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## **Political Suppression And Excessive Force: Belarus’ Increasingly Corrupt Government Could Leave Room For Russian Influence**

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Vitaly Shishov, head of a Belarusian exile group, was found dead in Kiev, Ukraine on 3 August. Shishov was head of the Belarusian House in Ukraine (BDU), a group that criticized the Belarusian government for its recent authoritarian actions. According to CNN, his body was found hanging in a park, after he was reportedly missing the day before. Ukrainian police are considering the possibility that this was a murder and have opened a criminal investigation in response. Shishov was an outspoken opponent of President Alexander Lukashenko’s human rights abuses after the controversial 2020 election. Excessive and indiscriminate police force, torture, and arbitrary arrests remain some of the major abuses in Belarus today.

According to BDU, “[V]italy was under surveillance. There were appropriate notifications to the police about the facts.” Shishov’s friend Yury Shchuchko told Current Time TV, “[V]italy called me last week and asked me to take care of his loved ones because he had some strange feeling,” but didn’t hear “any more details.”

Shishov’s death comes after almost a year of social and political upheaval. In August 2020, Alexander Lukashenko won the presidential election that was dubbed fraudulent by independent election monitors. Opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her supporters protested the results peacefully in the streets of Belarus. In response, Lukashenko authorized excessive police force, arbitrary arrests, deportations, and torture. As western countries weakened ties with Belarus and introduced targeted sanctions, Russia has spoken out in support of President Lukashenko. As noted by *Reuters*, Russian President Vladimir Putin promised \$1.5B in financial aid to Alexander Lukashenko after the election last year. So far, Russia has delivered on two installments of \$500 million each.

Freedom House, a nonprofit organization that conducts research on political freedoms, noted that “[B]elarus is an authoritarian state in which elections are openly rigged and civil liberties are

severely restricted. After permitting limited displays of dissent as part of a drive to pursue better relations with the European Union (EU) and the United States, the government in 2020 cracked down on a massive antigovernment protest movement, sparked by a fraudulent presidential election, and severely limited fundamental civil liberties.”

Limited personal autonomy, rule of law, and political freedoms were exactly what Shishov was protesting against when he died. The decision to open a homicide investigation into the case was a crucial step by Ukrainian police towards accountability. But Shishov was not the only one actively criticizing the Belarusian government. Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, a Belarusian Olympian who criticized the government’s handling of Olympic registration via Instagram, is now facing the same scrutiny as Shishov. According to Vox, a recorded conversation shows Tsimanouskaya’s coach telling her, “[I]f you stay here against [their] will, understand that it will lead to nothing good...that’s how suicide cases end up, unfortunately.”

With the worsening economic situation after the COVID-19 pandemic, things are not looking up for Belarus. The CATO Institute noted that the U.S. has imposed sanctions on state companies and targeted individuals, while the European Union closed airspace to Belarus and sanctioned the national airline Belavia. In response, the Belarusian government reduced the presence of U.S. embassy staff and USAID workers while cracking down on visa issuance. Doug Bandow of the CATO Institute believes that sanctions will be unsuccessful since they either hurt the general population or have little impact on government officials. A presence in the country is also off the table, as any sign of intrusion against a Russian neighbor would be met with great resistance.

Instead, Bandow recommends that the EU, aided by the U.S., should offer to ease restrictions on Belarus in return for concessions like releasing political prisoners. Slow but consistent concessions could be successful in turning President Lukashenka back towards Europe. Furthermore, Bandow suggests grounding the national airline Belavia and targeting anything controlled by the Belarusian government. The EU can offer to ease restraints in return for Lukashenka’s cooperation on freedom and governance issues.

Given Belarus’ position between Russia and western Europe, it is critical that the U.S. and EU use their diplomatic and political power to turn Belarus towards the West. If ignored, President Lukashenko will be forced to turn to Putin for help and Belarus will become increasingly, albeit reluctantly reliant on Russia. At a time when Russia continues to advance its coercive power over other nations, it is imperative that U.S. and EU counter with good governance and democratic institutions in Eastern Europe.