

# Anti-corruption party, ECLAB enrolment, White Legion released, Social Business Forum – Belarus civil society digest

SYMPA/BIPART invite to an anti-corruption party. ECLAB opens student enrolment for the 2017-2018 academic year. First Social Business Forum takes place in Belarus.

Civil Society Parallel Forum is held in Minsk ahead of the 26 annual OSCE PA session. Human rights defender becomes member of the government's penitentiary system monitoring commission.

New gender project helps Belarusian women tell their stories. All defendants in the White Legion case are released. Ministry of Economy agrees with Perspektyva's proposals.

This and more in the new edition of the Belarus civil society digest.

## Education and research

[SYMPA/BIPART invites to an anti-corruption party](#). The thematic event is held on 10 July in Minsk. The agenda includes a presentation of the Transparent Public Procurement Rating and the place of Belarus in it; an open lecture on the monitoring public procurement in Hungary, and a study on electronic public procurement. The entrance to the event is free.

[ECLAB opens accepting students for 2017-2018 academic year](#). European College of Liberal Arts in Belarus (ECLAB) is an

informal educational institution. The college suggests the courses on public history, mass culture and media, contemporary art and theatre, etc. For three years of work, the college has over 200 graduates and held over 30 public events and exhibition projects.

### **Belarus In the Trap of Slow Growth: Get Out or Settle Down?**

**seminar** will take place on 30 June in Minsk. Organised by the IPM Research Centre and the Ministry of Economy, the seminar will present the results of studies on the situation of vulnerable groups in the recession period, a new concept of regional development, IPM's macroeconomic forecast, etc. The seminar is held under the Kastryčnicki Economic Forum, KEF.



### **Study on the assessment of services for people with intellectual/mental disabilities in local communities**

was presented on 28 June in Minsk. The **study** was carried out by the Prospects for Mental Health (Lithuania) in cooperation with the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Belarus). The study analyses the existing community services and resources related to de-institutionalisation at the local level.

### **Minsk will host a conference on academic freedom in Belarus.**

The conference will take place on 26 June and discuss the situation with violations of academic freedom in Belarus, such as the expulsion of from universities for civic activities, the imposition of the state ideology, etc. The organisers are Human Rights Centre *Viasna*, Association of Belarusian Students (ZBS) and Libereco-Partnership for Human Right.

**Summer school Close Power** invites participants to Białystok to get acquainted with the system of the local government of Poland and Belarus. Organised by the *For Freedom* movement, the school includes meetings with leadership representatives, sessions about the mechanisms of decision-making at the local

level, advocacy campaigns, etc.

## Local and green activism

[City Show's Grand Finale](#). This week the City project has released the [last episode](#). In total, 8 video episodes tell how 20 activists from 13 Belarusian cities fight for the prize fund, meeting the urban challenges and implementing their ideas [in communities](#). The Grand Prix, a study trip to Brazil, went to the urban artist Bazinato who implements civic activism through art.

[V Forum of Environmental CSOs](#) will take place on 21-23 July  near Minsk. The key theme of the 2017 Forum is Public engagement. Representatives of eco-friendly organisations and initiatives are invited to participate. The Forum will raise such topics as partnership ethics, climate change, renewable energy, etc. The organisers are Green Network, EcoDom, Bahna CSO and others.

[Pain points of Minsk](#). [34mag.net](#) magazine has released a list of locations in Minsk that are under threat of destruction and need protection from urban activists. The list includes [Asmalouška](#) district and its active locals; [Baraŭliany](#), where the authorities plan to cut down five hectares of forest and others.

[Susedzi 2017 bike marathon](#). The 7th International Amateur Bike Marathon *Susedzi 2017 / Neighbors* will be held on 15 July, at the Augustów Canal, Hrodna region. Anyone can participate in the bike marathon if he/she has a bicycle and a helmet. Gender, age, and cycling experience do not matter. The organiser is VelaHrodna local CSO.

# Human rights

[Human rights defender enters the commission on the penitentiary system](#). This is a Chairperson of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee [Alieh Hulak](#). The Republican Public Monitoring [Commission](#) at the Ministry of Justice monitors compliance with the rights of convicts by institutions that carry out punishment and implement social projects aimed at the re-socialisation and adaptation of convicts.

[All defendants released in White Legion case](#). This week the remaining 14 people were released on recognisance in the so-called White Legion case; they have been charged with forming an illegal armed group, criminal art. 287. It was known about [31 people](#) who were detained on the eve of the 25 March Freedom Day protest rallies. In total, they spent behind bars 1,880 days.

[New gender visual project](#). A group of individuals has launched a visual project in Facebook allowing to Belarusian women to tell about themselves who they are, and not as they are expected to be; hashtag #такаякакесть375 (as I am). A series contains 19 stories of women, who wanted to share their looks, relationships with their breasts and bodies with the world.

## Other

[Civil Society Parallel Forum in Minsk](#). On 4 July, ahead of the 26th annual session of the OSCE PA, civil society held the parallel forum in Minsk, for the first time in the recent 13 years. The forum focused on international mechanisms in the sphere of human rights in Post-Soviet countries, the human rights situation and problems of civil society. The forum's [resolution](#) is available.

[First Belarusian Social Business Forum](#). On 28 June, on the

International Day of Social Business, Minsk hosted the First Belarusian Social Business Forum. Organised by a number of CSOs, the day was packed with events, including speeches from representatives of Belarusian social businesses, presentations from foreign guests, informal networking, and the Social Business Alley of over 20 Belarusian social companies.

[Ministry of Economy met CSO proposals](#). The officials agreed with a suggestion of the *Perspektiva* CSO that advocates the interests of small vendors. In particular, individual entrepreneurs will pay fees to the Social Protection Fund on a voluntary basis (now it's mandatory). The related draft of the presidential decree is being prepared.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

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## **Celebrating Kupallie, a pagan midsummer holiday – Belarus photo digest**

Kupallie (Midsummer) is an ancient pagan festival which marks the summer solstice – the longest day and shortest night. This holiday is one of the four most important in the pagan calendar.

When the Slavs were converted to Christianity, the Church designated the day as the feast of John the Baptist in order to destroy the holiday's pagan roots. However, nearly 1,000

years of pressure from the Church were not able to completely wipe out the celebration's pagan connotations.

When Belarus switched to the Gregorian calendar, the Church began to celebrate the holiday on 6 July, which distorted the holy day's compliance with astronomical phenomena.

Nowadays, Belarusians celebrate the holiday in two ways, both of which we present here. We will showcase the way in which enthusiasts celebrate, at night and following old traditions, and the way in which governmental Culture Centres mark the occasion.





*About the photographer: Siarhei Leskiec is a freelance photographer whose work focuses on everyday life, folk traditions, and rituals in the Belarusian countryside. Originally from Maladzeczna Region, he received a history degree from the Belarusian State Pedagogical University.*

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# Ostrogorski Academy, Ostrogorski Forum 2017, brain-drain, religiosity – Ostrogorski Centre digest

This June the Ostrogorski Centre launched the Ostrogorski Academy – a nonprofit educational project dedicated to disseminating knowledge of the humanities. The academy is the first Belarusian entirely online ‘university’, based on a series of lectures, tests, podcasts on important and engaging topics.

Ostrogorski Centre analysts discussed how Belarus’s neighbours doubt its sovereignty, brain drain, and religiosity in the country.

The Centre also held in Minsk the Ostrogorski Forum 2017, which focused on foreign policy, security, and identity.

## Ostrogorski Academy

On 19 June, the Ostrogorski Centre officially launched the [Ostrogorski Academy](#) – a nonprofit educational project dedicated to disseminating knowledge of the humanities. The academy is the first entirely online educational platform, based on a series of lectures on important and engaging topics. Each lecture series is read by well-known Belarusian academics and analysts based both abroad and in Belarus; courses also feature graphic illustrations, transcripts of lectures, e-books, podcasts, and links to additional sources of information.

# Ostrogorski Forum 2017

On 19 June, the Ostrogorski Centre held its 2nd Ostrogorski Forum, which was entitled [‘Belarus in the new environment: challenges to foreign policy, security, and identity after 2014’](#). The event and in particular remarks made by the Ukraine’s Ambassador to Belarus were widely covered in the Belarusian media, including [TUT.by](#), [zautra.by](#), [thinktanks.by](#), [Polish radio](#), and [Radio Liberty](#). You can see videos from the conference below.

## Analytics

[Siarhei Bohdan](#) showed that despite all of Minsk’s efforts to present itself as a neutral country, [some of its neighbours doubt](#) not only its neutrality but even its sovereignty and commitment to peace. Minsk’s efforts have failed to please at least some of its non-Russian neighbours, which would like to see Belarus distance itself more clearly from Moscow. The Belarusian government, however, can hardly pursue a policy other than a very cautious and incremental build-up of neutrality if it wants to survive as an independent state.

[Alesia Rudnik](#) analysed [brain-drain trends](#) in Belarus. According to official statistics, Belarus is among the few countries in the Post-Soviet region with more people coming to the country than leaving. Nevertheless, sociologists point to a discrepancy between official statistics and reality. The economic crisis, political pressure, and stagnation of education are just several reasons Belarusians are leaving the country, while the authorities do little to influence Belarusians to stay put.

Paula Borowska discussed a [recent study on religiosity](#) in Central and Eastern Europe by the Pew Research Centre with a

focus on Belarus. According to the study, the overwhelming majority of Belarusians believe in God and affiliate themselves with specific religious organisations. Nevertheless, the number of practising believers who regularly engage in religious activities is far smaller. Unexpectedly, Belarusian Protestants, not covered in the study, might be the de facto leaders on the ground.

## Comments of analysts in the media

On Polish Radio, Siarhei Bohdan argued that [Belarus is moving away from its old security doctrine](#) which ties it exclusively to the union with Russia. The Belarusian government is developing a more balanced foreign policy by creating a variety of partnerships in the area of security. It respects the interests of Russia while attempting to strengthen cooperation with the West.

On Radio Liberty, Yaraslau Kryvoi discussed [how Belarus's presidency of the Central European Initiative](#) could help the country break with its international isolation. Its presidency will garner the attention of the European community, help balance its foreign policy, and boost regional cooperation.

Also on Radio Liberty, Yaraslau Kryvoi discussed the [results of snap elections in the UK](#) and how they could affect London's negotiations with the European Union on Brexit.

Siarhei Bohdan commented for *thinktanks.by* on the [blockade of Qatar by a Saudi-led Arab coalition](#). The ultimate goal of the blockade is to put pressure on Iran, which aims to restore the military part of its nuclear programme. Belarus, which has been actively cooperating with Qatar, is losing an opportunity in the region due to the conflict.

✘ Ryhor Astapenia wrote an article for the Polish magazine *Kontakt* [discussing the fall in support for Aliaksandr Lukashenka](#) in Belarusian society.

On Polish Radio, Vadzim Smok discussed [a recent series of arrests of important Belarusian businessmen](#). In Belarus, they can not freely do business without informal arrangements with the country's leadership. According to the official version, the businessmen were tried for tax evasion, but the actual cause may also be a conflict in the system of informal relations with the authorities.

Siarhei Bohdan commented to *Deutsche Welle* on the [recent oil agreements between Belarus and Ukraine](#). The Kremlin sees all attempts of its clients to diversify oil supplies in non-economic categories of confrontation – you are either with or against Russia. At the same time, the transition to a new structure of oil supplies from Iran and Azerbaijan via Odessa to Brody and Mazyr, and from there on to Eastern Europe, could change the geopolitical map of the entire Eastern European region.

On Polish Radio, Alesia Rudnik discussed [alcohol policy in Belarus](#). The country continues to occupy top positions in the WHO's world alcohol consumption ranking. What's more, these statistics do not take into account illegal alcohol stock. Although the state claims to be working on some anti-alcohol policies, this seems to be in word only, and alcohol remains extremely affordable.

## Belarus profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following people: [Jury Karajeŭ](#), [Alieh Chusajenaŭ](#), [Iryna Abiełskaja](#), [Mikalaj Lukashenka](#), [Michail Zacharaŭ](#), [Paviel Cichanaŭ](#), [Alieh Rummo](#), [Jury Hurski](#), [Piotr Kraŭčanka](#), [Aliaksandr Džiamidaŭ](#).

We have also updated the profiles of [Siarhiej Pisaryk](#), [Aliaksandr Kosiniec](#), [Natalia Nikandrava](#), [Siarhiej Ciacieryn](#), [Siamion Šapira](#), [Fiodar Poŭny](#), [Anatol Kupryjanaŭ](#), [Viktar Marcinovič](#), [Aliaksandr Miažujeŭ](#), [Liudmila Michalkova](#), [Anatol Rusiecki](#), [Marjana Ščotkina](#), [Mikalaj Samasiejka](#), [Siarhiej Michalok](#), [Georgy Ponomarev](#).

## Belarus policy

The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update its database of policy papers on BelarusPolicy.com. The papers of partner institutions added this month include:

- Andrei Yahorau, Andrei Shutau, Mikalai Katsuk. [Civil society of Belarus: current state and development conditions](#). CET, 2017.
- Andrei Yahorau, Aliona Zujkova, Volha Lashkevich, Ihar Rasolka. [Potential and opportunities for implementing local planning mechanisms in the Belarusian regions to ensure the rights of people with disabilities](#). CET, 2017.
- Sierž Naŭrodski. [Population 50+ in Belarus: the experience of using the instruments of social harmonisation in the EU](#). CASE Belarus, 2017.
- [Monitoring Report on Implementation of Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform \(June-December 2016\)](#). Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, 2016.
- [Monitoring report on implementation of Belarus Roadmap for higher education reform \(January-May 2016\)](#). Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, 2016.

Think tanks in Belarus are encouraged to submit their research for inclusion into the database by [emailing us](#).

*The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule*

of law. Its projects include *Belarus Digest*, [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#), [BelarusProfile.com](#) and [Ostro.by](#).

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# **Belarus-Russia-EU triangle, Belarusian Yearbook 2016, Population 50+, corruption survey – digest of Belarusian analytics**

Eugene Rumor, Carnegie Endowment, argues that post-2014 Belarus is a less reliable satellite for Russia and the West should calibrate its policy accordingly. Grigory Ioffe breaks down recent harsh statements by Dalia Grybauskaitė and Svetlana Aleksievich.

OSW: energy dispute between Minsk and Moscow is not completely resolved. Yauheni Preiherman believes that Belarus' foreign policy cannot be grasped by the classic bandwagoning-balancing dichotomy.

IPM fresh survey: one third of Belarusian private businesses consider corruption widespread. CET presents an analytical overview that summarises data of sociological and sectoral studies of 2014-2017 related to the Belarusian CSOs.

This and more in the new edition of the digest of Belarusian analytics

# EU-Belarus relations

[Words matter: Belarus and its Western neighbors](#) – Grigory Ioffe analyses recent harsh public statements made by Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė and Nobel Prize winner [Svetlana Aleksievich](#). The author concludes that the government in Minsk has a better understanding than some of its Western neighbours that ongoing frustrations and regional grievances are perpetual nuisances in the overall European tug of war between the major global centres of power.

[EU should put pressure on Belarus nuclear project](#) –  EUobserver argues that the Astraviec Nuclear Power Plant, built and financed by Russia, disregards international safety standards as it is so close to the population centre. Moreover, poor safety has already led to at least six incidents and several deaths at the construction site.

[Toward a new European Union strategy for Belarus](#) – Complications have tensed the relationship between the EU and Belarus, with some arguing for continued engagement with the autocratic regime of Alexander Lukashenka, and others calling for a return to isolation and excluding Belarus from the Eastern Partnership. E-International Relations argue that clarity about the end goal is critical for framing EU strategy towards the country.

## Belarus-Russia

[Belarus's asymmetric relations with Russia: the case of strategic hedging?](#) – In his paper, [Yauheni Preiherman](#) argues that Belarus' foreign policy cannot be grasped by the classic bandwagoning-balancing dichotomy. Under the conditions of deeply embedded geostrategic asymmetries and with a view to bypassing structural restrictions of its foreign policy, Belarus pursues strategic hedging, in particular in its

relations with Russia.

[Case of Amriev: Minsk has discredited itself in eyes of international community](#) – Belarus in Focus experts, following the Murad Amriev [extradition](#), note that Belarusian authorities are attempting to demonstrate to the Kremlin their reliability as a partner in sensitive issues. However, what seems quite reasonable in Minsk, may negatively affect the country's reputation in the outer world.

[Belarus: with friends like these...](#) – Carnegie Endowment notes that since the breakdown of the post-Cold War security order and the rise in tensions between NATO and Russia, Belarus has occupied a prominent place as the critical territory between Russia and NATO. Although Russia has a strong influence in the region, its grip is less certain than often assumed.

[The story that never ends. New stages in the energy dispute between Russia and Belarus](#) – According to OSW experts, over the past few years, the situation in the area of energy cooperation of Russia and Belarus has become strained; Russia desires to optimise on their support for Belarus and the escalating recession in Belarus has forced them to apply for even more subsidies.

## Domestic politics

[Belarusian Yearbook 2016](#) – This is an annual comprehensive analysis of the key developments and current status of the main sectors of the state and society in 2016. Three processes determined the political agenda last year – the presidential election, normalisation of Belarus's relations with the West, and the economic recession. The [presentation](#) of the Yearbook was held in Minsk, on 23 June.

[Population 50+ in Belarus: the experience of using the instruments of social harmonisation in the EU](#) The working

paper analyses the demographic situation in Belarus and assesses the risks for the 50+ group to fall into the poverty line, become unemployed and the influence of age on alcohol consumption

### [Belarus's quest for self-identity aided by outside actors](#) –

Grigory Ioffe discusses the events that prove that a clear identity for Belarus as a nation is on its way to realisation. The Tell the Truth campaign was officially registered after 7 attempts. A debate over the Belarusian language has resumed. Lastly, Belarus came under renewed attacks by voices in both Russia and the West, but Belarus was able to perceive themselves as a unique and confident nation.

### [Lukashenka reformed the political system so that nothing changes](#).

Journalist [Paŭliuk Bykoŭski](#) argues that modernisation of the Belarusian political system is not present, although some micro-movements may be seen. There is a debate over whether or not any new political systems will arise.

### [Andrej Vardamacki: media situation may change within a month](#) –

In mid-May, the Belarusian Analytical Workshop presented the results of the latest national poll. [Andrej Vardamacki](#) tells Thinktanks.by what is behind a sensational surge of confidence to non-state media (from 19.4% in February to 30.4% in April), explains what topics journalists should cover and what geopolitical infantilism is.

### [How to reform Belarus' regions](#).

IdeaBy expert community has launched a landing to cover a topic dedicated to the situation in the Belarus' regions. The website collects actual data and analytics on the topic.

### [A third of the businessmen surveyed consider corruption widespread in Belarus](#).

The IPM Research Center commissioned a survey devoted to the state of the business climate in the country. Among over 400 enterprises interviewed, 22.6% of the respondents indicated widespread corruption in the country and 8.1% – pervasive corruption.

# Belarus Policy

[Belarus' civil society: current status and conditions of development](#) An analytical overview that summarises data of sociological and sectoral studies of 2014-2017 related to the Belarusian CSOs

[Belarus' civil society: current status and conditions of development](#) – Centre for European Transformation (CET) presents an analytical overview that summarises data of sociological and sectoral studies of 2014-2017 related to the Belarusian CSOs. The study covers such issues as statistics of CSOs, areas of activity, geographical distribution, public participation, as well as certain political, legal and financial conditions.

[Population 50+ in Belarus: the experience of using the instruments of social harmonisation in the EU](#) – The first part of the working paper describes the demographic changes and challenges in the world, sets basic indicators reflecting ageing of the population, as well as it reviews relevant literature available for Belarus. The second part analyses the demographic situation in Belarus and assesses the risks for the 50+ group to fall into the poverty line, become unemployed and the influence of age on alcohol consumption.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

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# Belarus extracts its own oil – Belarus photo digest

Many in Belarus took the recent discovery of new oil fields in the country as a joke: president Alexander Lukashenka had demanded earlier that the government start searching for its own black gold. According to experts, however, these deposits were already known.

It was only the complexity of extraction that had prevented the mining of these deposits before. However, officials now claim that Belarusian oil costs five times less than Russian oil, and extraction will be profitable even with world oil prices at \$20 per barrel.

Belarus extracts around 1.6m tonnes of oil on its territory annually. This is a tiny amount compared to world oil production leaders. Russia, for example, produces roughly the same amount daily. The capacities of Belarusian refineries, meanwhile, require an additional 24m tonnes per year, which the country traditionally buys from Russia.

Processing Russian oil and the export of oil products has guaranteed economic stability for Lukashenka for almost two decades. Oil production exports make up around one third of Belarus's exports, which makes the country vulnerable to global market fluctuations.

However, the Putin era brought [regular oil and gas tensions](#), which forced Belarus to seek alternative supplies. Belarus even resorted to importing oil from Azerbaijan and Venezuela in 2010-2011 and 2016, as well as re-examining its own reserves.



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*About the photographer: Siarhei Leskiec is a freelance photographer whose work focuses on everyday life, folk traditions, and rituals in the Belarusian countryside. Originally from Maladzeczna Region, he received a history degree from the Belarusian State Pedagogical University.*

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## **Belarusian-Russian visa, oil industry failure, new national idea – Belarus state press digest**

On 2 June, at a governmental meeting on oil industry problems, Alexander Lukashenka blamed managers and the government for lacking an adequate development strategy for the industry. The Belarusian oil industry showed negative results in 2016.

Belarus and Russia decided against the idea of a unified visa in favour of mutual visa recognition. Belarus should fear the informational war between Russia and the West, not a hypothetical occupation during the West 2017 military drills.

According to former foreign minister Piotr Kraŭčanka, the

national idea of Belarus should include shared values and identity, historical memory, language, consensus on domestic and foreign policy, and a market economy.

This and more in the new edition of the Belarus state press digest.

## Foreign policy and security

[Deputy State Secretary of the Union State of Belarus and Russia Alexei Kubrin reveals single visa plans.](#) The Ministries of Foreign Affairs decided to shift from a common document to mutual visa recognition. Thus, a person who receives a Belarusian visa will be able to travel to Russia with the same document. The first draft of the bilateral agreement has already been prepared, writes *Soyuznoe Veche*.

The sides decided to abandon the idea of a 'Union's Schengen' because a single visa works better only when many countries are involved. Belarus and Russia deciding to introduce a single visa would be a bureaucratic nightmare for migration and border services. Moscow and Minsk now recognise that they both provide migration security at the necessary level.

[Russia will not occupy Belarus during West 2017 military drills.](#) The head of the official Union of Journalists of Belarus Anatól Liemiašonak criticises an article by Ukrainian military expert Alexei Arestovich's, in which he argues that by 2020, Russia will occupy Belarus and launch a second offensive on Ukraine. Russia and Belarus remain close allies, and military exercises such as West 2017, scheduled for September, take place regularly. Moreover, they always involve foreign observers, writes *Respublica*.

Belarusian leadership has repeatedly stressed that the Russian military contingent will not remain on the territory of Belarus after the drills are over. The author also points out

that the EU itself can be considered occupied, as a large number of US bases and military contingents are located on its territory. Instead, Russia and Belarus need to prepare for informational warfare, as the presidential elections in Russia are approaching and Putin's enemies will do their best to end his political career. This will also threaten Belarus, the author argues.

## Economy

[Aliaksandr Lukashenka acknowledges the failure of the Belarusian oil industry in 2016.](#) Last year saw a negative trend in foreign trade in oil products. The government has invested a large amount of money in oil refinery modernisation, but without any result. Undoubtedly, global affairs played an important role, as oil prices fell two and a half times. Nevertheless, managers working in the sector failed to determine a development strategy for the industry. The government also failed to develop a clear course of action, reports *Zviazda*.

This question concerns the independence of Belarus,  Lukashenka asserted. The country must do everything to ensure its energy independence and security, but the contribution of oil refinement to the economy of Belarus, unfortunately, is declining. For example, the contribution of the two refineries is now equal to that of the national telecommunications company Beltelecom. 'Once again, I want to stress that we have failed many modernisation projects. I will not allow the President's decisions to be devaluated and neglected', the Belarusian leader said.

[Belarusian industry cannot rely on foreign investments.](#) *Belarus Segodnia* writes that in 2002-2016, Belarus received \$76bn of foreign direct investment. More than half of it (\$40bn) came from Russia, \$16bn from the UK, \$6bn from the US, and \$4bn from Switzerland and Cyprus. However, much of the

money that came through Cyprus was most likely Russian. Real western capital comes to Belarus very rarely. Even less of these funds reach the real sector of the economy, as they mostly invest in trade and services. Industry is modernised either by state funding or foreign loans.

The current plans for MAZ modernisation will hardly see any foreign financing either. Deputy Prime Minister [Uladzimir Siamaška](#) said that the government plans to invest about \$500m in the development of the plant and is looking for sources of money. The article concludes that the proper work of national industry remains a purely domestic concern, and can be supported only by Belarusian taxpayers.

## Social

[Belarus needs a new national idea.](#) Foreign Minister of Belarus from 1990 to 1994 dr. Piotr Kraučanka offered his vision for a national idea on the pages of *Belarus Segodnia*. According to him, the nation should be built on shared values and identity, market economy, historical memory, language, and consensus on domestic and foreign policy. He also brought up the possibility of introducing private land ownership.

☒ Meanwhile, the revival of the Belarusian language remains crucially important for the formation of the nation. It should be equal to the Russian language in state policies not only formally, but in practise, he argues. Belarusians need to come to a national consensus regarding foreign policy and external economic orientation with the West and East. Kraučanka also suggested recognising and honouring national activists of the past, including those of the Belarusian People's Republic, whom the current Belarusian government neglects.

[The government gradually eliminates unemployment.](#) The level of registered unemployment today is 0.9%; a year ago the figure

was 1.2%, reports *Belarus Segodnia*. The authorities achieved more than last year's goal of 50,000 new jobs, but this year's goal of 70,000 seems more challenging. However, the government may yet meet the targeted figure, as it created 15,742 jobs in the first quarter of 2017, while the plan required 15,000. The figures for each region vary, but the only region that failed to fulfil the plan was Minsk Region. Local officials explain that some new companies registered in the region have not yet managed to create production and employ staff. The other reason lies in the companies' migration to the capital.

The state press digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.

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## **Honouring translators, protecting the Soviet version of history – Belarus Foreign Policy Digest**

In May, Minsk continued its policy of following in Moscow's footsteps by exploiting World War II for political purposes. On Victory Day, Belarusian diplomats made statements about alleged 'attempts to falsify history'. Foreign minister Vladimir Makei invited diplomats posted in Minsk to a controversial historical site featuring a monument to Joseph Stalin.

The United Nations supported a Belarusian initiative to honour professional translators and interpreters. This move may also

have practical benefits for the country, which has a strong academic tradition in training professional translators. The [medical documents translation services](#) can also prove to be helpful for other translation needs.

Belarusian diplomats held largely mid-level discussions on trade and political relations with their counterparts from a dozen countries. The only scheduled top-level visit to Minsk failed to materialise when Estonia's foreign minister postponed his trip indefinitely.

## Protecting the Soviet interpretation of history

In the first half of May, Belarusian diplomats focused on events commemorating the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany during the Great Patriotic War (as World War II is [commonly known](#) in the post-Soviet space). To this day, [Victory Day celebrations](#) are the Belarusian diplomatic service's largest public relations campaign.

Belarusian diplomatic missions participated in wreath-laying ceremonies, commemorative meetings, concerts, exhibitions, and other events in forty countries alongside their counterparts from Russia and certain other CIS countries as well as local officials.

On 5 May, the permanent missions of Belarus and Russia to the United Nations organised a commemorative ceremony in New York dedicated to the 72nd anniversary of the Great Patriotic War. Tellingly, diplomats from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine refused to join other post-Soviet countries in the ceremony. They object to the use of the historical event as a [tool for achieving modern political goals](#).

A day earlier, the delegation of Belarus to the OSCE made a

statement dedicated to Victory Day on behalf of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

✘ The statement spoke strongly but vaguely against ‘attempts to falsify the history of the war and erase the tragic lessons of history from our memories’. Thus, Belarus once again sided with Russia, which uses such accusations to carry out political attacks against its neighbours, including Ukraine and the Baltic States.

On 8 May, [Vladimir Makei](#) invited the heads of diplomatic missions posted to Belarus to accompany him for a visit to Stalin’s Line. However, this ‘historical and cultural complex’ just outside Minsk has virtually no relation to the struggle of Belarusians against Nazi occupation.

Makei’s choice of venue is dubious. Belarus has many genuine historical sites and WWII memorials worth visiting for remembrance. However, Stalin’s Line features a monument to Stalin – [the butcher](#) responsible for the death and repression of hundreds of thousands of people in Belarus, including most of the country’s elite.

Belarus’s implicit support for the Soviet interpretation of the historical events of the mid 20th century will hardly serve to strengthen its ties with its non-Russian neighbours or improve relations with the Western world.

## **An uncontroversial initiative succeeds**

On 24 May, Belarus’s permanent mission to the United Nations brought to fruition a new multilateral initiative on honouring professional translation ‘as a trade and an art’. The UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on the role of

professional translation in connecting nations and fostering peace, understanding, and development.

Twenty-seven nations co-sponsored the document, which Belarus initiated and drafted together with Azerbaijan. The resolution declared 30 September International Translation Day.

✘ Unlike certain other Belarusian initiatives, such as on [protecting the traditional family](#), this idea met with no resistance from other members of the UN. The particular attention Belarus pays to this profession is no coincidence. Many senior Belarusian diplomats, including the country's ambassador to the UN Andrei Dapkiunas, who introduced the resolution, hold their first and sometimes only academic degree in professional translation.

Many Belarusians work as translators or interpreters in the Russian section of the UN translation service. The Belarusian State Linguistic University signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations on training candidates for competitive language examinations.

Belarus intends to further develop this idea by initiating an international instrument that would enhance the legal protection of translators and interpreters in situations of armed conflict and post-conflict peace-building.

## **A multi-directional approach to boosting trade**

As the summer holidays approach, the Belarusian foreign ministry is intensifying its political and trade consultations with countries from different regions of the world. However, the only top-level foreign dignitary to visit Belarus in May was the outgoing Serbian president.

Belarusian officials received officials from Turkmenistan,

Tajikistan, and Egypt in Minsk on 10, 18, and 25 May respectively for meetings of bilateral trade and economic commissions. They also met in the same format with Czech officials in Prague on 16-17 May.

✘ Belarusian exports to the Czech Republic, Tajikistan, and Egypt dropped dramatically in 2016 compared to 2015. However, this trend was partially reversed in January-March 2017, when Belarus's deliveries to Egypt and Tajikistan increased manifold (4.2 and 2.4 times against the same period of 2016). Exports to the Czech Republic have continued to decline.

In [relations with Turkmenistan](#), the Belarusian government is sticking to its declared goal of a \$500m turnover, encouraged by a modest recovery in 2016 (up to \$120.6m). Belarus is now pitching diesel trains, railway cars, and lifts to Turkmenistan. While the two countries have problems with currency conversion in reciprocal payments, Belarus is considering buying cotton under barter arrangements.

Also in May, Belarus held consultations on the deputy-foreign-minister level with Pakistan and Turkmenistan in Minsk, Croatia in Zagreb, and Greece in Athens. Working-level contacts took place in Minsk with Finnish and Australian diplomats. The negotiating partners focused on trade and investment issues as well as cooperation in international organisations.

The Belarusian foreign ministry had also announced a working visit to Minsk by Sven Mikser, Estonia's foreign minister, on 23 May. The Estonian diplomat was due to meet with his Belarusian counterpart as well as unnamed 'leaders of the government and the parliament of the Republic of Belarus'.

However, the visit was postponed indefinitely without much fuss. The press service of Estonia's foreign ministry explained the cancellation by blaming 'schedule changes in

Belarus'. Interestingly, Vladimir Makei was in Minsk on 23 May.

In the summer months, Belarus is expected to focus more on multilateral diplomacy as it prepares to host a Minsk meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Central European Initiative.

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## **Ostrogorski Forum 2017, Civil Bologna Committee, security cooperation – Ostrogorski Centre digest**

In May 2017, analysts at the Ostrogorski Centre discussed why the authorities continue to arrest Belarus's top businessmen, who benefits from the alcoholisation of Belarus, and how Belarus can maintain security cooperation with both Russia and the West.

The Centre is preparing a conference entitled 'Belarus in the new environment: challenges to foreign policy, security, and identity after 2014', to be held on 19 June. The conference will promote the development of professional and respectful dialogue between experts with different political views.

We have also added the Civil Bologna Committee as a new partner of the [BelarusPolicy.com](http://BelarusPolicy.com) database. From now on we will be adding papers on problems with compliance to European standards faced by Belarusian higher education.

# Analytics

Vadzim Smok discusses why the authorities [continue to arrest](#) Belarus's top businessmen. Being close to Lukashenka is by no means a guarantee of safety for oligarchs, and many prefer to register their companies and reside abroad. Those who cannot do so must demonstrate their support for the authorities in various ways and never make a misstep.

As the Belarusian state system is dominated by the security services, they spend their time and resources over-zealously pursuing white-collar criminals rather than improving the business environment in the country. This causes serious damage to the investment climate. In the absence of strong rule of law, large businesses continue to depend on patronage networks and informal arrangements with the country's leadership.

Alesia Rudnik analyses [who is benefiting from the alcoholisation](#) of Belarus. Belarus is perhaps the world's second booziest nation. Meanwhile, alcohol prices are considerably lower than in neighbouring western countries. Despite the government's attempt to set up a programme for prevention of alcoholism and rehabilitation of alcoholics, Belarus has so far failed to combat heavy drinking.

Moreover, alcohol prices tend to decrease right before  elections or during economic crises. Cheap alcohol in Belarus has become a tool to neutralise activism and numb national consciousness. By decreasing alcohol prices, authorities guarantee themselves more loyalty and support.

Siarhei Bohdan argues that Belarus can [maintain security cooperation](#) with both Russia and the West. It would behove the Belarusian government to build a more balanced and neutral policy by establishing more diversified partnerships in the security realm. At the same time, Minsk realises the

sensitiveness of this issue for Moscow, and agrees to what is most important to the Russian leadership, such as the forthcoming *West-2017* exercises.

This, however, does not mean that the Kremlin can dictate whatever it wants. On the contrary, Belarus is reshaping its national security policies and can still persuade Russia to help it with military equipment.

## Ostrogorski Forum 2017

On 19 June, the Ostrogorski Centre plans to hold a conference entitled [‘Belarus in the new environment: challenges to foreign policy, security, and identity after 2014’](#). It will focus on three aspects: foreign policy, security, and identity.

The conference will promote the development of professional and respectful dialogue between experts with different political views. Each panel will include speakers from both pro-government and independent communities, with journalists of leading Belarusian mass media sources as moderators.

The conference will be broadcast live. Videos from the conference will be forwarded to stakeholders, including state bodies, media, and civil society organisations. Videos from the 2016 Ostrogorski Forum are [available here](#). To register for the 2017 Forum, please fill in [this form](#).

## Comments in the media

Alesia Rudnik discusses the opposition and pro-government [youth organisations in Belarus](#) on Polish radio. The number of members of youth organisations in both camps remains a mystery due to their unclear institutional structures. Many people are members only formally. Belarusians do not actively express

their civil position, and in this regard young people are no different from the rest of the population. This poses a significant problem for Belarusian civil society.

Siarhei Bohdan argues that maintaining good relations with Kiev is [strategically important for the Belarusian government](#) on Polish radio. Belarus seeks to increase trade with Ukraine and is establishing cooperation in various fields: energy (oil supply, electricity), border issues, and military projects (helicopters, missile technology). This proves that there is mutual understanding between Minsk and Kiev and even a tacit alliance at the highest level.

✘ On Polish radio, Igar Gubarevich discusses the [effect of Lukashenka's press conference](#) on Chinese journalists. The Belarusian leader organised the event because he is concerned with the low level of Belarusian exports to China and the lack of progress with the Belarusian-Chinese technology park. After the conference, Chinese journalists will prepare pieces for the national and regional media, but this will hardly have any influence on the Chinese leadership.

Ryhor Astapenia discusses on Polish radio why Minsk is [keen to develop relations](#) with China. Alexander Lukashenka has repeatedly said that China is one of the poles of global politics, along with the US and Russia. Of these three poles, only China does not conditionalise its relations with political demands. China is ready to cooperate with Minsk on economic and political issues without demanding democratisation or recognition of the Crimea annexation.

On Radio Liberty, Yaraslau Kryvoi discusses how the results of the first round of presidential elections in France [were perceived in the UK](#). Many Brexit supporters see the very likely victory of Macron as a bad sign. On the other hand, they understand that Macron is a pragmatist and will put pragmatic interests above ideology. Traditionally, France is much more interested in its former colonies, and French policy

towards Belarus will not change significantly under the new president.

# Belarus Policy

The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update its database of policy papers on BelarusPolicy.com. The papers of partner institutions added this month include:

[Implementation of the Roadmap requirements in the draft Code of Education.](#) Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, 2017.

[4th Monitoring Report on Implementation of Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform \(Oct 2016-Jan 2017\).](#) Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, 2017.

Yana Ustsinenka. [The analysis of reforming higher education policy in Belarus in the period from 2010 to 2016.](#) BIPART, 2017.

Dzmitry Kruk. [Monetary policy and financial stability in Belarus: current state, challenges and prospects.](#) BEROC, 2017.

Uladzimir Paplyka, Halina Kasheuskaya. [Public procurement from a single source in the Republic of Belarus: analysis and recommendations.](#) BIPART, 2017.

Think tanks in Belarus are encouraged to submit their research for inclusion into the database by [emailing us](#).

*The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its projects include Belarus Digest, [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#), [BelarusProfile.com](#) and [Ostro.by](#).*

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# Milex 2017: Belarus's military exhibition – Belarus Photo Digest

On 20-22 May, Minsk hosted Milex 2017, its eighth exhibition of arms and military equipment. This year, the exhibition hosted more than 140 official guests from Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, China, and Kazakhstan.

Military officials from more than 27 countries were in attendance. However, the exhibition's results remain somewhat mysterious. Manufacturers have repeatedly stated that they do not want to disclose their partners or the amount of weapons they sell. Therefore, most contracts happen behind closed doors and do not appear in the press.

Belarus ranks 18th on the list of the world's largest weapons exporters. Both the authorities and independent experts agree that the country has a strong military industry. This is due not only to the country's Soviet legacy, but also to a mature market with many private companies. According to State Military Industrial Committee chairman [Siarhiej Hurulioŭ](#), Belarus is capable of making any weapon in the world right now.

'This is a risky business, organised by former employees of the defence industry and retired military officials', says military expert [Aliaksandr Aliesin](#). 'They are quick to take up the novelties which state-owned enterprises do not want to risk dealing with.'

The exhibition effectively demonstrates how the Belarusian defence industry is developing as well as the partnerships it

is forging. According to Siarhiej Hurulioŭ, weapons and equipment based on new technologies, IT, robotics, and drones are in the highest demand.

The main buyers of Belarusian products are the countries of the Persian Gulf, Indonesia, and China. Remarkably, the role of China in joint military projects is growing year by year. One of the results of this cooperation is the Belarusian multiple-launch rocket system Polonaise.





*About the photographer: Siarhei Leskiec is a freelance photographer whose work focuses on everyday life, folk traditions, and rituals in the Belarusian countryside. Originally from Maladzieczna Region, he received a history degree from the Belarusian State Pedagogical University.*

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## **Realists winning, Russian factor poll, Belarusisation increased – digest of Belarusian analytics**

Only 5% of Belarusians want Belarus to become a part of Russia according to the fresh polling data by the Belarusian

Analytical Workshop.

Chris Miller sees Moscow's plans to make Belarus a cornerstone of its Eurasian integration project as unsuccessful.

Grigory Ioffe argues that realists winning the tug of war with idealists, both in the Belarusian government and in the opposition.

The opposition is split on street protests tactics. Belarusization has not ended and even increased, argues Alieh Trusaŭ.

This and more in the new edition of digest of Belarusian analytics.

## **Belarus-Russia relations and Eurasian integration**

[Belarus: Sitting on Two Chairs Is What the Doctor Ordered](#) – Grigory Ioffe considers Belarus' sitting-on-two-chairs foreign policy. The expert believes that there is no mischief, just a genuine desire to sustain itself as an independent state in a problematic neighbourhood known as the historical 'bloodlands'.

[Realists Winning Tug of War Over Belarus](#) – Grigory Ioffe observes the ascending realism in Belarus in the growing understanding domestically that a) so-called Eurasian integration is no universal master key, but rejecting it altogether is harmful and unrealistic; and b) improving relations with both the EU and the US is vital because the sources of technological progress and healthy economic strategies are in the West.

[Only 5% of Belarusians want Belarus to become a part of](#)

[Russia](#). However, the Russian factor of impact on Belarus remains: 63% of the Belarusians positively assess the annexation of Crimea; the influence of Russian media on residents of Belarus is 60%. The fresh polling data by the Belarusian Analytical Workshop were announced at the round table, organised by the [Minsk Dialogue](#) expert initiative.

[Belarus and the Failure of the Russian World](#) – Chris Miller sees Moscow's plans to make Belarus a cornerstone of its Eurasian integration project as unsuccessful. Given its culture, history, and economy, no country is a more natural member of the 'Russian world' than Belarus. But over the past two years, no country has done more to demonstrate the weakness of Russian efforts to reestablish hegemony in the post-Soviet space.

## Spring 2017 mass protests

[The Opposition Is Arguing About Street Tactics](#) – Naviny.by analyses two current tactics of street activities of the Belarusian opposition – sanctioned and unauthorised actions – and concludes: in fact, there is no single solution. If, as a result of proper use of a particular political situation, the action turns out to be really mass, then, regardless of its status, it would become an important event on the political scene.

[Situation in the Field of National Security and Defence of Belarus. March 2017](#)  – According to the monthly Belarus Security Blog, the most important event in March was a wave of repression by the authorities, which was characterised by extreme chaos. The Belarusian leader managed to choose the worst from all bad decisions in the field of domestic policy. It jeopardised the prospects for Belarus' relations with the West.

[How Belarusians will rhyme 'Lukashenka, go away!' Next Time?](#) –

Naviny.by discuss the situation when Belarus authorities have managed to decrease a wave of street protests, but they do not have a program to make the population's life normal. Moreover, now the government itself, with its unsuccessful absurd decisions becomes 'the main factor of destabilisation.'

## Other

### [Belarusian Courts Don't Speak In Belarusian On the Internet](#) –

Legal Transformation Centre *Lawtrend* releases a study, which highlights the current judiciary state and problems of communication of activities on its websites and outlines the possible ways to improve the situation. The researchers hope that the Supreme Court, that is to become a common portal for the entire judicial system, will take into account the study's recommendations.

### [Freedom Of Association And Legal Conditions For Non-Commercial Organisations in Belarus in 2016](#) –

Legal Transformation Centre and Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs release an annual review which highlights the most important trends and developments related to the public associations and other forms of civil society in Belarus in 2016. Namely, the authors notice a trend of switching of CSOs to fundraise money inside the country.

### [Popular Myths About the Belarusian Economy](#) –

Grigory Ioffe analyses some common stereotypes of the Belarusian economy. For example, it is true that Belarusian state-run enterprises produce a larger fraction of the country's gross domestic product compared to its post-Soviet neighbours. However, Belarus significantly outperforms Russia and Ukraine on social indicators such as morbidity, mortality and social infrastructure.

### [Belarusisation Has Not Ended and Even Increased](#) –

[Alieh Trusaŭ](#), Chairperson of the Society of Belarusian language believes that dispersal of Belarusian protests in February and

March did not affect Belarusisation – on the contrary, it started to grow: a Belarusian-language band presented the country at the Eurovision Song Contest, the number of hours in the Belarusian in school increased etc.

## Belarus policy

[Public procurement from a single source in Belarus: analysis and recommendations](#) The paper explores legal regulation of procurement from one source and procedures for their conduct, official statistics on public procurement..

[Public procurement from a single source in Belarus: analysis and recommendations.](#) The paper explores legal regulation of procurement from one source and procedures for their conduct, official statistics on public procurement, official information on procurement from a single source and public discussion of the issue. Since procurement from one source is one of the procedures of public procurement, the scope of this research includes legal regulation common for all procedures.

During the analysis of the data the authors also focused on the interrelation of procurement issues from one source with other issues of legal regulation, including antitrust regulation, protection and development of market competition, antidumping policy during tenders and other.

[Monetary policy and financial stability in Belarus: current state, challenges and prospects.](#) This work is devoted to the current state of monetary policy and banking sector of Belarus. The paper shows that in the 4th quarter of 2016 – 1 quarter of 2017 significant changes in the monetary environment took place, the most important of which is the convergence of inflation expectations with actual inflation. Along with this favourable trend, a number of problems of the banking sector continue growing and threatening financial stability. Among them are bad debts and a systemic excess of

liquidity in the banking system.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

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## **Belarus and One Belt, One Road, alternative oil, CSTO – Belarus state press digest**

At the One Belt, One Road summit in Beijing, Lukashenka suggested that the project could be used not only as a trading route, but also as a basis for promoting ideas and creating joint innovations. □

According to foreign minister Vladimir Makei, during its CSTO chairmanship Belarus will focus on positioning the organisation in the international arena and strengthening its interaction with both the UN and the OSCE.

Belarus seeks to diversify its oil supplies, but refuses to mention alternative sources as long as negotiations are underway.

Experts analyse the consequences of flights departing from Minsk being assigned to the international sectors of Russian airports. Moscow introduced this security measure claiming that Belarus's five-day visa-free regime threatens Russian security.

This and more in the new edition of the Belarus State Press Digest.

## Foreign policy

[Belarusian President takes part in the 'One belt, one road' in Beijing.](#) According to Alexander Lukashenka, this global initiative is not only reshaping the world's economic map and creating new growth points, it also represents a new type of international framework. This means integration designed to harmonise all economic institutions and remove barriers to the free movement of goods, investment, and people.

At the forum, Lukashenka outlined his ideas for deepening and expanding cooperation on the Eurasian continent. In particular, Minsk suggested using the One Belt, One Road structure not only as a trading route, but also as a basis for promoting ideas and creating joint innovations. The Chinese-Belarusian Great Stone Industrial Park could serve as a model.

The Belarusian leader also held talks with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Chairman of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, and Chairman of the Board of the Chinese Corporation CITIC Group Chang Zhenming, reports *Belarus Segodnia*.

[High-level Chinese officials visit Belarus.](#) Over the past few weeks, Minsk hosted a number of high-ranking Chinese officials. Most notable was a parliamentary delegation headed by Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and the third most powerful man in the Chinese hierarchy. This level of political contact is evidence of the authenticity of the strategic partnership between the two countries, writes *The Minsk Times*.

Currently, Belarus is implementing over 30 investment projects financed by Chinese loans, worth circa \$6bn. The Great Stone

Industrial Park is the largest of them. Lukashenka insists that only high-tech companies with guaranteed sales markets should become residents of the park. Currently, eight residents are registered within the park, including China Merchants Group, Huawei, and ZTE. An imbalance in Belarusian-Chinese trade, however, is raising concern within the Belarusian government. In 2016 it exceeded \$2.5bn.

[Makei: Belarus will never abandon Russia or threaten neighbouring states.](#) *Soyuznoe Veche* published quotes from Belarusian foreign minister [Uladzimir Makei](#) concerning Belarus-Russia integration. Makei is sure that integration will continue to deepen despite attempts by third parties to destroy them for profit. During its CSTO chairmanship, Belarus will attempt to strengthen the organisation's weight in the world in several areas.

The first is more precise coordination of foreign policy activity. The second is stronger positioning of the CSTO in the international arena and increased interaction with the UN and the OSCE. The minister also commented on concerns from western countries regarding the upcoming military drills West 2017. Some fear Russia is preparing an attack on neighbouring states. However, Belarus has never threatened anyone and will certainly not start now. The country contributes to the stability and security of the region.

## Economy

[Belarus seeks to diversify its oil supplies.](#) *Respublica* interviewed the Chairman of the oil concern Belnaftachim, [Ihar Liašenka](#). Over the past 20 years, the concern's production volume has tripled in dollar equivalent. The concern accounts for about 20 percent of industrial production and a third of Belarusian exports. Recently, it has experienced a difficult period due to supply shortage during the Belarus-Russia [oil and gas dispute](#). However, it has also gained experience, which

it is taking into account as it forms a long-term development strategy.

Recent disagreements forced the concern to look closely at the possibility of sourcing oil from other regions. The chairman underlines that diversification is conducted not against Russia's interest, but serves as an airbag for the economic sustainability of any industry. He refused to name any country or ways Belarus could receive the alternative oil, as negotiations are underway and their content remains a trade secret.



[Experts analyse the consequences of flights originating from Minsk being assigned to the international sectors of Russian airports.](#) Russians have been carrying out border control of aircraft and passengers arriving from and departing for Belarus since 15 May. Flights from Minsk have been transferred to the international sector of Russian airports. Previously they had been treated like domestic flights, writes *Belarus Segodnia*.

Passengers will now have to show their boarding pass and ID. The Minsk airport and Belavia have made clear that how passengers will be treated in Belarus has not changed, despite new rules in Russia.

## Culture

[Russification was the result of the industrialisation of Belarus, not Russian politics.](#) *Zviazda* spoke with famous Belarusian historian and senator of the Council of the Republic [Ihar Marzaliuk](#) about the reason why nationalism failed to take hold in Belarus. Belarus is a link between East and West with inherent national and confessional tolerance. Belarus was the only country in Europe where anti-Semitism did

not emerge.

The Absolute Communist Supreme Council of the 11th Convocation elaborated a soft and very precise law on the revival of the Belarusian language. The entire ruling elite, understanding the delicacy and complexity of the problem, supported it. However, the nationalist faction in the council of the 12th convocation did immense harm to it, albeit in a Bolshevik manner.

Russification came to Belarus not from Russia, but as a result of the industrialisation of Belarus in the postwar period. Given the multinational nature of the USSR, the intelligentsia used Russian as the language of mass communication, which was also scientifically more advanced.

The state press digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.

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## **Belarus in Focus winners, cycling festival, Europe Week in Minsk – Belarus civil society digest**

Belarus in Focus 2016 journalistic contest awards winners. Viva Rovar! cycling carnival takes place in Minsk. BAJ announces Free Word winners on Press Freedom Day.

Europe Week is held in Minsk. First episode of the City urban

activism reality show is released. School of Managers will train new managers for CSOs. People detained and convicted during the May Day protests across Belarus.

Integration Forum announced in Viciebsk under the 5<sup>th</sup> Accessibility Week. This and more in the new edition of Belarus civil society digest.

## Journalism and media

[Awards ceremony of the winners of Belarus in Focus 2016 held on 12 May](#). This is an international [competition](#) for journalists writing about Belarus in international media. This year the contest took place for the sixth time and organised by the Belarus in Focus Information Office in partnership with Press Club Belarus and the International Visegrad Fund.

[Free Word winners announced on Press Freedom Day](#). On 3 May, Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) traditionally announced the winners of the BAJ professional contest for journalists *Volnaje Slova* (Free Word – in English). On the same day, the exhibition of the winners of the [World Press Photo](#) was launched at the gallery of CECH.

[Belarus Internet Governance Forum](#) will take place on 17 May in Minsk. It is a unique platform for multistakeholder dialogue aiming at finding the best ideas for the progression of Internet in Belarus. The forum attracts representatives from government, business, civil society, network service providers, etc. One of the forum's organisers is Human Constanta CSO.

[Europe Week in Minsk](#). The *Dzieja* initiative, *Students For Liberty Belarus* and *Belarusian Students Association* organise a series of events to mark the anniversary of the proclamation of the Schuman Declaration (9 May 1950), which is considered the beginning of European integration. The organisers promise

an intense program aimed at increasing the values of a united Europe in Belarus.

## **Regional and grassroots activism**

[The online platform Zvarot.by launches the 3rd Advocacy School](#). The School aims to train civic activists to independently plan and conduct advocacy campaigns at the local and national level using proper tools and methods. The organisers pay a particular attention to the practical focus on human rights activities. Deadline for applications is 17 May.

[School of Managers](#). The Association for Life Long Education (ALLE) invites to the School of Managers educational course. The School aims to improve the competencies of 20 managers of regional CSOs in developing and promoting civil and non-formal education programmes, using modern communication and advocacy channels. Deadline for applications is 14 May.

[The first episode of the City show released](#). The City is a [project](#) that teaches the activists to improve the cities and shoots all the process as popular series. During 8 episodes, 20 participants from 13 Belarusian cities fight for the prize fund and the Grand Prix of a study tour to Brazil. The participants meet various challenges and implement their urban projects. New episodes are scheduled every Thursday.

[Pool of Youth Work educational programme](#). Organised by [Fialta](#) Youth Centre, the programme provides an opportunity for young activists to learn professionally conducting trainings, workshops, international exchanges and coaching youth initiatives. The programme is based on the best international practices of non-formal education. The course will be held

from 6 May to 30 July in Minsk.

# Rights of the people with special needs

[Integration Forum in Viciebsk](#). On 17-18 May, Viciebsk will host the Republican Integration Forum *Accessible Job and Employment for People with Disabilities*. The forum is organised by CSOs, including the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, under the [Fifth Accessibility Week](#).

[Belarusian Children's Hospice NGO calls for local initiatives projects](#). The call aims to support the rights and needs of children with serious illnesses and disabilities, as well as their families. Two initiatives will be selected with a maximum budget with EUR 5K per initiative. Deadline is 25 May.

## Mass protests

[People detained and convicted in May Day protests across Belarus](#) . At least 15 people were detained by the police before and after [May 1's protests](#) held across Belarus, including [journalists](#) and opposition leaders [Mikalaj Statkievič](#) and [Paviel Sieviaryniec](#). The demonstration in Minsk was banned by the city authorities but attended by several hundred people.

[Analytical review of detentions in Minsk in March 2017](#) (infographics). In March-April, the Human Rights Centre *Viasna* processed 130 questionnaires from individuals whose rights were violated for exercising freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. In particular, 80 detainees claimed the use of physical force by police officers, 68 – special munitions without a cause on the part of a detainee.

# Other

[47 contracts were signed with CSOs](#) for the first three months of 2017 to provide services under the state social contracting. Over 1,000 people received the social services from CSOs supported from the state budget. State social contracting is an innovative form of interaction between local authorities and CSOs, developing in Belarus since 2014.

[Imena opens a unique art exhibition about Belarusians](#). From May 11, the Minsk space *Korpus* hosts an exhibition that presents 10 installations made by Belarusian artists together with the characters of the online magazine *Imena*. It writes about Belarusians and social projects that need help. During the year, *Imena* launched 22 social projects and collected \$150K to support them and its own activity.

[Cycling carnival Viva Rovar!](#) takes place in Minsk on 13 May: thousands of bicyclists will drive along the Pieramožcaŭ Avenue, and then enjoy a festival in Victory Park. On 12 May, for the first time Minsk hosts an International [conference](#) on the development of cycling in cities. Coordinators of the event are the Cycling Club Minsk and the Minsk Cycling Society.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

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# The first Belarusian river cruise: Belaja Ruś – Belarus Photo Digest

In recent years, the Belarusian leadership has been attempting to create a positive image of the country to attract foreign visitors. So far, Belarus seems to appeal mostly [to Russian tourists](#).

Russians perceive Belarus as a nostalgic holdout of the USSR with quality food and good cheap 'Soviet' service. They see tourism in Belarus more as a trip down 'memory lane'. For several decades, most Belarusian health resorts have relied on Russian tourists for business.

However, the launch of the cruise ship Belaja Ruś is a new pearl for Belarusian tourism. This motor ship is a restored and altered OS-2 technical vessel. Its restoration lasted more than five years, as the project was short of funds, and the total cost of the project remains a secret to this day. Local workers at the ship-repair yard jokingly call it the Titanic.

Local water channels still lack interesting and distinctive infrastructure, but hopefully development will gain momentum as more tourists arrive. The cruise's route will run along the Dnieper-Bug Canal on the rivers Bug, Muchaviec, Pina, and Pripyat, from the city of Brest to Mazyr over 8 days. Over the course of the voyage, tourists will relax and visit [tourist attractions](#) during the daytime and cruise the river at night.

✘ The interior of the ship room. Decorations are mostly of Belarusian origin.

✘ Open deck for evening gatherings and fresh air.

✘ The honorary launch of the ship's maiden voyage took place at the Pinsk shipyard. Local officials and plant workers were invited to the ceremony. Speakers expressed their hope that this new tourist itinerary would be profitable enough for the plant to finally regain its former glory and attract new orders for ship manufacturing.

✘ Officials speaking at the shipyard near the skeleton of a new ship.

✘ In accordance with long-standing tradition, a bottle of champagne was smashed against the ship board. The bottle only shattered on the third attempt.

✘ A blessing by an Orthodox priest is an indispensable part of any ship launching ceremony.

✘ Officials did not reveal the final cost of the ships, saying only that the works lasted for many years and it is hard to calculate the costs.

✘ The city of Pinsk has its own river station with distinctive wooden architecture.

✘ View of Pinsk from the Pina river.

✘ Shipyard workers stare bemusedly at the first tourists.

✘ Although many small technical ships sail along the Pina, the appearance of a tourist motor ship has sparked unprecedented interest.

✘ The captain and his crew set out on their first trial voyage.

✘ A notable marketing move: the name of the ship, Belaja Ruś, is the name of an official pro-government public association, which unites Lukashenka's power vertical and is widely referred to in official ideology.

✘ Local officials and journalists were the first to embark on the ship's trial voyage. Tourists have been able to book cruises since 29 April.

*About the photographer: Siarhei Leskiec is a freelance photographer whose work focuses on everyday life, folk traditions, and rituals in the Belarusian countryside. Originally from Maladzieczna region, he received a history degree from the Belarusian State Pedagogical University.*

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# A snubbed Makei and an axis of good – Belarus foreign policy digest

Belarus's recent regression in the human rights field has failed to visibly affect the intensity of its contacts with Europe. However, European governments seem to have taken note of the criticism they received for their initially meek reaction and have been voicing their concerns both publicly and (more often) privately.

Lukashenka's 'indiscriminate and inappropriate' reaction to dissent may have affected the chances of Ambassador Alena Kupchyna to become the next OSCE head. Nevertheless, her personal qualities and professional qualifications may still play in her favour.

Ukraine's security concerns and Belarus's economic interests have finally led to an overdue meeting between the two countries' presidents. Both leaders appear to be satisfied with the outcome of this encounter, which was held in an unorthodox format.

## Europe talks to Belarus but 'snubs' Makei

The harsh suppression of popular protests in the country by the Belarusian authorities has seemingly failed to affect the dynamics of Belarus's relations with Europe. Regular contacts between Belarusian and European officials, which [continued despite active repression](#), continued unabated in April.

After 25 March, when over 700 peaceful protesters were

detained in Minsk, Belarusian senior diplomats held political consultations with their counterparts from Latvia in Riga, Norway in Oslo, and Estonia in Minsk. Meanwhile, the country's puppet parliament received parliamentary delegations from Poland and Estonia.

On 31 March, the Belarusian foreign ministry held the second round of trade dialogue with a delegation from the European Commission. Two weeks later, in Minsk, the Belarusian government negotiated the development of business ties with Kai Mykkänen, Finland's Minister for Foreign Trade and Development.

✘ Foreign minister [Vladimir Makei](#) attended a meeting of foreign ministers of Eastern Partnership countries and the Visegrad Group on 12 April. Makei took advantage of the event in Warsaw to hold formal meetings with his counterparts from Croatia, Romania, and Ukraine, as well as European commissioner Johannes Hahn.

Probably the most significant event for Belarus's relations with Europe during this period was the third meeting of the Belarus-EU Coordination Group held on 3-4 April. Thomas Mayr-Harting, Managing Director for Europe and Central Asia of the European External Action Service, led the EU delegation to Minsk.

The delegation apparently took note of the widespread criticism of the EU's feeble reaction to recent developments in Belarus. Its post-meeting press release stressed that 'the actions applied by the authorities... were indiscriminate and inappropriate and... in contradiction with Belarus' stated policy of democratisation and its international commitments'.

Belarusian diplomats admit in private conversations that, while their European partners show no intention of scaling down bilateral dialogue, they have become highly critical of the recent relapse of the Belarusian authorities. As [Alexander](#)

[Lukashenka](#) confirmed it in his recent address to the parliament. 'Makei is already afraid to go to [the West]. He's been taken down a notch all over... Wherever he goes, he gets snubbed', he complained.

## Belarus's ambitions at the OSCE

Senior officials at Belarus's foreign ministry, as well as the country's ambassadors, have been striving to enlist the support of their foreign partners for the candidacy of [Ambassador Alena Kupchyna](#) to the position of the OSCE Secretary General.

In the race for the Organisation's top position, Kupchyna is competing with former foreign minister of Finland Ilkka Kanerva, Czech politician and former European Commissioner Štefan Füle, and former Swiss ambassador to the OSCE Thomas Greminger.

The appointment requires the consensus of all 57 member states. This means that in order to get the post, a candidate should not necessarily be the most popular generally, but rather the least objectionable to the most influential member states.

Thus, Füle's candidacy has a serious handicap, as he remains on Russia's travel 'black list' in connection with his activities as the European commissioner. Meanwhile, Moscow has formally endorsed Kupchyna's candidacy.

Kupchyna, now Belarus's permanent representative to the  OSCE, made a lot of friends in Europe (especially in its Eastern, Central, and Southern parts) during her tenure as deputy foreign minister in 2012 – 2016. Her European colleagues know her as a democratically-minded person and a

strong proponent of closer ties between Belarus and Europe.

Moreover, Ambassador Kupchyna's gender may be an advantage over all other candidates. Many European governments attach importance to greater representation of women in top international positions.

However, recent actions of the Belarusian government have dealt a definite blow to Kupchyna's chances. The [harsh response to the protests](#) has interrupted the positive dynamics in the evolution of Belarus's image in Europe.

Nevertheless, all is not yet lost for the Belarusian candidate. Other important posts need to be filled, and Kupchyna may become a part to a package agreement. A decision is expected by late May – early June.

## **'Kyiv-Minsk, an axis of goodness'**

The leaders of Belarus and Ukraine have finally found a suitable pretext and format for meeting. This will be their first meeting since the Ukrainian president's trip to Belarus in February 2015 for the summit that would result in the Minsk-II agreements

On 26 April, Alexander Lukashenka and Petro Poroshenko met at the site of Chernobyl NPP to commemorate those who died in the [Chernobyl disaster](#). Then, they went over the border to the village of Liaskavichy in Belarus for a working meeting.

Lukashenka's recent statements about Ukraine as [a source of militants and weapons](#) threatening Belarus's security have created a negative backdrop for the two leaders' meeting.

However, Ukrainian politicians seem to understand that these claims were made largely for internal consumption. Their

resentment over [Belarus's vote at the UN](#) against the Ukrainian resolution on Crimea has also become a thing of the past.

✘ Poroshenko sought reassurance from his Belarusian counterpart about [Belarus's continued neutrality](#) in Ukraine's conflict with Russia – and apparently succeeded. 'I received a firm affirmation and assurances from the President of Belarus: no one will ever be able to involve Belarus in a war against Ukraine', the Ukrainian leader said. 'We are kindred', Lukashenka confirmed.

Lukashenka's main interest in the meeting was to support the positive trend in the trade with Ukraine, which grew by 10.5% last year to attain \$3.83bn, after falling three years in a row. In January-February 2017, the growth was even more spectacular – 29%. Ukraine remains Belarus's second-largest trading partner, and Belarus is on the fourth place in Ukraine's list.

Belarus agreed to consider buying electric energy from Ukraine and plans to increase its supplies of oil products to this country. The two countries will also seek greater localisation of assembly of Belarusian machinery in Ukraine. Lukashenka and Poroshenko agreed to meet in Kyiv this summer to finalise several issues under discussion.

While Poroshenko called Russia (indirectly) a 'demon', Lukashenka carefully avoided taking sides in the conflict between Belarus's two neighbours. Nevertheless, he clearly has no intention of sacrificing his country's economic and security interests just to soothe Russian prejudices against Ukraine.

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# Lukashenka - Putin negotiations, discussion at KCL, Belarus - China achievements – Ostrogorski Centre digest

In April, analysts at the Ostrogorski Centre discussed the results of negotiations between Putin and Lukashenka in Saint Petersburg, ways to respond to continuing political repression in Belarus, prospects for Belarusian-Turkmen relations, and achievements of Belarusian-Chinese cooperation over the last 25 years

The Centre, together with the KCL Eurasia Society and KCL Diplomacy Society, hosted a public discussion entitled 'Between East and West: What's next for Belarus?'

We have also added new profiles and updated existing ones on our BelarusProfile.com database of influential people in Belarus.

## Analytics

Siarhei Bohdan discusses [what Russia got in exchange for gas and oil concessions](#). Moscow wants closer collaboration with Minsk in the spheres of security and foreign policy. The two governments clearly chose to resolve the issues critical to each of them: Russian gas and oil supplies for Minsk, Belarusian security and foreign policy cooperation for Moscow. Nevertheless, numerous other issues continue to undermine relations with Russia. Now, even leading experts in the Belarusian government doubt the utility of Moscow-led Eurasian

integration in its current form.

Alesia Rudnik writes about a [‘game’ called ‘blue whale’](#), popular among youngsters across the post-Soviet space. The game consists of 50 dangerous quests potentially culminating in suicide. Belarusian law enforcement services have initiated two criminal cases after two Belarusian youngsters attempted to commit suicide while playing the game. Nevertheless, a direct correlation between teen suicides and the game remains difficult to draw. The hyperbole surrounding the game in the media is not evidence of the game’s existence in real life. Under such circumstances, it is important that control of social media does not turn into censorship.

Igar Gubarevich analyses the [prospects of Belarusian-Turkmen relations](#) after plans for a plant in Garlyk came to an end. The plant, which is worth over \$1bn, and is capable of producing up to 1.4m tonnes of fertiliser per year, has become the flagship project for Belarusian-Turkmen cooperation. However, as trade turnover continues falling and Turkmen remain unsatisfied with Belarus’s role in the Garlyk project, the future of bilateral relations remain a big question.

## **Between East And West: What’s Next For Belarus? (Podcast)**



Events unfolding in Belarus have recently been headline news for major international news outlets because of the massive protests against president Lukashenka. Unlike in Ukraine, however, protests in Belarus have yet to lead to political change.

The Kings College London (KCL) Eurasia Society, KCL Diplomacy

Society, and the Ostrogorski Centre hosted a public discussion entitled 'Between East and West: What's next for Belarus?' on 12 April 2017 in London. The discussion featured prof. Yarik Kryvoi, founder of the Ostrogorski Centre, and Dr. Alex Kokcharov, Principal Analyst with IHS Markit Country Risk. The podcast of the discussion and a list of key issues discussed are [available here](#).

## Comments in the media

Ryhor Astapenia discusses the [decline of the 'third class in Belarus'](#) on *naviny.by*. The 'third class' involves small towns and villages, which currently struggle most with socioeconomic problems: unemployment, low salaries, undeveloped business, poor quality of healthcare, alcoholism, and rapid depopulation.

Siarhei Bohdan comments on [achievements in Belarusian-Chinese relations over the last 25 years](#) for Polish Radio. Since the early 2000s, Minsk has relied heavily on China, which it expects to become a major superpower in the long-run, thus ensuring a good position for Belarus. China is also important as a counterbalance to Russian influence. However, Moscow dislikes the openly pro-Chinese rhetoric of Minsk. Meanwhile, Belarus continues to have a large negative trade balance with China.

On Polish Radio, Alesia Rudnik talks about the [dangerous online game 'Blue Whale'](#), which has become widespread in social networks in the post-Soviet space. The game has resulted in a number of suicides, but the scale and consequences of its spread in Belarus remain unknown.

Siarhei Bohdan discusses the [results of the negotiations between Lukashenka and Putin](#) on 3 April on Radio Liberty. Moscow sees the military exercise West 2017 as an important move in its spat with the West, while Minsk would like to

minimise the effects of the show, and is eager to make the drills as transparent to the West as possible. The two sides also discussed strengthening their joint air defence system as Russia becomes increasingly concerned with defence in the Western direction.

Ryhor Astapenia on Radio Liberty discusses what [concessions](#)  [Russia wants from Belarus](#) and which of them the Belarusian government is ready to offer. Recent talks between Lukashenka and Putin have not been successful, and the parties keep returning to the old conditions which existed before the energy dispute. Russia has little interest in acquiring Belarusian companies. Belarus is also losing its significance for Russia in the political and security fields, and the Kremlin is not as willing to support its ally as before.

On Polish Radio, Yaraslau Kryvoi talks about the [EU's policy towards Belarus](#). Europe should continue its policy of engagement, but at the same demonstrate its willingness to bring back sanctions if Minsk continues to violate human rights. The EU should also draw a line between policy towards the authorities and Belarusian citizens, since citizens of Belarus can not freely elect their government.

Igar Gubarevich discusses the [West's reaction to a new wave of political repression](#) in Belarus on Polish Radio. These events came as a surprise to Western diplomats and politicians, and their first reaction was very cautious. According to Igar, the West must call a spade a spade and speak openly about human rights violations. Such actions of the authorities are unacceptable if Belarus wants to have good relations with Europe.

## Belarus Profile

The BelarusProfile.com database now includes the following profiles: [Miraslaŭ Lazoŭski](#), [Marat Markaŭ](#), [Viktar Ananič](#),

[Alieh Kraučanka](#), [Iryna Kascievič](#), [Ihar Siarhiejenka](#), [Heorhi Hryc](#), [Aliaksandr Liachaŭ](#), [Siarhiej Špiahun](#), and [Ihar Maršalaŭ](#).

We have also updated the profiles of [Anatol Isačenka](#), [Viktar Ščačko](#), [Iosif Siaredzič](#), [Valiery Kulakoŭski](#), [Vadzim Zakreŭski](#), [Lieanid Małcaŭ](#), [Usievalad Jančeŭski](#), [Aliaksandr Jakabson](#), [Valiery Capkala](#), [Ihar Buzoŭski](#), [Sviatlana Kalinkina](#), [Valier Malaška](#), [Siarhiej Kanoplič](#), [Viktar Prakapienia](#), [Ryhor Kisiel](#), and [Jaraslaŭ Kryvoj](#).

Think tanks in Belarus are encouraged to submit their research for inclusion into the database by [emailing us](#).

*The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its projects include Belarus Digest, [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#), [BelarusProfile.com](#) and [Ostro.by](#).*