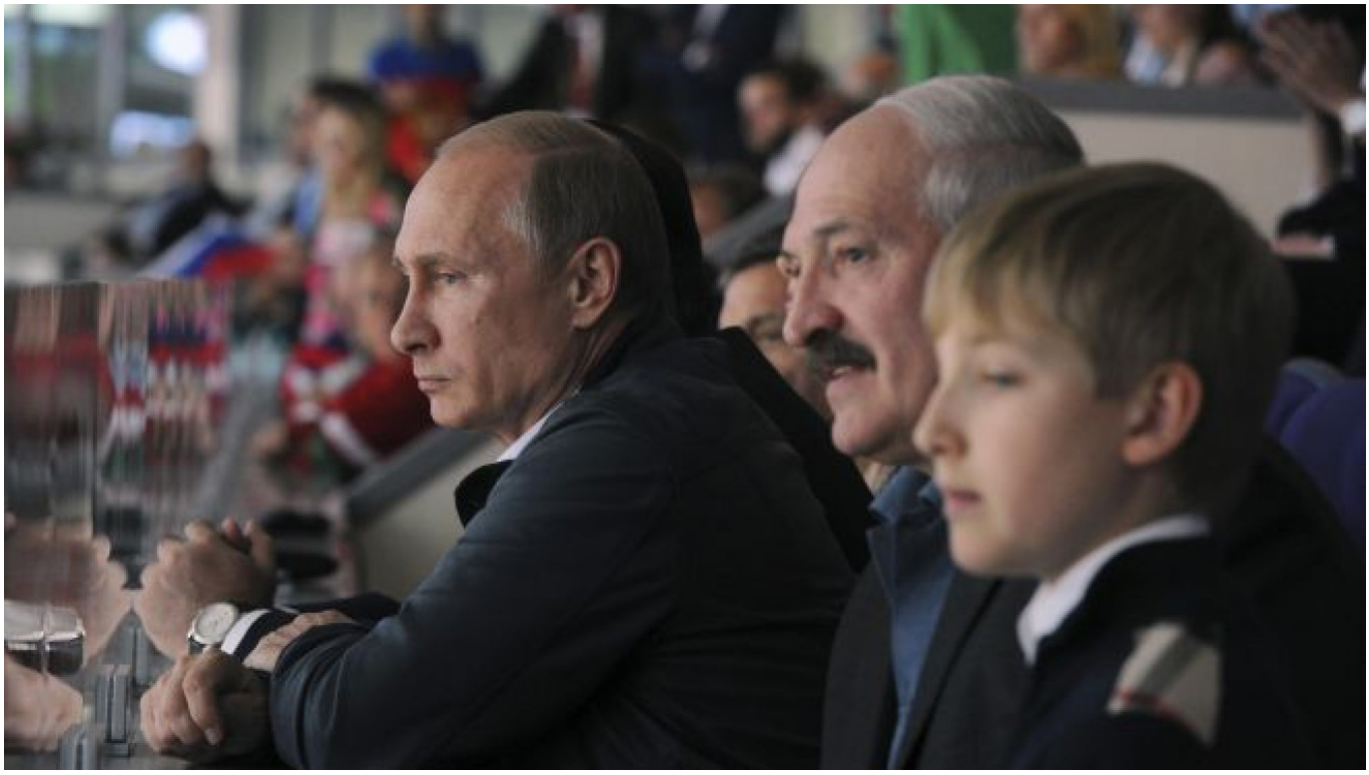
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Belarus' President Lukashenko Says West is Warming Up to Him

By Anna Dolgov

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Russian President Vladimir Putin (left), Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko (center) and his son Nikolai (right) watch the men's ice hockey World Championship final game at the Minsk Arena May 25, 2014.

Banned from traveling to much of what he derogatorily refers to as the "civilized" world, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko says his relationship with the West is finally improving — at least they are talking to him now.

"At least they already say hello to me and talk. This is also big progress," Lukashenko said in an interview with Serbian media quoted Tuesday by newspaper Belorussky Partizan.

Having ruled Belarus since 1994, Lukashenko is known for his outrageous statements much as for his suppression of human rights in Belarus.

"I won't let my government follow the civilized world," he had once reportedly proclaimed.

"What have I not seen in Europe? Everything is dirty. People are rubbing against each other," Lukashenko was quoted as saying by Komsomolskaya Pravda and other media.

The "civilized world," in turn, does not seem eager to see him, either — a series of Western sanctions imposed against Lukashenko during the past two decades include travel bans to the EU and the U.S.

When Lukashenko does leave his country, it is usually to visit countries that oppose U.S. policies, such as Syria or Venezuela.

Lukashenko has said he intends to live and die in Belarus whatever the cost. "For the sake of calm in the country," he said, "I am ready to sacrifice my own sanity."

The Belarussian leader has also sought to reassure Russia that Western sanctions imposed over Moscow's annexation of Crimea and meddling in Ukraine were no big deal.

"They are banning 20 guys from going to Europe? So what?" Lukashenko said recently, Reuters reported. "They [the West] start prevaricating, twisting and turning to save face. They are not capable of doing anything."

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Lukashenko Says Belarus Will Not Block Eurasian Economic Union

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