrests may well be unique, even amongst despots. In addition to the opposition politicians, he also had more than 600 mostly peaceful demonstrators arrested. The presidential candidates Mikola Statkevich and Andrei Sannikov were still in prison by the end of 2011. The international community considers them to be political prisoners, along with nine other democratic politicians, businessmen and youth activists.

Political prisoners had never been much of a problem for Lukashenko in the past, so now he either could not or would not understand why he was receiving criticism from European quarters. At the beginning of July, during a stay in his native Shklov, he responded to a question by a journalist as to whether he wanted to use the political prisoners as a bargaining chip in possible talks with the EU, by saying: "I have no intention of bargaining with anybody. (...) But if the EU wants to take them – no problem, we'll issue them with tickets tomorrow and send them off. If they really want them because they like political prisoners so much, we'll put them in a railway carriage – I'll happily make the decision."<sup>2</sup>

1 | Cf. Stephan Malerius, "The Long Shadow of the Belarus Presidential Elections – Procedures, Results and Political Fall-Out", *KAS International Reports*, 3/2011, 110-129, <http://kas.de/wf/en/33.22146> (accessed 11 Jan 2011).

2 | "Лукашенко готов посадить политзаключенных в самолет, если ЕС согласится их забрать", [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2011/07/07/ic\\_news\\_112\\_371716](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2011/07/07/ic_news_112_371716) (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

It is rare for news from Belarus to reach the international press. Over the last fifteen years, the country has generally only hit the headlines when it has held one of its regular rigged parliamentary or presidential elections or when people or even whole organisations have been forced into exile by the authoritarian regime in Minsk. An example of this occurred in 2004, when the European Humanities University (EHU) was forced to leave Minsk<sup>3</sup>, or in early summer 2011, when many predominantly young people left the country after the protests of December 19 were put down and oppression followed. "In prison or in exile" was the headline in the German weekly *Die Zeit* in May 2011<sup>4</sup>, and a report by the Franco-German TV station *Arte* in July carried a similar title: "In exile, rather than in prison."<sup>5</sup>

In the last 17 years of Lukashenko's presidency, people have left Belarus to go into exile for many different reasons. Many have left their homeland to study or set up a business, or simply because they feared for their lives. Many of the President's former allies who have fallen out of favour now live in Moscow. Lukashenko's democratic opponents who wanted to avoid imprisonment, or indeed being tortured in prison, have chosen Prague, Warsaw or Vilnius as places to live in exile.<sup>6</sup>

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However, the snapshots provided by *Die Zeit* and *Arte* failed to address an important point – the fact that the real problem for Belarus are those people who leave the country not because they are forced to, but because they cannot envisage an economic or personal future for themselves there and, above all, because they are sick of the

3 | "Is it possible at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that an entire university could be driven into exile in Europe?", from: Jonathan F. Fanton, "From exile, a beacon of hope for Belarus", *The New York Times*, 28 Jun 2005, <http://nytimes.com/2005/06/27/opinion/27iht-edfanton.html> (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

4 | Johannes Voswinkel, "Ins Gefängnis oder ins Exil", *Zeit Online*, <http://www.zeit.de/2011/21/Weissrussland-Exilanten> (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

5 | *Arte*, "Weißrussland: Ins Exil statt ins Gefängnis", [http://videos.arte.tv/de/videos/weissrussland\\_ins\\_exilstatt\\_ins\\_gefaengnis-4049050.html](http://videos.arte.tv/de/videos/weissrussland_ins_exilstatt_ins_gefaengnis-4049050.html) (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

6 | A good example would be the presidential candidate Ales Mikhalovich, who has lived in exile in Prague since March 2011. See also the *KAS Country Report* "Folter im KGB-Gefängnis", <http://kas.de/belarus/de/publications/22115> (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

regime. They are tired of the daily, all-encompassing arbitrariness of the legal system, of the absurd ideological regimentation of public life, of the primitive controls over the state media and the cynical irresponsibility of the ruling elite.

Since 2011, Belarus has witnessed the beginnings of a massive wave of emigration, the consequences of which are difficult to predict. The only way for the country to find a way out of the disastrous political and economic situation in which it finds itself will be to do it without Lukashenko. The trouble is, there is nowhere he could actually go into exile.

### **BNR RADA: EXILE IN NORTH AMERICA**

Most expatriates tend to feel a strong bond with their country and a clear sense of belonging to their homeland. They are usually banished or driven out, or have to leave their homeland because of political or religious persecution.

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This description has only really applied to people exiled from Belarus since the end of the 1990s at the earliest.<sup>7</sup> Belarusians are generally considered to be a people with a poor sense of national identity and this raises the question as to whether their sense of belonging to their homeland is actually strong enough for them to be considered expatriates at all, even if they are forced to leave their country.

7 | Lukashenko is quite happy to have opponents deliberately persecuted if they pose a threat to him – as was made painfully clear in the case of the “disappeared” at the end of 1999/2000. The arrest of Ihar Azaronak after the elections in 2010 and the court case against him in December 2011 only went to prove once again that in Belarus anybody can be persecuted if they choose to defy Lukashenko: “It is rumored that Ihar Azaronak, the former commander of the Air and Air Defense Force, was arrested after refusing to take part in a crackdown on post-election protesters (...) Mr. Azaronak, 49, is believed to have been arrested in Minsk either on December 19, after a post-election protest in central Independence Square, or the following day.” Zecco (ed.), “Belarusian Air Force ex-chief jailed for refusal to suppress protests”, <https://research.zecco.com/research/markets/news/story.asp?key=100-346n2240-1&lastPage=Index> (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

The region that Belarus belonged to over the centuries was far too big to create a real sense of identity. Artur Klinau described it as “a huge area of land that stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Many different peoples lived here, speaking many different languages. Many different religions coexisted peacefully together – practically all of the different religions that existed in Europe at the time. The region was similar to an empire, but it wasn’t one. It could have been an empire, but it became a ‘democracy’, run by its people. And it was this that ultimately destroyed it.”<sup>8</sup> Later Belarus developed a strong sense of regional identity, which can still be felt today. In rural areas in particular, many Belarusians see themselves as “locals” (Belarusian “tutejszy” from “tut” meaning “here”). This strong bond with the home region was described by the Belarusian national poet Yanka Kupala in his comedy *Tutejsyja* (1922), in which the people rejected the idea of an ethnic national identity, but saw themselves as simply “local”. This sense of identity that was also promoted by the opposition, and acted as a kind of defence mechanism, particularly at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that allowed people to adapt to the often violent changes in rulers in the region (the German Reich, Poland, Russia/Soviet Union): “statehood may change, but the people remain”.<sup>9</sup>

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Despite these strong ties to the home region, the region as a whole, which Timothy Snyder describes as “bloodlands”<sup>10</sup> on account of the major events that happened there at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, saw whole waves of people starting to emigrate. The First World War saw 250,000 people flee from Belarus into Eastern Russia, while 120,000 went to the Baltic States or Czechoslovakia. During the Stalinist Terror (1926-1938) 600,000 were deported from the Belarusian Soviet Republic to other parts of the Soviet Union, while 1.5 million people were evacuated to Eastern

8 | Artur Klinau, *Minsk. Sonnenstadt der Träume*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2006, 24.

9 | Cf. Imke Hansen, “Belarussische Identitäts- und Geschichtskonstruktionen im öffentlichen Raum”, in: Regina Fritz, Carola Sachse, Edgar Wolfrum, *Nationen und ihre Selbstbilder: Postdiktatorische Gesellschaften in Europa*, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2008, 233-254.

10 | Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*, C.H. Beck, Munich, 2011.

Russia during the Second World War and 385,000 were forced into labour in Germany. Many of these people never returned to Belarus and formed the basis of many new exile communities in neighbouring countries.<sup>11</sup>

The Belarusian People's Republic declared its independence at the end of the First World War while under German occupation. After the advances by the Red Army the BNR Rada (Council of the Belarusian People's Republic), the highest political body in the new republic, moved from Minsk to Grodno. After the Poles marched into Grodno the Rada went into exile, initially to Kaunas and then later to

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Prague and Berlin, from where it coordinated the anti-communist campaign in the 1920s. Since the end of the Second World War the "Rada" has existed as a government in exile in the USA and Canada. The fact that Belarus achieved national independence for a short time on 25 March 1918 is used by many Belarusian exile communities in North America to give themselves a collective sense of identity.<sup>12</sup> Today, the Belarusian diaspora includes around 3 to 3.5 million people, the equivalent of one third of the current population of Belarus itself. Around 600,000 Belarusians live in North America (USA, Canada), while tens of thousands live in Argentina, Brazil, France, Belgium, Germany, Great Britain and Australia.

The Baltic States, which have close links to Belarus in many areas, also had many very influential representative offices in exile in North America after the Second World War, and the leaders were recognised as the legitimate representatives of their country throughout the Soviet period. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the influence that these representatives in exile were able to exert on their newly-independent home countries was reflected

11 | Cf. also: The International Public Society Belarusians' World Association Backuascyna (Homeland), *The History of the Belarusian Nation and State*, Minsk, 2006, 378-388.

12 | As Belarus had been part of the Russian tsarist empire since 1795, immigrants in exile in North America were initially classified as Russian or coming from Russia. The same was true for many exiled Belarusians after the Second World War. Cf. Walter Stankevich, "A New Wave of Emigrants: Varied Goals and Values", in: Andrei Dynko (ed.), *The Generation Gap, or Belarusian Differences in Goals, Values and Strategy*, Warsaw, 2008, 22-27.

in the political courses adopted by those countries in the region after 1991. In Lithuania, the political and social transformation process that culminated in the country's membership of the EU in 2004, owed much to the formerly exiled Lithuanian Valdas Adamkus, who was President of the country for over a decade (1998-2003; 2004-2009). Adamkus, who was born in 1926, fled to Germany towards the end of the war to avoid the Red Army and in 1949 emigrated to the USA. In Latvia, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga also returned from exile to serve over eight years as President (1999-2007). Born in 1937 in Riga, Vīķe-Freiberga left her homeland with her parents in 1944 as war refugees. She grew up in Canada and taught at the University of Montreal from 1964 onwards. She returned to Latvia in 1998.

In Belarus, however, those in exile had no opportunity to influence political developments in their homeland after 1991. Lukashenko made sure of this very early on. Taking advantage of a manipulated referendum in 1995, he had the old Soviet symbols (flags, emblems) re-introduced and declared that Russian would be the country's second official language. In doing so, he made it clear that his country was going to follow the old Soviet social and state model in the broadest sense (planned economy, vertical division of power, extensive use of the secret services, ideological control of education, etc.), and would not be adopting the democratic, European way of doing things. He deliberately put a stop to the process of national self-reflection that had started in Belarus (1991-1994), when, after gaining independence, the country's history, even in official discourse, was no longer seen as beginning with the Great Patriotic War of 1945, but back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and Belarusian was declared the country's official language and began to replace Russian as the language of school instruction. Lukashenko understood very well that it would be much harder to exert authoritarian control over people with a strong sense of national identity than over those that lacked roots and a common (national) idea. Although it was being seriously considered at the beginning of the 1990s, Lukashenko made sure it would not be possible for the BNR Rada to return to Belarus from exile. As a result, the BNR

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Rada, led by Ivonka Survilla from Canada, is considered to be the longest established exiled government in the world.

At the beginning of the 1990s, an organisation called "Backauscyna" (Homeland) was set up to exploit the potential of the Belarusian exile communities in helping re-build the country after 1991. Their job is to strengthen ties between the Belarusian diaspora and their homeland. Since 1992 they have organised regular diaspora congresses in Minsk, initially for those from neighbouring countries and, since 1993, for people from anywhere in the world. The regime viewed these events with a certain amount of suspicion and only gave them its blessing through gritted teeth. In 2009 the presidential administration only gave the official authority to hold the congress after much wrangling and the threat that the congress would be moved to Vilnius. Since 2008, Backauscyna has also taken a leading role in the "Budzma Belarusami" campaign, aimed at strengthening a sense of national identity in Belarus. They have to systematically fight against state-generated propaganda that promotes the stereotypical notion that Belarusian history began with the Soviet Union, that the Belarusian language is just a peasant dialect and that Belarusian culture is based on little more than village life, straw hats and bast shoes. Artists, writers and historians travel throughout the country to take part in hundreds of events, telling people all about national and regional history and presenting modern Belarusian music, literature and art. The campaign is based on the principle that developing a national sense of identity is inextricably bound with an awareness of the Belarusian people's European roots. And the more people know about their own European history, the more likely it is that they will actively support the development of a more democratic society, not only based on European standards in practical terms, but also on traditional European values. After all, Belarus itself made a not insignificant contribution towards the creation of these values.<sup>13</sup>

13 | The region that includes Belarus was a political and intellectual centre of Europe for a long time, with Old Belarusian as its official language. The Statute of Lithuania (1588), a collection of common laws in Eastern Europe written in Old Belarusian, was one of the most modern legal documents of its time. The Statute provided an early template for democratic constitutions at a time when Europe was dominated by absolute rulers.

## VILNIUS – A NEARBY PLACE OF REFUGE

The exile communities in the USA and Canada were formed at times when nobody could predict that Belarus, which had been integrated into the Soviet Union, would one day regain its independence and become a free and democratic state. Belarus has now been independent for 20 years, and today the main exile communities are to be found in those countries that lie in the immediate vicinity, especially Poland, Lithuania, the Ukraine and Russia. More precisely, they are not really places of exile as only a few Belarusians are compelled to live here permanently. These places mostly offer a place of exile for institutions. The people connected with these institutions tend to live there temporarily or commute to Belarus. They all share a common hope that in the foreseeable future they will be able to properly return to their homeland. In the meantime they need a refuge nearby, to which they can flee from time to time to escape the nightmare reality of what is going on at home.

In the last five years Vilnius has become the undisputed favourite place of refuge for many Belarusians. The Lithuanian capital is 170 kilometres north of Minsk, which is two hours by car or three hours by train or bus. A one-way ticket costs little more than ten euros. The only serious obstacle is the EU border, 30 kilometres south of Vilnius, where car drivers can expect to face lengthy delays. If they are coming from Minsk they can leave their car on their own side of the border and walk across before being picked up by friends on the Lithuanian side. They need a visa, of course, which can be difficult to obtain and is always very expensive.

Vilnius was also special place for many Belarusians back in the old days of the Soviet Union. At that time, it represented a mental, rather than physical, place of refuge – somewhere to escape to from Soviet Minsk. While Vilnius still represents a time-out for many Belarusians today, the city has become an actual physical place of exile for some institutions during Lukashenko's rule. The European Humanities University has been there since 2005, the Belarusian Human Rights House was set

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up in exile there in 2007 and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) registered in Vilnius in 2008, as the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) had done earlier.<sup>14</sup> Some initiatives, such as Belarus Watch, operate almost entirely out of Vilnius. There is also a growing number of international organisations that are not welcome in Belarus and so coordinate their Belarus programmes from Vilnius. The International Republican Institute (IRI), the Swedish International Liberal Centre (SILC), Freedom House, Internews and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung all work in the city in cooperation with their Belarusian partners. In 2012, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Pact both intend to move their Belarus programmes from Kiev to Vilnius. Even exiled broadcasters based in Poland (*BelSat*, *European Radio for Belarus* in Warsaw, *Radio Racyja* in Białystok) produce many of their programmes in Vilnius, or at least have permanent correspondents stationed there.

For Belarusians, Vilnius has become a public space in exile, a place where individual development is still possible, at a time when Lukashenko has stifled all such development at home. Here you can attend concerts by musicians who are banned in Belarus, and there are art exhibitions showing art which would not be allowed in Belarus.

The democratic opposition and NGOs are not allowed to hold meetings in public in Minsk, which, at 1.8 million inhabitants, is four times bigger than Vilnius. For a long time, the office of the once largest civil rights movement and now marginalised opposition party, the Belarusian Popular Front (BVF), was the only place they could meet in the centre of the city. In early 2011, the party was thrown out of its offices. The only modern conference centre in Minsk is to be found in the Centre for International Education and Exchange, a joint German-Belarusian project. However, as the City of Minsk is co-owner of the building, any events planned by the Centre need official approval. Every possible care then needs to be taken to ensure that the right number of official representatives are invited and that the

14 | Both institutions are in Vilnius for mostly formal administrative reasons (state registration, accounting, banking), while their staff live in Belarus and commute across the border to work.

subject of the event is not controversial from an ideological standpoint. The few hotels with conference or meeting facilities in Minsk have to comply with strict guidelines from the presidential administration and the secret service, irrespective of whether they are state-owned or private. A typical charade at the Orbita, Planeta or Crown Plaza hotels is for previously-booked function rooms to be made unavailable at short notice due to burst water pipes, problems with the heating, air-conditioning or some similar excuse. The ways and means of controlling public areas are similar in all authoritarian states but in Belarus today they have it down to a fine art. This politically-motivated chicanery is not always so obvious to outsiders or to the untrained eye and only becomes clear upon closer observation.

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The Belarusian Human Rights House was set up in exile in Vilnius in 2007 because of the fact that Lukashenko does not allow any public spaces to be free from ideological control. Those behind the initiative were Belarusian organisations committed to promoting freedom of expression, the observation of human rights and a strong civil society. The house in the heart of the old town offers several training and meeting rooms, as well as simple accommodation for those attending seminars. There are training courses, conferences, discussions and cultural events taking place here on an almost daily basis. In addition to the Human Rights House, function rooms in many hotels in Vilnius can be booked for Belarus-related events, and it is not unusual for the Lithuanian parliament building to be made available as well.

Not all exile facilities in neighbouring countries are as well used as the Human Rights House. Since June 2011, Vilnius also has a House of United Belarus (HUB). When it was formally opened, the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Ažubalis called upon Lithuanian and Belarusian NGOs, academics and intellectuals to use the house as a place to meet. According to Ažubalis, Lithuania and Belarus share centuries of common experiences, including occupation and exile. "I hope that the House of United Belarus in Vilnius will become a second home for Belarusians in exile,"

he said.<sup>15</sup> The Solidarity with Belarus Information Office set up in early 2011 in Warsaw sees itself as a bridge between Belarus and the international community. It wants to keep Belarus on the international agenda and to provide the people of Belarus with a source of independent information.<sup>16</sup>

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Six months on, we have to draw the sober conclusion that neither of these initiatives can be seen as anything more than a sign of regional political rivalry between Poland and Lithuania or an expression of European helplessness. Neither the HUB in Vilnius nor the Information Office in Warsaw have become real political or civil society centres for the democratic opposition from Belarus. Their activities are infrequent and poorly coordinated, neither of them provides effective support to the oppressed activists in Belarus, nor do they function particularly well as a place of refuge or as a bridge to the international community.

There is another obvious problem with the HUB and the Information Office and that is that Europe is too focused on the consequences of Lukashenko's authoritarian rule, on providing protective exile or taking in political prisoners. As a result, not enough effort is being put into analysing the functions of the systems in place or into developing strategies to combat the causes of the problems in order to change the situation in Belarus in such a way that these European places of exile and refuge are no longer actually needed.

### **EDUCATION IN EXILE: THE EHU**

The best-known Belarusian institution in exile is the European Humanities University (EHU). Even *The New York Times* ran an article on the subject when the EHU was closed down in Minsk in 2004 and reopened in exile

15 | Cf. Petras Vaida, "House of United Belarus opened in Vilnius", *The Baltic Course*, 30 Jun 2011, [http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/baltic\\_states\\_cis/?doc=42790](http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/baltic_states_cis/?doc=42790) (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

16 | „Our mission: To act as a bridge between Belarus and the international community, keeping Belarus in the international spotlight and Belarusian society informed about international events relating to Belarus.” Cf. Solidarity with Belarus Information Office, <http://solidarityby.eu/mission> (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

in Vilnius in 2005. However, the comparisons drawn in the article between the closing of the EHU in Minsk and the expulsion of scholars and academics from Germany during the Nazi era are not quite accurate. In the case of the EHU, it is only the institution itself that has been fully exiled, while the vast majority of the academic staff continues to live in Belarus.<sup>17</sup>

The university was founded in Minsk in 1992 and specialised initially in subjects such as philosophy, law, politics, languages and European studies. In a largely closed society the EHU acted as an “oasis of free thinking”, one of the few places where controversial opinions could be expressed in open debate. At the EHU it was not only possible to study the country’s own history, free from censorship, but the democratic changes that had swept away many authoritarian regimes both in Europe and in other post-Soviet states were also subject to academic analysis. The EHU was also part of an excellent international network. One of its main objectives was to help strengthen both the national and intellectual sense of identity in Belarus. One student said in 2004: “I remember one lecture in the Belarusian language. It was about how a country’s people need an elite who can initiate the development of a nationalist consciousness and patriotism, take the country forward, highlight what makes the country unique and improve education levels and, with that, people’s self-confidence. In the past, elites had been destroyed in Belarus, and I am starting to wonder for the first time whether the same thing isn’t happening again here and now. I don’t want to put the EHU on too much of a pedestal, but after studying there for five years, I think I understand what they were really all about; enlightenment, development, intellectual exchange and the notion of a Belarusian consciousness.”<sup>18</sup>

**At the EHU, the democratic changes that had swept away many authoritarian regimes both in Europe and in other post-Soviet states were subject to academic analysis.**

17 | “Seventy-two years after scholars fled Hitler’s Germany to establish the Graduate Faculty at the New School for Social Research in New York, it has happened. Last year, the European Humanities University in Belarus was forced to close by the country’s authoritarian regime. This month, European Humanities University-International dedicated its new campus in Vilnius, where it now resides in exile.” Fanton, n. 3.

18 | Iryna Lösche, “Ungerechtigkeit”, in: Lahoda (ed.), *Kontra banda. Geschichten, Gedanken & Gesichter aus Belarus*, Frankfurt (Oder), 2005, 37.

**In July 2004, the EHU had its teaching licence revoked. Despite many local and international protests, the university was forced to go into exile that summer.**

It was clear that the very existence of such an institution would be seen as a threat by Lukashenko. In January 2004, his Minister of Education, Alexandr Radkov, called for the resignation of the Dean of the EHU, Anatoli Michailov. Michailov refused. In March 2004, Lukashenko called a meeting of all deans of universities, but deliberately snubbed the EHU. On July 19, the EHU received a letter cancelling the rental agreement on the EHU buildings and they were given two weeks to leave. On July 26, the EHU had its teaching licence revoked, even though it had been renewed in May. Despite many local and international protests, the university was forced to go into exile that summer.

The re-opening of the EHU in Vilnius would not have been possible without the political support of Lithuania. The Lithuanian president, Valdas Adamkus, who had experienced exile himself, made the re-opening of the EHU in exile into a personal project.

Vilnius has proven to be an ideal location for the EHU over the last six years. It allows both students and academic staff alike to maintain their ties with Belarus, but requires a high degree of mobility at the same time. This has proved to be a difficult balancing act for many, with careers or studies in Vilnius and private and home life in Belarus. The EHU tries to accommodate various options on the career and home-life front by offering different models for people to choose from, ranging from full-time attendance through block seminars with part-time attendance, to full-time home study. To help support those studying at the EHU who required a high degree of mobility and flexibility, a brilliant initiative was launched by the German Association of Christian Democratic Students (Ring Christlich-Demokratischer Studenten, RCDS), who in 2007/2008 collected books and laptops for the EHU from all over Germany. With the support of the then-Secretary General of the CDU, Ronald Pofalla, these were then transported to Vilnius in two trucks in autumn 2008 under the banner of "Building blocks for freedom".

In 2012, the EHU will have been in existence for twenty years, one-third of which has been spent in exile. Its twelve years in Minsk were a real success story, while the seven years in exile have been somewhat different. Now that the first students in exile are leaving the university, some fundamental issues need to be addressed. Degrees obtained from the EHU will not be recognised in Belarus and it will be difficult for graduates to find work in a job market where over 80 per cent of jobs are in the public sector. Where will the EHU graduates go? Does the EHU really have the right to claim that it can educate the future academic and intellectual elite of Belarus? What would be the necessary prerequisites for this and to what extent can the EHU fulfil them in exile?<sup>19</sup>

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These questions should not only be directed at the EHU, but at Europe as a whole. As Jonathan Fanton in *The New York Times* rightly pointed out, a university in exile cannot hope to bring democracy to Belarus on its own. Europe needs to ask itself what it can do "so that one day Minsk feels like Vilnius".<sup>20</sup>

## EMIGRATION

In addition to the political prisoners, who Lukashenko would be happy to sell into exile in Europe<sup>21</sup>, and the democratic politicians and journalists, who are already there, Belarus has had another much more significant problem to deal with since 19 December 2010. The regime's violent actions on election night and acts of oppression in the months that followed, together with successive devaluations of the

19 | In November 2011 the independent newspaper *Nasha Niva* reported that 64 per cent of 2011 EHU graduates had not returned to Belarus. 45 per cent of 2009 graduates, on the other hand, had found work in Belarus. Cf. <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=63700> (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

20 | "Minsk could one day feel like Vilnius, but for that to happen, the international community must apply persistent pressure. A university in exile cannot bring democracy by itself." Fanton, n. 3.

21 | Alexander Atroshchenkau, who was released from prison in September 2011 (he was a member of Sannikov's election staff), said at an event in Berlin at the beginning of December that KGB interrogators had explained the regime's logic to him: Belarus has no oil, so therefore it needs to sell political prisoners.

currency in 2011, shortages and foreign currency restrictions have led many people to believe that a halfway normal social and economic future in Belarus under Lukashenko is no longer possible. Since the beginning of 2011, people have started to leave the country, especially those who are well-educated, such as doctors, engineers and businessmen. What makes this emigration different is not just its scale – there is talk of tens of thousands of people having left the country since January<sup>22</sup> – but the fact that this movement of people is indicative of a new sense of resignation within society. The economic chaos immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the political turmoil of the early 1990s were seen by many people as no more than a very difficult period of transition. At that time they still hoped to contribute to the country's future development and have the freedom to develop their own ideas. Then along came Lukashenko.

The tragedy for Belarus in the 1990s was that many people underestimated Lukashenko in the beginning and saw him as a temporary phenomenon. Just how seriously they should have taken him became clear in 1999-2000, when his most important rivals disappeared, and after the presidential elections in 2001, when the opposition and civil society started to become marginalised and the state and society in general became more and more authoritarian in nature. The country fell into a state of deep stagnation. The selection of Alexander Milinkevich as their leader by the opposition in 2005 and the limited opening-up of the country from 2008 onwards encouraged some people to become a little bolder. The liberal election campaign of 2010 was a new experience for generations of Belarusians. With a growing sense of self-confidence, they took advantage of this new-found freedom to take part in a pluralistic political discourse, the like of which had not been seen since 1994.

**The liberal election campaign of 2010 was a new experience for generations of Belarusians. With a growing sense of self-confidence, they took advantage of this new-found freedom.**

22 | "Last but significant part of the social contract is that the borders are open for those looking for other possibilities, or simply disagree with the regime policies. Since January around 250 thousands of Belarusians are looking for higher income in the Moscow region, and 90 thousands of them are officially registered in Ukraine." In: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Memorandum. Belarus Transformation Project (Security Working Group), 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting, October 2011 (unpublished), 3.

A “de-Lukashenkization”<sup>23</sup> of society had begun. Autumn 2010 was like a mini Prague Spring for Belarus.

This new dawn came to a brutal end on December 19. The ramifications of this end to hope are now being seen in those people who, while not politically active, do care about the economic and social conditions under which they live. Since January 2011, they have been leaving for the Ukraine and Russia, where they are not only better paid, but can also realise their career potential in peace. Well-educated Belarusian workers are in great demand, especially in technical areas like the Russian gas and oil sectors.<sup>24</sup> The consequences could well be devastating for Belarus. When the country became independent in 1991, the fact that the people had a high standard of education was seen as a significant advantage over other former Soviet republics. Even though their advantage on the education front has shrunk somewhat over the years, Belarus now looks like being on the verge of losing it altogether. The country is in danger of repeating the fate of the Republic of Moldova, which generates a large proportion of its income from payments transferred into the country by Moldovans who have emigrated abroad and who support their families back home with income from their new country.

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### **“I WAS BORN HERE AND I INTEND TO LIVE HERE”**

Europe has proven to be both helpless and totally lacking in ideas when faced with the reality of the disaster that happened on 19 December 2010. The donor conference “Solidarity with Belarus”, arranged by the Polish Foreign

23 | Cf. Anaïs Marin, “Saving what can be: what the Eastern Partnership could (still) bring to Belarus”, Policy Paper No. 3, December 2011, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership (ed.), [http://www.eceap.eu/ul/EaP\\_3\\_\\_artikkel.pdf](http://www.eceap.eu/ul/EaP_3__artikkel.pdf) (accessed 19 Dec 2011), 10.

24 | “This brain drain is as serious as possible now, and many capable workers (the most capable) are leaving mostly to Russia, especially from the oil producing sector. The value of Belarusian oil managers and workers is very high regarded in Russia, due to their technical excellence and the strong adaptation character. Entrepreneurs are leaving to Ukraine and to the Baltic states.” Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Memorandum, Belarus Transformation Project (Security Working Group), 1<sup>st</sup> meeting, August 2011 (unpublished), 2.



Minister Sikorski in February 2011, was a significant affair but, in retrospect, lacked any real substance. Well over half of the EU Member States agreed to increase their support for Belarusian organisations in exile in Poland and Lithuania. The question of what should be done about the Lukashenko problem in Belarus was not discussed.

**Many younger people feel a commitment to their country, in which a sense of identification with Belarus is combined with a desire to oppose the Lukashenko regime.**

What was needed at the time was an intelligent plan to support those key individuals who wanted to stay in the country in spite of the repression, people who did not want to go into exile or emigrate, but wanted to work towards an alternative future for Belarus. For example, many younger people, who experienced that short period of hope between 1991 and 1994 (between independence and the election of Lukashenko as president), feel a commitment to their country, in which a sense of identification with Belarus is combined with a desire to oppose the Lukashenko regime. This was expressed in the music album "Fotoalbum. Ja narodziŭsia tut" (Photo album. I was born here) released at the end of the 1990s, a collaboration between several well-known Belarusian musicians. The title song "Ja narodziŭsia tut" became an anthem for pro-democracy youth at the time. The chorus went like this:

*"Maternity ward, kindergarten  
School and university  
I was born here  
And I intend to live here."<sup>25</sup>*

The musicians involved in the song, which included probably the best-known Belarusian rock musician, Lavon Volski, were constantly banned from performing, and yet most of them decided against going into exile. The title song "I was born here" is easy to understand from an ideological standpoint. The booklet that come with the CD "Belarusian Red Book"<sup>26</sup> says that the album is an attempt "to create a new musical myth about our past and our freedom. A myth where we would feel not the way we are. Or, to be precise, not to be those who we are now having

25 | Cf. e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnldgwCTdi8> (accessed 19 Dec 2011).

26 | Booklet from the CD "Belarusian Red Book, Music of Belarus", no date or place of publication given.

got used to everyday's pressure and cruelty. A myth where we would be the owners of our native land and where we would at last want to obtain it, if not for ourselves then for our children." Like many of his colleagues, Volski was given a de facto ban on performing in public after 19 December 2010, but he never considered leaving the country.

The Backauscyna organisation mentioned above plans to use "Country of my dreams – how I imagine Belarus" as the central theme of their "Budzma Belarusami" campaign this year. Using a variety of different formats, Belarusians will be encouraged to present their future vision for Belarus, or to try to imagine one at least. They also want to win people over to the idea of becoming actively involved in trying to make that vision a reality. The campaign is designed to increase people's awareness and to sow the seeds of hope that another Belarus – one without Lukashenko – is definitely possible, and that it is therefore worth staying. Creating an independent Belarusian culture and organising civil society campaigns aimed at strengthening a sense of identity, seem to make much more sense at the moment than creating even more places of exile outside of Belarus.

## **EXILE FOR LUKASHENKO**

The Lukashenko system is based on the principle of a vertical division of power, rigidly controlled and tailored individually to the President. The personalisation of power means that all key decisions are made and aggressively pursued by Lukashenko himself. The clearest evidence of this was after the suppression of the protests and the mass arrests on the election night of 19 December 2010, when Lukashenko justified the behaviour of the security forces at a press conference the following day and admitted that he alone had given the orders for the brutal crackdown. In light of this self-declared total political control, it would be fair to say that the EHU and the Human Rights House now find themselves in exile thanks to Lukashenko personally, and that artists are banned from performing in public and the BNR Rada cannot return to Belarus because of him. And of course it is Lukashenko personally who orders death sentences to be carried out, who has severely restricted civil liberties in the country and

**All key decisions are made and aggressively pursued by Lukashenko himself. The clearest evidence of this was after the suppression of the protests and the mass arrests on the election night.**

made sure that the Belarusian language and Belarusian culture have been suppressed. It is Lukashenko who is in the process of selling the country to Russia and who is the reason why tens of thousands of people have been leaving the country since the beginning of 2011. A Belarusian delegate at a recent conference in Warsaw talked about someone she knew who was thinking of going to work in Russia: "If you can prove to me that Lukashenko will not be around for much longer, then I will stay. But I need to know for certain. I need to see a doctor's certificate."

After December 19 it became obvious even to political realists that the situation in the country would never change while Lukashenko was in power: "Acknowledging that Lukashenko cannot embark on the path of reforms without damaging the very foundations of his power, no sticks or carrots could ever turn him into a democrat."<sup>27</sup> Just how little value Lukashenko personally attaches to democratic values, and just how much he feels at home with the great dictators of the world, could be seen recently when he publicly mourned the death of Kim Jong Il, but wasted no words on the death of Václav Havel.

Lukashenko will not give up power willingly, and in this respect he is very similar to North African despots like Gaddafi or President Assad of Syria. What makes this even less likely is the fact that he has no exit strategy. His closest political allies (Hugo Chávez, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) are unreliable and he doesn't trust the Russians or the Chinese. For Lukashenko, there simply isn't a place of exile that he could go to or flee to.

If there is to be a peaceful transfer of power in Belarus, then a way out for Lukashenko needs to be found. Just how important "offers of exile" are, was demonstrated by Lukashenko himself in March 2010 when he granted exile to the fallen Kirghiz president Bakiev and turned down all requests for his extradition. If something is to change in Belarus, then three key questions need to be answered: how can Lukashenko be replaced, by whom and where can he go into exile?

27 | Cf. Marin, n. 23, 8.